**Hope and Optimism, Improving Memory, Viewing America with Foreign Eyes**
**What Happens Next – 8.29.2021**
**Martin Seligman QA**

Larry Bernstein:

You mentioned Calvinism. Let's start with that. Max Weber wrote the book *The Protestant Work Ethic* and the Calvinists really seemed to be at a forefront of progress and you spoke against Calvinism.

Martin Seligman:

That it really is a myth the notion that the Protestant ethic causes progress comes out of Calvinism. Basically, Calvin believed in the utter depravity of a human being. He's an Augustinian and he believes in total predestination. But what happens between Calvin 1550 and 1650 is a revolution in Protestantism, which does establish a Protestant ethic. It's called Arminianism, Larry, and that's heresy against Calvin that says, "We can participate in our own grace. We can do things to get into heaven. It's not predestined." And that becomes the Protestant ethic that becomes Methodism and becomes Protestantism in America, particularly after the fall of the Puritans around 1750 in America. So, the Protestant ethic that works is anti-Calvin.

Michael Kahana:

Marty, fascinating thesis. I wonder if you see in recent years a shift away from a belief in agency, as we've begun to associate medical brain maladies with all sorts of human actions and suggest that people do things because this part of their brain is too big or too small or too active or not active enough.

Martin Seligman:

The answer is, I don't know, but I'm going to find out. And let me tell you how I'm going to find out. I've decided that cherry picking through history is not a very good idea methodologically. So, basically, with machine learning, we've created a vocabulary of the lexicon of agency, the lexicon of efficacy, and so what we now do is we plow through things like the front page of the New York Times over time and we can ask, does agency increase and decrease quantitatively, and correlate that with human progress. This very important question that you're asking very much about the human future is, has there been a decline, particularly in the last 20 years, in the belief in agency? And we can correlate that with, we have quantitatively measured progress as well.

By the way, what we're trying to do with that, Mike, is, for any given time slice, like 1800 to 1900, we take all the major progress events in five different kinds of progress, we multiply them by how important they are, we sum them up, and we ask you in any given decade how much of that occurs. You can actually look at changes in progress as a function of changes in the lexicon of agency.

Larry Bernstein:

You mentioned that there's been 40 years of lab, I want to discuss a couple of those experiments that I read about in your most recent book The Hope Circuit that might be relevant and you could tell me how you're going to apply it. The first thing you mentioned is your use of the going through the articles in the New York Times and what it reminds me of was the experiments you did with regard to ascertaining whether or not an individual is an optimistic person or not. And because it was difficult for you to interview everyone, what you did with sports stars was you read articles and looked at their quotes in the newspaper and you were able to, using certain criteria, grade them with levels of optimism. Can you comment about that in the context of how you're going to use it for this?

Martin Seligman:

We started with the sports pages and we wanted to know if we could predict coming back from defeat based on the optimism of sports heroes. They don't take questionnaires, so what we did essentially was to take all the press briefings that we could find and form optimism and pessimism profiles for players and teams. I remember when we were doing this, the Celtics were a very optimistic basketball team. The Sixers were very pessimistic. We formed a profile. We then went to the next season and we looked at sports betting, which is great because you have a predicted outcome line and the prediction was that optimistic teams like the Celtics after they were defeated would do better than expected and pessimistic teams like the Sixers, when they're defeated, would do worse than expected. And we found in both Major League Baseball, Olympic swimming, in which we could actually do the tests, and basketball that optimistic athletes, when they're defeated, do better than they're supposed to. Pessimistic athletes do worse than their predicted to do.

Larry Bernstein:

One interesting other addition to that analysis, you mentioned in the book that when you looked at the optimism or pessimism of the coach, that also was a very important predictor and more important than any particular player. How do you think about the role of the coach and his relative optimism in helping improve a team?

Martin Seligman:

Well, I think this is about leadership, and after we spent hours and hours doing every individual player's optimism and pessimism and analyzed, after all that work, we found that if we just evaluated the coach, we would have gotten the same predictive power. And that suggests that the leadership about optimism in general is contagious and optimistic leaders engender trying harder and innovation. Pessimistic coaches and leaders engender helplessness.

Larry Bernstein:

I want to switch to one of your colleagues, Angela Duckworth's work on grit. Does this have any applicability here, either in its methods of how to determine grittiness, whether it's a good predictive of success away from either intelligence or optimism, or is there some linkage between agency and grit that's important?

Martin Seligman:

Yeah, very much so. Angela, I'm very proud to say, was my PhD student. So, naturally, there is a relationship of helplessness and optimism to grit. Where does grit come from? What are the variables underneath it? For me, one of them is optimism. Otimism is one of the ingredients that leads to grit, both of which produce perseverance, trying harder, overcoming obstacles. Grit has the unfortunate side effect of getting you not to quit even when it's not promising out there. Optimism requires flexibility, the ability to recognize that you're hitting your head against an unmovable wall. So that's where grit and optimism diverge. There's no such thing as flexible grit, as far as I know.

Larry Bernstein:

What an interesting experiment, and you discussed this I think in your Learned Optimism book, you talk about grittiness. The experiments that they used, the marshmallows or the "Don't eat this cookie" experiments that you've done, how do you feel about our ability to evaluate a person's grit? And is it a defined born characteristic or do you think it can change? And I want to bring it back to agency for a second. Do you think that, are you born believing you have agency? Are you affected by your peers or the leadership in terms of your agency? And can you learn to be either a leader or that you have ability to change the world?

Martin Seligman:

For the grit question, ask Angela. But I can answer the agency question. First, efficacy, the belief that I can control the world, optimism, is about 50% heritable. We've done twin studies on it and identical twins are much more concordant for optimism than fraternal twins. One of the things we know about optimism, a major component of agency, is that it's highly heritable. The second thing we know is that the world changes it, you can learn it, and so I've devoted a large part of my career to teaching pessimistic people how to become optimistic. So even though it's heritable, like many heritable characteristics like alcoholism, for example, you can change it. The essence of changing pessimism into optimism is teaching people to argue against their most catastrophic faults, to argue realistically treating the thoughts that say "I'm a loser, I'm never going to succeed" as if they were shouted at you or someone whose mission in life was to make you miserable and to realistically argue against them. And that is the key to changing pessimism into optimism, to changing helplessness into efficacy.

Larry Bernstein:

I want to ask you about longitudinal studies. We have a mutual friend George Vaillant who worked on a longitudinal study called the Harvard Grant Study. These were lifelong interviews with the Harvard class of 1941 and 1942. And in your book, The Hope Circuit, you talk about the incredible power of longitudinal studies. Are you able to use longitudinal studies to evaluate agency better than some of these other tools you're talking about? How would you design a longitudinal study to find out the key aspects of your new hypothesis?

Martin Seligman:

A longitudinal study requires that you look the same person at different times. So, indeed, there are longitudinal studies of optimism and efficacy, and our best evidence comes from them. But this is a barrier in history, that is, while you can look at Israelites from 800 to 600 BCE, it's not the same people. You can't do longitudinal studies. So longitudinal studies are a great method for separating historical effects from individual change. Can't do that in history, except when you have the same person over time. One can, for example, look at Newton's sense of agency in his early writings and later writings, and indeed that's a conceivable thing to do with the new methodologies of agency. But, for the most part, historical analysis is limited by the inability to do true longitudinal studies.

Larry Bernstein:

I totally see your point. I want to just mention an interesting historical analysis that a MIT historian Frank Sulloway who wrote the book Born to Rebel: Birth Order, Family Dynamics and Creative Lives. And I don't know if you know his work, what he was very interested in was birth order and whether that affected whether you believed in new, innovative ideas.

Martin Seligman:

Yeah. I do know his work.

Larry Bernstein:

So just for my listeners' benefit, here's what Sulloway did. He would look at diaries of individuals and then look at their siblings and then see who believed in Newton's theory or Darwin's theory, or the earth is flat or in geological plates, for example, I think were the four major aspects. And what he found was firstborns didn't believe in innovations nearly as much as the second or later child in birth order. And he believes that the first born is more conservative, wants their parents' attention, and is less willing to be open-minded. Do you like Soloway's approach to analyzing historical fact? Is there anything from that, that you think you can use for your benefit?

Martin Seligman:

Yeah, I do. I think Soloway's ingenious and indeed it makes a lot of sense, particularly for Darwinian and Copernican revolutions. Unfortunately, for the great sweep of history, we're not going to know a lot about whether or not these people are first born or not, but it's a sensible thing to look at. Statistically, when people have taken Soloway's approach and looked at large samples of kids, it's a very small effect.

Martin Seligman:

But for the Darwinian effect, it's really stunning.

Larry Bernstein:

You mentioned Augustine's work and I imagine that in the West, very few people would have actually read Augustine at that time. How important are these philosophies in effecting millions

of people, particularly many who are illiterate and had no access to the big ideas that existed at the time?

Martin Seligman:

Yeah, that's a very important question. And we look, for example, in 100 year periods across the Middle Ages at prayers, what people say before they go to sleep.

And what you essentially find out is after Augustine and up to the time of Aquinas the prayers are all about God helping me. They're not about individual agency. And then, as the Renaissance approaches, Augustine, Abelard, Aquinas, you start to get more and more agency in the prayers. But, basically, the theology of Augustine and other major theologians is transmitted through prayers and stories, and we think in that way, seeps in to the beliefs of the people who can make a difference.

Michael Kahana:

Marty, Mike Kahana again jumping in just to ask you about going more ancient, if you look at prayers that ... For example, I happen to be familiar with the Jewish tradition. You'll see a lot of very strong emphasis on agency in a much earlier period in history if you look at even in what are called the chapters of our fathers. You'll see language about how the reward for a good deed is that it will lead you to do another good deed, and the punishment for a bad deed is it will condition you to do more bad deeds. I mean, that seems ... Isn't that all about agency there?

Martin Seligman:

I think you and I may disagree about the Old Testament, particularly the Torah. We've completed a complete analysis of agency words in the Old Testament and the New Testament, and what we find is indeed there are anecdotes. There are periods in which there looks like high agency, but quantitatively, the Torah is very God-agentic and not human-agentic.

Just a couple of examples, Mike, when Abraham is instructed by God to sacrifice Isaac, he doesn't question it. He obeys. He goes up to the mountain and is about to sacrifice Isaac, and God intervenes and tells him not to. Indeed, in these passages, there's no human agency, and then wonderful story, the burning bush. God tells Moses, "Go to Pharaoh, and tell him, 'Let My people go.'" You remember what Moses says? He says, "I can't do that. I'm a stutterer. I'm a stammerer." God says, "I will put the words in your mouth."

Now, those are just two anecdotes, and indeed there are anecdotes like, "Choose life" and the like, but quantitatively, the five books of Moses are God's agency and the Israelite obedience to God. One of my friends who said the only choice in the Old Testament is the choice to believe in God.

Larry Bernstein:

Just a follow-up on Michael's question here. You just mentioned that how you apply religion was critical in determining agency. So, what you said was, "I looked at the prayers." You said before bed. I want to follow that up with how we use the Old Testament in the Jewish tradition.

So yes, it's text, and I'll just give you an example from my own experience. My son was bar mitzvahed a few years ago, and as part of the Reform Judaism tradition, what we do is that my son reads from the Torah, and then he has to give a little speech. We met with a group all preparing for their Bar Mitzvahs, and my son asked the Rabbi, "Can I use humor in my speech?" The rabbi said, "Absolutely. I mean, humor is core to the Jewish tradition. Absolutely. Jonathan, don't do anything that is disrespectful, but you can use humor."

Larry Bernstein:

Jonathan's Torah portion was from Leviticus about the kosher laws. The first thing he started his speech was, "What's your bacon policy?" I know mine. I eat it, and I love it. Now, the text is the text. No bacon. No choice My son gives his interpretation of the text and what's unusual about the Jewish religion, is what is a 13-year-old doing on the bema to begin with, and why do we care what he has to say about his bacon policy? I wonder how to think about text and then how to think about its application in the religion.

Martin Seligman:

Yep. An important point, Larry. It's very clear that we re-interpret text according to the beliefs that have come to pervade the time we live in. In spite of Old Testament Judaism being about very much obedience to God and lack of agency, Judaism is a religion of enormous agency. The accomplishment of Jews across the world is amazing. Very interestingly, Calvinism and Lutheranism are still around, but they don't believe in predestination anymore. They don't believe in utter depravity anymore. In the same way that the Jewish tradition reinterprets the texts to be coherent with larger forces about the importance of human agency, human agency has become irresistible in this time.

Larry Bernstein:

We got a question from the audience. This one is from Irwin Warren. He says, "Pick a different story. How about Sodom and Gomorrah, where God provides agency in spades?"

Martin Seligman:

Yep. So indeed, Abraham argues with God about the number of righteous people that could be found in Sodom and Gomorrah. But notice that Abraham is dissenting, but it's still in the context of it is God's power to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah. So indeed, there are good instances, and that's one, in which the heroes speak back to God and wrestle with God. But quantitatively, if you take the whole sweep of agency words in the Torah, they're overpowered by God's agency as opposed to human agency. When you get to the Judges, when you get to the rest of the Old Testament, now you get human agency in force and obedience to God and God's agency quantitatively diminished and human agency, and here we're dealing with stories about 1000 BC as opposed to 1400 BC. You're getting progress, and you're getting human agency again.

Larry Bernstein:

Just as a follow-up on Sodom and Gomorrah, I mean, what I remember from the story more than anything else is how clever Abraham is in his negotiation tactics. Yeah, yeah, God's got all the power. Yeah, yeah, I know. But as a metaphor for life, and I take this as a story, is, "Oh my goodness. What a clever negotiator, how Abraham kind of broke this thing down and put God into a corner." I mean, God probably knew what Abraham was to say before he said it, but he fell into the trap all the same.

Martin Seligman:

Yeah. Good, Larry. Just to counterbalance that, next Passover, look at the service very carefully for the lack of human agency and the presence of only God's agency. A real counterbalancing here. The Sodom and Gomorrah story, Jacob wrestling with the angel, choose life are all good counterexamples, and that's why I don't cherry pick here. That's why we take every word in the Torah, every phrase, and quantitatively ask, "What's the ratio of God's agency to human agency?" That's what changes.

Larry Bernstein:

Just a follow-up on Passover. What I find amazing about Passover is here is one of the major Jewish holidays, and there is no rabbi in the house. We have a prayer book, we have a group of people, usually family members, and we're going to talk this thing through. Let's try to learn what we can from this experience. For me, I think there is an enormous amount of agency in the tradition, the fact we could create our own text, the fact that we decide when we're going to eat. I mean, there's some rules and stuff, but on balance, it's a very pro-agency sort of experience, unlike many other religions. The following week, sometimes I go, and I go to church and I hear the Easter experience in a church. I'm always awestruck at the comparison between the Passover Seder and the Easter services in church, because it's really focused on the priest and following his specific direction. How do you think about agency versus non-agency in the religious experience?

Martin Seligman:

Oh, well, this is a lot of what I work on, the evolution of agency and the religious experience. So very important is the Catholic reaction to the Reformation. The Reformation is hugely anti-agentic. It's predestination, it is utter depravity, and war breaks out across all of Central Europe. There's a 30 years' war going on. The Council of Trent is the Catholic answer to the Reformation. It goes on for 25 years, and it decides on two things. One is the doctrine that priests will follow and still do about human agency. It's anti-predestination. It says you can do good works as a Catholic and get into heaven. Slaps Luther in the face about that. But the other thing the Council of Trent does, and I can just, like our faculty meetings, Mike, understand the compromise. It doubles down on the superstitions. It doubles down on saints, on hell, on the superstitions. The Inquisition indeed followed from the Council of Trent. So importantly, in Catholicism and then after Arminius follows in Protestantism, the priests are talking about you can do things to get into heaven. You have human agency.

Michael Kahana:

Okay. Well, I disagree with Marty on the point about the Hebrew Scriptures, and maybe it's not worth spending the time of this program to go through it. But since Marty, you gave the example of Moses and not being a man of words, I thought I would look it up, because I remember that story differently. Moses said to the Lord, "What if they do not believe me and do not listen to me, but say, 'The Lord did not appear to you?'" The Lord said to him, "What is in your hand?" He replied, "A rod." He said, "Cast it to the ground." He cast it to the ground, and it became a snake. Moses recoiled from it. Then the Lord said to Moses, "Put out your hand and grasp it by the tail." He put out his hand and seized it, and it became a rod in his hand that they made believe that the Lord, the God of their fathers, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob did appear to you.

So in this story, and we can go further, and it keeps on going, it's fascinating, because it's the story where God is telling Moses to use agency to do his thing, right? Moses is responding, "Perhaps," and this may be to your point, in a way that is more reflective of the ancient culture, which is to say, "But no, I don't have agency." But God is telling him, "No, you do have agency. Go do it. Take that staff. Throw it down. It'll become a snake. Grab it. Take your hand. Put it in your bosom. It will become leprous. Put it back, and it won't be leprous anymore."

Then finally, when Moses persists and says to God, "No, I can't. I can't. I can't," God says to him the final word, which is, "Show them. Look at the water that I will turn to blood. When you see the blood," and the way I learned the story is when Moses realized all of the death that was caused by casting the males into the sea, that then he was able to take agency upon himself. So anyway, I mean, we could spend forever going back and forth.

Martin Seligman:

We're going to have a great time. We're going to have a great time debating it. Notice what's absent in the burning bush story and your very good telling of it is choice. Moses doesn't choose to do these things. God commands him to do these things. So, for me, the question of decision and choice as opposed to obedience is crucial to agency.

Larry Bernstein:

I wonder if you can do natural experiments comparing different religions of individuals at specific periods of time. For example, could you compare Protestantism with Catholicism with Islam or Judaism at coterminous periods to evaluate creativity or innovation?

Martin Seligman:

The answer is not coterminous periods, but very importantly for Islam, for Catholicism, for Judaism, across time, I want to correlate changes in belief in agency with changes in progress. These are not coterminous in time. The history of China, Judaism and the Hellenic tradition are actually coterminous, but Islam is not. For me, it's within a culture that you want to look at changes in the philosophy religion of agency as a driver of stagnation or of innovation.

Larry Bernstein:

I worry about this experiment deciding causality. In other words, let's say you're in a period of enormous economic growth. Does that economic growth increase agency, or was it the agency that increased economic growth?

Martin Seligman:

Yeah, so that's an extremely important question, and as I said at the outset, I can only determine causality by experiments in the laboratory now. I'm very interested in the origins of the Industrial Revolution, Britain 1800. Indeed, in the lexicon, you get big increases in optimism and agency, but Britain has just become enormously wealthy between 1750 and 1800. The British tolerate eccentricity. There's more coal being burned in Britain. There's more energy. The upper classes have more time to tinker. We don't know which of these things is causal, but very importantly, let's distinguish between remote causes, like becoming rich, and proximal causes, like the belief that I can change Michael's mind about the Old Testament. So that's an immediate cause of my having a dialogue with Michael. Agenticism is about proximal causes, and most of the confounds are about remote causes, which bring on the mental state of agency.

Larry Bernstein:

Marty, what are you optimistic about as it relates to your work on agency and innovation?

Martin Seligman:

Well, I think, as I said, the world is in labor. We're entering an age in which there's never been as much human agency, and I keep thinking about 1365, Giuliano of Norwich and the Black Plague, the worst Western plague we've ever had. What Giuliano writes is the following and expresses my sentiment now about our future. Giuliano says, "He said not, 'Thou shall not be travailed.' He said, 'Thou shall not be tempested.' He said, 'Thou shalt not be diseased.' He said, 'Thou shalt not be overcome, and all shall be well. All shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well.'"

Larry Bernstein:

That was beautiful, Marty. Thank you.