

# Eudaimonic Well-Being as a Core Concept of Positive Functioning

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## ABSTRACT

For over a decade, the discipline of positive psychology has been interested in concepts associated with positive human functioning. In this article we focus on eudaimonic well-being (EWB), which Waterman and colleagues (2010) define as the “quality of life derived from the development of a person’s best potentials and their application in the fulfillment of personally expressive, self-concordant goals” (p. 41). Stemming from Aristotelian philosophy, EWB has recently been recognized as a viable topic for scientific inquiry. Eudaimonic conceptions of happiness are associated with notions of the true self, personal expressiveness, and meaningful goal pursuits (Ryan & Deci, 2001). This idea is often held in sharp contrast with hedonic conceptions of happiness which reflect a life characterized by the maximum attainment of pleasure. In this article, we highlight the philosophical and historical roots of EWB as well as current conceptual and measurement issues related to its empirical study.

## RÉSUMÉ

Pendant plus d’une décennie, la discipline de la psychologie positive s’est penchée sur les concepts associés au fonctionnement humain positif. Dans le présent article, nous mettons l’accent sur le bien être eudémonique (BEE), que Waterman et ses collègues (2010) définissent comme la « qualité de la vie qui émane de la réalisation du plein potentiel d’une personne et de son application dans l’accomplissement significatif du self et concordant au self » (p. 41). Issu de la philosophie d’Aristote, le BEE a récemment été reconnu comme un sujet viable d’interrogation scientifique. Les conceptions eudémoniques du bonheur sont associées aux notions du self véritable, de l’expressivité personnelle et à la poursuite d’objectifs significatifs (Ryan et Deci, 2001). Cette idée est souvent tenue en contraste marqué avec les conceptions hédoniques du bonheur qui reflètent une vie caractérisée par la réalisation optimale du plaisir. Dans cet article, nous mettons en lumière les racines philosophiques et historiques du BEE ainsi que les questions conceptuelles actuelles et de mesures liées à son étude empirique.

Since its inception over a decade ago, the field of positive psychology has been chiefly concerned with developing empirical knowledge pertaining to the underlying factors of positive human functioning (Seligman & Csikzentmihalyi, 2000). In accordance with this mandate, one of the most fundamental concepts to permeate positive psychological research and practice has been *well-being*. Broadly defined, this concept refers to optimal psychological functioning and experience (Ryan & Deci, 2001). There has been a tendency to bifurcate conceptions of well-being to reflect the following two philosophies regarding happiness: (1) a *hedonic* philosophy supporting the idea that happiness is analogous to subjective experiences of pleasure and satisfaction; and (2) a *eudaimonist* philosophy supporting the idea that happiness occurs when individuals perform personally expressive behaviours during meaningful goal pursuits (Ryan & Deci, 2001). In the following discussion, we will focus primarily on eudaimonic well-being (EWB) by taking stock of its philosophical and conceptual roots, as well as its measurement within contemporary psychological research.

## Philosophical and Conceptual Foundations of Eudaimonic Well-Being

In his seminal work entitled *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle (4 BCE/1985) was the first to introduce eudaimonic conceptions of happiness. Rejecting the notion that happiness could be equated with the attainment of pleasure, Aristotle suggested that true happiness could be achieved by living a life of contemplation and virtue. In traditional Aristotelian terms *virtue* is objectively considered to be the best within a person or excellence (Ackrill, 1973). Thus, Aristotle might suggest that a gardener could live a life of virtue through exercising his or her function (i.e., gardening) to its fullest.

In recent history, the meaning accorded to the term *virtue* has shifted to denote a subjective sense of “doing that which is worth doing” (Ryan & Deci, 2001; Waterman, 2008). From this standpoint, activities judged as “worth doing” are also perceived as concordant with the *daimon* or “true self.” According to Waterman (1990; 1993), the *daimon* or “true self” is comprised of unique and (nearly) universal potentials that when developed through pursuit of personally expressive activities, promote a sense of eudaimonic well-being (EWB). Potentials that are (nearly) universal include developmental milestones such as grasping, walking, and talking, as well as abstract virtues such as

honesty and courage. Unique potentials of the “true self” may include activities such as gardening, basketball, and painting. Perceived development of these aspects of the “true self” during personally expressive activities (eudaimonia) is considered instrumental to the attainment of EWB (Waterman, 1993; Waterman et al., 2010).

Two of the most prevalent eudaimonic concepts to permeate the science of well-being have been Waterman and colleagues’ (2010) concept of EWB and Ryff’s (1989) concept of psychological well-being (PWB). The core theme of Waterman and colleagues’ concept of EWB involves the perceived identification and development of one’s “true self” (i.e., one’s best potentials and fullest capacities). Other components of EWB within this conceptualization include: a sense of meaning and purpose in life, investment of significant effort in the pursuit of excellence, intense involvement in activities (flow), and enjoyment of activities as personally expressive.

Two decades prior to this modern conceptualization, Ryff (1989) was noted for deriving the theory-based concept of PWB. This concept is noted for aligning with eudaimonic (rather than hedonic) conceptions of happiness. Derived as a multi-faceted construct, PWB consists of the following six factors: self-acceptance, positive relations with others, personal growth, environmental mastery, purpose in life, and autonomy (Ryff, 1989; Ryff & Keyes, 1995).

### **The Relationship between Eudaimonic and Hedonic Conceptions of Happiness**

Before contemplating any potential overlap between divergent conceptions of happiness, it is necessary to briefly review the tradition of hedonic happiness within the science of well-being. In light of this requirement, subjective well-being (SWB) is discussed as the concept most commonly aligned with hedonic notions of happiness. Originating from the insights of hedonic philosophers such as Aristippus of Cyrene and Jeremy Bentham, SWB stems from the position that pleasure is the sole good, and that any notion of “the good life” must be equated with maximum attainment of pleasure (Ryan & Deci, 2001; Waterman, Schwartz, & Conti, 2008). The concept of SWB stemming from this philosophical tradition has been conceptualized as including both affective and cognitive components (Diener, 1984; 1994). More specifically, SWB has been conceptualized as consisting of: high frequencies of positive affect, low frequencies of negative affect, and a global cognitive evaluation of life as satisfying (Diener, Suh, Lucas, & Smith, 1999).

As extensions of hedonic and eudaimonic philosophical ideologies, SWB and EWB represent related, yet distinctly unique concepts of well-being (e.g., Waterman et al., 2010). When SWB is adopted as an indicator of well-being, respondents are given the freedom to define happiness. Accordingly, an infinite number of activities and behaviours may facilitate increased perceptions of pleasure and SWB (Wa-

terman, 1993). On the other hand, behaviours facilitating increased levels of EWB are constrained by the researcher to reflect activities and behaviours of a specific type (e.g., only those that are perceived as personally expressive). Development of one’s fullest potential during personally expressive activities is, however likely to generate concomitant feelings of pleasure and SWB. Thus, it has been speculated that EWB is sufficient, but unnecessary for the attainment of SWB (Telfer, 1990). Some behaviours and activities may, therefore, contribute toward increased levels of SWB, but not EWB. For example, eating a candy bar may bolster perceptions of SWB, while exerting little to no influence on levels of EWB. In this way, SWB casts a broader conceptual net over a wider range of activities and behaviours than EWB.

From a eudaimonist perspective, not all pleasure producing activities giving rise to SWB are considered good for the wellness of the individual (Ryan & Deci, 2001). In additions research, it is widely recognized that alcohol can be used as an emotional anesthetic to numb feelings of negative affect (e.g., Cooper, Frone, Russell, & Mudar, 1995). In this context, intoxication may momentarily increase perceptions of SWB through escape/avoidance principles of operant conditioning (Skinner, 1953). A number of analogous examples would serve equally well in conveying the message that increased levels of momentary SWB may occur to the detriment of organismic health. Not surprisingly, recent research shows that dimensions of EWB (e.g., meaning and purpose, self-realization, etc.) are more robustly associated with self-reported well-being compared to hedonic dimensions of SWB (McMahan & Estes, 2011).

### **Measurement of Eudaimonic Well-Being**

The burgeoning field of positive psychology has only recently adopted EWB as a concept for scientific inquiry. As a result, the concept is receiving increased psychometric attention. One potential reason for this is perhaps due to the fact that its philosophical roots are not easily translated into psychometric properties. Considering the subjective nature of EWB, it may be easiest to ask individuals about their experiences during interviews as a method of investigating this phenomenon. Existential phenomenological interviews form a solid basis for EWB assessment by gaining insight into participants’ unique experiences (Dale, 1996). Unfortunately, qualitative interviews are psychometrically unreliable. In response to this hurdle, several EWB-related instruments have been developed. However, Kimiecik (2010) notes that in an effort to quantify and explain eudaimonic experiences, researchers may have lost the human qualities of this philosophical concept. Despite this contention, quantifiable and reliable measures have been established.

One of the most widely used scales to incorporate elements of EWB is Ryff’s Scales of Psychological Well-Being (PWB; Ryff, 1989). Specifically, Ryff drew upon eudaimonic

concepts from Aristotelian philosophy and Maslow's (1954) higher order needs (e.g., self-actualization) to develop a conceptual understanding of PWB. As noted previously, the core components of PWB are: self-acceptance, positive relations with others, autonomy, environmental mastery, purpose in life, and personal growth. The overlap between these PWB components and the theoretical underpinnings of EWB has led to the adoption of Ryff's scales as a popular method for assessing EWB. It is important to clarify that Ryff's PWB scales were designed primarily as a means for assessing positive psychological functioning, and not the specific concept of EWB. At best, Ryff's PWB scales yield a close approximation of EWB.

Several single-item or short form questionnaires have been employed as indicators of EWB in existing positive psychology literature. As mentioned previously, personal growth is widely recognized as an integral component of eudaimonia. In accordance with this idea, Vittersø and Søholt (2011) found that interest in activities predicted personal growth, thus forming the theoretical and empirical rationale for using interest in activities as a viable indicator of EWB. Although the construct validity of this measure is questionable, the theoretical underpinnings are justifiable. Using a similar reasoning, Butkovic, Brkovic, and Bratko (2011) used measures of self-esteem and loneliness to predict PWB. Since PWB has been used an indicator of EWB, these researchers extrapolated scores on self-esteem and loneliness measures to represent EWB.

In an effort to differentiate the "good life" from hedonic forms of happiness, Peterson, Park, and Seligman (2005) drew upon three Western ideas about the composition of well-being. Specifically, these researchers posited the "good life" as consisting of meaning, pleasure, and engagement. Hedonic aspects of the "good life" are captured in the pleasure constituent of this conceptualization, however, meaning and engagement are concepts more commonly aligned with EWB. In order to capture all three of these components using a measurement tool, Peterson and colleagues developed The Orientations to Happiness Scale. Although this scale has very good reliability, it may lack EWB construct validity due to the exclusion of other eudaimonic components (e.g., personal expressiveness).

Noting the lack of a valid measurement tool for EWB, Waterman and colleagues (2010) sought to develop the first ever scale designed specifically to assess EWB. To achieve this goal, Waterman and colleagues developed a theory driven measure of EWB which they coined the Questionnaire of Eudaimonic Well-Being (QEWB). This questionnaire was influenced by eudaimonic identity theory, which is itself rooted in theories of identity formation and eudaimonia. This theoretical background, in addition to Ryff's (1989) existing conception of PWB, formed the foundation from which the QEWB emerged. As noted previously, Waterman and colleagues conceptualized EWB as consisting of the following six components: self-discovery, perceived de-

velopment of one's best potentials, a sense of purpose and meaning in life, investment of significant effort in pursuit of excellence, intense involvement in activities, and enjoyment of activities as personally expressive. While the scale includes items tapping each of these six domains, a principal components analysis on the QEWB demonstrated a single EWB component accounting for the majority of the scale variance (Waterman et al., 2010). This scale has good psychometric properties, and is available to use as a reliable measure of EWB in future psychology research.

While the concept of EWB has a rich philosophical and theoretical heritage, its emergence in the realm of empiricism makes it an intriguing topic of inquiry for prospective Canadian positive psychology researchers. Even more exciting are the far-reaching practical implications of continued research on EWB as a central aspect of positive human functioning. In particular, bolstering individuals' EWB may promote mental health and have important implications for encouraging the development of positive institutions and happy nations. Despite receiving increased attention through its affiliation with the neophyte discipline of Positive Psychology, the concept of EWB has been ripe for investigation for nearly two decades. In the words of Fowers, Mollica, and Procacci (2010), "It is certainly too early to specify with confidence a canonical definition of eudaimonia or a preferred approach to measurement" (p. 142). The future of EWB research is wide open and holds much promise. Which direction might future Canadian psychology researchers take EWB?



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