Understanding the good life:

eudaimonic living involves well-doing, not well-being

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RUNNING HEAD: Critique of Eudaimonic Well-Being

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Abstract

This article critiques the increasingly popular concept of “eudaimonic well-being” (EWB), arguing that the term contains a category error that has misled and confused the field. Returning to the Aristotelian roots of eudaimonia, I propose the “Eudaimonic activity model” (EAM), which reserves the term eudaimonia to refer to specified characteristics of people’s conative activity, not to a positive psychological state or emotional condition. The EAM asks researchers to test purportedly eudaimonic activities as causes of subjective well-being (SWB), a practice which would help counteract researcher value biases and foster competition between different theories of eudaimonic living. SWB works as a criterion because it is relatively content free and is already known to discriminate well between eudaimonic-type activities (which typically produce SWB) and mere hedonic-type activities (which typically do not). The EAM treats psychosocial experience constructs, such as psychological needs (Deci and Ryan, 2000) and psychological well-being (Ryff & Keyes, 1995), as mediators that can perhaps explain the positive effects of eudaimonic activities upon SWB.
Overview

“Eudaimonia” is a philosophical concept, derived from the writings of Aristotle, which concerns the most virtuous, rational, or exemplary ways to live. First imported into psychology by Waterman in the 1990s (Waterman, 1990a, 1990b, 1993), the concept is becoming increasingly popular with positive psychology researchers. A November 2016 PsychInfo search on the terms “eudaimonia, eudaimonic, eudaemonia, eudaemonic” revealed 4 articles in the 1990s, 92 articles in the 2000s, and already 418 articles in the 2010s. A separate search on the terms “eudaimonic well-being, eudaimonic happiness, eudaemonic well-being, eudaemonic happiness” yielded 0 hits in the 1990s, 49 in the 2000s, and 312 so far in the 2010s. Clearly, “eudaimonia” is a growth industry within positive psychology and within well-being psychology. But is it growing too fast?

Expanding on the observations of other well-being researchers in recent years (Diener, 1998; Kashdan, Biswas-Diener, & King, 2008; Kashdan & Steger, 2011; King, 2011), this article criticizes psychology’s current use of the term “eudaimonia,” and in particular, the terms “eudaimonic well-being” and “eudaimonic happiness.” I suggest that psychologists have made a serious category mistake in linking the concepts of “eudaimonia” and “well-being,” a mistake that Aristotle himself took great pains to avoid (e.g., in Nichomachean Ethics 1095b13-23; 1097b1-5; 1098a1-10; 1099a6-25). Eudaimonia, as originally conceived, was not a feeling, psychological condition, or type of well-being; rather, the concept referred to particular ways of thinking and/or behaving, ways which might subsequently affect or contribute to well-being. I will show that researchers’ failure to make this distinction has contributed to erosion in
scientific precision, and lost opportunities for understanding how positive change actually occurs.

In making this critique, my hope is not to eliminate the concept of eudaimonia from psychological research. Instead I hope to point the way towards a more circumscribed (but still very broad) definition of the term, so that it can be more usefully applied within temporal process models of positive functioning and positive personality development. In the latter part of the article I discuss one such process model, the “Eudaimonic Activity Model” (EAM; Sheldon, 2013, 2016). The EAM carefully distinguishes the concept of eudaimonia from the concept of well-being, by treating well-being as an outcome criterion variable that reliably results from truly eudaimonic activities, due to the experiential satisfactions that those activities bring. I will show that the EAM supplies a potentially valuable framework for testing and comparing different eudaimonic theories and constructs.

Problems with the Concept of EWB

As noted above, there has been exponential growth in usage of the term “eudaimonic well-being.” But what does EWB mean, theoretically? Many answers have been given to this question, including “living in accordance with one’s daemon or true self” (Waterman, 1993); “striving for perfection that represents the realization of one’s true potential” (Ryff, 1995); “having meaning/value/relevance to a broader context, personal growth/self-realization/maturity, excellence/ethics/quality, and authenticity/autonomy/integration” (Huta & Waterman, 2014); and “being autonomous, competent, and related in life” (Ryan & Deci, 2000). As these quotes illustrate, EWB is seemingly an umbrella term that can accommodate
widely varying conceptions of the fully functioning human being, and widely varying conceptions of the nature of the good life.

From an empirical standpoint, the meaning of EWB is even broader and more multifarious. Below is just a partial list of measures that have been used to operationalize EWB. In some cases these measures are taken singly as measures of EWB, whereas in other cases they are combined together to create various aggregate EWB measures. The measures include: autonomy, mastery, positive relations, purpose, personal growth, and self-acceptance (i.e., psychological well-being; Ryff & Keyes, 1995); flow, psychological need-satisfaction, and meaning in life (Nelson et al., 2015); self-concordant motivation and elevation (Passmore & Howell, 2014); vitality, personal growth, life-engagement, and self-determination (Lewis et al., 2014); vitality and self-actualization (Thrash, Elliott, Maruskin, & Cassidy, 2010); and feelings of connectedness to nature (Trigwell et al., 2014). Bauer and McAdams (2008, 2010) operationalized EWB as Loevingerian ego development (for the reader’s information, ego development is scored via content analysis of the complexity of participants’ sentence completions). Hansen (2015) operationalized EWB as the combination of meaning in life, vitality, flourishing, and social relationships. Kiaei and Reio (2014) operationalized EWB in terms of a 15 item “goal aspiration” scale that combines goal-related effort intentions, importance, clarity, and inspiration. MacMahan and colleagues (MacMahan & Estes, 2011; MacMahan, Dixon, & King, 2013) operationalized EWB in terms of participant’s lay theories about well-being, specifically in terms of the extent people endorse the mere belief that well-being is a eudaimonic phenomenon. The 21-item Questionnaire for Eudaimonic Well-being (QE WB; Waterman et al., 2010) assesses feelings of self-discovery, of fulfilling best potentials, of
pursuing excellence, of having meaning in life, of investing significant effort in something, of being involved in life, of having purpose, and being personally expressive (Seaton & Beaumont, 2015). The recent Handbook of Eudaimonic Well-Being (Vitterso, 2016) has chapters on the following 12 “elements” of EWB: self-actualization, self-determination, personal expressiveness, flow, intrinsic motivation, meaningful life, flourishing, spirituality (wholeness and holiness), wisdom, positivity, personal growth, and individual orientations.

As these examples illustrate, the category of “eudaimonic well-being constructs” is threatening to become merely synonymous with the category of “positive psychology constructs,” a kind of terminological bracket creep (Kashdan & Steger, 2011). Figure 1 illustrates the resulting situation, in which the concept of EWB can contain any and every positive-sounding psychological characteristic. The only positive psychology constructs definitely not included in the EWB category are positive mood, life-satisfaction, and (low) negative affect. These are the three main components of Subjective well-being (SWB), or Hedonic well-being (HWB) as it is sometimes labelled. SWB and HWB will be discussed more fully in a later section of the article.
Of course there are many non-eudaimonic factors that can have effects on well-being. One such factor, illustrated in Figure 1, is “pets.” Most people are familiar with the Peanuts comic phrase, “Happiness is a warm puppy.” While we might agree with the sentiment, few of us would make the mistake of thinking that a warm puppy literally IS happiness; rather, it is a potential cause of happiness, among infinite other potential causes of happiness. In order to establish causality, an experiment would have to be run (i.e., comparing the effects, upon mood or joy, of being randomly assigned to play with a puppy, versus some other animal). Although it is easy (in this context) to see the mistake made by the “happiness is a warm puppy” phrase, it is more difficult to see the mistake when psychological constructs are involved. A central contention of this article is that those who use the terms “eudaimonic well-being” or “eudaimonic happiness” are making the “happiness is a warm puppy” mistake, and are thereby losing the distinction between the causes of happiness, and happiness itself.
One problem with this state of affairs is that the EWB umbrella is easily extended to cover ideas or constructs that define “the good” in questionable ways (i.e., spiritual ideologies demanding annihilation of non-believers, cultural ideologies extolling possession of a perfect body, or political ideologies justifying a permanent under-class). From a marketing perspective, promoters of “Factor X” might find it very useful to be able to link Factor X directly to the concept of “well-being.” But from a scientific perspective, it seems that linkages between psychological variables and well-being should be made using data, not just semantics. Otherwise, the definition of well-being could become ever-more dilute and tenuous, “up for grabs” to the most eloquent author, the most culturally dominant meme, or the most Orwellian leader.

An additional problem with unchecked expansion of the EWB category is that researchers are faced by an ever greater variety of outcome measures to consider including within their costly intervention studies. What kind of “well-being” should they measure and try to influence – spirituality, wisdom, benevolence, purpose, gratitude, self-regulation, ego development? What if they pick the “wrong” kind or kinds of well-being to study, according to reviewers of their work -- will they have missed the boat? Notably, studies of physical health are able to draw from a relatively small and unbiased set of measures, as outcomes (illness incidence, cardiovascular functioning, etc.). However in the study of psychological health we seem to lack such global and unbiased metrics. Instead, we have a category that is expanding exponentially.
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So far, my main contention has been that the term “Eudaimonic well-being” contains a category error, which has confused the field. Notably, the term “eudaimonia” itself does not contain this error, but the term is still scientifically problematic, because it seems to require making value judgments regarding the nature of the good. Whose definition of good, according to what value system? The concept of eudaimonia also raises the problem of potential value bias or confirmation bias in the eudaimonia researcher, and in positive psychology researchers more generally.

A typical research program in positive psychology starts with the identification of some un-studied positive characteristic, like gratitude, forgiveness, compassion, inspiration, curiosity, or mindfulness. The researcher has a personal conviction that this characteristic is important and commendable, and collects data to demonstrate that this is the case. To the extent he/she succeeds in this, his/her work is published, leading often to media attention, book contracts, and speaking tours. In other words, within positive psychology, in addition to trying to discover truth, researchers may also be tempted to market prescriptions, to the large population of people yearning for better lives – telling people how they could or should think or behave differently, in order to be happier, more fulfilled individuals. The potential distortionary effect of this state of affairs upon the science of positive psychology can hardly be overestimated (Lazarus, 2003). Thus, again, it seems we need to find a consensually agreed-upon, relatively standardized and objective way to test, and compare the effects of, emerging constructs. Which ones are actually essential for psychological thriving, according to some reasonable and established criterion, and which ones are not?

Towards a Solution: Definitional Considerations
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Defining well-being as prevailing SWB. In this section I will examine the definitions and meanings of happiness, well-being, and eudaimonia, seeking a plausible way forward. In Merriam Webster, the first definition of well-being is “the state of being happy, healthy, or prosperous.” The first definition of happiness is “a state of well-being and contentment.” The fact that happiness and well-being appear in each other’s definitions suggests that they are close synonyms, both referring to a positively valenced feeling or state of mind whose content, stability and duration are unspecified. In research psychology, the construct hewing closest to these definitions is SWB (mentioned earlier), which typically combines high positive mood, low negative mood, and high global life-satisfaction (Busseri, 2015; Diener, 1984, 1994; Sheldon & Elliott, 1999). SWB reflects the person’s evaluation of their own psychological feeling-state (Busseri, 2015; Busseri & Sadava, 2011; Diener, 1994), assessed as a resting condition of the person at a particular moment in time. This psychological state may of course be influenced by people’s prior or current behavioral activity, but the SWB measure makes no direct reference to such activity, a desirable characteristic as will be shown below.

In common research practice SWB refers not to momentary emotions or feelings, but rather, to a prevailing psychological state during a particular period of a person’s life -- a moving average that can be nudged up or down by the varying and changing circumstances people encounter, the various kinds of activities in which people engage, and their varying responses to those circumstances and activities (Lyubomirsky, Sheldon, & Schkade, 2005; Sheldon & Lyubomirsky, 2006). Defining happiness as a relatively stable but also somewhat changeable outcome state allows for scientific investigation of substantive rather than transitory changes in well-being, at the level of individual lives -- lives in which people are
continually trying out various new activities, goals, friends, work-out programs, positive psychology interventions, and so on, in the effort to craft enjoyable and meaningful lives for themselves. Thus the question arises: “which of the things people do, say, and think, actually succeed in improving their prevailing SWB?” (Sheldon, 2004). Perhaps ten sessions at the tanning salon will not do it, but ten sessions volunteering at a local shelter would do it (or vice versa)? People conduct many such experiments in their lives.

*Defining eudaimonia as a type or aspect of conative activity.* The Encyclopedia Britannica notes that for Aristotle, “eudaimonia was not a state of mind consequent on or accompanying certain activities but is a name for these activities themselves. ‘What is eudaimonia?’ is then the same question as ‘What are the best activities of which man is capable?’” This passage clearly shows that Aristotle did not define eudaimonia as a positive feeling or state of mind, as in the dictionary and operational definitions of well-being above; rather, eudaimonia refers to activity, specifically, activities that are known (or shown) to be rational, virtuous, ethical, or otherwise commendable. The term “activity” here refers to people’s values, orientations, motivations, goals, and behaviors (Huta & Waterman, 2014), all of which are expressions of people’s answers to Socrates’ perennial question: “how shall we live?” In other words, activities reflect the volitional or motivated functioning of human beings (Little, 1999), as they make choices, pursue goals, and express values. This activity-based conception of eudaimonia clearly distinguishes it from feeling-based conceptions of well-being, which again, involve emotional or evaluative states assessed as a resting condition of a person at a particular moment or period in time.
This conception of eudaimonia also fits well with the classical distinction between the cognitive, affective, and conative components of the human mind (Huiit & Cain, 2005; Little, 1999; Meyer, Chabot, & Carlsmit, 1997; Tallon, 1997). According to Meyer et al. (1997, p. 31), “Conation (or motivation) includes components that propel or move the organism such as the hunger drive or the need for achievement. In contrast the affect group—in particular, emotion—includes basic feelings such as anger and happiness along with the mental programs for emotional facial expressions. The cognition group—thought-related processes and mechanisms—includes elements such as working memory, judgment, and reasoning.” In these terms, eudaimonia is a conative concept, specifically attempting to address the “quality” of what the person is doing, or trying to do. In contrast, “well-being” is a construct that is primarily affective and evaluative in nature, concerning how the person feels. Meyer et al. (1997) insisted that clear distinctions should be maintained between these three components of the mind, in order to promote greater theoretical development and integration. Unfortunately the term EWB does the exact opposite, conflating affective, cognitive, and conative facets of the mind.

So far I have discussed the dictionary definition of well-being, concluding that it refers to SWB, and the Aristotelian conception of eudaimonia, concluding that it refers to qualities of action that are distinct from the state of SWB. But what is the dictionary definition of eudaimonia? Merriam Webster’s first definition of eudaemonia is: “well-being, happiness,” seemingly equating well-being, happiness, and eudaimonia as three close synonyms. Still, Webster’s second definition of eudaimonia is quite different: there, eudaimonia is defined as “Aristotelianism: a life of activity governed by reason” (https://www.merriam-
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webster.com/dictionary/eudaemonia). In this article, I am arguing that well-being researchers should stick with the second, Aristotelian definition of eudaimonia, in which eudaimonia is viewed as virtuous action, however the researcher cares to try to define and measure virtue. Eudaimonia is something that is done, not felt; in contrast, well-being is something that is felt, not done. This difference is important, because it means that the two types of concept are relevant at different phases of a dynamic behavioral process, in which motivated behaviors lead to experiential outcomes, which reinforce or fail to reinforce those behaviors, leading to further behaviors, and so on (Carver & Scheier, 1981; Sheldon, 2011).

Figure 2 illustrates a different approach for well-being and positive psychology researchers, in which the concept of well-being is restricted to SWB, and positive activity-based concepts are considered to be “eudaimonic factors,” rather than “aspects of EWB.” The distinction between eudaimonic factors and SWB variables is very similar to the two factor proposal of Keyes, Shmotkin and Ryff (2002), although they used the term “Psychological well-being” instead of my term, “Eudaimonic factors” (according to my arguments, the former term may also be a misnomer).

Figure 2 also shows that eudaimonic factors and SWB could both be considered as aspects of a broader category of “Flourishing,” if desired (as suggested by Keyes et al., 2002). After all, they are both attempts to understand the high-functioning human being, and eudaimonic and SWB measures tend to share much overlapping variance (Keyes et al., 2002). Figure 2 also contains the “warm puppy” icon, but not within the “flourishing” category; after all, pets cannot be flourishing itself, they can only help with flourishing. In contrast, when a
human being, through conative functioning, helps *him or herself* to flourish, then this activity itself must be considered part of flourishing.

Figure 2

Distinguishing Eudaimonic Factors from Subjective Well-being, as Aspects of Flourishing

*SWB as an Unbiased Metric for Evaluating the Eudaimonic Quality of Activity*

Thus far I have noted several problems with the increasingly prevalent EWB concept, and have suggested that we define well-being mainly as SWB. However, I have also pointed out that even the concept of eudaimonia, taken by itself, has issues because of potential value biases in researchers, who are tempted to promote their favored constructs as essential for, or even as an essential part of, happiness. Is there an objective, value-free way to evaluate the
happiness-relevant “quality” of an activity? In this section, I will further describe the properties of SWB and discuss several possible advantages of using it as a primary definition and measure of well-being. In the section after that, I will present the Eudaimonic activity model (EAM), which takes advantage of these properties to provide a general model for testing eudaimonic theories. Then in the final section of the paper I will consider further problems in the EWB literature, and show how the EAM handles or resolves these problems.

**Advantages of Adopting SWB as a Primary Measure of Well-being and Thriving**

1. **SWB is a good indicator of the overall state of the personality system.** I suggest that SWB provides a reasonably accurate read-out of the current prevailing state of the person’s emotional-evaluative system. Right now, in this particular period of his or her life, is the person cheerful, engaged, and satisfied -- or is she sad, angry, and dissatisfied? Such feelings are biologically grounded, to be point of being hard-wired into the facial musculature (Keltner, 2009). Of course SWB as measured by self-report is necessarily subjective, but this does not mean it is just a “feel good” state with few consequences; on the contrary, SWB predicts a wide variety of positive outcomes including greater job success, physical health, marital longevity, and even life-span duration (Lyubomirsky, King, & Diener, 2005; Myers, 2000). For example, the well-known nuns study (Danner, Snowdon, & Friesen, 2001) found that positive affect, as coded from the diaries of young nuns in their 20s, predicted the nun’s survival (or failure to survive) into their 80s and 90s. Such results suggest that designing interventions to boost population-level SWB is a laudable public health goal for policy makers (Diener, 2006).

2. **SWB is relatively unitary and economical.** Researchers working with measures of mood and life-satisfaction typically find that they form a single factor, upon which negative
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Affect loads negatively. Still, the three components can be kept separate for some purposes, to derive more detailed information (Busseri, 2015; Busseri & Sadava, 2011). For example, perhaps some interventions work primarily by reducing negative affect, and other interventions work primarily by increasing positive affect; this could be important information (van Zyl & Rothman, 2014). Overall, the construct of SWB gives researchers a relatively simple and easily administered measure of emotional health that can be used to compare the effects of the wide variety of different attitudes, activities, and practices that humans may adopt.

Note that my recommendation would in no way limit the possible complexity or diversity of our theories of well-being: I am only suggesting that we try to keep the complexity on the predictor side of the equation, not the outcome side, when possible, for parsimony’s sake (Sheldon, 2016). Note also that my recommendation does not preclude construing eudaimonic constructs as outcomes, rather than as predictors. For example, we might ask whether a gratitude intervention increases a woman’s measured gratitude relative to her former baseline, or whether a new marriage increases a man’s empathy score. I am only saying that we should not label these types of outcomes as forms of well-being. Yes, expressing gratitude and being empathic are part of the art of living well (Ryan, Huta, & Deci, 2013), and being grateful and empathic may contribute to well-being; but well-doing is not well-being, and happiness is not a warm puppy. Finally, I am not saying that researchers should only use SWB as an outcome. Instead, I am suggesting that SWB might form the core of a standardized well-being assessment, with additional outcome variables such as performance, social adjustment, or physical health, being identified and included based on the researcher’s goals.
3. **SWB is relatively unbiased because it is mostly free of psychosocial content.** As researchers try to conceptualize and compare the various ways that humans think, feel, behave, and live, their concepts and measures inevitably contain what I will call “psychosocial content.” Psychosocial content refers to the world of semantic and thematic concepts within which human beings live their lives -- what Karl Popper (1978) termed World 2, the world of mental objects and mental events. Psychosocial content can be seen not only in people’s minds, but also in the terminology of our psychological theories, as they name and explain the various possible causes of experience and behavior. Psychosocial content can also be seen in various philosophies of life, including eudaimonic philosophies, as these philosophies lay claim to identify the “best” goals/attitudes/practices etc. for people to engage in. Psychosocial content always comes within networks of implications, associations, and connotations, including both meanings that are shared across the globe and meanings that can be highly idiosyncratic to individuals and/or to the linguistic or cultural groups to which they belong.

For example, Levontina and Zalizniak (2001) noted that “… the difference between the Russian сhast’ev, сhast’e and the English words happy or happiness, is so great that it makes one doubt whether it is right to regard these words as translation equivalents… unlike the English word happiness which denotes an everyday emotion, the Russian word “schastye” refers to an existential ideal” (p. 297). It seems there is more psychosocial content bound up with the Russian conception of happiness than in the English conception, content having to do with prescriptive ideals for living. Thus, Americans and Russians might have very different concepts in mind when rating their “happiness,” making it impossible to meaningfully compare their scores.
If well-being is conceptualized primarily as SWB, however, then the situation is much simplified. The PANAS contains single mood adjectives that reference relatively universal emotional states, backed by biological processes (i.e., excited, afraid, ashamed), adjectives which are easy to translate and back-translate across different languages and cultural settings. Ratings on the satisfaction with life scale (SWLS; Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985) are also relatively free of psychosocial content, but in a different way: The referent, the participant’s overall level of “satisfaction,” is quite abstract (e.g., “I am satisfied with my life;” “My life is close to my ideal”). This abstraction entails that measures of global life-satisfaction contain no hints concerning what factors may have brought about the referenced degree of satisfaction; the items are uncontaminated with psychosocial content. Returning to the English/Russian difference: If researchers were to define well-being as SWB, this would simplify and standardize the definition of well-being, and would facilitate comparison of the effects of the two cultural systems upon their citizens. Perhaps Russians are lower in SWB, because their culture impresses an unattainable ideal of happiness upon them? Or perhaps Russians are instead higher in SWB, because of the inspirational effects of these existential ideals? Such hypotheses and processes can be tested.

In sum, the questions “how do you feel?” and “are you satisfied” pre-suppose no causes; instead, they refer to easily recognizable, cross-culturally equivalent states of mind which might be affected by a wide variety of causes and psychosocial contents. Although SWB measures are definitely valenced, they are not conceptually biased towards any particular lifestyle, philosophical/religious belief system, or theoretical definition of happiness. And even though the SWB measures are not completely content free (i.e., the PANAS includes the adjectives
“pride” and “interested,” both which have many connotations), SWB measures contain no allusions to what caused the pride or the interest. In contrast, EWB constructs, because of their near-circularity, are very clear as to what causes well-being: namely, themselves.

4. **SWB already distinguishes between eudaimonic and non-eudaimonic (or mere hedonic) ways of valuing and living.** In the last 25 years, constructs associated with hedonism (i.e. materialism, narcissism, Machiavellianism) have been found to be negatively associated with SWB, rather than positively associated (Kasser, 2002; Crocker & Canevello, 2012). In contrast, constructs associated with eudaimonia (i.e., purpose, gratitude, forgiveness) are typically positively associated with SWB (Vitterso, 2016). Thus, when purportedly “eudaimonic” (virtuous, commendable) and “hedonic” (self-centered, interpersonally corrosive) ways of living are compared to each other as predictors, SWB is already sufficient to distinguish between them. This means that researchers may not need to invent any additional measures of well-being in order to make the distinctions they want to make; SWB suffices to distinguish between eudaimonic and non-eudaimonic living.

5. **SWB thus provides a criterion for comparing and winnowing eudaimonic theories.** Different models or theories of EWB propose varying numbers of basic elements of EWB. For example, Seligman’s PERMA model (Seligman, 2011) focuses on five: positive emotions, engagement, meaning, positive relationships, and accomplishment. Ryff’s PWB model (Ryff & Keyes, 1995) focuses on six: mastery, positive relationships, personal growth, purpose, self-acceptance, and autonomy. Vitterso’s edited (2016) EWB book has chapters for 12 different elements of EWB, including self-actualization, self-determination, personal expressiveness, flow, intrinsic motivation, meaningful life, flourishing, spirituality, wisdom, positivity, personal
growth, and individual orientations. Considering these lists together raises questions. Which set of elements, if any, is correct? If no single list is correct in its entirety, which particular elements within the sets, if any, belong on a “final” list? Perhaps the ones which appear most frequently across the different sets? (for example, “meaning” made all three lists above). But this would seem to reduce the search for the core features of eudaimonic living to a popularity contest among theorists.

The solution advocated here is to test the multifarious members of these different sets, to determine which elements in the sets may be more or less important than others. Perhaps some eudaimonic-sounding concepts do not actually help people to thrive -- how will we know unless we test them? But how can we test and compare them? Again, SWB can provide a relevant comparison standard, allowing any and all purportedly eudaimonic contents, activities, practices, traits, contexts, interventions, or organizational/cultural styles, to be compared as to whether they help create positive mental states.

It is important to make this point: just because SWB can be used as a criterion variable (amongst other criteria a researcher might choose) does not mean that SWB is an ultimate virtue, or that SWB should be the true goal of all striving. SWB is a convenient outcome that seems to result from “right activity.” As King (2011) eloquently put it, “What stronger argument could there be for the central role of happiness... than evidence that this variable (“plain old happiness”) tracks the engagement of our better natures?” (p. 441).

But again, that does not mean that people should pursue SWB directly – that would mistake the symptom for the cause (Sheldon, Corcoran, & Prentice, 2017), would go against Aristotle’s
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recommendation to pursue virtue not happiness, and likely would not work anyway (van Zyl & Rothman, 2014).

The Temptation to Expand the Conception of Well-being

Why do researchers feel that additional measures or conceptions of well-being are needed, in addition to SWB? There appear to be several reasons. First, there is a fear that SWB misses something important -- intuition tells us that “there must be more to a good life than just positive mood and satisfaction.” Indeed, this intuition likely explains much of the appeal of Ryff’s Psychological Well-Being model (PWB; Ryff, 1989; Ryff & Keyes, 1995) when it first appeared: the model promised to deliver a more nuanced, complex understanding of well-being than what existed before. And in fact, the intuition is correct: there is much more to a good life besides SWB; as noted above, SWB is not what people should strive for. However, in the Aristotelian view, these additional features of a good life are not additional features of well-being, because they involve well-doing, not well-being; they are conative processes, not affective processes.

A second reason for some researchers’ desire to define well-being as involving something more than SWB is what might be called the “myth of the happy hedonist.” Believers in this myth feel sure that the world is full of pleasure-seeking, self-centered people who are happier than they should be. Truly virtuous people, in this view, are the ones for whom happiness does not matter; perhaps they even entirely sacrifice their happiness for great causes. Taken to its logical extreme, the myth suggests that measures of eudaimonic living should be negatively, not positively, associated with SWB! Again, however, research during the last 20 years has amply demonstrated that the notion of “the happy hedonist” is indeed a myth
-- people who are more narcissistic, materialistic, self-centered, and pleasure-centered are (on average) less happy, not more happy, than the rest of us (Crocker & Canevello, 2012; Kasser, 2002; Sheldon, 2014). Their relationships are not healthy and their personal growth is stalled; their hedonism is an over-compensation for an unfulfilling life (Kasser, 2002; Vansteenkiste & Ryan, 2013).

A third reason for the field’s search for something more than SWB is historical, lying in the desire of positive psychologists to deflect the criticism that positive psychology is just “happiology” (Lazarus, 2003). Early positive psychologists seemed to accept this critique, and to agree that positive psychology should be about much more than just happiness or SWB (King, 2011). Thus they embraced an obscure and multifarious conception of happiness, rooted in ancient Greek thought concerning virtue and right living, which seemed to solve much of the problem (Kashdan, Biswas-Diener, & King, 2008). But in this chapter I am arguing that the field went wrong in doing this, opening a way to define any and everything as happiness, and losing scientific precision in the process. SWB should remain central in the thinking of positive psychologists, because it provides an important and relatively unbiased indicator of the relative effectiveness of various eudaimonic activities, strategies, philosophies, or interventions.

Yet a fourth reason the field searches for a different thriving indicator than SWB is because of the misleading equation of SWB with “hedonic” well-being (HWB). A recent search (November 23, 2016) yielded 283 research articles comparing the effects of various interventions, social contexts, or personal practices, upon both “hedonic” and “eudaimonic” well-being (Kopperud & Vitterso, 2008). In these articles, HWB (theoretically, involving self-indulgence and pleasure) is construed as a less desirable or commendable form of well-being
than EWB (theoretically, involving virtuous living and self-actualization strivings; see Vitterso, 2013). Very frequently, however, SWB serves as the measure of hedonic well-being, because of SWB’s reference to positive relative to negative emotions (Church et al., 2014; Nelson, Fuller, Choi, & Lyubomirsky, 2014; Ryff & Singer, 2008; Ryff, 2014). However as discussed above, SWB is actually predicted by virtuous, eudaimonic activity, not by pleasure- and self-centered activity. Hedonic well-being (HWB) may well be worth studying, but if so, it needs to be defined and measured in ways more commensurate with its connotations of excess, imbalance, and immaturity. I suggest that the concept of HWB should not be operationalized via the SWB measure, because it taints the concept of SWB with content and properties that it does not actually possess.

Given the potential for confusion that it engenders, is the concept of eudaimonia worth retaining? Yes. One reason is that it is useful to have a historically and philosophically grounded term that explicitly references people’s quest for self-improvement. The eudaimonia concept provides ways of thinking about processes of self-directed personal growth and personality development, which are of great interest to positive personality psychologists. Another appeal of eudaimonia, properly understood, is its reference to virtue, i.e. the “best” within us (Waterman, 2013). By targeting something that is beyond ego, comfort, and other mundane concerns, eudaimonia provides ways of thinking about the nature of rational, ethical and moral behavior. Yet a third source of this Aristotelian definition’s appeal is the mature values that it promotes; we are enjoined to pursue learning, knowledge, and service, while avoiding too much indulgence in mere sensory pleasures and selfish pursuits. Again, however,
if researchers think of eudaimonia as merely an expanded conception of well-being, then the whole point of importing the concept from philosophy into psychology might be missed.

The Eudaimonic Activity Model

The foregoing reasoning suggests a specific heuristic for testing eudaimonic theories, which can resolve many of the problems discussed above: The “Eudaimonic Activity Model” (EAM). The simplest version of the EAM is depicted below:

Eudaimonic Activities  -->  SWB

The EAM is based on the assumption that peoples’ activities yield experiential results which may or may not bring SWB, and that (actual) eudaimonic activities tend to be the ones that really do bring SWB. In my own longitudinal research I have employed the EAM model to study the SWB changes induced by varying types of personal goal pursuits (Sheldon & Elliot, 1999; Sheldon & Kasser, 1998), varying happiness strategies (Sheldon & Lyubomirsky, 2006, 2012), varying value types (Sheldon, 2005; Sheldon, Arndt, & Houser-Marko, 2003), varying role identities and identity characteristics (Sheldon, Gunz, & Schachtman, 2012; Sheldon, Ryan, Rawsthorne, & Ilardi, 1997), and varying types of goal-motive matching (Sheldon & Cooper, 2008; Sheldon & Schuler, 2011). Many other researchers have pursued a similar strategy of treating SWB as a criterion variable for evaluating the effectiveness of particular traits, virtues, or activities (Kahneman, Diener, & Schwartz, 1999; Ryan et al., 2008). Although it is possible to think of some eudaimonic activities that might not be associated with well-being (i.e., self-control, self-denial, self-sacrifice), it should still be the case that these activities do produce SWB in the long term. In contrast, any purportedly eudaimonic activity that reduces a person’s SWB, in both the short and long term, should be viewed with suspicion.
What about Outcome Experiences that have Psychosocial Content?

Readers may have noticed that the boundary between conative activities (values, orientations, motivations, goals, and behaviors) and well-being (affective and evaluative outcomes) is not always as clear as I have portrayed. Again, I have suggested that conative constructs always come with psychosocial content, while SWB does not. However, there are many positive experiential constructs that are not necessarily conative, which do come with psychosocial content -- occupying an intermediate zone between intentional activity and evaluative/emotional reactions. Carol Ryff’s six PWB subscales – autonomy, mastery, positive relations, personal growth, purpose, and self-acceptance – are a case in point (Ryff & Keyes, 1995). Although it is possible to interpret the Ryff subscales in conative terms (the person is actively striving for personal growth, seeking mastery, searching for purpose, yearning for positive relations, etc.; Sheldon, 2011), given the actual item wordings it seems safest to interpret them in terms of feelings or experiences that a person is having. In other words, the Ryff PWB scale measures six different kinds of presumably satisfying experiences, based on six different types of psychosocial content. These experiential contents include the sense that one is growing and developing (or not), that sense that one is connected to other people (or not), the sense that one accepts oneself (or not), the sense that one has a purpose guiding one into the future (or not), the sense that one is able to be effective and efficient (or not), and the sense that one is living one’s life autonomously (or not).

I suggest that like SWB, the PWB scales should also be treated as read-outs of the psychological health of the person, with each aspect of PWB having a narrower and more specific content focus compared to SWB, and with each aspect perhaps helping to produce
Of course, the six PWB constructs are not really narrow; Ryff (1989) distilled them from a comprehensive analysis of the entire mental health literature. Still, from the EAM perspective, none of the six types of PWB are well-being itself; instead, they are important categories of satisfying experiences that may potentially cause SWB. But how can we tell this is true? By testing them. In fact, the Ryff scales have already passed this test (Ryff & Keyes, 1995), helping to validate all six PWB subscales as important types of satisfying experiences that people can have if they manage to live eudaimonically (Huta & Ryan, 2009), experiences that facilitate SWB.

One benefit of recognizing an intermediate category of “satisfying experiences” is that it can help us to explain why certain eudaimonic activities produce SWB: namely, because those behaviors bring people rich and rewarding experiences, which both reinforce the behaviors and produce well-being. Self-determination theory (SDT; Deci & Ryan, 1985, 2000) makes extensive use of this idea. As noted above, SDT says that all human beings have basic psychological needs, for three specific types of satisfying experiences: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. When people’s needs are satisfied they are enabled to experience wholeness, health, and happiness (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Many SDT studies assess various positive features of a person’s life, such as the autonomy-supportiveness of their educational or work context or the quality of their friendships and relationships, and also assess the quantity of psychological need-satisfaction the person is currently experiencing (Ryan & Deci, 2008), and also assess conventional SWB. Psychological need-satisfaction is often treated as a mediator variable, to explain how and why those activities or life-circumstances result in greater well-being for the person (Ryan & Deci, 2008).
Just in my own research, psychological need-satisfaction has been shown to mediate the SWB effects of achieving self-concordant vs. less concordant goals (Sheldon & Elliott, 1999), the SWB effects of having balanced vs. unbalanced time apportionments across the day (Sheldon, Cummins, & Khamble, 2012), the SWB effects of having one’s “social character” traits be consistent with one’s “unguarded self” traits (Sheldon et al., 2012), the SWB effects of attending a student-centered compared to a traditional law school (Sheldon & Krieger, 2007), the SWB effects of being assigned to pursue motive-congruent (Sheldon & Schuler, 2011) or need-congruent goals (Sheldon, Abad, Ferguson, Gunz, Houser-Marko, Nichols, & Lyubomirsky, 2010) rather than alternative goals, and the SWB effects of being exposed to need-supportive vs. unsupportive instructional styles in a game-learning context (Sheldon & Filak, 2008).

The Full Eudaimonic Activity Model

The above reasoning leads to the full EAM, depicted below.

**Eudaimonic Activities**  -->  **Satisfying Experiences**  -->  **SWB**

This is a very abstract model which acknowledges that people have a wide variety of choices they can make regarding what to do, who to associate with, and what to think and believe, in their conative life. The chief advantage of making wise (i.e. truly eudaimonic) choices, according to the model, is that such choices will bring many satisfying experiences, which in turn will tend to bring happiness and satisfaction, i.e., SWB. As noted above, the EAM also implies that people should not pursue SWB directly (Sheldon et al., 2017). Since SWB is relatively content free, it is very difficult to forecast or predict in advance what will bring positive feelings and satisfaction (Gilbert, 2006; Wilson & Gilbert, 2005). Instead, as discussed earlier, people should pursue “the best activities of which they are capable” (i.e. eudaimonia).
People will know that they are succeeding at this when they start to feel deep satisfactions in life. Enhanced SWB will merely be a by-product of these satisfactions, a “natural reward for a life well lived” (Sheldon, 2013). In Keltner’s memorable (2009) book title, humans are “born to be good.” One of the things this means is that people are born to feel good (i.e., to feel SWB) when they are good (i.e., when they behave eudaimonically). We receive emotional rewards when we strive for our best.

Figure 3 contains an updated version of Figure 2, which distinguishes three aspects of flourishing, not just two. It does this by splitting the “Eudaimonic factors” category into two categories: Eudaimonic practices and satisfying psychosocial experiences. The satisfying experiences category (Sheldon et al., 2001) potentially contains the three proposed needs of SDT (autonomy, competence, relatedness), as well as Ryff and Keyes’ six PWB constructs, as well as other seemingly important experiences such as awe, meaning, or inspiration, that still need to be evaluated in comparison to one another. Figure 3 also contains three arrows that depict the full dynamic process model posited by the EAM, illustrating a “virtuous cycle” effect in which, if people can get themselves to behave in eudaimonic ways, they will have satisfying experiences (lower arrow), which will both reinforce the original behaviors (upper arrow), and bring SWB as an outcome (right arrow).
Critique of Eudaimonic well-being

Figure 3

The full Eudaimonic Activity Model

Importantly, the EAM is in some respects merely formalizes a suggestion made by Ryan, Huta and Deci (2008). Ryan et al. (2008) argued that there are four aspects of eudaimonic living: self-determined motivation, intrinsic value orientation, the practice of mindful self-awareness, and psychological need-satisfaction. Furthermore, Ryan et al. (2008) suggested that psychological need-satisfaction is best construed as a mediator, which can explain the effects of the other three aspects of eudaimonia, upon positive outcomes such as SWB or physical health. The EAM fully accepts this suggestion, but does not restrict the category of Eudaimonic activities to only self-determined motivation, intrinsic value orientation, and mindful self-awareness; other eudaimonic constructs besides the three could be proposed and tested. Such tests might lead us to accept Ryan et al.’s (2008) proposal that the “what,” the “why,” and the
“awareness of” motivation are the three most essential aspects of eudaimonic living; or, they might lead us to some other conclusions. Similarly, appropriate tests could determine whether autonomy, competence, and relatedness are the three most essential satisfying experiences, or whether other experiences, such as awe or inspiration, might also need to be admitted to the set (see Sheldon et al., 2001, for one example of such research). The answers would depend on data, not argumentation.

How the Eudaimonic Activity Model can Help Solve Other Problems in the EWB Literature

Earlier in this article I discussed a variety of problems with the concept of Eudaimonic well-being, problems which seem to have confused researchers and unduly complicated our understanding of well-being. These problems include a) the problem of mixing up two different aspects of the human mind (conation and affect), and the consequent problem of confusing prescribable behaviors with the experiential results of those behaviors; b) the problem of profound disagreements within the field concerning the definition and measurement of well-being; c) the problem of over-proliferation of eudaimonic theories and constructs, without sufficient winnowing and comparative testing; and d) the problem of value and confirmation bias in positive psychology research and eudaimonia research. The EAM addresses all of these issues, by a) clearly distinguishing between three types of construct – conative activities, satisfying psychosocial experiences, and SWB; by b) defining well-being primarily as SWB, thereby preventing contamination of an important criterion variable by the very practices which may produce (or not produce) that criterion; by c) providing a powerful process model framework that can afford comparative evaluation and explanation of new eudaimonic concepts and measures; and by d) promoting a norm in which eudaimonic theories are
expected to be tested as producers of agreed-upon measures of psychological health, in the same way that medical prescriptions are efficacy-tested by their effects on agreed-upon measures of physical health.

In a recent review article Huta and Waterman (2014) also discussed problems with the concept of “Eudaimonic well-being,” including several addressed herein, but they took a different approach in trying to resolve them. Below I consider some differences between their approach and mine, and explain why the EAM approach may be preferable. Among the problems Huta and Waterman identified and hoped to resolve (see p. 1426) were “the multiplicity of conceptual and operational definitions being employed, especially with respect to the term eudaimonia, without any systematic overview or classification;” the fact that “eudaimonia is sometimes defined as a way of behaving whereas hedonia is defined as a way of feeling, making it difficult to compare them;” also the problem of “the looseness and vagueness with which hedonia and eudaimonia are sometimes discussed;” and the problem that “eudaimonia may become a synonym for everything non-hedonic, or even for all of positive psychology.” Obviously, Huta and Waterman’s list of problems in EWB research coincides rather closely with mine.

Huta and Waterman’s main proposed solution to these problems was to identify four categories of construct that have been addressed by Eudaimonic well-being researchers: 1) Orientations (orientations, values, motives, and goals), 2) behaviors (behavioral content, activity characteristics), 3) experiences (subjective experiences, emotions, cognitive appraisals), and 4) functioning (indices of positive psychological functioning, mental health, flourishing). They used this system to classify many different constructs and research programs currently
appearing within the EWB literature, locating those constructs/programs within a single very large table. However, the exercise was purely descriptive; they did not attempt to use the system to simplify or delimit the concept of EWB. Thus, it was not clear that any of the underlying problems had been resolved.

The EAM approach addresses the same four categories, but defines 1) orientations and 2) behaviors as conative constructs, which concern people’s choices and values concerning the perennial problem, “how best shall I use my time and life?” Huta and Waterman’s categories 3 and 4 are thus excluded from the “eudaimonia” category. Instead, the EAM defines Huta and Waterman’s (2014) third “experiences” category as the “satisfying psychosocial experiences” that may result from truly eudaimonic activities, experiences involving constructs such as psychological need-satisfaction (Ryan & Deci, 2008) or psychological well-being (Ryff, 1989). Such experiences can explain how a particular eudaimonic activity or practice is reinforced and rewarded, and also why it produces enhanced SWB (Sheldon, 2011). Notably, the EAM does not locate emotions within this “experiences” category as do Huta and Waterman; instead it locates emotions within the last category, concerning health. Specifically, the EAM uses SWB to represent Huta and Waterman’s (2014) category 4, which Huta and Waterman (2014) called psychological functioning. Notably, Huta and Waterman (2014) argued that functioning should be measured by indices of mental health, which are typically self-report measures very similar in kind to SWB measures.

In sum, the EAM restricts application of the concept of “eudaimonia” to only the first two of Huta and Waterman’s four categories (orientations and behaviors), and posits a process model where truly eudaimonic activities lead to outcomes in the third category (satisfying
experiences) which in turn lead to outcomes in the fourth category (positive functioning, i.e. SWB). Of course, other indices of positive functioning beyond SWB could be employed within the EAM, including objective indices (i.e., supervisor-rated work performance, observer-rated relationship quality). However, SWB could provide a useful core measurement tool for evaluating the effects of interventions and programs, one that allowed for ready comparisons across those different interventions.

Conclusion

In 2009, in their response to Kashdan, Biswas-Diener and King’s (2008) article criticizing the EWB construct, Ryan and Huta (2009) argued in favor of retaining the concept of EWB. They suggested that it is premature to confine well-being to SWB alone, and asserted that it would be more generative for the field to further explore the implications of the EWB concept. My survey of the recent literature suggests that EWB has failed the test: it is making the situation more confusing, rather than less confusing. However, there is a relatively simple solution to the problem. Namely, re-conceptualize EWB constructs not as forms of well-being, but rather, as either “eudaimonic activity” constructs, which can potentially bring satisfying experiences and thus SWB, or as “satisfying experience” constructs, which can potentially reinforce eudaimonic activities and mediate their effects upon SWB. I suggest that this re-conceptualization could allow the field to make swift new progress concerning many important questions, and surmount considerable confusion in the process. Failing this, the field of positive psychology might continue to be a marketing competition as much as a scientific competition, in which the incentives sometimes favor murkiness over clarity.
Although I have painted the picture in somewhat dire terms, in truth, there is more agreement than disagreement here. All eudaimonia researchers would agree that an essential aspect of human nature is people’s quest to find better ways to live, so that they, and those around them, can thrive to the maximal extent. And, all researchers would agree that some forms of activity and ways of living are more self-centered and short-sighted, and unlikely to be as fulfilling as other, more eudaimonic ways of living. The only problem is that eudaimonia researchers have gone somewhat astray by focusing on distinguishing eudaimonic well-being from “mere” SWB, rather than focusing on distinguishing eudaimonic activity from less eudaimonic activity. Instead of battling SWB, eudaimonia researchers might instead use SWB, as one of the most powerful tools for validating their theories of right action.
References


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