
Conceptual Challenges for a Science of Eudaimonic Well-Being

5

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5.1 Introduction

The first challenge I'll consider is the most basic one and fundamental to any investigation into EWB: this is the challenge of defining EWB in a way that preserves its uniqueness as a distinctive form of well-being. Tackling this challenge, indeed, was how Aristotle first introduced the concept of eudaimonia (Aristotle, 1962). His efforts to define eudaimonia began with the process of elimination. Some people, he argues, think living well consists in a life of pleasure, or a life of wealth, or a life of honor. But these views go astray insofar as they fail to identify living well—what Aristotle takes to be our supreme good—with something that is tied to our humanity and that is a complete and self-sufficient good.

A life of pleasure, he argues, is suitable to beasts, not humans. Those who pursue it “betray their utter slavishness in their preference for a life suitable to cattle” (Aristotle, 1962, bk. I.5). A life of wealth is not complete insofar as wealth is only useful for the sake of something else. The money-maker's life “is led under some kind of constraint: clearly, wealth is not the good which we are trying to find, for it is only useful, i.e., it is a means to something else” (Aristotle, bk. I.5). A life of honor is not self-sufficient insofar as honor

depends upon others bestowing it: “honor seems to depend on those who confer it rather than on him who receives it, whereas our guess is that the good is a man's own possession which cannot easily be taken away from him” (Aristotle, bk. I.5).

Through this process of elimination, the following criteria for the good life emerge: the good life must be a life distinctive to humanity, and it must be something complete (good in itself) and self-sufficient insofar as its goodness doesn't depend on something (or someone) else. Aristotle's own construal of eudaimonia makes heavy use of the first criteria and it is here that we find the language of flourishing and well-functioning that is now commonly associated with EWB. Aristotle is drawn to this interpretation of the good life insofar as it follows from the above criteria and meshes with his teleological commitments (according to which each being has a distinctive end towards which it strives).

Reflection on what is the distinctive function of human beings leads Aristotle to focus on rationality and our capacity to use reason to think, to act, and to control how we feel. Our function consists in the exercise of rationality and well-functioning consists in the best kind of exercise of rationality, which Aristotle describes as activity in conformity with virtue:

[I]f we take the proper function of man to be a certain kind of life, and if this kind of life is an activity of the soul and consists in actions performed in

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conjunction with the rational element, and if a man of high standards is he who performs these actions well and properly, and if a function is well performed when it is performed in accordance with the excellence appropriate to it; we reach the conclusion that the good of man is an activity of the soul in conformity with excellence or virtue, and if there are several virtues, in conformity with the best and most complete. (Aristotle, 1962, bk. 1.7)

Eudaimonia, for Aristotle, is the life of virtue. Because this life consists in the exercise of our rational faculties, it is one that is distinctive to human nature; it is self-sufficient in that it does not depend upon anything else; and, in Aristotle's eyes, it is a complete good, lacking nothing and enjoyed and valued for itself.

We see that Aristotle meets the challenge of defining EWB through a pretty rigorous formula that starts with a concrete analysis of its nature and then moves from there to determine its content. Contemporary theorists, however, tend not to take this formulaic approach. Rather, the approach seems to be a looser, less-defined project of trying to capture a state of flourishing or well-functioning. That is, rather than beginning with an analysis of the features of the good life and then moving to a focus on well-functioning, contemporary theorists begin with a focus on well-functioning, and move from there to analyze the features of this state.

While, as we'll see, this contemporary approach is not without its problems, this move away from Aristotle has its merits. While we can see quite clearly why, given his approach, Aristotle's conception of EWB favors the exercise of rationality, it isn't obvious that the description of eudaimonia we end up with from his analysis captures something that is truly a flourishing state for us. And while we can accept that living well ought to be something that is both complete and self-sufficient, it isn't clear that the fact that something is distinctive to human nature ought to be the driving factor in determining our well-being. Aristotle's methodology of defining eudaimonia in terms of that which fits certain criteria thus allows too much room for gaps to be created between that which fits the criteria and

our own experiences of flourishing.¹ Starting with flourishing seems a promising route, at the very least insofar as it mitigates the potential for these kind of gaps.²

This method seems to be the one embraced by most psychologists. Consider Waterman, who starts with this description of "personal expressiveness", which he takes to be eudaimonia:

[T]here are instances when an individual engaging in an activity will report one of more of the following: (a) an unusually intense involvement in an undertaking, (b) a feeling of special fit or meshing with an activity that is not characteristic of most daily tasks, (c) a feeling of being complete and fulfilled while engaged in the activity, and (d) an impression that this is what the person was meant to do. (Waterman, 1990a, p. 40)

On Waterman's approach, the first task is to outline the phenomenon; with this understanding of the phenomenon in tact, we can go on to determine the conditions underwhich individuals can experience this phenomenon.

This approach reduces the chances that we end up specifying EWB in a way that feels foreign to the individual and that might present a gap between EWB and the individual's experience of well-being. The challenge this approach introduces, however, is the challenge of specifying the phenomenon. We all have experiences of better and worse states of functioning, but what is distinctive about the state of well-functioning? And what components are requisite this state? For both philosophers and psychologists, this challenge amounts to being able to describe EWB in a way that preserves its status as a unique

¹Haybron (2008) criticizes Aristotle along these lines, charging that because Aristotle specifies well-being in terms of the species, rather than the individual, he thereby creates the potential for a gap between his theory of well-being and well-being as it is experienced by the individual.

²As noted, my interpretation of Aristotle draws on Book 1 of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. Some interpreters (e.g. McDowell 1998) find in Aristotle's subsequent analysis of virtue a methodology more akin to the contemporary one I describe here.

form of well-being, i.e., that (a) is distinct from other recognizable forms of well-being; and (b) is nonetheless still a theory of well-being, where well-being is taken to be a prudential value—that which is good for the agent. Let's consider each of these components in turn.

In trying to describe EWB as a unique form of well-being, a central challenge is to try to describe the subjective experience of EWB in a way that does not collapse into other subjective experiences associated with well-being, such as feeling pleasure or feeling satisfaction. Traditionally EWB has been understood as an objective theory of well-being insofar as it describes a state that does not depend upon the possessor experiencing positive feelings about one's life (for discussion, see Besser-Jones, 2014). If we take its roots seriously, EWB is fundamentally a state of flourishing and well-functioning; while it typically leads to positive feelings about one's life, to truly capture the phenomenon it is important to be able to identify it independently of these positive feelings with which it is correlated. These positive feelings are associated with very different approaches to well-being: respectively, hedonism and life satisfaction. Unlike EWB, these forms of well-being describe well-being entirely in terms of these positive feelings.

Insofar as EWB is meant to capture something that is importantly different from these forms of well-being, it is important to be able to specify it in objective terms of well-functioning. But of course EWB has a subjective element—well-functioning is an experience, after all, and this makes the task of specifying EWB that much more difficult. How should the subjective element enter into the specification of EWB?

Aristotle's conception of eudaimonia is largely silent on its experiential component. Where Aristotle does describe the experiential component of eudaimonia it is in the context of the feelings that he believes ought to be associated with the exercise of virtue. The exercise of virtue, he argues, ought to be something that flows from us wholeheartedly and without reservation; the existence of conflicting desires signifies continence and a lack of full virtue. When we are fully virtuous, our desires point to the exercise of virtue without conflict and we experience a kind of

pleasure that “completes” the act (Aristotle, 1962, bk. X). It is difficult to parse exactly what Aristotle is after here, and his view of pleasure is complex.³

Backing away from providing a full description of the experiential component of eudaimonia might have been okay for Aristotle, given his methodology; but as we move away from his methodology and towards the current approach to understanding EWB by first describing the phenomenon itself, this task becomes more pressing. And, indeed, we've seen disagreement amongst psychologists regarding how best to categorize the phenomenon of EWB.

Ryan, Huta, and Deci (2008), for example, emphasize that EWB tracks a process of living well and that this is very distinct from hedonic approaches which tend to look at the outcomes.

[H]edonic versus eudaimonic psychologies do not in principle constitute a debate about what well-being “feels like” or what “happiness,” considered as a state of mind, entails. Rather, eudaimonic conceptions focus on the content of one's life, and the processes involved in living well, whereas hedonic conceptions of well-being focus on a specific outcome, namely the attainment of positive affect and an absence of pain. (Ryan et al., 2008, p. 140)

The distinction made here between well-being considered as a “process” and well-being considered as an “outcome” is an important one and certainly mirrors Aristotle's understanding of EWB. In contrast to hedonism and other forms of well-being, EWB is an active state of well-being that requires on-going activity. As LeBar (2013) has argued, it is one that requires and highlights an individual's agency. When we experience EWB, our lives go well *because of how we have lived* and not because we are passive receptors of positive feelings.

In their efforts to uniquely identify EWB, we see Ryan, Huta, and Deci's emphasis on the *content* of one's life, and the *processes* involved in living well. As a form of life, we can thus describe EWB in terms of objective features of one's life (see also Huta, Chap. 15, this volume and Ryan & Martela, Chap. 7, this volume). But, as Ryan

³See Annas (2008), Besser-Jones (2012), and Curzer (2002) for discussion.

et al acknowledge, this doesn't release us from the challenges of describing the subjective experience of EWB: "The foci of eudaimonic research are to specify what living well entails and to identify the expected consequences of such living. These consequences may include hedonic satisfactions, but typically eudaimonic theorists have been especially interested in other outcomes indicative of a good life, such as vitality, intimacy, health, and sense of meaning, among others" (2008). Notice here that their efforts to describe the subjective experience of EWB takes it to be an outcome indicative of a good life, but not constitutive of a good life.

In contrast, Waterman finds it important to include the subjective experience of EWB as constitutive of it (1990b). In fact, while he stresses the importance of self-realization, in one of his most recent formulations he locates EWB as a product of self-realization, rather than as constitutive of it: "'eudaimonia' is a positive subjective state that is the product (or perhaps by-product) of the pursuit of self-realization rather than the objective being sought" (Waterman, 2007). On his analysis, the subjective experience of eudaimonia is understood in terms of personal expressiveness, and arises where there is an intense involvement with one's actions, a feeling of "special fit or meshing" with the activity along with a feeling of completeness or fulfillment and an impression that this is what one is meant to be doing (Waterman, 1990a, p. 47). These experiences of personal expressiveness are constitutive of EWB, he argues, and not the activities that give rise to them, for the activities themselves might be experienced differently between individuals. This is one reason why Waterman departs from Aristotle (and Ryan, Huta, and Deci) in his emphasis on the subjective experience of EWB.

Ryff's (1989) multi-dimensional account can be seen as a kind of balance between these two divergent approaches towards understanding the subjective experience of EWB. Her account includes some elements descriptive of the objectively construed content of one's life (e.g., positive relationships, environmental mastery) and some descriptive of one's experiences of this life (e.g., self-acceptance, autonomy), all which she

takes to be constitutive of EWB (Ryff, Chap. 6, this volume).

At this point we might reasonably question whether or not it matters whether we see the typical, subjectively experienced, indicators of EWB as constitutive of EWB or as outcomes of EWB. On the one hand, it seems that in order to preserve the unique status of EWB, we need to separate the outcome from the process and focus only on the process of living well, for we otherwise risk mistaking EWB for hedonism or some other subjective form of well-being. This is certainly how the philosophical approach runs, and this seems to have influenced Ryan, Huta, and Deci in their emphasis on understanding EWB as a process that can be understood independently of subjective feelings. On the other hand, it seems as if the science of EWB depends upon our abilities to identify the experiential component of it. To study EWB, and to determine which ways of living are constitutive of it, we need to be able to identify it.

While it may be conceptually possible to separate the process of EWB from its outcome and indicators, in practice this separation seems somewhat artificial. This is increasingly clear when we realize that the very methodology by which we come to learn about the process of living well is by first identifying and reflecting on its indicators, and then understanding which ways of living correlate with those indicators. This methodology, of course, presumes that we can distinguish the subjective experience of EWB from other positive feelings, a point Vittersø (2013) emphasizes in his distinction between eudaimonic and hedonic feelings. Drawing on emotion research, Vittersø (e.g., Chap. 17, this volume) argues that the capacity to distinguish between feeling states is vital to the overall purpose of emotions, which is to prompt us towards different sorts of actions. Hedonic feelings "facilitate stability and adaptation", while eudaimonic feelings "facilitate growth and accommodation" (Vittersø, p. 51). We thus can distinguish between positive emotions that feel hedonic, and those that do not; according to Vittersø, eudaimonic feelings just are positive non-hedonic feelings. This emphasis on describing eudaimonic feelings in terms of their direction and purpose may help

to us in our efforts to identify the subjective experience of EWB.⁴

Reaching a better understanding of the subjective experience of EWB may also help to ward off concerns regarding the normativity of EWB and so may help bring discussion of EWB into greater focus. In our discussion of Aristotle, we saw that his focus on describing the process of living well in objective terms threatens to create a gap between leading a life that fits the criteria for living well and experiencing the eudaimonic feelings correlated with that life. Diener, Saptya, and Suh (1998) raise related concerns, arguing that well-being ought to be something determined by the individual experiencing it and not by experts. They go on to question whether or not the ingredients often taken to be essential to EWB have any worth independently of their connection to subjective well-being. Attributing a great role to the experiential components of EWB will help to establish its importance in the face of these challenges.

I've argued that while it is challenging to uniquely identify the subjective experience of EWB, doing so will help to advance the study of it. Emphasizing the subjective experience may be a departure from Aristotle's original conception of eudaimonia, but from a scientific perspective, the subjective experience of EWB provides the window through which we can best understand what it means to live well, and what is involved in so doing.

A second and related conceptual challenge for the science of EWB concerns how it is that we frame and understand the concept of "well-functioning". This component is essential to EWB, yet in many respects it may be the hardest to understand.⁵ As we've seen, Aristotle reaches

his understanding of eudaimonia by reflecting on what he took to be the distinctive function of human nature. This analysis flows nicely with his teleological commitments, according to which everything has some end towards which it strives. While many contemporary philosophers defend Aristotle's focus on reason and the exercise of practical rationality (LeBar, 2013; Russell, 2012), from an empirical point of view this position is relatively easy to challenge. The fact that reason may be *distinctive* to human nature does not on its own carry much normative weight. There may be many features distinctive to human nature that we do not want to highlight and frame as features that ought to be developed and pursued as part of living well. Neither, for that matter, does the fact that the exercise of reason may constitute our *function* carry much normative weight. From a scientific point of view functional analyses lead us towards thinking about what is good for the species, not the individual; there is no guarantee that a functional analysis will lead us to a way of living that is recognizable as living well for that individual.

Rather, when we reflect on EWB and in what living well consists, what seems to count is whether certain ways of living tap into features of human nature, the synthesis of which leads agents to function better in their every day tasks. This, I take it, is what many psychologists are after when they discuss EWB in terms of personal growth, personal expressivism, and need satisfaction. But it is worth noting how very different the former two construals are from the latter. Talk of personal growth and personal expressivism leads to an individualized conception of EWB. Depending upon one's individual talents and skills, what counts as living well for one may very well vary from one person to the next. This consequence is something both Ryff and Singer and Waterman embrace: Ryff and Singer describe the "essence of eudaimonia" as "the idea of striving toward excellence based on one's unique potential" (2008, p. 14), and Waterman writes that "eudaimonia is experienced only on connection with activities that advance one's highest potentialities, either in terms of aptitudes and talents and/or purposes in living" (1990b, pp. 40–41).

⁴Vittersø's own proposal is that both eudaimonic and hedonic feelings are essential to optimal functioning.

⁵Some psychological approaches take EWB to consist in more specific components of well-functioning such as a life of purpose or meaning (e.g. Steger, 2012). I worry that these formulations of EWB are misleading insofar as they focus on one specific aspect of well-functioning, as opposed to beginning with the general reflection on well-functioning that, historically, lies at the heart of EWB and allows for a more inclusive approach to determining what counts as well-functioning.

These individualized understandings of eudaimonia track a very different thing than Aristotle started with. Aristotle believed that there was a way of living well that was consistent across individuals and reflective of human nature itself, and sought to describe this in his formulation of eudaimonia. In this respect, the self-determination theoretical approach towards conceptualizing EWB in terms of the satisfaction of innate psychological needs better preserves a conception of EWB as an objective form of living well, that does not vary between individuals. And to the extent to which there is evidence supporting the positing of innate psychological needs as relatively consistent across human nature, understanding EWB in these terms seems accurate, insofar as it captures the desired kind of synthesis between features of human nature and ways of living that contribute to overall functioning. Of course, that the self-determination theoretical approach more closely approximates Aristotle's conception of eudaimonia as describing an objective form of living well does not necessarily count against the individualized interpretations of EWB. But to the extent that they end up tracking very different things, this conceptual difference in the various psychologist's interpretation of EWB is worth emphasis.

Defenders of the individualized interpretation of EWB do face some unique challenges when it comes to its study. Testing whether or not an individual is using her potential and aptitudes is tricky, as is determining which potentials and aptitudes we are comfortable including in our conception of living well. An aptitude towards aggression, for instance, does not mean that the individual lives well when she develops this aptitude, and there are many more such examples.⁶ A greater awareness of these challenges, and of whether or not one is committed to an individualized understanding of EWB or an objective understanding of EWB, will help the science of EWB progress.

The third and final challenge I'll discuss is one I worry may be insurmountable in practice, and this concerns how to conceptualize EWB in a

way that preserves its emphasis on living well construed as an overall phenomenon, as opposed to something that we can experience in some aspects of our lives and not others. According to almost all those who theorize about EWB, EWB describes an overall way of living well that doesn't reduce to separate components; it is a function of one's whole life. But psychological research on EWB tends to carve up EWB into separate components, as if EWB could be experienced in one aspect of one's life but not in others. Waterman (1990a) is explicit about this departure, and argues that understanding EWB in terms of different aspects of one's life allows us to better appreciate how it is that EWB can be experienced in degrees. I'm not sure why Waterman believes that understanding EWB as a function of one's whole life does not allow for the attributions of EWB to come in degrees, but it is understandable that psychological research ends up carving up EWB into separate components. Doing so makes the science and study of EWB more manageable. However, to the extent that this transforms EWB into an umbrella phenomenon, capturing a variety of different aspects, I worry that we lose sight of the central thrust of EWB.

EWB is meant to capture an entire way of living, something that infiltrates all aspects of one's life. The individual who experiences EWB doesn't just experience it in one context and not another; the fascinating thing about well-functioning is that it carries over to different contexts and infiltrates one's life. Most of us still experience it in degrees, but to the extent there are those who enjoy a fully eudaimonic life, the experience of it infuses all of her daily activities. In my own work, I've found it helpful to understand EWB through the framework of organismic integration theory (Besser-Jones, 2014). That we strive to integrate our experiences, and that we function better when we do, explains and captures well EWB as a form of living one's whole life well.

The science of EWB has made tremendous progress and, to my mind, improvements over eudaimonia as it was initially conceived by Aristotle. The challenges I've raised are genuine

⁶Waterman (1990a) addresses some of these challenges.

ones, but are not necessarily insurmountable. More careful attention to the conceptualization of EWB would go a long way, as would greater transparency regarding the differences between one's one conception of EWB and others. EWB is, in the end, a theoretical concept and effort to understand a very real phenomenon. It is understandable that we will vary on our conceptualization of the concept; but dangers arise when we use the same concept in very different ways without acknowledgement.

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