A Brief History of Eudemonia in Positive Psychology

By Dr. Robert Biswas-Diener
Introduction

In a 2015 commencement address to graduates of the University of Houston Oscar Award winning actor Matthew McConaughey offered some of his personal views on happiness. I don’t know if the actor subscribes to the *Journal of Positive Psychology* but his remarks seem to reflect some of the most current thinking on happiness. Here is what he said,

“If happiness is what you’re after, then you are going to be let down frequently and be unhappy much of your tome. Joy, though, is something else. It’s not a choice, not a response to some result, it is a constant. Joy is ‘the feeling we have from doing what we are fashioned to do,’ no matter what the outcome. “

McConaughey’s comments parse happiness into two parts; one is fleeting and the other is constant; one is subjective and the other is objective. One waits around for good things to happen and the other—oh boy!—the other takes life by the horns and identifies personal passions and then cultivates these.

Recently, it has become *en vogue* to discuss happiness in terms of types. Blogs, research articles, and workshops are full of mentions of these two happinesses. Specifically, researchers and lay people alike have come to talk about *eudemonic* and *hedonic* happiness. At risk of simplifying these two concepts the former is roughly thought of as including a sense of purpose and living up to one’s full potential while the latter is concerned primarily with the feelings (emotions) of happiness.
Eudemonia was a concept first popularized by Aristotle (although other philosophers, including hedonists, were also interested in eudemonia). Aristotle, like his Hellenistic buddies, was often concerned with a question of fundamental importance: what sort of life is best? When you consider the good life you might include certain material comforts like a warm bed, but also might include supportive relationships, opportunities to express your opinions, or the ability to earn a living. Where you are more likely to view happiness in a modern way Aristotle was concerned with the moral foundation of the good life. He was interested in freedom, civic engagement, and virtuous action, to name just three targets of Aristotle’s attention that seem mildly out of bounds for modern concerns about happiness that tend to focus on attitudes, relationships, health and work.

If you find yourself rushing to tout eudemonic happiness you might consider this quote from Aristotle himself, found in the Nicomachean Ethics:

> The life of the intellect is the best and the pleasantest life for man, inasmuch as the intellect more than anything else is man.

I do not mean to dismiss Aristotle here, but to point out how his thinking differs from that of the modern self-help movement or from workshops on happiness. Aristotle was concerned with unearthing the core elements of human nature—the intellect in his estimation—and awarding well-being points to those who rose to such a life.

Many people currently act as if there is a happiness hierarchy. I understand the temptation. The word hedonist sounds selfish and shallow and there remains an enduring prejudice against emotions as our more animalistic and lower aspect of human psychology. Contrast that with words like “flow” “purpose” and “virtue” and no wonder the blogosphere is ringing with people singing the praises of eudemonia. There is an intuitive sense that meaning is permanent, deep, and therefore “better” than fleeting emotions like joy. Unfortunately, I think this line of thinking largely misses the mark.

As such, I thought you might like a little insight into the history of modern research on happiness, with special attention to eudemonia and hedonia. My intention here is not to convince you that I am right and you are wrong about happiness. What I would like to do is place the concept of eudemonia in a historic research context and point out what I believe are some very interesting moments in this history.
The year 1984

Not only did George Orwell write a dark novel about this year but it is also the year that happiness research kicked off in earnest. To be honest, there were a host of happiness researchers before that time—about 700 articles on the topic were published between 1967 and 1984. But it was in 1984 that Ed Diener (my father) published his seminal work on happiness, entitled “subjective well-being.” It was a landmark paper and a modern reading of it astonishes with its prescient vision of happiness processes. In the article my father reviewed the fine points of measuring happiness, discussed influences on happiness, and pondered the idea that happiness is a process.

Interestingly, he explicitly mentioned eudemonia in this paper. Here’s what he had to say:

“When Aristotle wrote that eudemonia is gained mainly by leading a virtuous life, he did not mean that virtue leads to feelings of joy. Rather, Aristotle was prescribing virtue as the normative standard against which people’s lives can be judged. Therefore, eudemonia is not happiness in the modern senses of the word but a desirable state judged from a particular value framework.”

Yup, thirties years ago my father dismissed eudemonia not because it was a bad concept—quite the opposite—but because it made a troublesome scientific variable. Eudemonia can be judged from the outside with authority because it uses social standards for right action to determine whether a person is living the good life.

Take, for instance, the topic of “maturity”—meaning complete or fully developed. Psychologists have argued that maturity represents full cognitive, moral social and emotional development. A mature person, then, would be able to work effectively with others, control and use their own emotions well, be self-aware, and morally sophisticated. Importantly, we don’t really rely on hearing how a person feels about his or her own maturity; we can judge it from the outside based on agreed upon societal norms.

It is almost certainly for this reason that Diener is lumped into the hedonia camp and not included among the legion scholars who cluster together under the eudemonia banner. Some knowledge critics have scratched their heads at the idea of Diener being branded a hedonic researcher because his concept of subjective well-being does not focus exclusively on emotions. Indeed, it included life satisfaction, which is a cognitive judgment.
To be clear: it is not because he studies emotions that Diener is termed a hedonia researcher; it is because he places a premium on the individual’s internal construction of reality in studying happiness. This may be a fair characterization. In an edited book on happiness—the single volume I consider the greatest contribution to happiness research—Nobel Prize winner Danny Kahneman and his colleagues refer to their field of study as “hedonic psychology.”

The 1990s

And so eudemonia lay dormant for almost a decade. In the early 1990s philosopher Alan Waterman published a series of papers investigating eudemonia and hedonia. Waterman thought that elements of eudemonia—excellence, personal expressiveness, and acting virtuous—were, in fact, relevant to the study of happiness. Waterman offered the common sense notion that many acts of virtue and excellence will likely also feel pleasurable. That is, he conceded that eudemonia and hedonia likely fit hand in glove. Waterman also raised the good question of the possibility of virtuous acts that do not feel pleasurable.

His early study remains an intriguing one. In it, Waterman identified statements that were related to both eudemonia and hedonia as well as statements that were uniquely related to one or the other. Here’s what he found: There was a ton of overlap between the two concepts. Statements such as “I have clear goals” and “I feel competent” and “I am in harmony with my surroundings” all seemed to be related to pleasurable feelings and his measure of eudemonia.

There was a single statement that appeared to be squarely focused on eudemonia alone: “I feel challenged.” This makes sense. When we experience confusion or hardship—two states directly associated with learning and growth—it typically doesn’t feel good even though most folks would acknowledge that it can feel virtuous or valuable. If you learn statistics, for example, you typically struggle with new vocabulary, difficult concepts, and puzzling computation. Much of the process is not fun but somehow, upon reflection, the hardship associated with learning gets recast as a sense of personal pride (using pride in the positive sense here).

There are a couple of noteworthy facts about Waterman’s work in the 1990s. First, he did not cite the Diener (1984) article. I don’t mean to suggest that this is a problem at all. I think it reflects the fact that Waterman did not have a particular axe to grind with regards to different research laboratories approaching the concept from unique directions. In fact, I think Waterman was engaged in the most scientific of all mindsets: discovery.
A note on invention versus discovery

Again, at risk of simplification, let’s parse apart the scientific realm of thought into two parts: invention and discovery. Invention reflects human creation. It is about making something that would not otherwise exist in nature. The airplane was invented, as was epidemiology. Calculus was invented and so was superglue. Agriculture, fingernail clippers, and clothes—all invented. The world of invention is extraordinary. Yet, it is distinct from discovery. Discovery is fundamentally about looking at nature and noticing something that is there. The waggle dance of bees was a discovery, as was Mt. Everest, penicillin, and the fact that bears hibernate.

Psychologists are largely discoverers. We observe the world and notice certain ways that people think, feel or behave. One scientist notices that women seem to underperform on tests of math and then goes about the business of trying to explain the process by how this phenomenon happens. Another researcher notices that people have a tendency to attribute the “bad” actions of others to personality, but are more likely to chalk up their own “bad” actions to situational influences. A subsequent series of studies seeks to shed light on this process.

Imagine you are a happiness researcher. If you are guided by the mindset of discovery you are curious about eudemonia and hedonia. You wonder how they fit together, how they work. When a young woman takes up rock climbing you wonder about how much pleasure she feels, how much flow she experiences, how much growth and mastery are involved, and—more importantly—how each of these gears form an overall clockworks of human happiness. Research by Laura King and her colleagues is a perfect example of this. In a series of studies they found that artificially inducing a positive mood also makes people more vigilant for meaning. That is, somehow mood and meaning generally go together.

Some practitioners have more of an “invention” mindset. There is nothing wrong with this but it should be noted that it is a different way of thinking. In the invention mindset there is less curiosity about the relation of eudemonia to hedonia. Instead, inventors take the fact that there are “two happinesses” as a foregone conclusion. This line of thinking leads to workshops in which people present eudemonia as the superior brand of happiness because of its supposedly enduring nature.
The new millennium

The modern movement of positive psychology formally got underway in 1998 when Marty Seligman assumed the presidency of the American Psychological Association and made positive psychology a primary part of his platform. At this same time there was renewed attention to the science of happiness in the form of conferences, grants, and a wave of chapters and articles. One noteworthy publication was a 2001 Annual Review of Psychology article by Rich Ryan and Ed Deci these two research giants argue for the concept of eudemonia to take center stage in happiness research.

This article, arguably, ushers in the modern era of two-part happiness. At the heart of the paper is an important distinction that I fear often gets lost among armchair positive psychologists: the role of theory in guiding research. They rightly argue that subjective well-being—the poster child for hedonic happiness—is atheoretical. That is, Diener and his “camp” aren’t interested in defining the criteria by which people can and do live the good life. Instead, they want to just ask folks about their lives and draw conclusions from these reports.

The hedonic method of discovery resembles the methods of early astronomers who simply charted the stars in the heavens without first trying to create grand theories about gravity, light and so forth. My own research on the happiness of homeless people was undertaken in exactly this light. I was intensely curious about the well-being of homeless people. I assumed that it was certainly possible that the negative events of their lives and poor access to resources would leave them unhappy. But I also couldn’t be certain of that. I simply wanted to sit with them and discover where and how they experienced happiness and unhappiness. I found that they were very satisfied with themselves, but that they were not satisfied with their lives or their material circumstances.

Researchers from the eudemonic camp, on the other hand, are more likely to be guided by existing theories. Ryan and Deci, for example, argue that people have three fundamental psychological needs—the needs to connect with others, be autonomous, and to be competent. This theoretical perspective drives their own notion of eudemonic happiness: to the extent a person is connected, autonomous, and competent she will be happy.

Carol Ryff, long-time researcher of psychological well-being, has a similar theoretical approach. She posits that when people are able to make progress toward and achieve 6 areas of functioning they will experience eudemonic happiness. These 6 areas are: self-acceptance, mastery, positive relations, personal growth, purpose in life, and autonomy. Do these 6 dimensions go hand in and with positive emotion? In a study comparing subjective well-being to

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psychological well-being Ryff and her research team found results very similar to what Alan Waterman discovered a decade earlier: the two concepts are related. Here are her results in table form (you can see under which heading each aspect of well-being fits)

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<tr>
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<th>Hedonia</th>
<th>Eudemonia</th>
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<td>Self-acceptance</td>
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<td>Mastery</td>
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<td>Positive relations</td>
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<td>Personal growth</td>
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<td>Purpose in life</td>
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<td>Autonomy</td>
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This is pretty cool. Ryff and her team found that of her 6 candidate psychological needs three of them were associated with hedonic happiness, two of them were not, and one—autonomy—didn’t really seem to find a home anywhere. It is worth lingering on this study because it so closely parallels the writing of Alan Waterman. Ten years ago, or twenty years ago, researchers were not trying to stake out territory and make the claim that one type of happiness was better than another. Instead, they were asking curious questions about how these two concepts relate to one another.

These days

These days the term eudemonia has been fully integrated in positive psychology. There are now dozens of studies emerging that make a distinction between hedonic and eudemonic happiness. Be mindful, however, that this is a nascent science. It can be tempting to rush to the conclusion that there are two, and only two types of happiness. But these conceptual distinctions are more inventions than they are discoveries. This is why we need to wait for research on the topic to play out. We are somewhere between 15 and 25 years into research on the topic and scientists are still struggling with operational definitions of eudemonia. Some study flow, others psychological needs, still others personal expressiveness. Each adds a dimension to this on-going conversation. We are only scratching the surface of how these concepts fit together or are distinct from one another.
For practitioners my advice is this:

1. **Don’t rush to closure on eudemonia.** Don’t act as if eudemonia is completely distinct from hedonia. You can certainly talk about each, much as the heart and arteries are distinct parts of the body. But it also make sense to speak about them together, as if they are part of the same system. Keep an open mind and continue to update your knowledge on the topic.

2. **Don’t act as if eudemonia is better.** Hedonia is part of our basic psychological architecture and it helps people function. The excitement of an upcoming trip, having sex, relaxing in a bath tub, enjoying classical music, being surprised by an old friend, the sense of accomplishment that comes with winning a game—all of these are felt and you need hedonic pleasure to do so. I recommend thinking about eudemonia and hedonia more like a left and right shoe; you need both. When I hear people say that one is better, or that eudemonia trumps hedonia, I know they have mentally shut the book on these topics and quit learning about them.

Application: If you wanted to increase eudemonic happiness, what would you do? Would you suggest to people that they head out the front door and try to improve their own sense of purpose or growth? I believe that sounds a little odd, in that most people are likely already pursuing meaningful goals to the best of their respective ability. I argue here that the ethical approach to happiness, a la Aristotle, is based more on reflective practice followed by right action. I believe that a series of powerful questions can guide people toward personal growth:

   1. In which ways do I accept myself, and in which ways do I not accept myself?

   2. Which areas represent my greatest strengths and competencies? How have I grown in this areas? How do I use them currently?

   3. Who are my most cherished relationships? How do they support me? How do I support them?

   4. What would I like to learn?

   5. What would I like to accomplish? How will this make the world better?
An overview of happiness

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<th>HEDONIC HAPPINESS</th>
<th>EUDEMONIC HAPPINESS</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Theory</strong></td>
<td>No guiding theory</td>
<td>Needs satisfaction, virtuous action</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Explanations</strong></td>
<td>Desires, comparisons, events, biology</td>
<td>Basic psychological needs, sense of progress or development, connection to others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Features</strong></td>
<td>Pleasant emotions, satisfaction</td>
<td>Purpose, connection, growth</td>
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<td><strong>Researchers</strong></td>
<td>Kahneman, Diener</td>
<td>Ryan, Deci, Ryff, Keyes, Waterman, Vitterso, Fava</td>
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About the author

Dr. Robert Biswas-Diener is a psychologist and researcher with expertise in subjective well-being. He has more than 50 scholarly publications and focuses especially on income and culture as they relate to happiness.

Dr. Biswas-Diener is also interested in the real world application of positive psychology research. He is a pioneer of positive psychology coaching and often publishes on the topic. His coach training program—Positive Acorn—is ICF accredited and specializes in teaching skills related to courage, curiosity, and positive psychology skills not typically taught elsewhere.

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