

Understanding our best: eudaimonia's growing influence in psychology

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Since the conception of positive psychology over a decade ago, researchers have sought to explore the causes and consequences of optimal functioning. At that time, most positive psychologists adopted a view that the end-goal was to create a life full of frequent experiences of positive emotions, infrequent experiences of negative emotions, and an overall evaluation of one's life as satisfying. This perspective was influenced by a call to create "a vision of the good life that is empirically sound while being understandable and attractive" [1, p. 5]. Seminal work by Ed Diener [2] and others on the measurement, causes, and consequences of "subjective well-being" were influential to this evolving field.

Two prominent approaches to the study of well-being exist. The *hedonic perspective* ties well-being to a subjective condition of getting what one wants and the pleasure that comes from this [2]. The *eudaimonic approach* equates well-being with living well or actualizing one's potentials [3]. In eudaimonic approaches, some outcomes are good for people even if they do not produce pleasure. Early work in positive psychology heavily favored hedonic over eudaimonic perspectives. Within the past decade, however, eudaimonic perspectives have gained considerable interest and empirical support. This is partially due to expansion in the measurement of eudaimonic well-being driven by increased contributions by philosophical perspectives in the work of empirical psychologists.

In *The Best Within Us: Positive Psychology Perspectives on Eudaimonia*, Waterman [4] collects contributions from leading theorists and researchers who have advanced

the field by exploring eudaimonic approaches. This volume has several strengths; foremost, however, is the emphasis on the integration of theory and work from both psychology and philosophy to inform definitions of eudaimonic well-being. Indeed, in each chapter, the authors begin with a discussion of how philosophical ideas inform their work and provide their definition of well-being. Given that considerable variance in definitions of eudaimonic well-being exists, this helps orient the reader with each chapter and promotes an appreciation of the nuances in definitions of well-being.

The Best Within Us also offers several suggestions for discovering one's *daimon* or "true self," which is viewed as a hallmark of eudaimonic well-being. Many suggestions involve components founded in hedonic conceptualizations of well-being. Positive emotions, for example, do not get left behind in the adoption of eudaimonic theories. Instead, a major advantage of the work in this volume is the illustration that adopting a eudaimonic approach does not necessitate discarding hedonic perspectives. Indeed, a combination of hedonic and eudaimonic approaches provides a balanced, nuanced, and more complete view of well-being.

Another advantage is the exploration of eudaimonic well-being as it relates to one's *daimon*, as a changing and dynamic construct as opposed to a fixed entity. In this way, following one's *daimon* does not come from lining up one's values and goals with a specified list of acceptable possibilities (i.e., an objective list approach); but instead comes from a fully engaged life of trial and error, failure and success, pleasure and, at times, disappointment. In this process, subjective states influence eudaimonic pursuits and guide an individual to understand more about his or her *daimon*. Many chapters discuss subjective states that are familiar to those versed in the traditional positive psychology literature (i.e., positive emotions, flow, and satisfaction with life), however,

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several others are welcomed additions to positive psychology discourse, such as passion or vitality.

Absent from this volume, is a detailed discussion of common positive psychology conceptualizations of people at their best. A single chapter addresses character strengths, and although it acknowledges some of the work in the field, it unfortunately leaves much of it out. Many strands of research within positive psychology (e.g., curiosity [5]; grit [6]; optimism [7]; practical wisdom [8]) could be linked to eudaimonia. Including these constructs could further expand the scope of eudaimonic perspectives and contribute additional empirical work to this area. This omission is likely related to the assumption that within “positive psychology, the concept of well-being constitutes the primary criteria for positive functioning” (p. 8). This is an over simplification of the field of positive psychology, which explores positive individual strengths, civic virtues, and the institutions that support these characteristics as important elements of positive functioning as well. For readers interested in these topics, *The Best Within Us* provides a starting point, but additional reading may be necessary.

Overall, *The Best Within Us* is a useful volume for those with an interest in the study, assessment, and promotion of people’s full potential. Its inclusion of contributions from both psychologists and philosophers increases the accessibility of this volume for those from diverse backgrounds. As such, those with an interest in well-being for applications in education, social policy, counseling, or clinical work could benefit from an increased appreciation of eudaimonia as promoted by this volume. As a self-proclaimed adherent to the subjective well-being approach, I found that this volume challenged and expanded my concept of well-being.

Eudaimonia introduces nuance into an understanding of well-being created solely on the basis of subjective appraisals and emotional states. This volume would be a valuable source for material for undergraduate classes and could even support advanced seminars or graduate classes in the study of well-being. Its thorough overview of the field of eudaimonia is timely given the expanding influence of this work in positive psychology. Although, research could benefit from further refinement of the definition and measurement of eudaimonic well-being, this first requires conceptual discussions such as those promoted by *The Best Within Us*.

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