

'The Pandemic and Eudaimonism'

My Student Devised Assessment represents how eudaimonic approaches to wellbeing by individuals have increased since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, shifting one's focus from pleasure fulfilment via hedonic measure to goal fulfilment through the actualisation of one's potential towards a certain purpose. My painting (which is 16 inches by 20 inches) depicts the famous virtue ethicist Aristotle - a Greek philosopher and polymath - in a surgical face mask (which is utilised and considered necessary by many to conduct daily activities in the current climate). The background is bleak and dark, with streaks of grey and black, to represent a dreary life outlook devoid of hope or signs of escape. This is a direct response to the current global climate, stricken by COVID-19, which has brought waves of panic, fear and threatened the social fabric of society with the imposed lockdowns. The red writing reads in block capitals 'SOCIAL DISTANCE', words as easily recognisable as the surgical face mask to all in 2020.

Wellbeing is studied through two different views: the hedonic and eudaimonic perspectives. They have been explored thoroughly in literature and are interesting to investigate as it allows individuals to enhance their understanding of wellbeing and happiness. Hedonic wellbeing focuses on personal happiness and attainment (Ryan and Deci, 2001) whilst eudaimonic wellbeing focuses on self-realisation and attaining meaning for oneself. Ultimately, it is the 'process of fulfilling or realizing one's daimon or true nature—that is, of fulfilling one's virtuous potentials and living as one was inherently intended to live' (Ryan and Deci, 2006). These are suggested to dictate wellbeing, and research finds that pursuits of eudaimonic wellbeing results in higher self-reported wellbeing, due to increased personal development which fosters future growth and long-term satiation (McMahan and Estes, 2011). However, many people pursue hedonic codes of conduct and this is shown by O'Donoghue and Rabin's (1998) finding that individuals procrastinate preparing for retirement as they have a taste for 'immediate gratification', which shows individuals tackling wellbeing in manner closer to hedonic approaches, due to their preference for present gains over long term plans to achieve their goals.

The COVID-19 pandemic has been a shock to many and has resulted in lower wellbeing and happiness levels for millions across the world. It has resulted in high rates of depression and emotional distress due to physical health uncertainty, financial issues, unemployment, and social distancing (Marques de Miranda et al., 2020). Moreover, there is expected to be some post-traumatic disorders following the pandemic, with children and young adults more likely to face long term health consequences from this pandemic. This is due to virtual learning and subsequent lower cognitive development due to reduced physical interactions. Hence, it is important to understand how such a drastic wellbeing change among individuals has been influenced by hedonism and/or eudaimonism. This would enable individuals to understand how they can work to improve their happiness and increase self-awareness so they can aim to tackle personal mental issues independently and effectively. This piece of art has thus been heavily influenced by Bojanowska et al. (2020) which studies the changes in values and wellbeing as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. They come to the consensus that wellbeing has suffered heavily due to the pandemic, but more importantly that there has been a fall in the pursuit of hedonic pleasures over the past year.

Hence, this phenomenon has introduced a new dimension to the study of wellbeing; how has a life-threatening, once-in-a-lifetime pandemic affected the wellbeing of individuals, and consequently, how have values for wellbeing been altered? It has been established that many individuals pursue hedonic pleasures in most situations, but the pandemic has appeared to change priorities and

contexts for these people. Barnes et al. (2020) further supports this hypothesis and suggests that 'in crisis context, the salience of needs shifts from hedonic to eudaimonic'. Therefore, to reflect this increase in eudaimonic pursuit of wellbeing, I have depicted Aristotle wearing a surgical mask to highlight his current importance in wellbeing studies. Aristotle is a leading philosopher in eudaimonic wellbeing studies although writing over 2300 years ago. The eudaimonic approach to life is deeply embedded within Aristotle's works, as famously espoused in his *Nicomachean Ethics* (Moore, 2019). Hence, by painting Aristotle in the centre of the frame as the focal point, I aim to represent and redirect attention to his ideas around eudaimonia, and the belief that virtuous living allows for greater wellbeing and fulfilment of one's potential purpose. I chose to paint his statue-like state to highlight how his ethical concepts and code of conduct, concocted eons ago, reflect wellbeing developments today and play a direct, key role in enhancing modern understanding of wellbeing.

Furthermore, I painted the surgical mask, overlaid on top of Aristotle, to represent the COVID-19 pandemic, and to question how the pandemic has affected our wellbeing approaches. It has been shown that the appeal to hedonism for individuals has fallen as restrictions and external threats (the virus itself and its knock-on detrimental effects) have been established. This suggests two things: firstly, once access to and the availability of necessities has been compromised, people have reduced their pursuit of pleasure through the purchase of other commodities, and, secondly, in times of global tragedy, people are working to establish their goals, motivations, and purpose as means of self-development and maintaining continual growth in critical times. Hence, Aristotle and other philosophers contribute heavily to our understanding of wellbeing, and in the new normal, people should seek to reflect on their teachings and apply to their circumstances.

However, with restrictions lasting over 9 months in the United Kingdom, it is uncertain whether individuals will continue following eudaimonic approaches to wellbeing or if they will simply adapt to the situation and thus pursue hedonic wellbeing which was previously practiced. For instance, online shopping has increased by 6 to 10 percentage within many countries (UNCTAD, 2020). With shopping seen as a source of hedonic pleasure (Hedhli, 2016) many individuals still evidently pursue hedonistic wellbeing. Moreover, Lucas (2007) identifies that individuals return to their previous levels of happiness following massive changes in life events. Whilst they find this in the context of hedonic wellbeing levels, there is no evidence that wellbeing values (that is hedonic or eudaimonic) may not change as well. Individuals adapt their happiness levels to any shocks in their lives and thus one can assume individuals may have simply adapted to the pandemic and will return to their previous hedonic pursuits of wellbeing. Thus, this painting, and the theories behind it, are deep and varied when applied to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Another critique of this flight to eudaimonic approaches to wellbeing is the lack of universal accessibility. This is particularly applicable to individuals at a socio-economic disadvantage (Ryff, 2017), such as those without the correct digital infrastructure (a personal computer or strong internet connection) to overcome the social-distancing restrictions (through digital meetings or online chatrooms for their education). In the face of these life-threatening events, establishing oneself and eudaimonically pursuing one's growth may not be a priority.

Ultimately the audience for this painting remains young adults and older, or those with profound appreciation for the philosophy of Aristotle and other like-minded academics. By naming this piece 'The Pandemic and Eudaimonism', I hope to also guide the viewer in a certain direction and link the two aspects which are a subject of this painting. Moreover, I hope this painting would encourage adults to talk about the theories underlying this painting and further develop their understanding of wellbeing. Gulliver et al. (2010) find that adults are unwilling to talk about their mental health, or to

seek help when they require it. Hence, I believe art which explores wellbeing and mental health acts as an avenue for the viewer to delve deeper into their own understanding of self.

Moreover, Puig et al. (2006) found through their randomised control trial that visual arts improves wellbeing by reducing depressive or negative thoughts and emotions. Mastandrea et al. (2019) also establish that viewing art improves health and cognitive skills among individuals. Thus, considering my intention in painting this image was to explore how wellbeing values have been evolving during the pandemic, it is important for individuals to appreciate this and interpret the painting deeply. I hope it would trigger a self-assessment within individuals – which I believe is more likely caused by a painting than a lengthy report or a learning resource – and explore how they have been pursuing their wellbeing over the pandemic. This self-assessment may trigger a healthier approach to living as the pandemic continues and enable individuals to become more aware of their hedonic and eudaimonic approaches to wellbeing. Moreover, I found painting this a very productive and supportive method to tackle my own understanding of wellbeing; this shows how useful art can be in helping individuals process their emotions and knowledge.

Thus, this painting employs Aristotle's ethics to visualise the impact of the pandemic on individuals' happiness and aims to educate and encourage the viewer to consider their wellbeing and the approaches they are employing during such a crisis.

Word count: 1514

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