



“Unhappiness in Japan: Failures of Eudaimonism in My Hero Academia”

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Abstract

My research was done in the pursuit of understanding the sources of unhappiness in Japan through cultural figures such as Endeavor from the manga *My Hero Academia* by Kohei Horikoshi. In order to do this, I studied the two major approaches to happiness, those being hedonism and eudaimonism, and discovered that Japan tends to lean towards the latter. Using journal articles to define my framing concepts, scientific studies to support my claims, and an essay on the history of self-actualization in Japan, I was able to make the necessary connections between Endeavor's failure to find happiness and Japan's failures in practicing eudaimonism. Although eudaimonism does act as a potent source of happiness when followed correctly, its self-sacrificial nature along with its incompatibilities with human nature may cause more harm than good, as evident in the case of Endeavor.

Introduction

“You have to spend money to make money” has become a common English saying, one that is still debated by businessmen and economists alike. However, this ideology of sacrifice has slowly found widespread popularity in fields other than economics, such as in the pursuit of happiness. Sacrificing short-term happiness in the pursuit of long-term happiness is practiced by many around the world, but nowhere is it as prevalent as it is in modern Japan. A society that has spent years building up its wealth and prosperity, and at the forefront of medical and technological advancements, the people of Japan still find themselves unhappy. According to studies done by the World Health Organization, Japan has the 14th highest suicide rate in the world, and these high suicide rates indicate a societal failure to find happiness, most likely due to fundamental issues which exist in their general approach.

In the manga *My Hero Academia* by Kohei Horikoshi, Endeavor’s insistence of only practicing eudaimonism despite its evident flaws is what ultimately led to his unhappiness. Endeavor’s unhappiness mirrors that which is generally found in Japan, as it is the outcome of their flawed approach and understanding of eudaimonism. Sasaki Hidekazu in his paper “Self-Actualization and/or Self-Realization in Japan: A Historical Approach to its Various Aspects” has shown that although the methods by which Japanese people have sought to obtain well-being has evolved over the years, eudaimonism is still a fundamental aspect of their society. As defined by Richard Ryan in his paper “Living Well: A Self-Determination Theory Perspective on Eudaimonia”, eudaimonism is the belief that one may find happiness through the process of self-improvement and self-actualization, be it through maximizing one’s contribution to society or by fulfilling one’s true potential in the practice of their choice. It is inherently connected to self-determination theory, also known as SDT, which is one of the leading theories of well-being.

Scholars such as Edward Deci and his team have studied the underlying mechanisms of eudaimonism in their paper “Hedonia, Eudaimonia, and Well-Being: an Introduction” and have discovered that autonomy, relatedness, and competence are the three pillars upon which it rests. Further studies by Timothy Church and his team in their paper “Need Satisfaction and Well-Being” have shown that eudaimonic well-being cannot be found without at least two of these pillars, leading one to a life of unhappiness. The issues with practicing eudaimonism come from its pillars’ incompatibility with humans, and specifically their flawed nature. The fallibility of humans plays a large role in blocking one from achieving competence, leaving no room for error in relatedness and autonomy. In this way eudaimonic well-being is guaranteed only if one is flawless, which is impossible. Although scholars have shown many times over that eudaimonic well-being directly leads to happiness, the difficulty to achieve eudaimonic well-being can cause unhappiness for the vast majority in any eudaimonist society. One such failure of eudaimonism is seen in the Japanese graphic novel *My Hero Academia* through the character of Endeavor, also known as Enji Todoroki. Similar to many people in Japan, Endeavor has spent his entire life in the pursuit of self-actualization and fulfilling his potential by becoming the number one hero; however, after achieving his lifelong ambition, he still finds himself unhappy. Endeavor’s flawed nature, combined with his sole focus on practicing eudaimonism, is what leads him to the path of unhappiness, a road which is still being followed by many Japanese citizens today.

Approaches to Happiness

Although many eastern societies such as the one found in *My Hero Academia* tend to focus solely on eudaimonic well-being, approaches to happiness have generally been split up into two major schools, hedonism and eudaimonism (also known as eudaimonia). Those who practice hedonism “define well-being as happiness, interpreted as the occurrence of positive affect and

the absence of negative effect” (Ryan et al. 139). Hedonism is closely related to the maximization of positive affect, also referred to as pleasure, and minimizing negative affect, generally known as pain. The author distinguishes pleasure as positive affect because unlike positive effect, pleasure is not the outcome but the continuous increase in happiness. Most hedonistic practices are associated with accumulation of wealth and power, the use of drugs and alcohol, and other earthly desires. Contrary to the hedonistic approach to well-being, eudaimonic well-being comes from “living a complete human life, or the realization of valued human potentials” (Ryan et al. 140). In this way eudaimonism can be said to be dependent on one’s personal growth and character. While hedonism focuses on the outcomes of one’s actions, those being either pain or pleasure, eudaimonism is closer related to the content of one’s life, as well as the processes involved. Therefore, it is possible for one to achieve both eudaimonic and hedonistic well-being by finding pleasure in the process of self-actualization while also minimizing pain. Although hedonism and eudaimonism are Western concepts, studies have shown that both act as sources of happiness and well-being in eastern cultures as well. In their study of well-being in both western and eastern cultures, Church and his team found that “needs for self-actualization and pleasure-stimulation—was moderately related to most aspects of well-being in all cultures” (Church et al. 527). Hedonistic and eudaimonic needs, referred to by Church as needs for pleasure-stimulation and self-actualization respectively, act as sources of happiness in eastern cultures. However, this does not imply that individuals in Eastern societies seek both. Endeavor is one such individual who sought only eudaimonic well-being and denied himself hedonistic pleasure. However, his flawed understanding of eudaimonic well-being also led him to deny the pleasure one is supposed to gain from self-actualization, leaving him with only the pain one sacrifices to achieve their goals.

Like most other careers, heroes in *My Hero Academia* are able to obtain happiness through both hedonism and eudaimonism alike. There are many conflicting definitions of what it means to be hero, which can vary from comic book to comic book, however it makes the most sense when talking about eudaimonism to only examine the definitions given inside the *My Hero Academia* universe. When one strives to fulfill their potential as a hero, they are doing so in accordance with their own definition of hero, regardless of whether it is correct. However, the definition of hero in the *My Hero Academia* universe is dual sided, and as such the path to becoming the greatest hero is dual sided as well. Throughout the story multiple perspectives are given on the nature of heroism; however, the all-encompassing definition is given to the reader by the former number-one hero, All Might. He explains to two of his students that “You can become the ultimate heroes. Ones who save by winning, and win by saving” (Horikoshi 37; vol.14). The panel in which he defines a hero is split into two parts, two people, and two perspectives, representing its dual nature. By saving people, a hero is always able to win, but in order to save people, they must also win the battle.



Figure 1. All Might's Definition of Hero page 37, vol. 14

The dichotomy of heroism exists not only in its definition, but also in the sources of happiness one receives from being a hero. Heroes are able to find hedonistic well-being by taking pleasure in their victories, whether it be by saving others or by defeating villains. Studies by psychologists such as Daniel Kahneman have shown that such hedonic pleasure follows a logarithmic scale, meaning that the hedonic well-being gained from such activities grow at slower and slower rates (Kahneman 1). Similarly, heroes are able to find eudaimonic well-being by taking pleasure in their growth as heroes. However, as some psychologists may argue, this pleasure is not eudaimonic since growth as a hero requires acquisition of power, which is pleasure that is hedonistic in nature (Ryan 139). This stems from the common misconception that self-actualization cannot exist in the pursuit of hedonistic goods such as power and wealth. As explained by Hidekazu Sasaki the source of such well-being “was, however, apt to be misunderstood without careful deliberation as a theory stipulating that economic growth is a prerequisite for human happiness. In fact, the ideal of self-actualization could be an effective incentive for people motivating them to work industriously and earn money enthusiastically” (Sasaki 166). Sasaki argues that after the large economical growth in Japan, it became common to misinterpret pleasure stemming from this growth as hedonistic in nature, when it was eudaimonic well-being that acted as a motivator for economic growth. The same can be said of eudaimonic well-being and its relation to power. Instead of taking pleasure in the acquisition of power, which is associated with greed and hedonism, a hero is also able to find eudaimonic pleasure by improving on their ability to save others and by training themselves to defeat greater villains, thus fulfilling their potential.

By focusing solely on eudemonism, Endeavor limits himself to only one source of happiness, thus lowering the probability of successfully finding happiness. Eudaimonism is not directly associated with the pursuit of happiness, yet it is still viewed as an approach to well-being, as self-actualization and meaningful endeavors are theorized to bring pleasure that is indistinctive from hedonistic well-being (Ryan et al. 141). A study by Church and his team has shown that such theories are well-posed, and that happiness comes from a combination of pleasure that is derived from hedonistic and eudaimonic pursuits. Church and his team “did not [find] that satisfaction of hedonic needs (i.e., pleasure-stimulation) was a better predictor of hedonic well-being (i.e., positive and negative affect) than eudaimonic well-being” (Church et al. 523). Church implies that pleasure, also known as positive affect, is indiscriminately derived from both hedonistic and eudaimonic pursuits. However, the true contradiction one runs into when attempting to find hedonistic pleasure through eudaimonism is within its insistence of self-sacrifice. Sasaki explains that self-sacrifice plays a large role in the process of self-actualization, especially in collectivist societies such as Japan. In his paper on the history of eudaimonism in Japan, Sasaki explains the influential Japanese philosopher “Inoue [Tetsujiro] argued that the specific contents of self-realization led to individuals’ devotion to society through self-discipline, and that self-realization could not be accomplished without self-sacrifice” (Sasaki 162). Here Inoue argues that self-discipline and sacrifice are necessary for one to fulfill their potential in their devotion to society; however, this can be generalized for a devotion to any practice. Fulfilling one’s potential in any field, be it academic, athletic, or corporate, requires a tremendous amount of self-sacrifice. This allows for the possibility of one’s self-sacrifice to outweigh the pleasure they receive from fulfilling their potential, leading to an overall unhappiness. One such case is found within Endeavor, who was willing to sacrifice everything in

the pursuit of becoming the number one hero, and in the process sacrificed his own hedonistic well-being. Shoto Todoroki, the abused son of Endeavor, explains that “He’s a powerful bastard who only thinks of becoming stronger” (Horikoshi 96; vol.4). In the panel we see Endeavor with tensely strained eyes, with his back turned to All-Might, who is not only the number one hero, but is also someone well-known for finding happiness in his work. By turning his back on All-Might, Endeavor is also abandoning his hedonistic pleasure, something we see multiple times throughout serialization. Inasa Yoarashi, another student and ex-fan of Endeavor, recounts one such experience, saying that unlike other heroes who find enjoyment and passion in their work, Endeavor won’t allow himself to feel happiness from his victories. Instead he coldly stares forward, focusing solely on fulfilling his potential. After sacrificing his hedonistic well-being, Endeavor is left with eudaimonism as his only source of happiness.



Figure 2. Endeavor being a bastard page 96, vol.4

Sacrificing Relatedness

Eudaimonic well-being is directly dependent on one’s growth as a person; however, simply fulfilling one’s potential does not guarantee happiness. Although Endeavor is a massively successful and powerful hero with the highest number of resolved incidents in Japan, he still found himself unhappy upon achieving his goal of becoming the number-one hero. This may

seem to act as a counter-example for the efficiency of eudaimonism, since it is a case in which someone fulfills their potential yet still feels unhappy, however the underlying issue is not that Endeavor found himself unhappy after completing his goal. The true signal of failure for eudaimonism was that Endeavor never felt happiness during his road to greatness. Endeavor failed to meet the requirements needed for one to obtain eudaimonic well-being, leading to an ultimately unhappy life, since as explained by Deci “From this perspective, living well involves those motives, goals, and behaviors that are satisfying of the basic psychological needs for competence, relatedness, and autonomy” (Deci 9). This implies that since Endeavor is approaching happiness only from the eudaimonic perspective, it is required for him to achieve appropriate levels of competence, relatedness, and autonomy.

Endeavor's failure to achieve a sense of relatedness stems from the sacrifices he made in his pursuit of self-realization, and acts as an example of the contradictory nature that exists in eudaimonism and its allowance of self-sacrifice. Ryan provides a concise definition for relatedness, stating that the “*need for relatedness* refers to feeling connected to and cared about by others” (143). Although the constant criticism and dissatisfaction from the people that he attempts to save acts as an example of his failure to find relatedness on a societal level, Endeavor's true failure exists in his relationship with his family. After coming to the realization that he would never be able to surpass All Might, Endeavor did what any logical person would do and decided to genetically engineer children for the purpose of fulfilling his ambitions and becoming the number one hero. In order to accomplish this, Endeavor arranges a marriage for a woman with ice powers, and psychologically tortures her and her children for years in the name of his dream. After over a decade of seeing her children neglected and abused by her husband, Endeavor's wife is driven insane and is hospitalized after pouring boiling water down her sons

face (Horikoshi 98; vol.4). As stated earlier, Endeavor is a flawed character. By all accounts, it is clear that any sense of relatedness he may have once had has been thrown away in the pursuit of becoming the number one hero, and acts as a large contributor for his consistent unhappiness throughout the serialization. Endeavor's situation is reminiscent of those found in many of the married Japanese men working in industry. As described by Michael Hoffman in his article "Japan is as Happy as it Feels-Miserable", many of these men are forced to throw away their familial relationships in pursuit of a higher salary. "His two daughters despise him, his wife won't look at him. 'The harder I work for them, the less they know I exist'" (Hoffman 9). This is an example of one of the fundamental issues that exist within the relationship of eudaimonism and self-sacrifice. Since eudaimonic well-being requires self-sacrifices along with a sense of autonomy, competence, and relatedness, then how can one achieve eudaimonic happiness if they must sacrifice one of these three to fulfill their potential. Church and his team does offer a conditional solution, explaining that "Generally one or two, but not all three, SDT needs contributed independent prediction of well-being" (Church et al. 527). Church claims that not all three SDT needs, used interchangeably to mean autonomy, competence, and relatedness are needed to provide a stable source of eudaimonic well-being. While it may be true that it is possible to find eudaimonic happiness with only two of the three needs, what happens to those who have goals which require more sacrifice than others. In this way, eudaimonism cannot act as a source of happiness for those whose goals require certain sacrifice in the areas of autonomy, competence, and relatedness.

Incompatibility with Human Nature

In Endeavor's abusive treatment of his family, he not only sacrificed his sense of relatedness, but his competence as well. Competence is defined by Ryan and Church to mean the need to feel

capable and effective in one's actions (Ryan et al. 153; Church et al. 508). In the context of eudaimonism, this can be taken to mean the one's effectiveness in their ability to make decisions in pursuit of their goal. Endeavor, wishing to become the greatest hero, acted as a failure of competence, since his role as an abusive father worked to negate his accomplishments as a hero. Endeavor later realizes this, saying "I have to safe-guard the future for them. That's the job for whoever's on top! And yet... What about the futures I cut short" (Horikoshi 63; vol. 21). By abusing his family, he went against his own meaning of heroism. His actions were grossly incompetent, as they pushed him further away from his goal of becoming the greatest hero, and although he did eventually receive the official title, he knew that he had accomplished nothing. By failing to achieve either competence or relatedness, Endeavor was not able to find eudaimonic well-being.

Endeavor's failure to achieve competence is two-fold, as it is also thanks to competences' conditional incompatibility with the existence of fallibility in human nature. Ryan defines "The *need for competence* [as] concern[ing] the sense of efficacy one has with respect to both internal and external environments" (143). Competence in the context of eudaimonism is extremely related to one's ability to act effectively and correctly in the pursuit of their goals. However, the fallibility of human nature tends to obstruct one's goal in achieving competence and can even create the illusion that they are achieving competence. The conflict between competence and fallibilism arises in the possibility for one to achieve their goals through incorrect means. Baron Reed explains that the fallibility of human nature implies the possibility for one to know something is true despite not having proper justification. In logical terms, "S knows that p in a fallibilist way just in case S knows that p on the basis of some justification j and yet j does not entail (or guarantee) that p" (Reed 586). We can extend fallibilism to actions as well, claiming

that is possible for one to achieve their goals even by incorrect means. Reed likens such scenarios to a child solving a math problem with the incorrect formulas yet still receiving the correct answer. Endeavor is one such example of someone falling into the trap that is created by fallibilism, which is the scenario in which one consistently finds themselves getting the right answer through the wrong means, convincing themselves that their approach is correct.

Endeavor, who worked all the way up to number one hero through non-heroic like means convinced himself that his path was correct, when it clearly contradicted the values of what it means to be a hero.

Endeavor and Japan's failure to find happiness through eudaimonism stems from the difficulties of maintaining its three pillars. Competence's incompatibility with human nature makes it extremely difficult for Endeavor to achieve it, and the self-sacrificial nature of eudaimonism forced Endeavor to sacrifice his familial relationships to fulfill his potential. While it is true that many Japanese citizens have found themselves in a similar position to Endeavor, this is not the exact reason why Japan as a whole has failed to find happiness through eudaimonism. Since it is difficult for one to maintain each one of the three pillars of eudaimonism, it follows that the probability of achieving and maintaining at least two of these pillars is significantly low. On a societal scale, this equates to a significant portion of the population not being able to maintain at least two of these pillars, and thus not being able to achieve eudaimonic well-being. Endeavor acts a showcase for the numerous difficulties for achieving eudaimonism in Japan, however any more difficulties found in maintaining each of these pillars only further lowers the probability of finding happiness through eudaimonism. It would be ignorant to assume that all difficulties in achieving eudaimonic well-being come from situations like Endeavor's, since Japan's unhappiness is not only found in its married

businessmen. According to studies done by the Japanese government “Among those between 15 and 39, meanwhile, suicide has been the dominant cause of death since 2012” (Kyoto 5). The widespread unhappiness in Japan is indicative of other factors which lower the probability of achieving eudaimonic well-being, such as Japan’s recent adoption of individualism, as shown in a study performed by Yuji Ogihara and Yukiko Uchida who found that “individualistic values in Japan were associated with a deterioration in close relationships” (Ogihara Uchida 4). The introduction of individualism in Japan has acted to deteriorate close relationships, making it more difficult for one to achieve a sense of relatedness. As predicted, Ogihara and Uchida also found a negative correlation between individualism and happiness (Ogihara Uchida 6), most likely due to eudaimonic well-being’s requirement of relatedness. Japan’s widespread failure to find happiness through eudaimonism can be attributed to the many factors which make it difficult to maintain its three pillars, such as those faced by Endeavor.

Conclusion

Endeavor’s failures in finding happiness through eudemonism parallels much of the unhappiness found in Japan’s society. Endeavor and many of Japans citizens focus solely on practicing eudaimonism, limiting their sources of happiness and lowering their chance of successfully finding happiness. In addition, eudaimonism’s incompatibility with human nature lowers the probability of successfully finding happiness, because of its requirement that one must make the correct decisions. Many people may be forced to sacrifice relatedness or autonomy in the pursuit of their goal, thus lowering the probability of achieving eudaimonic well-being even further, as was the case for Endeavor. There are many factors that lower the chance of one successfully achieving eudaimonic well-being, causing wide-spread unhappiness in cultures such

as Japan where eudaimonism is exclusively followed. Endeavor acts as just one of the many cases for the failures of eudaimonism in Japan.

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