

The definitive version of this review can be found in *Mind* 2014.

What is this thing called happiness?, by Fred Feldman, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010. Pp. xv + 286. H/B £27.50.

Fred Feldman's *What is this thing called happiness?* is a pleasure to read. The book as a whole is *extremely* clear and well written, and is largely a persuasive defence of a highly plausible view. Those working on the nature of happiness, its importance, or more broadly on well being, ought to read the book. Here I shall summarise the various chapters of the book, and make a handful of critical comments along the way.

The book begins by carefully distinguishing various questions we might be interested in. Most importantly, Feldman is interested in understanding the nature of happiness, and not its causes. In chapter 2, Feldman argues against sensory hedonism about happiness, according to which happiness consists in a positive balance of sensory pleasures over sensory pains. Feldman offers counterexamples. One is a woman giving birth who is feeling more sensory pain than sensory pleasure, but who might nonetheless reasonably describe it as the happiest moment of her life. Sensory hedonism must therefore be mistaken.

As Feldman describes sensory hedonism, it is the view that happiness consists in a positive balance of *sensory* pleasure over *sensory* displeasure. I find it doubtful that anyone has ever really held such a view. Feldman implies that it can be found in Bentham, Mill, and Sidgwick (p. 23-4). But it seems doubtful that these attributions are correct. The quotations Feldman provides do not mention *sensory* pleasures and pains in particular, and reading these authors in this manner seems uncharitable. Mill, at least, seems to explicitly deny the view at the start of chapter II of *Utilitarianism*.

Feldman's own theory appeals to attitudinal pleasure: pleasure *about* things. Perhaps Feldman might say that all pleasure is either sensory or attitudinal, so that all I am really saying here is that Bentham, Mill and Sidgwick are best read as endorsing something more like Feldman's theory. But I am not sure that this is correct either: it is far from obvious that all pleasure is either sensory or attitudinal. Perhaps pleasure is a non-sensory and non-attitudinal feeling, to be understood similarly to tiredness. If we understood pleasure in that way, we might hold a view unlike Feldman's but which could nonetheless handle the mother above, whose joy is presumably a feeling even if it is not sensory.

In chapter 3, Feldman argues against Kahneman's theory of 'Objective Happiness'. Roughly, the theory says that happiness consists in a desire for one's present experiences to continue. After spending some time clarifying Kahneman's view, the real objection to the view is that some people are made happy by change. For example, Brett is in a race, and will be happy only if his experience of the car's location changes. So happiness cannot consist in a desire that one's present experiences persist. Next, in chapter 4, Feldman objects to other preference satisfaction theories of happiness, especially Wayne Davis' theory. His main objection is that preferences are too independent of mood to be the determinants of happiness. For example, someone might be the kind of upbeat person who is happy

even in the face of disaster, and someone else might be the kind of misery guts who is unhappy even in the face of vast success.

Chapter 5 argues against life satisfaction theories of happiness, according to which happiness consists in how well one judges one's life to be going. Feldman rightly emphasizes that this view comes in very many different forms. But he has an objection to all of them, which comes in the form of a dilemma. Either we identify happiness with how well someone actually judges their life to be going, or else we identify happiness with how well someone would judge their life to be going under some counterfactual circumstances (however specified). The problem with the former view is that someone might be happy at some moment without having actually paid any attention to the reflective question of how well their life is going at that moment. The latter counterfactual view, in contrast, faces a different objection. The problem is that your level of happiness might change as a result of your thinking about how well your life is going. One might, for example, become annoyed as a result of trying to answer such a difficult question, or become happier as a result of such reflection. So such counterfactuals might not accurately represent one's actual present level of happiness.

Feldman doesn't note that this latter problem is really just one instance of a wider known problem: the conditional fallacy (Shope, Robert K. 'The Conditional Fallacy in Contemporary Philosophy' in *The Journal of Philosophy* 75:8, 1978, pp. 397-413). Feldman also fails to note that there are some possible solutions to that problem which defenders of life satisfaction theories might try to employ. For example, they might not analyse A's happiness in terms of how A would evaluate their life if they thought about it, but instead in terms of A's *dispositions* to evaluate their life in different ways (cf. p. 112fn). Or for another example, they might analyse happiness by appeal to what an idealised version of A would think about A's life in the actual world (Suikkanen, Jussi. 'An improved whole life satisfaction theory of happiness' in *International Journal of Wellbeing* 1:1, 2011, pp. 149-166). Feldman does not consider options like these, but they might be promising strategies for defenders of life satisfaction theories to exploit.

Part 2 of the book turns to defend Feldman's positive proposal, according to which happiness consists in having a positive balance of attitudinal pleasure to attitudinal displeasure. This is a hedonic theory of happiness, since it appeals to pleasure, but distinct from sensory hedonism, because it appeals to our capacity to take pleasure in a broader range of things than merely sensory experiences. In chapter 6, Feldman spends some time making the view precise. Chapter 7 addresses objections to the view. For example, can't I feel generally happy without feeling happy about anything in particular? Feldman's response is that to be in such a mood is just to take extra pleasure in everything. When I get out of bed on the right side, I might say that I am happy, but about nothing in particular. But really this is just to say that I am taking great pleasure in everything: the birds are singing, the sky is blue, and even doing the washing up has a certain joy.

Chapter 8 defends 'Eudaimonism', defined as the view that only happiness contributes to welfare. One objection is that some people might be sufficiently stoical that they feel happy even when their life is going badly and others might be sufficiently glum that they feel unhappy even when their life is going well. Feldman's

response is effectively to dig in his heels: stoicism does indeed make one's welfare higher, and being glum makes your life go worse. Chapter 9 defends Eudaimonism from the objection that inauthentic happiness doesn't contribute to welfare. If I am happy just because I have been brainwashed into taking great pleasure in pushing a rock up a hill repeatedly, this does nothing to show that my life is going well. Feldman's response to this is again to dig in his heels: under these conditions my life is going well. Feldman's defensive strategy is to offer a series of debunking explanations of why we might be wrongly tempted to deny this truth. Chapter 10 defends Eudaimonism from the objection that 'disgusting' (immoral) happiness doesn't contribute to welfare. If I take great pleasure in harming people, even if that makes me happy, it might seem that it doesn't make my life go well. Feldman is yet again inclined to dig in his heels: immoral pleasures do make your life go better. Again, Feldman's defensive strategy is to offer a series of debunking explanations of why we might be wrongly tempted to deny this truth, though he also mentions a modified version of his view that he might resort to if necessary.

I am not sure that Feldman's defence of Eudaimonism in these chapters is compelling, and certainly, it is incomplete. His main concern in these chapters is to defend the claim that *all* happiness matters for well-being. But the advertised view said that *all and only* happiness matters (e.g. p. 169). Feldman doesn't defend the 'only' part of this claim. It is both plausible and common to think that a variety of things contribute to welfare other than just happiness: liberty, knowledge, friendship, achievement, etc., and Feldman says almost nothing about such possibilities. Some of his remarks imply a view (p. 210-215): that these things do not matter in themselves, though they amplify the value of pleasures taken in them. That might be a plausible view, but it would have been nice to see it brought out and defended more explicitly (to be fair, some relevant claims are also made in Feldman's *Pleasure and the Good Life*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

Chapter 11 discusses whether we have authority over our happiness. Feldman argues that we do not have good epistemic authority about our levels of happiness, and that we might have some mild controlling authority over our happiness. Part 3 addresses the implications of Feldman's claims for the empirical study of happiness. This last part of the book is shortest, and I think, for philosophers, least significant. Chapter 12 offers a suggestion about how we might measure people's happiness via questionnaires, and chapter 13 effectively argues for the priority of philosophical research into happiness over empirical research. The most interesting part of this chapter argues that happiness is not a natural kind.

In summary, Feldman (a) argues against rival theories of happiness, (b) offers his own attitudinal hedonistic theory in their place, (c) defends the view that all and only happiness contributes to wellbeing, and (d) briefly says a little about the relevance of all this to empirical research. He has interesting things to say on each of these subjects, and I highly recommend the book to anyone working on these topics.

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