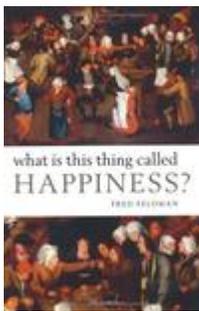


Happiness, Push-Pin, and Poetry

A review of



What Is This Thing Called Happiness?

by Fred Feldman

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Reviewed by

[David Manier](#)

The excellent *What Is This Thing Called Happiness?* is must reading for anyone interested in the topic of happiness (philosophers, psychologists, etc.). Moreover, it is enjoyable reading. Its approach lies squarely within the mainstream of Anglo-American philosophy, but there are times when its arguments shine with nearly Socratic brilliance. Pertinently, its method is often dialectical: Feldman holds various proposals about the nature of happiness up to the light of philosophical scrutiny, exposes their shortcomings, and ultimately proposes his own carefully formulated theory. He does all this with a notable flair for humor and style. Even those who disagree with Feldman's conclusions will hardly fail to admire his knack for lucid exposition and incisive analysis.

Because of space restrictions, this review will not provide a detailed summary of Feldman's book. Other reviews that provide such a summary are available, and readers will find samples of Feldman's work through his own website (<http://people.umass.edu/ffeldman/>)

[index.html](#)). Therefore, this review will focus mainly on critical reactions to some controversial issues raised by this outstanding—but not flawless—book.

What Happiness Is (and Isn't)

The first controversial issue arises in defining the limits of the inquiry. Feldman criticizes Eysenck (1990) for blurring the distinction between the nature of happiness and the causes of happiness: Eysenck's book contains a chapter titled "What Is Happiness?" (implying an interest in the nature of happiness), but this is "profoundly misleading" because it summarizes only "views about what is likely to cause happiness or to increase happiness" (p. 6).

Feldman, by contrast, is not at all concerned with specifying the causes of happiness, but only with clarifying its nature. He declares that his interest is in how the word *happiness* is used by "ordinary people, unperverted by semantical [sic] revisionism" (p. 12—presumably he means its use in the English language, since he does not worry much about whether happiness might have different meanings in other languages).

Feldman generally limits himself to happiness used in its "descriptive or 'mental state' sense . . . not used in its evaluative sense" (p. 10). He acknowledges that *happiness* is sometimes used in an evaluative sense (e.g., to discuss the "good life"), but he states that the word is used in this "evaluative sense only by philosophers and others whose good linguistic instincts have been perverted by them" (p. 136). His references to how ordinary language can be "perverted" by philosophers inclined toward semantic revisionism signal that Feldman has little interest in (or patience with) abstract speculations on the topic of what happiness *might* mean—he is interested in analyzing what is ordinarily meant by the word *happiness* and whether this ordinary usage is reflected in how various contemporary scholars use this term in their research.

There are benefits to limiting the inquiry in this way, but also costs. Isn't it possible that understanding the causes of happiness could help us toward a better understanding of its nature? Similarly, there are costs to focusing on ordinary language usage of the word *happiness*. *Happiness* has been used to mean many different things by a great variety of scholars. Is it really obvious (as Feldman suggests) that ordinary language usage should be our ultimate reference point in judging the merits of all that these scholars have written about happiness?

The first third of Feldman's book is devoted to a review of recent scholarship on happiness. Generally, Feldman finds it to be wanting. He discusses several different theories of happiness and gives a critique of each, including the *sensory hedonism* of Bentham (1789/1948), the *preferentism* of Kahneman (1999), the *subjective local preferentism* of Davis (1981), and the *whole life satisfactionism* of scholars such as Sumner (1996). Feldman levels

some very effective criticism at each of these accounts of happiness, and how they diverge from the ordinary usage of the term.

Feldman next presents his own view. It is a version of hedonism—not *sensory* hedonism, but rather *attitudinal* hedonism. Sensory hedonism focuses on physical pleasures and pains, whereas attitudinal hedonism is more cognitive or propositional in that it focuses on the judgments one makes about some event or state of affairs. For example, if someone is pleased (makes a positive judgment) about recent international events, then being pleased in this way means that she has a positive *propositional attitude* about the events, whether or not she has a “cheery feeling” when thinking about them (p. 111).

Feldman then proceeds to discuss the implications of his theory of happiness (which he calls *Attitudinal Hedonism about Happiness* or *AHH*) for “objectless mood states” (p. 137), such as the sadness that might be felt by someone who is clinically depressed. AHH depends on propositional attitudes, which he says must have *objects* (p. 110), so the unhappiness associated with an *objectless* mood state (that is, a feeling that cannot be explained cognitively) is not easily explained by his theory.

Feldman emphasizes that a propositional attitude can be a thought without a feeling, but that a feeling without a thought is not a propositional attitude (and therefore, according to AHH, does not affect happiness levels). Generally, Feldman’s emphasis on propositional attitudes leads him to be less than clear about the interconnections between cognition and feeling, which contemporary research shows to be intricately intertwined (see Knutson, Rick, Wimmer, Prelec, & Loewenstein, 2007; LeDoux, 1998; Parker-Pope, 2005).

Push-Pin, Poetry, and Eudaimonism

“Prejudice apart, the game of push-pin is of equal value with the arts and sciences of music and poetry”: This was the controversial statement made by Jeremy Bentham (1830, p. 206). Push-pin was a children’s game, so the modern equivalent of Bentham’s statement might be that, so far as happiness goes, a game of tiddlywinks is as good as a piano sonata.

Feldman seems to agree with Bentham on this, declaring: “Happiness, as ordinarily understood, does not need to be replaced with something grander” (p. 149). He takes this stand in the face of some strong counterarguments, including the well-known critique of Bentham made by J. S. Mill (1864, p. 11 ff.). Several contemporary writers go further than Mill’s emphasis on qualitative differences between sources of happiness and argue that “authentic happiness” depends on activities that are meaningful and fulfilling (see Csikszentmihalyi & Csikszentmihalyi, 2006; Haybron, 2008; Seligman, 2002).

Feldman, to the contrary, says that “it’s better to have inauthentic happiness than no happiness at all” (p. 202). Happiness is happiness, no matter how shallow or inauthentic it might be. To the extent that Feldman unduly praises “shallow happiness” (p. 147), it seems

to result from his determination to focus narrowly on the nature of happiness in the everyday meaning of the word and to ignore qualitative differences in the sources of happiness and whether they may affect the achievement of abiding happiness. (Regarding those whose happiness depends on criminal activities, Feldman hesitantly proposes a modification of his theory but then concludes that he is “not entirely convinced” that such a modification is necessary; p. 215.)

Feldman brings a similar approach to the topic of *eudaimonia*, which is a transliteration of a Greek word that is sometimes translated as “happiness,” “well-being,” or “flourishing.” Many philosophers have analyzed happiness in the context of the discussion of *eudaimonia* in Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*, where happiness is associated with virtue. Feldman shows little interest in “moral happiness” (or, indeed, Aristotle):

The details of Aristotle’s view are all matters of somewhat technical controversy among Aristotle scholars. I have very little to say about it, aside from the fact that it appears to be a mistake to identify *eudaimonia* with any sort of garden variety happiness. (p. 186)

Aristotle’s view continues to be influential, so for more than just historical reasons, one might wish that Feldman had more to say about it.

Yet Feldman does endorse *eudaimonism*, which he defines as the view that “happiness determines welfare” (p. 160). What he means by this is that AHH corresponds with “garden variety” welfare, that is, the “welfare value” (or well-being) of a person’s life will be proportional to his or her AHH, or, in brief, “Welfare tracks happiness” (p. 169). He does not mean that happiness corresponds with virtue or moral excellence (the Aristotelian view), or a meaningful life, or self-fulfillment through one’s creativity. Instead, he advocates a “garden variety” view of welfare (p. 186).

As Feldman admits, his account of welfare is “not entirely conclusive”: He tries to “locate welfare by triangulation” (p. 168). What does he see as its characteristics? He offers that welfare may correspond to “the amount of *intrinsic value that the life has for the person, or how good in itself it is for him*” (p. 161, italics in original). He goes on to say that something “can be good for Mary even though Mary takes it to be worthless; or even if Mary has no view about its value” (p. 161). If Mary is not able to judge what is good for her, who is? Feldman says that a friend, a psychiatrist, or a philosopher “may sometimes be able to make a better assessment” (pp. 220–221). He may well be right, but he offers the reader very little assistance toward understanding how and why this may be so.

Feldman criticizes some current ways that psychologists measure happiness (suggesting, but never making explicit, a critique of operationalism). He then makes a proposal of his own that (in part) involves asking research participants to list eight topics that “have been on your mind during the past few days” (p. 242).

This is problematic (among other reasons) because participants’ responses will probably be context dependent: If they are questioned while on a university campus, they

will tend to think of topics related to the campus, whereas if they are questioned while at home, they will tend to think of topics related to the home. Yet, although his proposed measure might be criticized from several different angles, Feldman deserves credit for devising a theory of happiness that is thorough enough to provide suggestions for developing an instrument that might be used in empirical research.

Conclusion

This is an exceptionally lively and thought-provoking book, and it will surely spark many debates. Yet its central message can be summarized quite briefly: Happiness is a matter of how one thinks about things. Psychotherapists of various stripes will find this viewpoint congenial.

Beyond this, Feldman has accomplished something of signal importance. He has clarified the construct of happiness and made fruitful suggestions about how to measure it. By doing so, he has provided an example of philosophy at its best, neither ignoring the results of empirical research nor slavishly parroting them, but shedding critical light on concepts of crucial concern to both philosophy and psychology.

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