

Fred Feldman, *Pleasure and the Good Life: Concerning the Nature, Varieties, and Plausibility of Hedonism* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 2004), pp. xi + 221.

Despite its intuitive appeal, hedonism has few adherents. I suspect that most philosophers think Nozick's 'experience machine' put the final nail in hedonism's coffin. Feldman's book breathes new life into this much-maligned view. He pursues a strategy of relentless assimilation – accepting the intuitive force of traditional arguments against hedonism, but showing how to account for the intuitions that underlie those arguments without abandoning hedonism. For each argument, we get a new version of hedonism that is designed to be immune to the argument. The result is a panoply of hedonisms to suit a variety of axiological tastes.

The book begins with a helpful introductory chapter about the concept of well-being, in which Feldman distinguishes well-being from other concepts in the neighborhood and offers some brief critical remarks about hedonism's main competitors. Feldman points out some potholes to avoid in the formulation of hedonism, and then formulates a default version of hedonism. Feldman then details several anti-hedonistic arguments, notably the experience machine argument and the argument from worthless pleasures (e.g. pleasure taken in the suffering of innocents). Much of this is familiar, but very well done.

We then reach the core of the book, where we get the distinctively Feldmanian brand of hedonism. First we are introduced to 'attitudinal' hedonism, which differs from default hedonism in its presuppositions about the nature of pleasure. Default hedonism presupposes that pleasure is a sensation. According to Feldman, pleasure is, most

fundamentally, a propositional attitude. It is more akin to belief than to a sensation like hotness, since like belief it has a propositional object, and unlike hotness it need not have a distinct phenomenal feel. To be sure, there are pleasant feelings; but to say these feelings are pleasant is just to say that attitudinal pleasure is taken in them.

Feldman's conception of pleasure is independently motivated, but also enables him to do the work he wants to do in assimilating supposedly anti-hedonistic views. The value of a pleasure may vary depending not only on its intensity, but also on features of its propositional object. Consider a person who believes that it would be better to walk around doing normal things while not hooked up to any machines than to be hooked up to the experience machine, even if the experience machine life contained more pleasure. Such a person might think that pleasure is more valuable when its propositional object is true than when it is false. For such a person, Feldman offers Truth-Adjusted Intrinsic Attitudinal Hedonism (TAIAH). Or consider a person who believes that a life full of pleasure taken in the suffering of innocents would be worse than a life full of pleasure taken in beautiful artworks and music, even if the art-and-music life contained less pleasure. Such a person might think that pleasure is more valuable when its object deserves to have pleasure taken in it. For such a person, Feldman presents Desert-Adjusted Intrinsic Attitudinal Hedonism (DAIAH).

A natural worry at this point is whether these new versions of hedonism are really versions of hedonism. Feldman argues that they are. His argument employs the notion of basic intrinsic value states. The basic intrinsic value states are those states that have their intrinsic values in the most fundamental way; they are the 'value atoms'. Hedonists think that the value atoms are 'pure attributions of some sort of pleasure or pain' (p. 177).

A pure attribution of attitudinal pleasure is a state of affairs consisting of a person taking attitudinal pleasure to some degree in some proposition. Feldman says that according to this criterion, TAI AH, DAIAH, and the other axiologies he introduces all count as versions of hedonism.

In other chapters and appendices, Feldman argues against ‘shape of life’ theories put forth by Velleman and others; shows how to interpret G.E. Moore as endorsing a sort of hedonism; further explains the distinction between attitudinal and sensory pleasure; gives an account of masochism; and offers an interpretation of Epicurus’s hedonism.

I have a few minor concerns about the book. Feldman’s strategy is to defend hedonism by formulating new versions of hedonism. But it seems to me that this defense of hedonism is incomplete without some weighing of the merits and defects of the resulting theory (DAIAH, or TAI AH) against those of its main competitors. We don’t get much of a sense for how this balance sheet might look. For one thing, we don’t get an in-depth critical discussion of alternative views. In the first chapter, Feldman does offer some brief arguments against eudaimonism, preferentism, perfectionism, and objective list theories. But this discussion is very brief, and I suspect that some opponents might feel shortchanged. For example, Feldman dispatches preferentism in two pages. The objections he raises are important ones, but there is little discussion of how a preferentist might respond. When I finished the book, I wondered whether the preferentist might be able to make use of many of the same strategies Feldman suggests for the hedonist, such as adjusting the value of a preference satisfaction based on features of the object of the preference.

For another thing, Feldman never subjects TAI AH or DAIAH to much criticism at all. He does address the objection that these theories are not hedonistic (more on this below). But there is no other discussion of possible objections. I think both TAI AH and DAIAH face problems that are not faced by default hedonism. In ‘A Paradox for Some Theories of Welfare’ (2007), I argue that TAI AH, unlike default hedonism, runs the risk of paradox in the case of a person who takes pleasure in the proposition that his life is going badly. In ‘Indeterminate Value, Basic Value, and Summation’ (2006), Noah Lemos argues that views like DAIAH run into problems involving pleasure taken in objects with an indeterminate degree of pleasure-worthiness, such as the proposition *that someone is happy to some degree*. I do not have room to discuss these problems in sufficient detail here, and I do not mean to imply that they are decisive objections. But the concern is that, by introducing these new versions of hedonism to avoid familiar objections, we run the risk of raising new objections that are even more serious than the familiar ones.

Finally, I have a concern about the assertion that TAI AH and DAIAH are forms of hedonism, given Feldman’s own characterization of hedonism. According to TAI AH, the intrinsic value of a pleasure state is determined by the intensity of the attitude of pleasure and the truth-value of its propositional object. Thus, according to Feldman, the basic intrinsic value states are pure attributions of pleasure, consisting of a person taking pleasure to some degree in some proposition; it’s just that the values of such states are determined by features other than the amount of pleasure or pain they contain.

But this seems to me to be a misleading way to describe the situation. If the basic intrinsic value states consist of a person taking pleasure to some degree in some

proposition, but the intrinsic value of such a state depends on the truth-value of the propositional object, then there could be two lives that contain all the same basic intrinsic value states but have different values. This strikes me as wrong. It would be more perspicuous to say that the basic intrinsic value states are states consisting of a person taking pleasure to some degree in some proposition, and that proposition being true. (At least, the result would be a theory extensionally equivalent to TAI AH.) The basic intrinsic value states would not be pure attributions of pleasure, but conjunctions that have a pure attribution of pleasure as one conjunct. The same could be said about DAI AH, *mutatis mutandis*. So these theories seem to me to fail Feldman's test for being a form of hedonism. They do, however, seem substantially more hedonistic than many other theories of well-being, since every basic intrinsic value state does contain a pure attribution of pleasure as a part.

The concerns I have raised are minor, and to some extent unfair. After all, Feldman's main goal in the book is not to defend any particular form of hedonism. Rather, it is to defend the basic hedonistic insight – that 'pleasure is the Good' – by describing the forms and limits of hedonism. Concerning this goal, the book is an unqualified success. Anyone interested in value theory will benefit from studying it. It should be the first book philosophers turn to when they are looking for a clear statement and defense of hedonism, or when looking for a model of how to present an axiological theory. And it should help to bring hedonism back to life as a viable contender in the theory of well-being.¹

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