

Varieties of Hedonism in Feldman's *Pleasure and the Good Life*

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In these comments on Fred Feldman's *Pleasure and the Good Life*, I first challenge the dichotomy between sensory and attitudinal hedonisms as perhaps presenting a false dilemma. I suggest that there may be a form of hedonism that employs the concept of a 'feel' that is not purely sensory. Next, I raise some problems for several of the versions of hedonism explored in the book.

INTRODUCTION

There is much to admire in Fred Feldman's *Pleasure and the Good Life*,¹ and much with which to agree. It is a wonderful exploration of varieties of hedonism, and a demonstration of the plasticity of the very concept of hedonism. Feldman succeeds ably in arguing that most, if not all, of the traditional arguments against hedonism can be met by different versions of the theory, all of them versions of what he calls 'attitudinal hedonism'. We don't get a fully worked-out presentation of the One True Version, but we do get plenty of hints about the version he prefers. In this essay I will raise some questions, and some misgivings I have about different versions of hedonism. Whether these misgivings rise to the level of disagreement with Feldman will depend largely on the extent to which he is prepared to endorse, as opposed merely to explore, the hedonism in question.

SENSORY VERSUS ATTITUDINAL HEDONISM

The first major move in the book is that from sensory to attitudinal hedonism. Sensory hedonism

takes the fundamental bearers of positive intrinsic value to be episodes in which a person feels a pleasurable sensation. 'Pleasure' in this context is assumed to indicate some sort of feeling, or sensation. But Attitudinal Hedonism understands pleasure to be something different – an attitude. (55)

¹ Fred Feldman, *Pleasure and the Good Life* (Oxford, 2004). All page references are to this book.

Here is more explanation of attitudinal pleasure:

A person takes attitudinal pleasure in some state of affairs if he enjoys it, is pleased about it, is glad that it is happening, is delighted by it. . . . Attitudinal pleasures are always directed onto objects, just as beliefs and hopes and fears are directed onto objects. . . . attitudinal pleasures need not have any 'feel'. We know we have them not by sensation, but in the same way (whatever it may be) that we know when we believe something, or hope for it, or fear that it might happen. (56)

Intrinsic Attitudinal Hedonism (IAH) is, in part, a response to the Stoicus objection (an example of what Feldman calls 'The Argument from Nonexistent Pleasures') to sensory hedonisms, such as Default Hedonism (DH). Stoicus 'wants peace and quiet as ends in themselves [and] gets exactly what he wants – peace, quiet, no episodes of sensory pleasure, and no episodes of sensory pain. . . . He is satisfied with this life. . . . he enjoys the peace and quiet. . . . [he] eventually dies a happy man' (50). According to DH, because Stoicus's life contains no pleasure or pain, it is a life devoid of worth altogether, neither good nor bad. However, it seems to Feldman, and to me, that Stoicus's life might still be a good life for Stoicus, even if it could be improved by the addition of some cold beer, salty peanuts and chocolate cake. IAH can give this intuitively acceptable result, because Stoicus experiences attitudinal pleasure, even though he has no sensory pleasure. IAH also seems to deal well with the phenomenon of temporal shape, which poses problems for DH. For example, compare two lives which contain the same amount of sensory pleasure, but differ with respect to when the pleasure occurs. The first life starts out with plenty of pleasure and very little, or no, pain, but gradually transforms until it ends with huge amounts of pain and no pleasure. The second life is the reverse. On a smaller scale, consider two portions of a life, say a couple of weeks long, containing the same amount of sensory pain (and little or no sensory pleasure). In one, the pain starts out fairly mild, but gradually increases until it is quite severe, before ceasing. The other is the reverse. Although both descriptions are extremely sketchy, it is fairly easy to fill in the details so that the amounts of sensory pleasure and pain remain constant between the two members of each pair, but the second (life or part of a life) seems clearly preferable to the first. IAH can accommodate this intuition by specifying that, although the amounts of sensory pleasure and pain are equal, the amounts of attitudinal pleasure and pain are not. Take the second pair as illustration. If you start out in fairly mild pain, but it gradually increases until it is quite severe, not only are you displeased to be experiencing the amount of sensory pain you are in fact experiencing, you are also displeased *that* the amount is increasing. On the other hand, if the pain gradually decreases, your attitudinal pain at experiencing sensory pain might be

significantly mitigated (at least later in the sequence) by attitudinal pleasure that the sensory pain is decreasing.

Although I think the move from sensory hedonism to attitudinal hedonism represents an important insight, I am not so sure that the distinction between sensory and attitudinal pleasure is as clear cut as Feldman suggests. Feldman contrasts the 'feeling, or sensation' in which sensory pleasure consists, on the one hand, with the 'propositional attitude' of enjoying, being pleased by, being delighted by, etc. in which attitudinal pleasure consists on the other. The attitudes central to attitudinal pleasure are compared with beliefs, hopes and fears. There is, though, an important difference between believing that I won the lottery on the one hand, and fearing that I didn't win it, or enjoying the fact that I did win, on the other (I'm not sure about hoping). My enjoyment or fear must be conscious, whereas my belief need not be. The attitude of belief can hold of us for long stretches without interruption. For almost all of my life I have believed, uninterruptedly, that two plus two equals four. For several years fewer, but still uninterruptedly, I have believed that the square of the hypotenuse in a right-angle triangle must equal the sum of the squares of the other two sides. We don't lose our beliefs when we focus on other things, or even when we sleep, but we do lose our enjoyment and our fears, at least sometimes. This is not to say that we must be aware of our own enjoyment in order to enjoy it, any more than we must be aware of our own beliefs in order to have them. Though enjoyment must be conscious, it need not be self-conscious. We must, however, be aware of something relevantly connected with the enjoyment. Feldman doesn't dispute this. So, what is the relevance of this to the distinction between sensory and attitudinal pleasure (and pain)? The 'feelings' central to DH are sensations, but 'feeling' can be used in the sense of emotion too (as in the old lounge favorite 'Feelings, whoah whoah whoah, feelings'). The attitude of enjoyment (or taking pleasure in) may not be a feeling in the sense of a physical sensation, but it may be something like a feeling in the sense of an emotion. If Stoicus was genuinely pleased with his life, happy and contented, he had feelings, even if no sensations of pleasure or pain. I agree with Feldman that it is unlikely that there is such a thing as the *sensation* of 'pleasure itself' (85), but I am not so sure about the *feeling* of enjoyment, or contentment. Once we realize that we are not looking for some kind of sensation that all pleasures must have in common (an admittedly unlikely result), it becomes less implausible to suggest that the attitudes of enjoying, or delighting in, or taking pleasure in share some kind of emotional feel. Emotions are different from sensations, but they are also different from the purely cognitive attitudes, such as belief. Emotions, but not beliefs, may well have particular qualia as essential elements.

These are only suggestive remarks, which I don't have the space here to explore further, but they do point to the possibility of a third form of hedonism, neither the crudely physical sensational kind nor the coldly cognitive attitudinal kind.

TRUTH-ADJUSTED INTRINSIC ATTITUDINAL HEDONISM AND THE ISSUE OF VALUE PLURALISM

Truth

In response to what he calls 'The Argument from False Pleasures', Feldman suggests (but doesn't necessarily endorse) a modification of IAH to Truth-Adjusted Intrinsic Attitudinal Hedonism (TAAIH), which discounts false pleasures, but not false pains. The basic idea is that 'if the pleasure is taken in a false object' the value of the pleasure is less than it would have been had it been taken in a true object (90 per cent less). The example used to motivate this possible move is Nagel's well-known deceived businessman case. Regardless of whether Feldman ultimately supports discounting the value of false pleasures, it is a move that will appeal to some. I have a couple of misgivings, one about the specific role of truth in TAAIH and one about the role of truth at all.

TAAIH discounts pleasures for having false objects, but not pains. Why the asymmetry? Feldman's explanation is that he 'can readily sense the attractiveness of adjusting the value of pleasures for truth' (111), but he 'cannot so readily see the corresponding attractiveness of a similar adjustment of the value of pains for truth' (111). Nagel's example of the businessman who falsely believes he is loved and respected, apparently, strikes a chord with him, but his attempts to produce corresponding examples for false pains do not. Speaking of someone who is pained by the belief that there are starving children in Somalia, he says 'What difference does it make if the object of my belief is false? Is my pain worse if in fact there are no suffering children in Somalia? Or is it better?... I simply don't know what to say' (111-12).

I think it is possible to explain the difference in ambivalence between this latter case and Nagel's without assuming that truth really does play an asymmetric role. In the Somalia case we are thinking, 'given that I am pained, is it better or worse (or neither) that my pain has a true object?' One consideration that speaks in favour of truth being worse in this case is that it is clear that the world as a whole would be worse, if the children were really suffering. Obvious considerations on the other side are that it is also clear that false beliefs are generally instrumentally bad, and that we don't like to be deceived. On the other hand, in the deceived businessman case, the world wouldn't be worse if his family really did love him (and probably would be better – they would probably be happier if they really loved him, and were

not constantly pretending). So the two types of considerations oppose each other in the false pain case, but agree in the false pleasure case. Of course, neither type of consideration has any relevance to the questions of whether the values of intrinsic attitudinal pleasures or pains are affected by the truth of their objects (as Feldman himself points out). But they may well have a significant effect on our intuitions about specific examples designed to test these questions. It is one thing to distinguish issues in such a way that it is obvious what is relevant to what. It is quite another to train our moral intuitions so that they only respond to relevant factors. In general, our moral intuitions about more or less concretely described cases are notoriously unreliable.² The more we can explain specific intuitions as influenced by factors that are clearly irrelevant to the issue in question, the less reason we have to place any trust in them, much less construct theories based on them. Now I know that at this point, many readers will be itching to point out that you can't do moral theory without using intuitions at *some* point. I agree. The questions are, at *which* point, and *which* intuitions? (Or perhaps they are the same question.) One obviously acceptable role for appeals to intuitions is in demonstrations that proponents of particular theories are committed to results that they themselves find intuitively unacceptable. Much trickier is the question of what kinds of intuitions should be appealed to in constructive, rather than critical, work. This is not the place to explore this question, but I will say that, in general, I place more trust in intuitions about principles or theories than in intuitions about concrete cases. Returning to the present issue, my intuition that if truth is relevant to the value of attitudinal pleasures or pains, it is equally relevant to both is far stronger than any intuition I may have about the value of the deceived businessman's pleasures or the sympathetic person's pains.

I also have a more general worry about any theory that has the truth of a proposition relevant to the intrinsic value of an attitude to the proposition. Many propositions in which we delight are complex, perhaps theory-laden, conjunctions. Suppose that I am pleased that my pressing the accelerator pedal causes my car to accelerate. It is at least possible that a full account of the proposition in which I take pleasure will include a theory of causation, an ontological theory of the nature of physical objects, and the physics of motion. Chances are pretty high that there will be some falsehoods mixed in with whatever truths I happen to believe about causation, ontology and motion. Imagine, for example, that Doug Ehring's trope transference theory of causation is correct.³ I don't for a minute believe it. I'm more inclined to some

² See, for example, Peter Unger, *Living High and Letting Die* (Oxford, 1996), for highly persuasive evidence of this.

³ See Douglas Ehring, *Causation and Persistence: A Theory of Causation* (Oxford, 1997).

version of the counterfactual theory. Could such a mistake on my part render my pleasure less valuable (even 90 percent less valuable) than had I believed his theory? It seems pretty obvious that details such as this couldn't affect the value of my pleasure. But then we would need a theoretically sound, deeply grounded account of just *which* truths matter. I am skeptical that such an account could be given.

Pluralism

Feldman addresses two arguments for the conclusion that TAI AH is not a form of hedonism. First, one might claim that TAI AH is not a form of hedonism, because it is a form of pluralism. Second, TAI AH might seem to violate supervenience. Concerning the first argument, Feldman agrees that 'if it is a form of pluralism, then it is not a form of hedonism' (113), but claims that it is not a form of pluralism. Explaining this claim, he says:

As I understand pluralism, what marks a theory as a form of pluralism is that it postulates the existence of a plurality of fundamental sources of intrinsic value. . . . TAI AH . . . does not imply that there is some independent source of intrinsic value in addition to pleasure. . . . the theory does not imply that *truth* has any intrinsic value. The mere fact that something is true does not have any value in itself according to the theory. The only ultimate bearers of positive intrinsic value according to this theory are episodes of pleasure. (113)

It might seem obvious that hedonism cannot be a form of pluralism. After all, what is a more obviously monistic theory than hedonism? However, even this claim has been challenged. Michael Stocker⁴ claims that hedonism is actually pluralistic. He does so based on some obvious claims about the qualitative differences between different pleasures, the different types of judgment required to evaluate different pleasures, and the rationality of regretting missing out on olive oil salad dressing when one has chosen the clearly superior walnut oil dressing.⁵ What this example illustrates is that the debate over monism versus pluralism may well be a red herring. Who cares whether hedonism is pluralistic or monistic? The interesting questions concern the relevance to intrinsic value of such things as truth, justice, happiness and apple pie (the answers: no, no, yes, no). It may be that TAI AH doesn't entail that truth has intrinsic value, when that claim is interpreted as the claim that the mere fact that something is true has some value in itself. I don't know of any theory that makes that claim. There are those who claim that the mere fact that a belief is true has some value in itself. Others might claim that a belief must be an instance of knowledge in

⁴ See Michael Stocker, *Plural and Conflicting Values* (Oxford, 1992).

⁵ When he presented this material to a graduate seminar in Syracuse, we (the long-suffering members of his seminar) asked him who, on his account of monism, the monists were. He wouldn't give us names, but he claimed they lived in Australia!

order to have value. TAI AH restricts the axiological relevance of truth to the propositional attitudes involved in attitudinal pleasure. It seems to me that we don't start with the intuition that there is or is not a plurality of fundamental sources of intrinsic value. If we have any beliefs of this nature, it is because we first have beliefs about the relevance of particular things, such as truth, justice, happiness and apple pie. The claims that the truth of a belief (perhaps only in conjunction with the other conditions for knowledge) make it more intrinsically valuable than it otherwise would have been, and that the truth of a proposition make attitudinal pleasure taken in the proposition more intrinsically valuable than it otherwise would have been, are distinct. However, they seem importantly related, in a way that has nothing to do with the semantic debate over what makes a theory pluralistic. Specifically, I have a hard time understanding why anyone would be attracted to the latter claim without also being attracted to something like the former. Apart, that is, from a desire to construct a theory that fits the appearances of intuitive reactions to concretely described examples. Perhaps it is just because, as I said above, that method of theory construction has little to no attraction for me that the highly curtailed role for truth presented in TAI AH has no appeal.

DESERT-ADJUSTED INTRINSIC ATTITUDINAL HEDONISM

Feldman presents another variation on IAH, *Desert-Adjusted Intrinsic Attitudinal Hedonism* (DAIAH). Unlike TAI AH, the enhancing factor, in this case desert, works symmetrically for pleasures and pains. Here is the basic idea:

the value of a pleasure is enhanced when it is pleasure taken in a pleasure-worthy object, such as something good, or beautiful. The value of a pleasure is mitigated when it is pleasure taken in a pleasure-unworthy object, such as something evil, or ugly. The disvalue of a pain is mitigated (the pain is made less bad) when it is pain taken in an object worthy of pain, such as something evil or ugly. The value of a pain is enhanced (the pain is made yet worse) when it is pain taken in an object unworthy of this attitude, such as something good or beautiful. (120)

DAIAH gives some curious results. Consider two people, Ian Innocent and Gertie Guilty. Both are imprisoned, but, as their names coincidentally suggest (how did the jurors not notice?), Ian is innocent and Gertie is guilty. Both are mightily pained by their imprisonment. Ian is pained by his unjust imprisonment, and Gertie is pained by her just imprisonment. Ian is not just pained by his imprisonment, he is pained by the injustice of his imprisonment. Likewise, Gertie is not just pained by her imprisonment, but by the justice of it (being a criminal, she doesn't much care for justice). DAIAH seems to suggest that, other

things being equal, Ian's pain is less bad for him than Gertie's is for her. That is, Ian's life actually goes better as a result of his unjust imprisonment and attitudinal pain in it than Gertie's goes as a result of her just imprisonment and attitudinal pain in it. Or consider the life of someone, call him Al, surrounded by aesthetic and moral ugliness (velvet clowns, dogs playing poker, an endless succession of Bushes squatting in the White House) who is, appropriately (according to DAIAH), pained by it, and who gets no attitudinal pleasure at all. Contrast this with the life of someone, call him Bob, surrounded by aesthetic and moral beauty (Michelangelo, the Simpsons on TV, Manchester United winning the Champions League, England winning the World Cup, the Bushes rotting in jail) who is, inappropriately (according to DAIAH), pained by it, and who gets no attitudinal pleasure at all. Finally consider Cletus, who has the same surroundings as Al, but is, wildly inappropriately, delighted by them, but who also is frequently subjected by his wife, Darleen, to Shakespeare, which, inappropriately, pains him greatly. Absent other details, DAIAH suggests that Al's life is not nearly as bad as Bob's. We would need more details of the durations and intensities of Cletus's pleasures and pains, but it is certainly possible that DAIAH would judge his life to be worse overall than Al's, even though it would be pretty good on IAH. Once we get clear, as Feldman is very careful to do, that the hedonisms we are considering are theories of what makes a life good in itself for the individual living it, and not, for example, what makes a life good for others, or the world in general, I find these implications of DAIAH to be highly counterintuitive, especially the comparison of Ian with Gertie. As I said above, though, I don't have much confidence in particular intuitions about cases. I would like to know what Feldman thinks of these cases, though, since he seems to think it more important (at least than I do) how well a theory fits with intuitions about cases such as these.

I am also puzzled about the limitations of desert in DAIAH. The inappropriateness of the object can render a pleasure less valuable, but it cannot make it bad. Likewise the appropriateness of an object can render a pain less bad, but it cannot make it good. My intuition (an intuition about theory, not specific cases) is that if desert can shift the value of an attitudinal pleasure or pain, it can shift it past the neutral point. Feldman does consider a version of DAIAH that does precisely this, *Moorean Desert-Adjusted Intrinsic Attitudinal Hedonism* (MDAIAH). His criticism of MDAIAH is that it gives some highly counterintuitive results. In particular, it judges the life of someone like Al to be overall good (his example is structurally similar). I would like to know, then, whether I am right in guessing that the reason Feldman prefers DAIAH to MDAIAH (which he seems to do) is because DAIAH avoids this particular kind of counterintuitive result. In which

case, I would again be interested in hearing what he has to say about my examples above involving Ian, Gertie, Al, Bob and Cletus. It seems to me that the kind of counterintuitiveness at the heart of Feldman's criticism of MDAIAH is also at the heart of my examples. There may, of course, be a difference of degree, and that might be enough to allow Feldman to live with my examples for DAIAH, but not with his for MDAIAH. Or, of course, he might not be willing to endorse DAIAH at all.

SUBJECT'S DESERT-ADJUSTED INTRINSIC ATTITUDINAL HEDONISM

Finally, I would like to say a few words about Feldman's response to Ross's Two Worlds Objection. Consider two possible worlds, each containing the same net amount of intrinsic attitudinal pleasure. In one world the good people get lots of pleasure and the bad people get lots of pain. In the other, the actual world, the good people get lots of pain, and the bad people get lots of pleasure. Feldman points out that, even if we agree that the two worlds are not of equal value, this example isn't relevant to any of his theories of the good life. DH, IAH, and the rest, are theories of what makes a life good in itself for the person living it, not theories of what makes a world good. He suggests a theory of the goodness of worlds that takes what he calls the *subject's desert-adjusted intrinsic values* of episodes of intrinsic attitudinal pleasure or pain as determining the value of worlds. The values of pleasures or pains are adjusted for a subject's desert roughly as follows: when someone who deserves pleasure (a good person) gets it, the pleasure is worth more; when someone who deserves pain (a bad person) gets pleasure, the pleasure is worth less, but is nonetheless still of positive overall value. When a good person gets pain, the pain has even greater negative value; when a bad person gets pain, the pain has less negative value, but negative value nonetheless. One result, as he points out, is that it is possible for there to be a world in which everyone's life is going pretty well, but which had fairly low, but still positive, overall value.

I don't have the space to explore this theory in depth here. It is not a theory of the good life, anyway, and only comes up briefly at the end of the book. I do have a question, and a comment, though. Just as with the corresponding question for DAIAH, I wonder why an individual's desert cannot render a pleasure intrinsically bad or a pain intrinsically good. The kind of intuition that supports the move to this kind of theory doesn't stop at the neutral point. In fact, many people seem to share Moore's intuition that the 'organic whole' consisting of a bad person suffering pain is actually good. When Shelly Kagan gave

a talk a few years ago⁶ in which he seemed to be embracing this kind of approach, I asked him what on earth had prompted him so to take leave of his senses. His reply was 'I don't know whether there is a hell, but I certainly hope that, if there is one, Stalin is burning in it.' Well, I have similar hypothetical hopes about Stalin, Hitler, Nixon, Kissinger (future-oriented hopes in his case) and many others. I also have hopes that my son will win any athletic contests he enters, that I will win the lottery, and that Manchester United will win the Champions League. I don't pretend that any of these worthy hopes is directly morally relevant (except, perhaps, the one about Manchester United). It is fairly easy to explain why the desire for justice exemplified by Kagan's and my hopes is part of a good moral character without assuming that justice has any kind of intrinsic moral relevance, or assuming that the intrinsic value of pain or pleasure is affected by the moral character of the one experiencing it.⁷ That's a task for another time, though.

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⁶ At the Utilitarianism 2000 conference, in Wake Forest, North Carolina.

⁷ For an example of the kind of argument I have in mind applied to the justification of personal commitments to people and to principles, see Alastair Norcross, 'Consequentialism and Commitment', *The Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 78:4 (December 1997), pp. 380-403.

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