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The Nature of Pleasure: A Critique of Feldman

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In these remarks on Feldman's recent book, *Pleasure and the Good Life*, I concentrate on Feldman's account of pleasure as attitudinal. I argue that an account of pleasure according to which pleasure need not have any feel is implausible. I suggest that Feldman could avoid this problem but retain the advantages of his attitudinal hedonism by giving an account of the attitude 'taking pleasure in' such that the attitude has a feel.

INTRODUCTION

In his recent defence of hedonism in *Pleasure and the Good Life*, Feldman is very keen to impress upon his reader that hedonism is not all sex, drugs, and rock and roll. As a hedonist I'm quite keen on sex, drugs, and rock and roll, and my own view is that it is the obvious value of these things that makes hedonism the true theory of value. In these remarks about Feldman's excellent book I will urge a return to sex, drugs, and rock and roll – or at least, a return to the view that pleasure is good because it feels good. I argue that Feldman has over-intellectualized pleasure, and I suggest that there is a better position available to Feldman that won't interfere with his larger project.

Feldman makes an extremely interesting distinction between sensory pleasure and attitudinal pleasure: sensory pleasure is a feeling – akin to an itch or a tickle, as Feldman puts it. Attitudinal pleasure, which will be crucial in Feldman's view, is a kind of attitude:

A person takes attitudinal pleasure in a state of affairs if he enjoys it, is pleased about it, is glad that it is happening, is delighted by it.

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.¹

Attitudinal pleasure is supposed to be a clearer and less problematic notion than sensory pleasure, and indeed Feldman defines sensory pleasure in terms of attitudinal pleasure: a sensory pleasure is a sensation that we take pleasure in having. On Feldman's view, a hedonism of attitudinal pleasure is much more plausible than a hedonism of sensory pleasure, and of course, that is the view the book is devoted to defending.

¹ All quotations are from Fred Feldman, *Pleasure and the Good Life* (Oxford, 2004), p. 56.

The idea of pleasure is quite puzzling: as Feldman and lots of others point out, different pleasures feel different, and it is hard to say what makes them all pleasures. It seems unlikely that all pleasurable sensations involve the very same sensation. This is the so-called heterogeneity problem. Thus it is tempting to try to analyse sensory pleasure in terms of something other than a sensation. One frequently suggested solution is to say that a pleasure is a sensation that we desire – but as Feldman points out (in Appendix B and in his ‘Two Questions about Pleasure’), it is clear that we can enjoy things that we do not desire and desire things that we do not enjoy. So it seems that any analysis of pleasure in terms of desire is bound to fail. On the other hand if we don’t analyse pleasure at all, and claim that it is a primitive, we are back to the heterogeneity problem – what on earth do different pleasures have in common?

Feldman analyses sensory pleasure in terms of attitudinal pleasure. The notion of attitudinal pleasure solves the problem as follows: the basic notion is attitudinal pleasure – the attitude of taking pleasure in something. On Feldman’s view, sensory pleasures are pleasures because they are sensations in which we take pleasure. So though they are all very different from each other, what sensory pleasures have in common is that we have a pro-attitude to them. Defining sensory pleasure in terms of attitudinal pleasure solves all sorts of problems in addition to the heterogeneity problem. It explains how fakirs can train themselves not to feel pain, how the very same sensation can start as pleasurable and become painful, and how the masochist can enjoy her pain (I’ll come back to masochism).

Feldman has dealt with the heterogeneity problem and many others by analysing sensory pleasure, not in terms of desires, but in terms of another sort of pleasure – attitudinal pleasure. However, this neat trick is bound to raise some worries – what is attitudinal pleasure? What is going on when we take pleasure in something? What makes attitudinal pleasures pleasures? On Feldman’s view (though he never says this explicitly), attitudinal pleasure is a primitive, and (he does say this explicitly – quoted above) it is an attitude that does not have a feel.

CRITIQUE OF FELDMAN

According to Feldman, attitudinal pleasure need not have a feel, and we don’t identify it by sensation. Both of these claims seem false to me, and I will try to show that attitudinal hedonism would be improved by a slightly different account of attitudinal pleasure.

Feldman’s account of sensory pleasure and the open question argument

Feldman rightly points out that analysing sensory pleasure in terms of desire is not satisfactory. There are lots of reasons for desiring things

that have nothing to do with pleasure – to use Feldman’s own example, I might desire to be dizzy because I am researching dizziness. There is a more general lesson to be learnt here, and I will illustrate the more general lesson with one of Feldman’s own arguments. In an earlier piece, ‘Two Questions about Pleasure’, Feldman criticizes a modification of the desire analysis: the view that sensory pleasure is a sensation that is desired intrinsically (i.e. for its own sake and nothing else). Feldman rejects this view, though his arguments here are not completely clear. Feldman admits that my desire for dizziness might over time become a desire for dizziness for its own sake: ‘Dizziness which I formerly desired only extrinsically, is now something I desire at least partially intrinsically. Nevertheless, the feeling of dizziness, when I get it, may fail to be a sensory pleasure’.² Feldman does not say *why* it can fail to be a sensory pleasure, but the answer is not difficult – I might desire to feel dizzy for the sake of dizziness without *enjoying* the dizziness – without *liking it*. What is essential to a sensation being a pleasure is not just that I desire it, but that I enjoy it when I am experiencing it.

We can see the more general problem now – there is something special about pleasure, and no analysis in terms of a mere attitude will be sufficient to explain why a sensation is a sensory pleasure – there will always be an open question:

I desire this sensation, but is it a pleasure?

I desire it intrinsically, but is it a pleasure?

I have a pro-attitude to it, but is it a pleasure?

Essentially, Feldman is using this open question argument in his objection to desire accounts. (So it is a valid form of argument by Feldman’s own lights!) Feldman’s own analysis gets around this problem by analysing pleasure in terms of pleasure – for him, a sensation is a pleasure if I take pleasure in it. It seems to me that that is the right answer, but equally, it seems to me that it will only be a satisfactory answer if we say a little more about what it is to take pleasure in something. Crucially, our analysis of ‘taking pleasure in’ must avoid the sort of open question argument that applies to bare attitudinal analyses of sensory pleasure.

Unfortunately, Feldman’s account does not avoid the open question argument. Feldman says that ‘taking pleasure in’ is just like desiring. Feldman tells us that (like desiring), taking pleasure in needn’t have any feel to it. Of course, ‘taking pleasure in’ has the *word* pleasure in it. But that is not enough. If the word itself is doing all the work, then nothing has really been explained by Feldman’s analysis – ‘taking pleasure in’ something is just as mysterious as ‘feeling pleasure’. In

² Fred Feldman, *Utilitarianism, Hedonism and Desert* (Cambridge, 1997), p. 90.

his earlier work ('Two Questions ...'), Feldman describes attitudinal pleasure as a 'pro-attitude'. Although he doesn't use this locution in the book, I'll use it to press my point against Feldman. If attitudinal pleasure is just a pro-attitude, then the open question argument applies to Feldman's argument:

I take pleasure in this sensation = I have a pro-attitude to this sensation.

I have a pro-attitude to this sensation, but is it a pleasure?

Feldman's later account faces the same problem. Feldman implies that 'taking pleasure in' is a *sui generis* state, but it is just like a pro-attitude – it need not have any feel. So Feldman's analysis misses out that crucial element: the *enjoyment* of the object of the attitude.

I have described the problem in terms of Feldman's account of sensory pleasure, but the same applies to his account of the pleasure we take in states of affairs. I am pleased that my paper was accepted. I desired that it be accepted, and now I am taking pleasure in the fact that it has been. However, there are plenty of other things that I desired come about which I am not now taking pleasure in having come about. What's the difference? There must be a difference – by Feldman's own lights the mere fact that you desired something to come about will not guarantee that you take pleasure in its having come about. If 'taking pleasure in' is supposed to be a *sui generis* attitude, then Feldman has just begged the question – he has shifted the problems of sensory pleasure to the level of attitudes.

Feldman's analysis of attitudinal pleasure turns out to be just another cycle in the cycle of desire accounts. But desire accounts are doomed for the reasons that Feldman himself gives. The problem is that an attitude without a feel does not capture a crucial element of pleasure – the *pleasurable* bit – the bit that feels good.

A 'feel' account of attitudinal pleasure

This problem can be solved by insisting that the attitude of 'taking pleasure in' does itself have a feel to it, and the feel is a primitive – the feel is pleasure. This is different from the view that sensory pleasure is basic – on this view sensory pleasure can still be defined in terms of attitudinal pleasure (with all the advantages that that has). The view is rather that the basic pleasure state is a sensory and an attitudinal state – 'taking pleasure in' has both a cognitive and a non-cognitive element. It is directed towards objects (including sensations), but itself has a typical phenomenology.

That doesn't seem like an outrageous thing to say, though large numbers of philosophers seem attached to a sharp dichotomy between cognitive and non-cognitive attitudes. But consider a few attitudes that seem plausibly both: yearning; fearing; certain sorts of nausea; sexual

passion. Yearning is typically identified by a dull ache in the region of the diaphragm, a feeling of emptiness, and recurrent thoughts of the yearned-for object. Taking pleasure in? Typically identified by a feeling of lightness and ease, a warm feeling in the stomach, sometimes a giggly feeling and shortness of breath, and recurrent thoughts of the object. Of course it isn't that simple, and the feelings are hard to describe. However, it strikes me that most non-philosophers would not look at you as if you were crazy if you asked them, 'what does it feel like when you are pleased about something?'.

This move blocks the open question argument by giving an explanation of why attitudinal pleasure is really pleasure. A sensation is a pleasure when I take pleasure in it, just as Feldman says. However, when it comes to the issue of what it is to take pleasure in something, my analysis differs from Feldman's. On the view I am suggesting, the answer is that taking pleasure in a sensation involves a pro-attitude to that sensation, but a very special sort of pro-attitude – one that involves a particular sort of feeling – the feeling of pleasure. So there is no open question – the answer to 'why is this sensation a pleasure?' is 'I have the pleasure feel'.

The feel of pleasure

The feel account of attitudinal pleasure solves the problem of the open question argument. However, I think it is independently a more plausible account of pleasure, and it makes some of Feldman's claims much more plausible. It is plausible that taking pleasure in a sensation actually has a feel to it. It is plausible that when I take pleasure in an object or fact there is a feel to it. As I have argued, these claims are plausible because we want to be able to distinguish between 'taking pleasure in' and other pro-attitudes.

Take sensory pleasure – say, a massage. When the massage starts, I feel the hands on my back, and I experience it as a neutral, not a pleasurable sensation. I start to relax, and I start to experience the hands on my back as pleasure. What has changed? Not just my attitude – the experience actually feels different. From feeling neutral, it now feels pleasant. Compare a different sort of case, where only an attitude changes. Imagine that I turn on the TV and see an interview by an incredibly offensive, rude and sexist interviewer. He keeps making lewd suggestions to his female interviewee, and does not seem sensitive to her obvious embarrassment. I am outraged by this, until I am told that the interviewer is in fact an alter ego of the comedian Sacha Baron Cohen. I reconceptualize what I am watching, and now instead of being shocked by the interviewer, I am shocked that the interviewee doesn't realize that she is being mocked. My experience of the TV show is completely different. In this case, 'feel' is not really relevant (I'm assuming that I don't get any pleasure from the show before or after I

realize what it is), and it seems very plausible to me that the difference in my experience is explained just by a different attitude. However, the massage case needs something more – it's not just that I have changed my attitude, there is something that is just physical going on.

Next, take pure attitudinal pleasure – the pleasure I take in my loved ones' successes, or in the fact that beer and peanuts are in my immediate future. Surely we want to make a distinction between a mere pro-attitude and a pleasurable pro-attitude – or between mere anticipation and pleasurable anticipation. Imagine I am told that after this talk I will be offered a glass of orange juice. I am thirsty, and that sounds OK, so I am pleased in a very weak sense that that will happen. (Our vocabulary here is unhelpfully large: I can be glad, pleased, happy, relieved, satisfied, contented, delighted, overjoyed, thrilled that P. Taking pleasure in the fact that P may be implied by some of these expressions; others may express a phenomenologically flat reaction.) While I would say that I am pleased about the orange juice in my future, I would not say that I am *taking pleasure* in the anticipation. But tell me that there will be frosty beer and salty peanuts, and I feel lighter, a warm glow, a slight tingling of my scalp – I get 'the pleasure feel'. I get it too when I think about my loved ones, my successes, my dog, the fact that I have a job as a philosopher – maybe even Bush leaving office. I don't get it when I think about lots of other things to which I have pro-attitudes – I want the Tory party to become a more effective opposition to Labour, but I do not take any pleasure in the thought that they are becoming so. I was pleased (in the weak sense) that my bus came on time this morning, but I did not take any pleasure in that fact – unfortunately, I don't have the capacity to take pleasure in such mundane things. Not all cases of being pleased are cases of taking pleasure. It seems very plausible to me that genuine cases of taking pleasure do involve a feel.

Masochism

Here is an illustration designed to show that my modification of the Feldman account of attitudinal pleasure is more plausible than Feldman's account.

Feldman claims that a masochist takes pleasure in the fact that he is taking pain in the fact that he has a sensation (Appendix B). That is to say, he takes pain *in the fact that* he has a certain sensation, and then he takes pleasure *in that fact that* he has taken pain in the fact that he has this sensation. Surely this is all too intellectual! As the masochist feels the needle go into his thigh, is he really conceptualizing the state of affairs in one way and then meta-conceptualizing in another way? It just doesn't seem to capture what might be attractive about masochism. It is mysterious why anyone would have a favourable attitude to a state of affairs in which they have an unfavourable attitude. Indeed, the only

kind of explanation that springs to mind is one that Feldman rejects – that the masochist hates himself in some way.

Surely the masochist likes the needle in his thigh because of the way it feels, not because of the way he thinks about it. This is not to deny that the way it feels is deeply intertwined with the way he thinks about it – but it seems essential to understanding the masochist that the needle going into his thigh feels a special way. My modified account of pleasure can deal with this thought much better, while still using Feldman's analysis of masochism. I agree that the masochist is taking pleasure in his pain, however on my view that comes out as follows:

1. The masochist takes pain in a sensation, i.e. he has a negative attitude to the sensation and that attitude involves the pain feeling.
2. He enjoys the pain feeling – which is to say that the painfulness of the sensation produces in him an attitude of enjoyment – which of course involves the pleasure feeling.

Notice that this analysis comes close to one of those which Feldman rejects: Feldman considers the possibility that the masochist experiences pains as pleasures in addition to experiencing them as pains (p. 87). This view seems to be approximately correct, except that, as Feldman points out, it doesn't sound coherent. My version of the masochist story makes it coherent. Feldman also objects that it doesn't explain why the masochist would bother – the pains and pleasures would cancel each other out. However, we can imagine that the pleasure feeling as produced in this way is particularly intense (not implausible, physiologically, given what we know about adrenaline and dopamine and so on). So this analysis also captures what seems right about another of the analyses that Feldman rejects – MG3 on p. 89 – according to which the masochist puts up with the pain in order to feel a uniquely intense sexual pleasure.

This is a much more plausible account of masochism than Feldman's. It involves an attitude, but also a feeling. It captures the sense in which masochism is a 'perversion' (the cognitive willingness to see pain in a positive light), it captures the sense in which pain can be physically thrilling, and it captures the sense in which masochism is simply a route to intense sexual satisfaction (the feeling of pleasure produced by the feeling of pain).

Feldman's likely worries

First, Feldman is bound to point out that he only said that the attitude of taking pleasure in *need not* have a feel. So, in the masochism case, for example, Feldman could agree with me. Feldman may then object that there are cases in which being pleased about something has no

phenomenology, so his view is superior to mine because it allows for these cases.

I am prepared to bite the bullet here. I think that a cognitive attitude with no feel to it cannot count as taking pleasure or pain in something. As I said earlier, we have many expressions for our attitudes, and I think it is very plausible that some of our pro-attitudes have no feel to them. Take, for example, the supposed pleasure I take in the news that the cleaner turned up on time today and cleaned the house. I certainly have a positive attitude to the news, but it is not unexpected, and it just doesn't register on the actual pleasure scale. Some of the things I am pleased about are not things I take pleasure in. Would Feldman pay any price in terms of his larger theory by admitting that these attitudes are not attitudinal pleasure? I don't think he would. In fact, the theoretical benefit is usually in making sure that more distinctions can be made rather than fewer.

One of Feldman's examples concerns an injured motorcyclist under total anaesthetic, who feels nothing but takes pleasure in the fact that he will recover. If we take the example at face value, it does prove Feldman's point – you can feel nothing but still take pleasure in states of affairs. However, I don't think that we should take this example seriously. Complete anaesthesia is a slightly odd idea – one's brain is not paralysed, and surely the dopamine can still flow around in there. I think the most plausible suggestion is that the motorcyclist does feel something when he thinks of his recovery. Compare the motorcyclist to the patient in the next bed to him – the depressive motorcyclist. The depressive motorcyclist is in exactly the same state as the motorcyclist, but he is depressed. When the doctor tells him that he will live he understands, but he doesn't care – he feels nothing. It is nothing to him whether he lives or dies. That, I think, is what it would be like to be under complete anaesthetic – and in that case, I think we should bite the bullet and say that it is not possible to take pleasure in things.

Second, Feldman explicitly says that we do not discover whether we are pleased by inspecting our sensations. However, it is not a consequence of the feel version of the attitudinal pleasure view that we must, but in fact I think that we sometimes do, and this of course lends support to my view. On my view, attitudinal pleasure essentially has both cognitive and non-cognitive elements, and so it is possible that we often know whether we are pleased or not by inspecting our cognitive attitudes. Nonetheless, I think it is plausible that we sometimes find out whether we are taking pleasure or pain in something by inspecting our non-cognitive attitudes. Take the following two imaginary cases:

My colleague tells me that he has published another article in a top journal. I like my colleague, and respect him. I believe that I want him to flourish. But when he tells me this, I find my heart sinking, and I

feel (in the words of Gore Vidal) as if a little part of me has died. I realize that I am not pleased about my colleague's success.

I hear through a mutual friend that my ex-boyfriend is expecting a baby and is extremely happy about it. When we were together he showed no interest in fatherhood, much to my dismay at the time. Our split was acrimonious, and I generally wish him ill. However, on hearing the news I feel a sudden rush of warmth, and over the next few days, this returns to me, and I realize that I am pleased for him.

It is part of the phenomenology of pleasure that it can be unexpected. We can take pleasure in things despite ourselves. The feel account of attitudinal pleasure is better at making sense of this than the bare attitude version.

Third, Feldman will object that if we make the attitude of pleasure involve an unanalysable feeling the heterogeneity problem arises again: what do all of these different episodes of taking pleasure in something have in common? The problem does not arise for Feldman's account of attitudinal pleasure, as his account of attitudinal pleasure does not involve a feeling, but an attitude. The attitude is plausibly the same each time. However, it is less easy to see that a feeling – a certain tickle-type thing – is the same when I take pleasure in the masseuse's hands on my back as when I take pleasure in having my paper accepted. I agree that there is a problem here. I can only suggest that it is less puzzling that attitudinal pleasure has the same feel each time than that sensory pleasure has the same feel each time, and end on a promissory note – more work to be done.³

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³ Crisp has an interesting solution to the heterogeneity problem. See Roger Crisp, 'Hedonism Reconsidered', *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* (forthcoming).