

Conditions of Happiness One-Page Paper 2

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In Feldman's (2012) theory of attitudinal hedonism, he postulates the concept of the "atom of happiness", which he defines as "an attribution of occurrent intrinsic attitudinal pleasure or displeasure to a person, at a time, to a degree, in a specific propositional object". The sum of the degrees assigned to all atoms of happiness can be plotted against time, resulting in a happiness curve. He then argues that the area under the happiness curve represents the total amount of happiness an individual experiences during an interval of their lifetime. While this theory in some way helps us assess our feelings of joy and displeasure in a clearer manner, I believe that it neglects the fact that happiness has not only a "degree", but also "significance". Consequently, its relevance is undermined by the fundamental limits of human memory which allows us to only remember events that are significant enough.

When assessing one's happiness in an interval of time in the past, attitudinal hedonism is a largely impractical tool. As Feldman puts it on Page 15 of *What is This Thing Called Happiness*, the principles of attitudinal hedonism summarised above "can be applied to any person, and any period of time." It can also answer, in theory, questions such as "How happy was Helen during March?". In practice, however, attitudinal hedonism may fare poorly in answering them. Firstly, happiness is an extremely subjective and multifaceted notion that is difficult to quantify. If we ask an ordinary person to rate the happiness levels of all the events they have experienced today, they will most likely struggle to give a definite answer, let alone do so in a systematic way to determine the area under the happiness curve. Many practical questions will arise, such as "*do positive and negative emotions simply cancel out?*" and "*how to rate different types of happiness?*". Secondly, assuming we manage to assign accurate numbers to define happiness, a more serious problem ensues: in order to assign a number to an event, we have to first *recall* that event in our minds, and then judge its happiness level based on our recollection of what happened in this particular event. However, memory can be distorted or even lost. According to the peak-end rule, an event is judged by the most intense moment and the feeling experienced at the end (Kahneman & Daniel, 2000). This implies that an individual's perception of happiness during a period of time is best captured by the most significant event and the ending, rather than a mere numerical sum of happiness values.

To extrapolate the application of attitudinal hedonism to determine whether someone has led a happy life, Feldman further proposes on Page 17 that this can be measured by the difference between areas under the happiness and unhappiness curves. Again, this idea derails too much from reality, as it is impossible for someone to recount what has happened exactly and how they have felt at every single instant of their entire life. A person most likely only remembers the most significant events they have experienced (which may not necessarily be the happiest/saddest ones) as well as recent events. Therefore, it seems that the *significance* of happiness matters more than the *absolute degree* of happiness, rendering attitudinal hedonism less relevant.

In conclusion, the inextricable link between happiness and human memory, coupled with the inherent subjectivity of the latter, diminishes the relevance of attitudinal hedonism when applied to the past. It would be helpful, perhaps, to incorporate the significance level of happiness to arrive at a more comprehensive and realistic representation.

Citations:

1. Feldman, F. (2012). *What is this thing called happiness?* Oxford University Press
2. Kahneman & Daniel (2000). *Evaluation by moments, past and future*. Cambridge University Press