

Daniel M. Haybron

The Pursuit of Unhappiness: The Elusive Psychology of Well-Being.

Oxford: Oxford University Press 2008.

372 pages

US\$55.00 (cloth ISBN 978-0-19-954598-8)

Daniel Haybron's book brings together both earlier published work and new writings into a comprehensive philosophical examination of happiness which also explicitly draws, albeit critically, on figures of the 'positive psychology' movement such as Mihaly Csíkszentmihályi and Martin Seligman. Haybron also draws, albeit more tangentially, on the work of contributors to the rising interdisciplinary field of 'happiness studies', such as psychologists and behavioral economists Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman. The book has two main, related aims: to defend a particular conception of what happiness is in the face of competing accounts, and to argue for 'liberal sobriety' rather than 'liberal optimism' when it comes to our ability to achieve it.

On the first point, Haybron argues that happiness should be understood primarily in terms of a subject's emotions. This might seem an innocuous enough claim, and compatible with either hedonistic or eudaimonist approaches, as well as with an optimistic liberalism. However, though Haybron self-identifies as broadly eudaimonistic in his views, he is critical of a 'Platonic highbrow' optimism about human rational powers, both in itself and as it informs particular conceptions of human flourishing *or* happiness. He is equally at pains to distinguish his view from a 'Benthamite lowbrow' view of well-being as something even a child could grasp and achieve. (Haybron is also, notably, rather more focused on eudaimonistic concerns—human flourishing and happiness—than on the 'aretaic', virtue-centered, approach of much of the revived 'virtue theory' movement and the inspiration this draws from ancient philosophy.)

In elaborating his conception of happiness in emotional terms, Haybron also crucially draws on (and includes) his own earlier work on what he calls *affective ignorance*, which is the idea that our awareness and understanding of our own emotions may be crucially flawed, not least because they both rely on interpretation and not just on direct or incorrigible perception: we can be wrong about what we feel, and how strongly, as well as what the causes and intentional objects of our feelings are. In this context, crucially, we can be wrong about whether or not we are (un)happy, what it is that 'makes' us (un)happy, and what our (un)happiness is about. Relatedly, though partly independent of this, we are also liable to failures to remember or forecast our own emotions accurately. Such error may be motivated—we wish we were other than we really are, also in our emotional lives—or it may be due to plain cognitive fallibility, both in remembering and projecting.

Haybron's argument here is an important contribution to the philosophical (and other) literature on emotion as well as on happiness specifically, and it raises interesting issues about, e.g., the increase in self-reported levels of anxiety and depression, as well as the attempted use of non-self-report measures in this area. That said, on the latter count one might wish for some deeper engagement between Haybron's still largely conceptually oriented approach and the more empirically based work of, e.g., the aforementioned Tversky and Kahneman, for this seems like an area with rich possibilities for mutual benefit from interdisciplinary exchange and collaboration.

The notion of affective ignorance, in the present as well as in forward- or backward-looking projections, is what most crucially links Haybron's emotion-centered account of happiness and his critique of 'liberal optimism' about our capacity for the effective pursuit of happiness. For if our rational powers are more limited than optimistic rationalists might wish to think, as well as liable to be clouded and working from distorted data (including emotional data); and if this error applies even to the most rationally capable of us, let alone the 'simpler' creatures, from children to animals; then both the Platonic and the Benthamite approaches to the pursuit of happiness are in trouble for overestimating our grasp on the very nature of happiness. And this is even before we consider that both accounts may also underestimate our vulnerability to imperfect information, informational and choice overload, attentional and hedonic adaptation, and cognitive errors from sources such as framing effects.

Haybron sees the 'liberal optimism' he cautions against as marrying the Platonic and Benthamite mistakes in supporting itself on an assumption he refers to as *Personal Authority*, a misguided 'authority-claim' for the first-person perspective in questions of what will in fact help us achieve happiness. This authority-claim, he argues, is based on two further assumptions, *Transparency* and *Aptitude*. *Transparency* holds that what is good for a person is relatively easy for that person to discern, and *Aptitude* holds that people typically have the psychological endowments necessary to make good choices (that is, choices that are genuinely in their own interest) given the broad ability to choose as they wish. But both these claims are problematic, Haybron argues, and in particular, our actual lack of Transparency, so understood, necessarily presents serious obstacles for our Aptitude.

This is also compounded, for Haybron, by the complex nature of happiness, and more generally by our emotional natures in themselves. Happiness as an emotional state is defined by Haybron in terms of 'psychic affirmation' at three levels: security or attunement, which is the 'core and centre' of happiness; commitment or engagement ('flow') and 'endorsement' (joy and cheerfulness). These also have correlates at the levels of moods, mood propensities, and the subject's general 'emotional condition'. All these may vary in quantity (how happy or unhappy we are) as well as according to whether they are what Haybron calls central or peripheral: central unhappiness, Haybron says, is what Epictetus is referring to when he advises us not to 'groan in the centre of [our]

being', even when hit by, or sympathizing with someone else's, misfortune.

Happiness in the truest sense, then, is a matter of central affective states and mood propensities, not just of occurrent feelings, but of 'overall emotional states and dispositions'. But it is also not a simple net balance of positive versus negative feeling on the lines of Bentham's felicity-calculus. Haybron draws on an analogy with the concept of health, where dispositions as well as occurrent factors matter, but where positives and negatives do not necessarily cancel each other out neatly: someone who has massive arterial plaque but escapes cardiac trouble is not healthy, Haybron argues, any more than we could claim he is 'overall healthy' if his arterial plaque is discounted against his other healthier organs. In other words, if happiness is to be understood in this way there are major obstacles to straightforward calculation of it, let alone planning towards achieving it.

To this Haybron also adds two further important qualifications: 1) while happiness is an important, and central, human good, it is not the only one or always the main one, and 2) external circumstances make a real difference, i.e. a happy temperament is not necessarily the same as a happy life. The point about external circumstances is also elaborated in Haybron's examination of the misfit between our animal natures, even at their most distinctly human, and our modern lives. Even 'lay rationalism', he argues, tends to underestimate our 'softer' sides in favor of a more hard-nosed emphasis on quantifiable goods such as income level, though lives focused on such goods are not necessarily meeting the needs whose satisfaction makes humans happy. Similar concerns also drive much of his rejection of 'shallower' hedonistic accounts of happiness, as well as of 'life-satisfaction' accounts, though Haybron is less censorious than some about such arguably 'inauthentic' sources of happiness and self-fulfillment as those achieved through the use of, e.g., anti-depressants or anti-anxiety medication. Together with the critique of 'tyranny of freedom' aspects of modern life in the industrial world, and the recurring references to an unnamed idyllic holiday island, the tone of the discussion in places verges on the mistily nostalgic, though he is canny enough to rein this in for the sake of 'liberal sobriety' rather than 'liberal pessimism', and he stops well short of endorsing any full-bodied paternalism.

Whether one shares Haybron's own conclusions or not, then, this comprehensive and densely written monograph is a very welcome addition to both the political and the moral psychology literature on human happiness.

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