Are Sensory Pleasures Happiness-Constituting States?

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In *The Pursuit of Unhappiness* (2008), Daniel Haybron has defended an emotional state theory of happiness, according to which happiness consists in a broadly positive balance of (primarily) emotions and moods. One interesting aspect of Haybron’s theory is that it regards some pleasures – i.e. most notably, sensory pleasures – to be too shallow and superficial to be happiness-constituting states. In fact, according to Haybron, sensory pleasures can only be sources of happiness, but never constituents of it.

The goal of my paper is to reconsider the role of sensory pleasures for happiness. More specifically, I shall offer two arguments to think that sensory pleasures are happiness-constituting states, alongside emotions and moods.

The first, and more direct, argument consists in showing that sensory pleasures possess the relevant features for counting as constituents of happiness. According to Haybron, the essential characteristic of happiness-constituting states is that they dispose an individual to experience certain affects rather than others. In this paper, I argue that this is precisely how the most plausible contemporary accounts (including the conative account, e.g. Heathwood 2007; the psycho-functional account, e.g. Aydée 2014; and the perceptualist account, e.g. Bain 2013) characterise sensory pleasures.

The second, more indirect, argument consists in showing that sensory pleasures are sufficiently similar to emotions to be regarded as happiness-constituting states in the same way as emotions. In order to defend this position, I shall consider the five criteria used in philosophy and psychology for thinking that an affective state counts as an emotion, identified by Deonna and Scherer (2010) and Cova and Deonna (2014), and argue that sensory pleasures satisfy all these criteria.