

Stumbling on happiness by daniel gilbert – book report essay sample

[Experience](#), [Happiness](#)



In *Stumbling on Happiness*, Daniel Gilbert explores the concept of happiness through a scientific and psychological standpoint, and shows us how our perceptions of happiness is distorted. Gilbert begins his argument by making the claim that “the human being is the only animal that thinks about the future.” Indeed, when ordinary animals such as squirrels seem to plan for the future by saving food for the winter, for example, they are merely “nexting” or predicting a future event in accordance to their reflex and instinctive tendencies. On the other hand, when humans plan for the future, they are able to imagine it due to the existence of the frontal lobe in their brains. So why do humans construct imaginary futures? Gilbert claims that imagining about a pleasant future event can be pleasurable, while imagining an unpleasant event can minimize its negative impact. As humans, we come into the world with a desire for control. Imagining the future allows us to control or change what is about to happen to us.

Gilbert makes the case that happiness is a subjective feeling and it is therefore not possible to define or compare the levels of happiness between two people. To an outsider, Lori and Reba, the conjoined twins, may look sad and unhappy, but they are in fact happy in their situation. But surely, we can compare our own levels of happiness? Gilbert claims otherwise and claims that our own memories are very inaccurate and therefore, we cannot depend on our memory to compare our happiness.

It is possible that people can be mistaken about what they feel and this is evident when Gilbert describes a study in which subjects had misinterpreted their feeling of fear for sexual arousal. People can also experience something

without being aware of it, as is evident from people who suffer from blindsight. With feelings such as happiness being as subjective as they are, how can we study them and measure them? Gilbert provides three premises to make the process easier. First, tools are imperfect and we should not expect perfection from measurements. Second, even though an individual's claim about their feelings may be subjective, it is the best type of measurement. Finally, through the law of large numbers, the effects of imperfections can be minimized.

Gilbert also challenges our perception of reality and he argues that our memories and our perceptions are not always what they appear to be. When memories are created, only pieces of it are stored and the brain "fills in" the rest of the detail when it comes time to retrieve those memories. According to Gilbert's argument, "filling in" occurs when our brains use what we see, feel, think, want and believe, and this is combined with our knowledge to construct our perception of the world. Essentially, the brain fabricates information in the missing gaps of our perceptions and this is presented to us as what we are experiencing in reality.

Another misperception that exists is the fact that we tend to notice the presence of something, but not the absence of something. This tendency to notice the presence and not the absence also occurs when we imagine the future. When we imagine the future, there are many details that have been left out, and therefore, our perception of the future may not be as we imagined it to be because it does not include the details which had been left out. Just as we can see objects with much more detail when they are closer,

we include more details in our imagined futures which are closer to the present, than those which are further away.

Human perceptions of the past, present and future are also flawed, as Gilbert argues. People tend to recall their past memories based on their present state. The brain “fills in” holes of memories from the past with things from the present. People also tend to imagine the future as being similar to what they are experiencing and feeling in the present. For example, when someone is told to predict how hungry they will feel in the future, they tend to base their judgement on how hungry they are now. As such, when people “prefeel” their events, it may not be accurate because they use their current feelings to imagine the future.

Gilbert also argues that the concept of time can distort our views. He claims that people tend to imagine how they will feel in the future by imagining how they will feel if those events happened right now. Even though we take into account the issue of time after we had created this imagined future, we are prone to errors because the starting point (the present) can have an impact on the ending point (the future) and therefore, we overstate the effect of the present on the future. Similarly, people tend to compare the present to the past and instead of the possible. For example, people would prefer to take a job that gives small raises but pays less, than a job that gets pay cuts but pays more. The reason is that they are comparing their pay with the past, and they cannot bear the fact their pay is decreasing (even though the total pay is more).

Furthermore, Gilbert claims that people are optimists in that they rationalize their experiences. We often rationalize our experiences in positive ways, and we support these rationalizations with facts. When we want to believe something, we use facts to support our views. However, we sometimes ignore the facts that conflict with our interests, and instead, “cook” our own facts by selecting only those which support us.

Gilbert provides a strong argument for his premises. However, there is a major flaw in his argument which he does not address in his premises. That is, how is the term “happiness” defined? Gilbert based his entire argument on how we interpret our own levels of happiness, and uses the concept of happiness to describe a wide range of situations that we experience, from enjoying a cake, to experiencing the companionship of being conjoined with twin. However, what exactly is happiness? The happiness one gets from eating a chocolate bar is very different from the happiness one gets from being with a loved one. What do the subjects described in Gilbert’s experiments mean and what exactly do they feel when they say they are “happy”?

When subjects describe how happy they are in different points in time, they may use different definitions for “happy”. For example, a hungry person eating an ice cream cone may feel more happy than if the same person were to eat it while on a full stomach. Furthermore, are people happy because of what they feel (i. e. comfort and satisfaction), or are they happy because of what they are not feeling (i. e. depressed or angry). Finally, people with different attributes may also define happiness differently. For example, the

subjects described in Gilbert's experiments were predominantly North Americans. It is clear that people from different cultures may define happiness differently, but Gilbert does not take this into account. Due to his subjective definition of what happiness really is, Gilbert's argument is weakened.

Bibliography: Gilbert, Daniel (2006). *Stumbling on happiness*. Knopf.