A critique of Daniel Gilbert's book, *Stumbling on Happiness*

by Joey Tomlinson

Daniel Gilbert, Harvard College Professor of Psychology at Harvard University has written a book that “describes what science has to tell us about how and how well the human brain can imagine its own future, and about how and how well it can predict which of those futures it will most enjoy.” (xvii). It’s a book about happiness and man’s pursuit of it. Gilbert writes as a humanistic scientist and he does so forcibly with the assumption that each reader will share his worldview. Gilbert is witty and he writes in a very winsome way on the condition of man and his prediction of his future self. This paper will interact with some of Gilbert’s humanistic worldview, his conclusions regarding man and provide a theological alternative regarding hedonism.

**Summary of Primary Argument in Stumbling on Happiness**

Gilbert writes from a thoroughly *humanistic* perspective, dismissing and not even acknowledging the possibility of another worldview regarding man and his pursuit of happiness. Gilbert states, “The human being is the only animal that thinks about the future.” (4). Gilbert goes on to assert that “we [humans] think about the future in a way that no other animal can, does, or ever has, and this simple, ubiquitous, ordinary act is a defining feature of our humanity.” (4). In the first chapter, Gilbert proposes that thinking and planning for the future is a source of both happiness *and* intense stress and this is something very unique about the human brain. Gilbert states, “the human brain is an “anticipation machine,” and “making future” is the most important thing it does.” (5). Humans have the ability to imagine things that do not exist. Humans have the ability to imagine their future selves and make predictions about different outcomes whether good or bad. A part of this is because of the frontal lobe part of the brain. The “frontal lobe is the critical piece of cerebral machinery that allows normal, modern human adults
to project themselves into the future.” (15). Apart from the frontal lobe, man cannot plan or predict the future. Gilbert goes on to discuss how certain scientific studies have shown that some people who have experienced a trauma to the frontal lobe seem less stressed because they cannot plan for the future. Gilbert argues however that planning and thinking about the future can be pleasurable (18) because people tend to think more about succeeding rather than failing (18). Regarding future tragedy, Gilbert asserts that even thinking about future pains can lessen the impact of different losses (20) and that people who are going through dark times such as cancer patients seem to be resiliently optimistic about life as they think about their future selves (20). Contemplating future events, whether good or bad, gives man a sense of control over his life and according to Gilbert, control is something that all men long for and believe will make them happy (24).

In the sections that follow, Gilbert delivers a strong and engaging apologetic against the makeup of the human mind. He asserts all throughout the book that the human mind and imagination cannot be trusted in the pursuit of planning, preparing and hoping for the future. Gilbert states, “We insist on steering our boats because we think we have a pretty good idea of where we should go, but the truth is that much of our steering is in vain… because the future is fundamentally different than it appears through the prospectoscope.” (25). In other words, man does not think accurately about his future and he does so unintentionally. His thinking and perspective is skewed because his mind takes liberties without asking permission.

Gilbert defines happiness as “nothing more or less than a word that we word makers can use to indicate anything we please.” (33). He goes on further to state that happiness can usually indicate at least “three related things… emotional happiness, moral happiness and judgmental happiness.” (33). Happiness is a “you-know-what-I-mean feeling.” (35). In other words, happiness is subjective. There is no independent, objective definer of what happiness is or is not. Everyone defines and measures happiness and how to pursue it in different ways and no one can tell you that your pursuit of it is not correct because they do not share your perspective. In fairness, Gilbert aims to remedy this with a scientific experiment called the “large numbers
laws”. This experiment seeks to capture a universal definition of happiness by surveying large amounts of people on the subject. In theory, the majority determines the “standard” for happiness (73-9).

Gilbert goes on later to discuss the error of man’s perspective. He discusses the shortcoming of man’s “imagination (the faculty that allows us to see the future) … memory (the faculty that allows us to see the past) and perceptions (the faculty that allows us to see the present).” (86). In Gilbert’s assessment, the mind, as amazing as it is, cannot be trusted to deliver accurate representations of any of its three functions. The mind takes liberties filling in information about the present, distorting man’s perspective about the future and selectively storing events about the past. Another issue Gilbert brings out in his apologetic against trusting the human mind is man’s tendency to interpret the past and the future through the experience of the present. The present is a big magnifying glass man gazes through in an effort to interpret himself and his future. Gilbert states, “When middle-aged people are asked to remember what they thought about premarital sex, how they felt about political issues, or how much alcohol they drank when they were in college, their memories are influenced by how they think, feel, and drink now.” (125). Man’s perspective is tainted and often times man is incapable of being realistic in a self assessment.

As Gilbert concludes the findings of his research regarding the human mind, he concludes that man will stumble onto happiness because he “cooks the facts” (179). In other words, man believes what he needs to believe in order to endure any circumstance in life. Gilbert states, “Over the course of human evolution, the brain and the eye have developed a contractual relationship in which the brain has agreed to believe what the eye sees and not to believe what the eye denies.” (179). He goes on later to draw the conclusion that “no one can say precisely where that standard [for happiness] should be set…” (184). Gilbert suggestion at the conclusion of the book is in order to remedy the deficiencies of the human mind in the pursuit of happiness, man must lean into other people who have walked their path. In order to gain a more accurate assessment of what the future holds, man should ask someone who is
already there because in the end, according to Gilbert, “our happiness is in our hands.” (259).

**Biblical Assessment**

There is no question that Gilbert is entertaining in his book *Stumbling on Happiness*. He does an incredible job at making scientific research engaging and accessible to the lay man and he does so in a very winsome way. However, behind the wit and the charm is a worldview. It is a worldview Gilbert is committed to and seeks to instill in his readers. It is a humanistic worldview and while not exhaustive, this portion of the book review will deal biblically with some of Gilbert’s assertions.

The first assertion is that humans are unique animals because they can plan for the future (4). At the very beginning of the book Gilbert is not shy regarding his anti-theist perspective. Gilbert seems to even be in awe at a human’s ability to plan and think and labor for the future. While he blames this on macro evolution, Christians look to the word of God for answers regarding the uniqueness of man. Genesis 1:26 states, “Then God said, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.” This passage alone has several important distinctions from Gilbert’s assessment of man. First, man is created in the image of God, the *Imago Dei* and this is solidified elsewhere in Scripture (Gen 1:27; 5:1; 9:6; 1 Cor. 11:7; James 3:9). In other words, humans are like God as no other earthly creatures are. This makes humans distinct from animals, not more evolved animals. Second, the Imago Dei comes with the mandate to have dominion. God created man to rule on his behalf and for his glory over all created things. Third man is relational. As God lives in community with himself as a Trinity, man is created to be in relationship with God and with other people, for his glory. Therefore man’s ability to think, plan and act for the future is not by chance through macro evolution, but by God’s design from the very beginning.

Later in his book, Gilbert asserts, “We insist on steering our boats because we think we
have a pretty good idea of where we should go, but the truth is that much of our steering is in vain... because the future is fundamentally different that it appears through the prospectiscope.”

(25). Now this is true as far as it goes and credit should be given to Gilbert for this statement. However, this statement does not go far enough. A biblical perspective is that man apart from Christ insists on his own way and this is a major problem. It is man’s desire to “steer his boat” that separated him from God in the first place. Consider the serpent’s tactic at tempting Eve in Genesis 3:5-6,

For God knows that when you eat of it [the fruit] your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil. So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate, and she also gave some to her husband who was with her, and he ate.” In man’s pursuit to seek what is good, he actually seeks what is evil.

Because of this transgression against God, man is incapable of making decisions that honor God. Romans 3:10-11 states, “None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God.” Therefore, Gilbert is right in his claim that much of man’s steering is in vain.

However, as a believer it is important to understand that all steering is in vain because of man’s fallen nature. The remedy for this will be discussed in the next section.

Another dangerous error in Gilbert’s book is his canon for happiness. Gilbert’s conclusion is that it is subjective (35) or at the very best, determined by the majority (73-9). The logical conclusion of this type of worldview is moral relativism. This sort of worldview is similar to that of the Israelites in the concluding verse, Judges 21:25, “In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes.” In Gilbert’s worldview there is no standard and Gilbert believes that no one can speak to your lifestyle because they do not have your perspective. America is certainly experiencing the fruit of that type of worldview. This is rebellion against the law of God that is written on the heart of every man (Rom. 1:19-21). The manifestation of this type of rebellion is at the end of Romans 1, “Though they know God’s righteous decree that those who practice such things deserve to die, they not only do them but give approval to those who practice them.” God’s judgment for this type of rebellion is found in Romans 1:28-31,
And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done. They were filled with all manner of unrighteousness, evil, covetousness, malice. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness. They are gossips, slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless.

Moral relativism leads to the opposite of happiness. It leads to a debased mind full of unfulfilling fleeting counterfeit pleasures. It is a tiresome worldview that is never satisfied with its perversion.

Another assertion that Gilbert makes is directed toward the deficiency of the human mind (86). Gilbert is a skeptic of the mind because he believes that man’s perspective is unknowingly tainted by his unique perspective. In other words, man’s opinion cannot be trusted because he “cooks the facts” (179). Surprisingly Gilbert is half right. A more biblical perspective would be that man’s outlook and perspective is distorted by original sin (Rom. 5). This was not always the case and this is not a deficiency in God’s creative handiwork (Gen. 1:27-28). The fall of man has distorted and tainted all of mankind. This is known as the doctrine of total depravity (Ps. 143:2; Eccles. 7:29; Mic. 7:2-4; Rom. 3:10-18; Rom. 5:7-8; Rom. 5:12, 19; 1Jo. 1:8, 10). Therefore, man is incapable of finding the right perspective within himself. The remedy for this will be discussed in the next section.

**Biblical Theology of Human Happiness**

While Gilbert may be halfway right about man’s inability to have an accurate assessment about himself and his circumstances, he does not have the ability or worldview to account for why man is this way or offer the remedy for such an issue. Even bigger than that, psychology does not have answers for the problems fallen, sinful people encounter. So far, Gilbert’s book has been briefly summarized and his faulty thinking and worldview have been exposed. This section will briefly deal with the remedy to man’s dilemma regarding human happiness.

One of the issues that Gilbert brings up and the Scripture deals with directly is *pride*. Gilbert is correct in his assertion that men like to steer their own boats (25), but he does not see this as sinful and he does not offer a viable solution to the vain steering of the metaphorical boat
of life. Man has exchanges the wisdom of God for foolishness masked as wisdom (Rom. 1:22-23). The consequence for doing such a thing is that man has begun to worship the creature rather than the Creator (Rom. 1:23-25). Man is completely incapable of doing anything else but worship the created (Rom. 3:10-18). Therefore, the direction man chooses to direct his life will always be wrong and sinful if left to himself. This is also true of man’s perspective. Gilbert astutely notes the deficiency of man’s perspective, but can’t give an account (apart from evolutionary deficiencies) for why man has a tainted perspective and cannot offer a viable alternative. The remedy is found outside of man. First and foremost, man must be reconciled to his Creator and counselors should not be shy in saying this plainly. The Apostle Paul reiterates this in 2nd Corinthians 5:20-21, “Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.” Biblical Counselors are ambassadors for Christ and should make much of Christ by counseling their counselee to be reconciled to God.

Apart from being reconciled to God, man does not have the capability to do anything other than sink his boat in the ocean of habitual sin. As counselors demonstrate the need for Christ by exposing sin, labeling it appropriately, and faithfully pleading with the counselee to be reconciled to God, the counselee is being given the opportunity to look past himself. The counselee is being given the chance to stop worshipping the creature and to begin to worship the Creator.

Another important remedy is to faithful present the written word of God to the counselee. This also answers the question of moral relativity. The standard for what is good and what is evil is contained in God’s inspired word, the 66 books of the Bible. Biblical counselors must frequent the Scriptures and direct the counselee’s attention to the word of God. God’s word should navigate the thoughts and behaviors of the counselee as opposed to unsubmitive feelings and culture.

By God’s grace, a reconciled person who begins to submit his feelings and thought life
to the word of God can also begin to receive a biblical definition of happiness. The Bible turns man’s definition of happiness on its head. 1st Peter 4:13-14 states, “But rejoice insofar as you share Christ’s sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory if revealed. If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you.” The Apostle Peter uses the words “rejoice”, “glad” and “blessed” to believers who are experiencing persecution for their faith in Christ. This is the very antithesis of how the culture would use these words. Consider another passage of Scripture that would be profitable to counsel, “Delight yourself in the LORD and he will give you the desires of your heart” (Psalm 37:4). The Psalmist goes on for the rest of that particular Psalm to define exactly what that passage of Scripture means. Included in that passage are imperatives to trust God (5); to be still (7); to wait patiently and not fret over those who do evil and prosper (7); to flee anger and wrath (8) to trust that God’s people will inherit his promised land (9); to take comfort that the wicked will not prosper in the end (10); to remember that the meek inherit the earth (11); to remember that the LORD is sovereign over the wicked (13); to remember that the LORD knows and sees the righteous (18); to remember that God establishes his steps and that his salvation is from the LORD (23-40).

Ultimately, counselors should direct the counselee’s attention to their Savior, Christ Jesus. Philippians 2 demonstrates that Christ is not only Savior, but also a template and example to follow. God has given man the ability to find joy, rest and peace through the person and work of Christ. The Bible is the standard for happiness. Man must look outside of himself and to the living word of God for guidance and direction. If he does this, he won’t stumble onto happiness. He will be gifted with it by God through the Holy Spirit because of Christ Jesus. Happiness is not found in temporal, fleeting pleasures, it is found in the contentment that only God can offer. As ambassadors, biblical counselors should never grow weary in saying, “be reconciled to God”.