

The distinctive feeling theory of pleasure

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Published online: 8 June 2011
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Abstract In this article, I attempt to resuscitate the perennially unfashionable *distinctive feeling theory* of pleasure (and pain), according to which for an experience to be pleasant (or unpleasant) is just for it to involve or contain a distinctive kind of feeling. I do this in two ways. First, by offering powerful new arguments against its two chief rivals: attitude theories, on the one hand, and the phenomenological theories of Roger Crisp, Shelly Kagan, and Aaron Smuts, on the other. Second, by showing how it can answer two important objections that have been made to it. First, the famous worry that there is no felt similarity to all pleasant (or unpleasant) experiences (sometimes called ‘the heterogeneity objection’). Second, what I call ‘Findlay’s objection’, the claim that it cannot explain the nature of our attraction to pleasure and aversion to pain.

Keywords Pleasure · Pain · Desire · Motivation · Valuing · Dan Haybron

1 Introduction

What do all pleasant experiences have in common in virtue of which they are pleasant? And what do all unpleasant experiences have in common in virtue of which they are unpleasant? Philosophers have suggested two main kinds of theories¹: *phenomenological theories* and *attitude theories*. According to phenomenological theories, what all pleasant experiences (as well as all unpleasant ones)

¹ Other theories exist, but are not sufficiently plausible or developed to warrant discussion here. On one such theory, which we might call *representationalism*, for an experience to be unpleasant is for it to represent bodily damage in oneself. See Tye (1995). Rachels (2000) argues convincingly against this view.

have in common in virtue of which they are pleasant (and unpleasant) is some aspect of how they *feel*, or their *phenomenology*. The best known such theory is the *distinctive feeling theory*, according to which for an experience to be pleasant (or unpleasant) is just for it to involve or contain a distinctive kind of feeling, one we might call ‘the feeling of pleasure itself’, or simply ‘the pleasant feeling’ (or, in the case of unpleasant experiences, ‘the unpleasant feeling’).² Most phenomenological theorists, however, deny the existence of such a feeling, arguing instead for some other way in which all pleasant experiences are phenomenologically alike. Key theorists of this kind include Roger Crisp, Shelly Kagan, and Aaron Smuts.³

Attitude theories, by contrast, say that what all pleasant (and unpleasant) experiences have in common in virtue of which they are pleasant (and unpleasant) is not some aspect of how they feel, but their relation to the *attitudes* of their subjects at the time of experience. Pleasant experiences are those that are, for example, *liked*, *wanted*, or *approved of*, by their subjects at the time of experience, while unpleasant experiences are those that are, for example, *disliked*, *unwanted*, or *disapproved of*, by their subjects at the time of experience. Most contemporary attitude theorists hold something like Chris Heathwood’s sophisticated *motivational theory*, according to which for an experience to be pleasant is just for its subject, at the time of experience, to *intrinsically want it to be occurring* (i.e., to want it to be occurring *for its own sake*), and for one to be unpleasant is just for its subject, at the time of experience, to *intrinsically want it not to be occurring*.⁴

² Some have characterised the distinctive feeling theory differently, as the view that “pleasurable sensations are pleasurable in virtue of the fact that each of them *causes* a special feeling we might call ‘the feeling of pleasure itself’” (Feldman 1997, p. 86) (my emphasis). Aaron Smuts, also, writes, “Pleasurable experiences, on this view, are those that *give rise* to the distinct feeling of pleasure” (Smuts 2010) (my emphasis). However, on this characterisation, the theory would not ascribe pleasantness to an experience of, say, eating a juicy peach that, while it involved ‘the pleasant feeling’, was not itself a cause of this feeling. Moreover, it would ascribe pleasantness to an experience of eating a juicy peach that, while it did not itself involve ‘the pleasant feeling’, happened to cause this feeling some time down the track. However, any philosopher who self-identifies as a distinctive feeling theorist will want to hold that an experience of eating a juicy peach that involves ‘the pleasant feeling’ is a pleasant one, even if ‘the pleasant feeling’ in question was caused, not by the *experience* of eating the peach, but by, say, the ingestion of the peach. And no such philosopher will want to hold that future events can have any bearing on which past experiences were pleasant and painful. For this reason, the distinctive feeling theory is better characterised as holding that what makes an experience pleasant is the *inclusion or involvement* in that experience of ‘the pleasant feeling’. Unfortunately, I cannot refer to characterisations given by actual distinctive feeling theorists to support this claim, because, rather surprisingly, there aren’t any. The distinctive feeling theory, while it is easily the best known phenomenological theory, has not been explicitly advocated in print. G.E. Moore (1903, §12) is a possible exception.

³ Crisp (2006), Kagan (1992), Smuts (2010). It is common to refer to phenomenological theories that are alternatives to the distinctive feeling theory as ‘hedonic tone’ views. Other well-known hedonic tone theorists include C.D. Broad (1930), and Karl Duncker (1941). See also Carolyn Morillo (1995), Timothy Schroeder (2004), Jesse Prinz (2004), Valerie Hardcastle (1999), and Daniel Dennett (1978). I regret that there is not sufficient space in the article at hand to devote to discussion of all this important and relevant work.

⁴ For a more precise formulation of Heathwood’s theory, and an excellent discussion of how it improves upon earlier attitude theories, see Heathwood (2007a). Others who hold similar theories to Heathwood include Alston (1967), Parfit (1984), Carson (2000).

The chief attraction of phenomenological theories is their consistency with the commonsensical idea that the pleasantness and unpleasantness of experiences is *right there in the experiences themselves*. As Stuart Rachels says, “When you twist your ankle or jam your finger, the experience itself seems to hurt; the unpleasantness seems to be right there in it”.⁵ Likewise, if you are walking along a suburban street, and find yourself suddenly struck by a pleasant smell, say, of jasmine (or some other flower—take your pick) wafting from a passing garden, the experience you become aware of seems *already* to be pleasant, i.e., pleasant even before you have had a chance to take up any kind of attitude toward it. Attitude theories seem unable to account for this.

The big downside of phenomenological theories is their implication that all pleasant experiences (and all unpleasant ones) *feel* alike in some way. As Fred Feldman says,

Consider the warm, dry, slightly drowsy feeling of pleasure that you get while sunbathing on a quiet beach. By way of contrast, consider the cool, wet, invigorating feeling of pleasure that you get when drinking some cold, refreshing beer on a hot day...They do not feel at all alike.⁶

Here, also, is Christine Korsgaard:

If the painfulness of pain rested in the character of the sensations...our belief that physical pain has something in common with grief, rage and disappointment would be inexplicable. For that matter, what physical pains have in common with each other would be inexplicable, for the sensations are of many different kinds. What do nausea, migraine, menstrual cramps, pinpricks and pinches have in common, that makes us call them all pains?⁷

Attitude theories, by contrast, can easily explain the apparent felt diversity of pleasant (and unpleasant) experience. What does a pleasant experience of sunbathing have in common with one of drinking a cold beer on a hot day? Nothing other than that its subject happens to like, want, approve of, it, or whatever, at the time of experience.

In this article, I will argue that, contrary to what almost every philosopher writing on pleasure and pain in recent years has maintained, the distinctive feeling theory is the best theory of pleasure and pain on offer. My argument will have four parts. First, I will argue that recent work by Daniel Haybron and Eric Schwitzgebel on our ignorance of our own occurrent phenomenology provides a decisive objection to attitude theories. Second, I will argue that the leading phenomenological alternatives to the distinctive feeling theory (i.e., the theories of Crisp, Kagan, and Smuts) all fail because they rely on analogies that are either inapt or uninformative. Third, I will argue that the distinctive feeling theory has a good reply

⁵ Rachels (2000, p. 196) Even Heathwood accepts the intuitiveness of this idea. He writes, “Imagine the feeling of stepping barefoot on a tack. Isn’t it just part of the very nature of that feeling that it is painful? It can seem incredible to suppose that this feeling qualifies as painful only due to the attitude that we happen to take up towards it” (Heathwood 2007b).

⁶ Feldman (2006, p. 79).

⁷ Korsgaard (1996, p. 148).

to the objection that not all pleasant experiences (and not all unpleasant ones) feel alike. Finally, I will consider an overlooked, but important, objection to phenomenological theories, one I will call ‘Findlay’s objection’ (after J.N. Finlay). This objection, I will argue, does not defeat phenomenological theories, but instead teaches us something important about our attraction to pleasure and aversion to pain.

2 The ‘reflective blindness’ objection

A common objection to attitude theories is that there can be unpleasant experiences whose subjects have no negative attitudes toward them at the time of experience. Consider, for example, the painful whipping of an eager masochist, a heart-wrenching experience of watching Ingmar Bergman’s *Scenes from a Marriage*,⁸ a pain felt by a meditating yogi, or by a lobotomised patient who says he no longer ‘minds’ it,⁹ etc.

Attitude theorists are unmoved by such cases. They insist that, while these individuals might not want *on balance* that their unpleasant experiences not be occurring, they must have *some* negative attitude toward these experiences, even if one only of *dislike*.¹⁰

Fortunately, we have no need to get involved in the dispute over such cases, because recent (independent) work by Daniel Haybron and Eric Schwitzgebel suggests a very clear reason why there can be unpleasant experiences whose subjects have no negative attitudes toward them at the time of experience. According to Haybron and Schwitzgebel, *one can have unpleasant experiences that one is entirely unaware of at the time of experience*. If they are right, then of course there can be unpleasant experiences whose subjects have no negative attitudes toward them at the time of experience. This is because *one can hardly have the relevant kind of attitude (be it disliking, not wanting, devaluing, or whatever) toward an experience that one is entirely unaware of*.¹¹ Haybron writes:

⁸ Smuts (2010).

⁹ Melzack (1961, p. 47).

¹⁰ *Liking/disliking theories* are held by Hall (1989), and Parfit (2011). Liking/disliking theorists are notoriously vague on what the relevant attitude of liking (or disliking) involves. Some attempt to explain it by saying that it must be liking (or disliking) “at the time of experience”, “by the experiencing agent”, or “merely as feeling”. However, these explanations seem to me to add nothing. Is it really possible to *like* a past or future experience of one’s? Or to *like* somebody else’s experience? Or to *like* an experience for something other than its phenomenology? I doubt it. One might like *that* one is having or has had a certain experience, but to like an *experience* itself seems already to imply that it is one’s own, that it is occurrent, and that it is liked for its phenomenology, rather than for some other feature of it.

¹¹ A hint of this argument is contained in Rachels (2000, p. 194): “Yesterday I felt pleasure, to different degrees, all day long. In what sense did I have a “favorable emotional attitude” to my experiences when I was not focusing on them? The notions of liking and disliking need further explication.” Note that it is entirely consistent with this argument that we can have *attitudes*, too, (for example, intrinsic desires) of which we are entirely unaware. My point is that one cannot take up the relevant kind of attitude (be it an attitude one is aware of or not) toward an experience of which one is entirely unaware. An agent must have some kind of awareness of an occurrent experience if he is to, say, intrinsically want it not to be occurring.

Some affective states are more elusive than the paradigmatic ones, particularly moods and mood-like states such as anxiety, tension, ennui, malaise...They may exceed our powers of discernment even while they are occurring...A vague sense of malaise might easily go unnoticed, yet it can sour one's experience far more than the sharper and more pronounced ache that persists after having stubbed one's toe. Likewise for depression, anxiety and related mood states, at least in their milder forms. *Consider how a tense person will often learn of it only when receiving a massage, whereas stressed or anxious individuals may discover their emotional state only by attending to the physical symptoms of their distress.* Presumably being tense, anxious, or stressed detracts substantially from the quality of one's experience, even when one is unaware of these states.¹²

He continues:

Everyone knows that we often adapt to things over time: what was once pleasing now leaves no impression or seems tiresome, and what used to be highly irritating is now just another feature of the landscape. *Could it also be that some things are lastingly pleasant or unpleasant, while our awareness of them fades? I would suggest that it can. Perhaps you have lived with a refrigerator that often whined due to a bad bearing. If so, you might have found that, with time, you entirely ceased to notice the racket. But occasionally, when the compressor stopped, you did notice the sudden, glorious silence. You might also have noted, first, a painful headache, and second, that you'd had no idea how obnoxious the noise was – or that it was occurring at all – until it ceased. But obnoxious it was, and all the while it had been, unbeknownst to you, fouling your experience as you went about your business. In short, you'd been having an unpleasant experience without knowing it.* Moreover, you might well have remained unaware of the noise even when reflecting on whether you were enjoying yourself: the problem here is ignorance – call it reflective blindness – and not, as some have suggested, the familiar sort of inattentiveness we find when only peripherally aware of something. In such cases we can bring our attention to the experience easily and at will. Here the failure of attention is much deeper: we are so lacking in awareness that we can't attend to the experience, at least not without prompting (as occurs when the noise suddenly changes).¹³

Schwitzgebel's best example is that of a husband who is entirely oblivious to his own (unpleasant) feelings of anger while doing the washing up:

¹² Haybron (2008, p. 222).

¹³ Haybron (2008). See also Oliver Sacks, who quotes a patient of his who has lost his sense of smell: "Sense of smell? I never gave it a thought. You don't normally give it a thought. But when I lost it—it was like being struck blind. Life lost a good deal of its savour – one doesn't realise how much 'savour' is smell. You smell people, you smell books, you smell the city, you smell the spring – maybe not consciously, but as a rich unconscious background to everything else. My whole world was suddenly radically poorer" (Rachels 2004, p. 225).

My wife mentions that I seem to be angry about being stuck with the dishes again...I deny it. I reflect; I sincerely attempt to discover whether I'm angry – I don't just reflexively defend myself but try to be the good self-psychologist my wife would like me to be – and still I don't see it. I don't think I'm angry. But I'm wrong, of course, as I usually am in such situations: My wife reads my face better than I introspect. Maybe I'm not quite *boiling* inside, but there's plenty of angry phenomenology to be discovered if I knew better how to look. Or do you think that every time we're wrong about our emotions, those emotions must be nonconscious, dispositional, not genuinely *felt*? Or felt and perfectly apprehended phenomenologically but somehow nonetheless mislabeled? Can't I also err more directly?¹⁴

For an even clearer example, imagine being suddenly transported into a younger body. Isn't it likely you would learn immediately, due to the contrast, of unpleasant experiences you had been having in your older body that you had been completely unaware of at the time (say, ones due to physical pressures being put on your body as a result of aging)? Unpleasant experiences seem to be capable of sneaking up on us by starting in very small amounts or very low intensities and then slowly accumulating or intensifying over time. In this way, we can come to suffer a considerable amount without ever having any idea of it. Unpleasant experience of this variety we might refer to as 'suffering by stealth'.

A motivational theorist might reply to the reflective blindness objection by proposing an *ideal* motivational theory, according to which an experience is pleasant just in case its subject *would* intrinsically want it to be occurring *were he fully aware of it*. Such a theory, however, seems unable to account for pleasant and unpleasant experiences whose pleasantness or unpleasantness *depends* on one's being unaware of them.¹⁵ Consider, for example, pleasant experiences that are so very pleasant precisely because one has 'lost oneself' in them—experiences of 'flow' or utter absorption or abandon. Or consider an unpleasant experience that has snuck up on one—one due, say, to one's body aging. It might not even be *possible* to become fully aware of an experience of this kind—even to notice it might be to fundamentally alter it, including its degree of unpleasantness.

An attitude theorist might reply by proposing that an experience is unpleasant just in case its subject dislikes it, or it is *sufficiently (phenomenologically) similar* to an experience its subject would dislike were he aware of it. This proposal, however, raises other questions I doubt can be satisfactorily answered. For example, in what phenomenological respects would the experience in question have to be similar to one that its subject would dislike were he aware of it, in order to count as unpleasant? Also, what kind and extent of awareness must the agent have, and in what setting must he be placed, when we are determining his attitude toward a sufficiently similar experience?

I conclude that attitude theories are untenable.

¹⁴ Schwitzgebel (2008, p. 252).

¹⁵ Compare Rachels (2000).

3 Crisp, Kagan, and Smuts

Roger Crisp, Shelly Kagan, and Aaron Smuts have all proposed phenomenological theories that are not distinctive feeling theories. Here is Crisp:

If the advocate of heterogeneity is seeking in enjoyable experiences something like a special sensation, such as sweetness, or a tingle or feeling located in a certain part of the body, such as an itch or pins and needles, or indeed something like a perceptual quality such as redness, he will fail. But there *is* a way that enjoyable experiences feel: they feel enjoyable. That is, there is something that it is *like* to be experiencing enjoyment, in the same way that there is something that it is like to be having an experience of colour...Enjoyment, then, is best understood using the determinable-determinate distinction, and the mistake in the heterogeneity argument is that it considers only determinates. Enjoyable experiences do differ from one another...But there is a certain common quality – feeling good – which any externalist account must ignore.¹⁶

Crisp's view is that the way in which all pleasant experiences are phenomenologically alike is best understood by thinking about, for example, the way in which all experiences of colour are phenomenologically alike. There is, of course, a sense in which an experience of a shade of blue is in no way phenomenologically like an experience of a shade of red—there is, after all, nothing *bluish* about red, or *reddish* about blue. Similarly, there is a sense in which a pleasant experience of listening to Bach is in no way phenomenologically like a pleasant experience of drinking a beer—there is, for example, nothing cool or liquidy about an experience of listening to Bach. They are not even experiences of the same sense—one is *aural*, the other *gustatory*. Nevertheless, there is a clear sense, according to Crisp, in which an experience of a shade of blue *is* phenomenologically like an experience of a shade of red—namely, *both are experiences of colour*. This similarity is purely phenomenological—it owes nothing to, for example, the attitudes we might hold toward these experiences. Similarly, Crisp thinks, there is a clear sense in which a pleasant experience of listening to Bach *is* phenomenologically like a pleasant experience of drinking a beer: *both are pleasant experiences*.

Crisp's suggestion is both subtle and interesting. However, I think it cannot be right, because the analogy with colours is inapt. Crisp is surely right that all coloured experiences are phenomenologically alike, in a way that none of them is like any non-coloured experience. This likeness, however, seems to me to be just that *they are all visual experiences*. If an experience is coloured, then, we can be certain, it is a visual one.¹⁷ How is an experience of seeing a rainbow

¹⁶ Crisp (2006, p. 109).

¹⁷ It might be objected that there can be coloured experiences that are not visual—for example, the experience of *thinking* of a red phone booth, or a *feeling* of anger. I am inclined to think, however, that such non-visual experiences are not well described as themselves being literally coloured. When somebody is angry, and 'sees red', he is not literally having a red experience—or, if he *is*, then this is because his *visual* experience has been subtly reddened as a result of (or in connection with) his angry feelings. Similarly, when I think of a red phone booth, bring one to mind, or whatever, what is red is the

phenomenologically like one of seeing a red phone booth, but unlike one of hearing a jackhammer outside my bedroom window? The answer is just that the first two are visual experiences, while the third is an aural one. If this is correct, then Crisp's analogy with pleasant experiences is inapt, because pleasant experiences, unlike coloured ones, are not all associated with a particular sense. Pleasant experiences can be visual, aural, gustatory, olfactory, tactile, *or* emotional.

It might be responded that Crisp is comparing pleasant experiences not to *coloured experiences*, but to *the experiences of particular colours* (e.g., a shade of red, a shade of blue, a shade of yellow, etc.). Experiences of a shade of red, a shade of blue, etc., it might be claimed, are phenomenologically alike in a way over and above their being visual experiences, a way that is shared not even by other visual experiences (say, an experience of a colourful rainbow, or a red phone booth). It is *this* likeness, it may be suggested, that Crisp believes is analogous to the felt similarity of all pleasant experiences.

On this interpretation, however, Crisp's theory fares no better. It is certainly true that the experiences of particular colours seem to be phenomenologically like each other in a way additional to their being visual experiences. This additional similarity, however, it seems to me, is that *they are experiences of some of the ways in which visual experience must come*. If you're having a visual experience, then it must come in one or, more typically, some combination of, these shades of colours. If I am correct, then, still, no helpful analogy can be drawn with pleasant experiences. Pleasant experiences, clearly, are not *ways in which experiences associated with a particular sense must come*. Pleasant experiences can be visual, aural, gustatory, olfactory, tactile, *or* emotional.

The second phenomenological theory I wish to consider is one proposed by Shelly Kagan. Like Crisp's, it relies on an analogy. According to Kagan's proposal, pleasantness is a single 'dimension' along which experiences can vary, like volume when it comes to auditory experiences.¹⁸ What is it for an experience to be pleasant? It is the same sort of thing as it is for an auditory experience to have a volume. Kagan writes:

It is obvious that loudness or volume is not a *kind* of sound. And it seems plausible to insist that loudness is not a single kind of component of auditory experiences. Rather, volume is a dimension along which sounds can vary. It is an aspect of sounds, with regard to which they can be ranked. Recognition of the qualitative differences between the sounds of a symphony, rain falling, and a bird chirping, does nothing at all to call into question our ability to identify a single dimension – volume – with regard to which these and other sounds can be ranked. Similarly, then, pleasure might well be a distinct dimension of

Footnote 17 continued

object of my thought, not my experience of thinking of it. On the other hand, I would not wish to rule out the possibility that some thoughts are, in a way, quasi-visual. Talk of one's 'mind's eye' may be more literal than is commonly thought. If this is right, however, then, even if my experience of thinking of a red phone booth can itself fairly be described as literally red, this is only because it *is* a kind of visual experience.

¹⁸ Kagan (1992).

mental states, with regard to which they can be ranked as well. Recognition of the qualitative differences between the experiences of hiking, listening to music, and reading philosophy, need not call into question our ability to identify a single dimension – pleasure – along which they vary in magnitude. Once we have a picture like this in mind, we might in fact be prepared to insist that there *is* a sense in which pleasure is an ingredient common to all pleasant experiences. For it seems to me that there is a sense in which a specific volume is indeed an ingredient of a given sound, along with a particular pitch, and so forth.¹⁹

Kagan's analogy, however, like Crisp's, is inapt. Consider that, for most pleasant experiences, one can reduce their pleasantness to nothing, while leaving the experience intact, whereas one cannot ever reduce the volume of an auditory experience to nothing and still be left with the auditory experience in question. For example, if I am having a pleasant experience of sitting in the park, but then I grow tired or bored, so that its pleasantness saps away to nothing, I will still (unless I have gotten up and left) be having an experience of sitting in the park. By contrast, if I am hearing a tune, and its volume is turned down completely, I will no longer be hearing that tune. Some pleasant experiences, in other words, can survive the reduction of their pleasantness to zero, whereas no auditory experience can survive the reduction of its volume to zero. If pleasantness were analogous to volume, then entirely removing the pleasantness of a given experience would always remove that experience, but this is not the case.²⁰

Finally, I wish to briefly comment on Smuts' *feel good theory*. According to it, "pleasurable experiences are those that *feel good*".²¹ What is it for an experience to "feel good"? Smuts says "To feel good is...well, to feel good".²² He admits that this is "not incredibly descriptive",²³ but says we can get some idea of what it is for an experience to feel good by thinking metaphorically. He notes the "warm glow" of pleasant experiences, as well as their "enticing hum".²⁴ He leaves it at that. While I share Smuts' sense that all pleasant experiences are phenomenologically alike in some way, I cannot pretend that I find his metaphors at all helpful in clarifying for me what this way is. In fact, I have trouble assessing Smuts' proposal because I do not really understand what it is.

4 What 'the pleasant feeling' must be like if it exists

The distinctive feeling theory has a good reply to the objection that all pleasant experiences seem not to feel alike. Consider what 'the pleasant feeling' would have

¹⁹ Kagan (1992). Kagan cites unpublished work by Leonard Katz.

²⁰ For further criticism of Kagan, see Crisp (2006) and Sobel (1999).

²¹ Smuts (2010).

²² Smuts (2010).

²³ Smuts (2010).

²⁴ Smuts (2010).

to be like if the distinctive feeling theory is to be at all plausible. It would have to be the sort of feeling that can occupy an experience, and so make it count as pleasant, by *permeating* it. Consider, for example, pleasant experiences of listening to Bach, eating a juicy peach, solving a puzzle, sunbathing, etc. Clearly, if ‘the pleasant feeling’ exists, it does not make these sort of experiences pleasant by being ‘tacked on to them’, so to speak, in any crude fashion. Instead, it must be the sort of feeling that can come in extremely low intensities, and very finely discriminable locations within one’s experiential field, so that it can come scattered throughout one’s experiential field. If the distinctive feeling theory is correct, and I enjoy listening to Bach, while you do not, then the difference between our experiences of Bach has got to be that mine is permeated by ‘the pleasant feeling’, while yours is not. In this way, ‘the pleasant feeling’ might ‘brighten’ a whole experience, or lend it a ‘warm glow’ (thereby giving substance to Smuts’ metaphors mentioned earlier).

This explains, it seems to me, why, if the distinctive feeling theory is true, we should not expect to be able to gain a clear sense of ‘the pleasant feeling’, or the way in which all pleasant experiences feel alike. The reason is that, if the distinctive feeling theory is true, most instances of ‘the pleasant feeling’ are, taken by themselves, virtually imperceptible. They occur in extremely small quantities (or low intensities), and in very abstract or ethereal locations in one’s experiential field, locations that are not at all easy to direct one’s attention toward, or focus upon. What does a pleasant experience of sunbathing have in common phenomenologically with one of drinking a cool beer on a hot day? Just that it has a whole lot of these tiny, independently virtually imperceptible, feelings scattered throughout it. When you add to this the fact that these feelings may be distributed in quite different patterns, both at a time, and over time, it is no wonder Feldman cannot identify a felt likeness between these two pleasant experiences.

The explanation I have given is supported by other work of Haybron and Schwitzgebel. They argue not only that we can have unpleasant experiences of which we are unaware, but also that

we make gross, enduring mistakes about even the most basic features of our currently ongoing conscious experience (or “phenomenology”), even in favorable circumstances of careful reflection, with distressing regularity...The introspection of current conscious experience, far from being secure, nearly infallible, is faulty, untrustworthy, and misleading – not just possibly mistaken, but massively and pervasively.²⁵

Schwitzgebel presents cases of mistaken beliefs about one’s own visual imagery,²⁶ auditory experience,²⁷ and emotional experience.²⁸ Recall his example of the

²⁵ Schwitzgebel (2008, p. 250) emphasises that it is not just that we can be inarticulate about our phenomenology, but that our introspection can fail us too: “It’s not like perfectly well knowing what particular shade of tangerine your Volvo is, stumped only about how to describe it. No, in the case of emotion the very phenomenology itself—the “qualitative” character of our consciousness—is not entirely evident, or so it seems to me.”

²⁶ Schwitzgebel (2002).

²⁷ Schwitzgebel (2000).

²⁸ Schwitzgebel (2008).

husband doing the washing up, who is unable to determine even whether he is angry. He goes on:

Most of us have a pretty poor sense, I suspect, of what brings us pleasure and suffering. Do you really enjoy Christmas? Do you really feel bad while doing the dishes? Are you happier weeding or going to a restaurant with your family?...There's confusion between mild pains and itches or tingles. There's the football player who sincerely denies he's hurt. There's the difficulty we sometimes feel in locating pains precisely or in describing their character. I see no reason to dismiss, out of hand, the possibility of genuine introspective error in these cases. Psychosomatic pain, too: Normally, we think of psychosomatic pains as genuine pains, but is it possible that some, instead, involve sincere belief in a pain that doesn't actually exist?²⁹

Haybron argues, in particular, that “widespread, serious errors in the self-assessment of *affect* are a genuine possibility—one worth taking very seriously”.³⁰ He says:

There are good reasons for doubting that any of us have a firm grasp on the quality of our experience of life, in particular its affective character. Possibly, many of us are profoundly ignorant about such matters, to the point that we often don't know whether we are happy or unhappy, or even whether our experience is pleasant or unpleasant.³¹

Even Smuts, who rejects the distinctive feeling theory because “we cannot isolate a distinctive feeling of pleasure”³² says, in defense of his own feels good theory,

Our memories of experiences are pale simulacra of the real things. Try to remember what a peach tastes like, or what it feels like to chew a crispy potato chip, or the way a new car smells. I have a vague sense of what these experiences are like, but my dull, gray memory is nothing compared to Technicolor conscious experience. It is unreasonable to expect that people can clearly identify a common phenomenal aspect among experiences that they cannot recall with any level of specificity for much time at all. It is extremely difficult to reflect on powerful feelings with much precision, even in tranquility.³³

If I am right about what ‘the pleasant feeling’ would have to be like for the distinctive feeling theory to be true, and Schwitzgebel, Haybron, and Smuts are right that we can be grossly mistaken about important aspects of our own occurrent phenomenology, then our inability to gain a clear sense of ‘the pleasant feeling’, or to introspect a felt similarity between all pleasant experiences, should not weigh all that heavily against the distinctive feeling theory. Indeed, it should be roughly what we should expect if the theory is true.

²⁹ Haybron (2008, p. 200).

³⁰ Smuts (2010).

³¹ Haybron (2008, p. 199).

³² Smuts (2010).

³³ Smuts (2010).

That said, one can perhaps gain some sense of ‘the pleasant feeling’ by thinking, say, of the experience of orgasm as ‘the pleasant feeling’ delivered in a very large quantity (or a high intensity), explosively. Similarly, one might gain some sense of ‘the unpleasant feeling’ by thinking of a painful experience like stubbing one’s toe as ‘the unpleasant feeling’ delivered in a large quantity, and a particular bodily location, explosively.³⁴

5 ‘Findlay’s objection’ to phenomenological theories

In his 1961 book *Values and Intentions*, J. N. Findlay writes:

Were pleasure and unpleasure peculiar qualities of experience, as loud and sweet are peculiar qualities of what comes before us in sense-experience, it would be a gross, empirical accident that we uniformly sought the one and avoided the other, as it is a gross, empirical accident in the case of the loud or the sweet, and this of all suppositions the most incredible and absurd. Plainly it is in some sense trivially necessary that we should want pleasure (or not want unpleasure).³⁵

Findlay’s objection to phenomenological theories is that they cannot explain the nature of our attraction to pleasure, and aversion to pain. If such theories are correct, Findlay says, our attraction to pleasure, and aversion to pain, would be an empirical accident, a quirk of our nature, merely contingent in the way that we just happen to get pleasure from such things as chocolate and backrubs, and pain from being injured. But, it is *not* like this. It goes somehow deeper than this. There would be something extremely *odd*, and not merely *different*, about an alien species whose members were entirely indifferent to their pleasures and pains, liking and wanting, say, only *yellow* experiences, instead.³⁶

One response available to a phenomenological theorist is to hold that “pleasures and pains are of their very nature liable to affect behavior in certain directions.”³⁷ According to this response, it is just a necessary causal truth that one who expects to feel a pleasure by doing a certain thing will be (at least somewhat) motivated to do it.

³⁴ Another possibility worth mentioning is that, while there is no ‘feeling of pleasure itself’, there are a number of ‘pleasant *feelings*’, the presence of *any* of which in an experience is enough to make that experience count as pleasant. These feelings might be related to each other in the same way that the different shades of a single colour are related to each other. Sprigge (1988) seems to hold a view like this. If this view is correct, it may further explain the felt diversity of pleasant experiences.

³⁵ Findlay (1961, p. 177).

³⁶ Heathwood (2011) suggests, though does not state, this objection when he writes that, if phenomenological theories are true, then “pleasure is really just another sensation among others (or, on its hedonic tone variety, just another feature of sensations among others). Just as there is the taste of chocolate, the feeling of sun on your back, and the sound of Ella Fitzgerald’s voice, there is the feeling of pleasure. On [phenomenological theories], it must be just a contingent fact about us humans that we tend to like and want this feeling of pleasure (just as it is contingent that we tend to like and want to hear the sound of Ella Fitzgerald’s voice).”

³⁷ Sprigge (1988).

This response, however, contradicts ‘Hume’s dictum’, the idea that there can be no necessary connections between distinct existences. (In this case, the ‘existences’ would be one’s anticipation of pleasure, and one’s subsequent motivation.) This is a significant cost.³⁸ Another worry is that it seems possible for there to be people who expect to feel a pleasure by doing a certain thing, but who have no motivation whatever to do it. Consider, for example, an ascetic who knows he would experience a great deal of pleasure by taking a warm bath (say, on a cold day), but, since he believes such pleasures to be worthless or only bad for him, has no motivation whatever to take one.

A better response is proposed by Irwin Goldstein. Goldstein writes:

In the case of pleasure and pain it is the apprehension, or recognition, that pleasure is worth having and pain worth avoiding that leads to the seeking behaviour characteristic of pleasure and the avoidance behaviour characteristic of pain and unpleasantness...It strikes one immediately as absurd to say that our preference of pleasure to pain is an arbitrary one; the absurdity lies in the obvious fact that pain does not *merit* our desire and approval in the way that pleasure does.³⁹

Why are we attracted to pleasure, and averse to pain, rather than, say, the other way around? It is because we recognise that our pleasures are *good*, and our pains *bad*, and we are attracted to what we think good, and averse to what we think bad. Why would there be something odd, and not merely different, about a species of creature whose members were entirely indifferent to their pleasures and pains? It would be because such creatures would have to be *en masse* oblivious to the goodness of their pleasures, and the badness of their pains, or else somehow indifferent to what they regarded good and bad.⁴⁰

There are two important objections to this reply that need to be addressed. The first is that a phenomenological theorist cannot invoke the goodness and badness of our pleasures and pains to explain our attraction and aversion to them, because, even if some phenomenological theory is true, our pleasures and pains would not *be* good and bad if we were indifferent to them. According to this objection, even if one’s attitudes do not make one’s experiences *pleasant* and *unpleasant*, they must at least play some role in making one’s pleasant and unpleasant experiences *good* and *bad*. As Heathwood says,

³⁸ Wilson (2010).

³⁹ Goldstein (1980, p. 354). See also Rachels, who writes, “pursuing pain, on [phenomenological theories], may be intrinsically odd because it is so obviously imprudent” (Rachels 2000, p. 201).

⁴⁰ Note that this explanation assumes both (a) that our pleasures are (at least, for the most part) good, and that our pains are (at least, for the most part) bad, and (b) that there is a conceptual connection between believing something good and being attracted to it, and also between believing something bad and being averse to it. These assumptions, while not universally accepted, are extremely widely held. I will not attempt in this article to defend them. Note also that this explanation is consistent with the existence of individuals who are not attracted to their pleasures, or averse to their pains. Such individuals, according to this explanation, would be failing to believe that their pleasures are good, or their pains bad. An example of such an individual might be the ascetic mentioned above. Other examples might include individuals who are profoundly self-loathing or guilt-ridden as a result of abusive childhoods, or religious indoctrination.

[Given phenomenological theories], it is hard to see why we would want to say that pleasure is good in itself for us in the first place (in the same way that it would be hard to see why we would want to say that the white color sensation you are experiencing while looking at this page is an intrinsically good sensation for us to experience).⁴¹

William Alston makes essentially the same point when he writes,

What we are suggesting to be necessarily true is (*P*) the fact that one gets pleasure out of *x* is a reason for doing or seeking *x*...The conscious-quality theory can throw no light on this necessity. If pleasure is an unanalyzable quality of experience, there is nothing about the meanings of the terms involved in (*P*) that would make it necessarily true. Why should it be necessarily true that a certain unanalyzable quality of experience is something to be sought? It would seem that any such quality is something that would or would not be taken as desirable by a given person, or people in general, depending on further factors.⁴²

What these writers forget, however, is that, if the distinctive feeling theory is true, then a painful experience, even if its subject does not mind it—even, indeed, if he is not aware of it at all—still *hurts* (i.e., still possesses the distinctive phenomenal feel characteristic of pains). It is just for *this* reason that a pain is bad even if it is not minded by its subject. Recall Haybron's man who suffers from a whining refrigerator, while having no notion of it, or Schwitzgebel's husband who is unpleasantly angry without being able to discern it. Isn't it plausible that their unpleasant experiences, though they are unaware of them, are bad for them?⁴³ Similarly, a pleasant experience, even if its subject has no notion that it is going on, still possesses the phenomenal feel characteristic of pleasures. *This* is why it is good. Why is it the involvement of 'the pleasant feeling', rather than, say, the sound of Ella Fitzgerald's voice, the smell of jasmine, or yellow phenomenology, that is what makes an experience good? There is no answer to this question, but also no need for one.

⁴¹ Heathwood (2011).

⁴² Alston (1968, p. 346). See also Sobel (2005, p. 445): "Given the historical significance of versions of hedonism that claim a phenomenological commonality between pleasures, it is surprisingly obscure what can be said by way of vindicating the reason-giving status of such states." Sobel goes so far as to compare a phenomenological theorist who claims that only pleasant experiences are intrinsically valuable, to someone who insists that chocolate is an intrinsically more valuable flavour than strawberry. The very notion, he says, is comic.

⁴³ See also Haybron's wonderful example of Glen, a mechanic from Detroit, who only realises how unhappy he is in his everyday life after he returns to his childhood home in the countryside and is struck by the contrast: "He experiences real joy for the first time in years, but more than that he feels a tremendous surge of vitality and expansion of spirit. He feels *free* and *big*; by contrast, his usual self, and most of those back in the city, now strike him as tiny, compressed and shriveled up, like ants. He instinctively resumes the confident posture and stride of his youth, and at day's end slips easily into a deep, untroubled sleep. He now realizes that what had previously seemed like happiness was anything but – not because he didn't understand what happiness is, but simply because he was oblivious to the character of his emotional condition. This becomes more apparent still when he returns home to Detroit and gradually resumes that unhappy state." Intuitively, Glen's unhappiness in Detroit was bad, even though he was ignorant of it.

The second objection to Goldstein's reply that needs to be addressed is that it *overintellectualises* our attraction to pleasure, and aversion to pain. Is it really plausible that, normally, when I want a massage, a beer, or to listen to The Beatles' *Abbey Road*, etc., I want these things because I believe my experiences will be *good* or *valuable*? Isn't it rather that I want them *just* because I expect them to be pleasant? Similarly, when I feel nauseous, and I hate what I am experiencing, do I really hate it because I regard it as *bad*? Isn't it rather that I hate it *directly*, just because of how it *feels*, without any mediating normative judgment between the experience and my attitude? Non-human animals, after all, share our attraction to pleasure, and aversion to pain, but it is not clear that they can even think normatively. Even supposing they can, is it really plausible that a cat eagerly licking from a saucer of milk is doing so because it *values* the experience it is having?

There are several things to say in response. First, Goldstein's proposal is (obviously) not that it is *conscious* judgments that our pleasures are good that explains our attraction toward them, but *unconscious* judgments of this kind. When I am sitting on my couch, and form a desire for a beer, what explains my desire is not a conscious thought that my experience of drinking a beer will be good or worth something, but an unconscious one.

Second, one must be careful not to confuse my *feeling like* having a beer (or a backrub, or whatever) with my actually having a genuine *desire* for one. Undoubtedly, I can feel like having a beer without thinking that my experience of having one would be good in any way. However, to feel like having a beer is just to think that I would enjoy having one (i.e., that I would experience pleasure as a result of having one). It is not yet to actually *desire* one. To genuinely desire one would require something in addition to this. An ascetic, remember, could feel like having a beer, but have no desire whatever for one. What I am suggesting is that one reason a critic might be tempted to think that I can desire a beer without my believing that one would be good in some way is that he is confusing my merely feeling like having a beer with my having an actual desire for one.

Third, consider that those who, in the grip of an existential crisis, come to think that nothing is worth anything, lose interest even in basic pleasures of theirs, and stop being bothered about their pains. We do not find such people continuing to eagerly pursue pleasure in the way most of us ordinarily pursue pleasure. Nor would it be at all surprising to find such a person lying all day in his bed, lacking any motivation to cure his hunger or thirst, open a window, or even change his clothes. It is not that such people cease to *feel* pleasures and pains. Rather, they cease to care about them—they are no longer *motivated*, in the usual way, to pursue pleasure, and avoid pain. This suggests that, in the normal case of attraction to pleasure and aversion to pain, our attraction and aversion is the product of normative beliefs. If our ordinary attraction to pleasure, and aversion to pain, were *not* mediated by evaluative beliefs, then we should expect that those who cease to regard their pleasures and pains as worth anything would be unchanged in their attraction to pleasure and aversion to pain. But, this is not what we find. Indeed, if we see such a person pursuing pleasure again, or minding his pains, we take this as a sign that he is getting over his crisis, and has started to value things again.

Finally, what of non-human animals' attraction to pleasure? Frankly, I find it hard to imagine cats, dogs, etc., *not* having some kind of appreciation, sense, or understanding that their experience of pain is a bad thing, and their experience of pleasure is a good thing. These are, after all, as Goldstein says, elementary insights, and "creatures of elementary intelligence are still capable of elementary insights".⁴⁴ Goldstein goes on:

The good or bad in these experiences is not hidden...That there is something in a pleasant experience worth having and something in a painful experience worth avoiding is obvious.⁴⁵

If there is a capacity we humans have that cats, etc., lack, I would suggest it is the capacity, not to think of our pleasures as good, but to think of them as *not* good. This would explain why there are ascetic human beings, but no ascetic cats.

In the end, I believe, the lesson of Findlay's objection is not that phenomenological theories are false, but that our attraction to pleasure, and aversion to pain, is the result of our regarding our pleasures as good and our pains as bad.⁴⁶

6 Conclusion

In this article, I have argued that the distinctive feeling theory is the best theory of pleasure and pain currently on offer. My argument has had four stages. First, I argued that recent work by Haybron and Schwitzgebel on our capacity to be ignorant of our own occurrent phenomenology provides a decisive objection to attitude theories. Second, I argued that the theories of Crisp, Kagan, and Smuts all fail because they rely on analogies that are either inapt or uninformative. Third, I argued that the distinctive feeling theory has a good reply to the objection that not all pleasant experiences (and not all unpleasant ones) feel alike. Finally, I considered an overlooked, but important, objection to phenomenological theories, 'Findlay's objection'. This objection, I argued, shows us not that phenomenological theories are false, but rather that our attraction to pleasure, and aversion to pain, is the result of our regarding our pleasures as good and our pains as bad.

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⁴⁴ Goldstein (1980, p. 357).

⁴⁵ Goldstein (1980, p. 358).

⁴⁶ Things might be different if there turned out to be a viable alternative to phenomenological theories.

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