

The Feels Good Theory of Pleasure

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Abstract

Most philosophers since Sidgwick have thought that the various forms of pleasure differ so radically that one cannot find a common, distinctive feeling among them. This is known as the *heterogeneity problem*. To get around this problem, the *motivational theory of pleasure* suggests that what makes an experience one of pleasure is our reaction to it, not something internal to the experience. I argue that the motivational theory is wrong, and not only wrong, but backwards. The heterogeneity problem is the principal source of motivation for this, otherwise, highly counterintuitive theory. I intend to show that the heterogeneity problem is not a genuine problem and that a more straightforward theory of pleasure is forthcoming. I argue that the various experiences that we call “pleasures” all feel good.

1 Introduction

We can feel pleasure from eating a juicy peach, smelling clean laundry, emptying a full bladder, seeing the friendly smile of a passing stranger, solving a puzzle, taking a warm bath on a cold day, hearing the laughter of children, watching a cat play with a rubber band, climbing into a soft bed, thinking of someone we love, soaking up the sun, and so on. Undeniably, pleasures come from a wide variety of sources and they also vary radically in size and shape. Although we might not be able to quantify the difference, the pleasure of an orgasm is typically much more intense than the pleasure had from finding our misplaced car keys—that is, they differ in size. In addition, pleasures vary in shape; it seems that the pleasure had from eating barbeque is of a very different sort than that had from solving a crossword puzzle.

The variety of the sources and sizes of the experiences that we call pleasurable has not proved nearly as important in the development of theories of pleasure as that of the variety in shapes. To see why, one merely needs to ask, if pleasures can be as different as circles and squares, why do we call them all by the same name? Most philosophers since Sidgwick have thought that the various forms of pleasure differ experientially to such an extent that one cannot find a common, distinctive feeling among them. The heterogeneity of pleasurable experience is thought to make it something of a mystery as to why we call these things by the same name. This is known as the *heterogeneity problem*.

One popular type of solution to the heterogeneity problem claims that the

reason why we call all these different types of experiences “pleasures” is not because of some similarity in the way the experiences feel, since they feel very different, but because of some similarity in our responses. Simply put: A similar response to otherwise dissimilar experiences is why we call them all by the same name. Such accounts are externalist theories of pleasure. They hold that what makes a feeling pleasurable is something external to the experience. The most compelling version of this kind of explanation is called the *motivational theory of pleasure*. Very roughly, the motivational theory of pleasure holds that a feeling should be called “pleasurable” if it is one that we would rather have than not have, for its own sake.

I argue that the motivational theory of pleasure is wrong, and not only wrong, but backwards. The heterogeneity problem is the principal source of motivation for the motivational theory of pleasure; otherwise the theory is highly counterintuitive, since it suggests that what makes an experience one of pleasure is our reaction to it, not something internal to the experience. I intend to show that the heterogeneity problem is not a genuine problem and that a more straightforward theory of pleasure is forthcoming. I argue that there is indeed something common among pleasurable experiences, namely, they all feel good.

My argument proceeds in a few steps. I begin by explaining a compelling version of the motivational theory of pleasure, a version that solves the problems facing other similar formulations. I then present two problems for the theory: It cannot account for the fact that we sometimes intrinsically desire unpleasant experiences, such as those elicited by painful art. In addition, the theory suffers from a Euthyphro-style problem—it holds that an experience is pleasurable because we desire it, but this seems backwards. Surely we desire the experience because it is pleasurable. In response to these difficulties, I present a theory that avoids both, a view that I call the “feels good theory of pleasure.” However, my view faces a formidable objection—the heterogeneity problem. In defense of the feels good theory, I attempt to resolve the heterogeneity problem by undermining its support. Finally, I consider several objections that appear to provide alternative sources of support for the motivational theory.

2 The Motivational Theory of Pleasure

The motivational theory of pleasure holds that what makes an experience pleasurable is not the presence of any one common feeling, but that it prompts a common response. As for the kind of response, multiple candidates have been proposed, including the following: the thought that the experience is desirable, the desire to continue the experience, the concurrent desire to be having the experience, and being pleased that the experience is occurring.¹ The principal

¹Henry Sidgwick, *The Methods of Ethics* (London, 1907); Richard Brandt, *A Theory of the Good and the Right* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979); Chris Heathwood, “Desire Satisfactionism and Hedonism,” *Philosophical Studies* 128 (2006): 539-563, and “The Reduction of Sensory Pleasure to Desire,” *Philosophical Studies* 133 (2007): 23-44; and

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source of support for the motivational theory is the heterogeneity problem. Although externalist theories appear to solve a few additional puzzles, no one would think to identify the nature of pleasure with something external to the experience if it were not for the heterogeneity problem. Historically and rhetorically it is the principal driver for externalist views. Otherwise, such theories are counterintuitive. Of course, one could excuse the fact that the motivational theory is counterintuitive if it worked, but no formulation of the theory is free from serious difficulties. My discussion will focus on the most compelling version of the theory, one recently proposed by Chris Heathwood.²

In *The Method of Ethics*, Sidgwick develops a proto-motivational theory, which holds that pleasures are experiences that we find desirable.³ He makes it clear that the heterogeneity problem is the principal driver for his theory. Unable to specify a common phenomenal aspect of pleasurable experiences, Sidgwick proposes that we must be identifying pleasure with those experiences that we think are worth desiring or those that we find preferable to others. Sidgwick explains that

when I reflect on the nature of pleasure,—using the term in the comprehensive sense which I have adopted [. . .],—the only common quality that I can find in the feelings so designated seems to be that relation to desire and volition expressed by the general term “desireable” [. . .] I propose to therefore define Pleasure [. . .] as a feeling which, when experienced by intelligent beings, is at least implicitly apprehended as desirable or—in cases of comparison—preferable.⁴

Unfortunately, Sidgwick’s theory is prone to obvious counterexamples. A committed ascetic may take pleasure from being tossed into a warm bath on a cold morning, but he might not think that the experience is desirable. Given his ascetic commitments, he might prefer to have remained cold. Similarly, an epicurean might take pleasure from an expensive glass of wine, but when the price is revealed she may not find the experience desirable, since it might interfere with her ability to appreciate the Two Buck Chuck she is currently satisfied with. And a reluctant sadist may take pleasure in the cries of injured children, but wish that he were not the kind of person that enjoyed the suffering of others. These examples show, contra Sidgwick, that one can take pleasure in

Fred Feldman, “Two Questions about Pleasure” in *Utilitarianism, Hedonism, and Desert* (Cambridge, 1997), and *Pleasure and the Good Life* (Oxford, 2004).

² Fred Feldman defends what he calls the “attitudinal theory of pleasure,” which holds that sensory pleasures are those that we are pleased to have. It is not entirely clear that his theory should be called a motivational theory, since it does not make reference to desire. Feldman’s theory avoids the problems facing any attempted reduction of pleasure to desire, but it suffers from the same Euthyphro-style problem as the motivational theory. In addition, it rests on a problematic distinction between attitudinal and sensory pleasures. Due to limitations of scope, I do not discuss Feldman’s theory in this paper.

³ Since Sidgwick does not say that pleasurable experiences are those that we do desire, but those that are apprehended as desirable, he does not clearly offer a motivational theory. Of course, it depends on how one cashes out the notion of “desirable.”

⁴ Sidgwick, p. 127.

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experiences that one does not find desirable.

Richard Brandt proposes a similar theory that identifies pleasure by reference to motivation. He presents a “motivational theoretical-construct theory. The theory to which we come is, roughly, that for an experience to be pleasurable is for it to make the person want its continuation.”⁵ But Brandt’s theory is also subject to counterexamples. For instance, one can take pleasure from a bite of a rich dessert, so rich that one could not stomach another crumb. Similarly, walking down the road one might take pleasure in the sweet perfume of a rose garden, but not want to continue the experience.⁶ Desserts become cloying and perfumes suffocating in prolonged doses. Hence, one can take pleasure in an experience that one does not desire to continue.

Although Sidgwick’s and Brandt’s theories are problematic, more sophisticated versions of the theory are forthcoming. William Alston argues that a promising form of the motivational theory of pleasure is that

to get pleasure is to have an experience which, as of the moment, one would rather have than not have, on the basis of its felt quality, apart from any further considerations regarding consequences.⁷

Similarly, Thomas Carson defines the motivational theory of pleasure as

the view that the pleasantness or unpleasantness of an experience is a function of one’s desires with respect to it qua feeling. A pleasant experience is an experience that one prefers to have rather than to not have (abstracting from all considerations about its consequences and preconditions).⁸

The advantage of this style of formulation of the theory is that it both rules out extrinsic factors and focuses on the present. Hence, the ascetic’s reservations about the possible undesirable consequences of pleasurable experiences are irrelevant. Likewise, the cloying second bite is not a problem since the theory does not require a desire to continue the experience.

Following this model, Heathwood considers his key contribution to the theory of pleasure to be the precise formulation he gives to the idea that sensory pleasures are somehow intimately related to desire. The bulk of Heathwood’s effort is spent revising simple forms of the theory to get around niggling objections involving anti-luminosity and disappointments. His final formulation of the motivational theory is as follows: “a sensation *S*, occurring at time *t*, is a sensory pleasure at *t* iff the subject of *S* desires, intrinsically and de re, at *t*, of *S* that it be occurring at *t*.”⁹ To state it less formally, the theory is that a sensation

⁵ Brant, p. 38. On page 41, Brandt offers a more technical notion of pleasure in functionalist terms.

⁶ J. C. B. Gosling develops these objections in *Pleasure and Desire* (Clarendon Press, 1969), p. 65.

⁷ William Alston, “Pleasure,” in *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Collier-Macmillan, 1968).

⁸ Thomas Carson, *Value and the Good Life*, (University of Notre Dame Press, 2000), p. 13.

⁹ Heathwood, “Reduction,” p. 32

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is a sensory pleasure if and only if it is contemporaneously desired for its own sake.

As stated above, the motivational theory implies that pleasure can be reduced to desire, since there is nothing more to being a pleasure than simply being desired in the right way. This should strike us as odd, since we often get more or less pleasure from things than we had desire for them. Often we find that things we desired a great deal bring little or no pleasure—experiences that Sidgwick calls “Dead Sea apples.” Conversely, we can be pleasantly surprised. We can take a great deal of pleasure in experiences for which we had little or no pre-existing desire. Consider an unexpected massage: Although you may have no pre-existing desire for a massage, if a friend comes up behind you and starts to rub your shoulders, it is certainly possible to feel pleasure. Similarly, someone could be reluctantly dragged along to a play but, unexpectedly, end up enjoying it tremendously. These examples simply highlight the obvious: Our expectations are not always correct. The basic problem for a crude desire-based theory of pleasure is that the intensity of our desire frequently fails to predict the intensity of our pleasure.

Heathwood's resolution of this problem is to restrict the relevant desires to those that are contemporaneous with the sensations. Although we might have desired something a great deal, if we did not take pleasure in its experience this indicates that we did not desire it much while it was occurring. Similarly, we do not have to form a pre-existing desire for something to find it pleasant. When we find something pleasant, according to the motivational theory, we desire the experience for its own sake while it is occurring. The contemporaneous requirement solves the major problems facing other desire-based theories of pleasure.¹⁰

¹⁰ This move also makes the motivational theory dependent on a highly suspect theory of desire. If not logically or even psychologically impossible to desire what one already has, it is, no doubt, exceedingly rare. Of course one might “want” something to stay the same, such as wanting to keep a sweater rather than give it away or wanting to keep one's car in the same spot when asked if we want to move it. Echoing Socrates' argument in the *Symposium*, I think that Anthony Kenny is correct to point out that the “want” in such cases is just shorthand for “wanting to keep”, which is essentially a desire for the future. Anthony Kenny, *Action, Emotion, and Will* (Routledge, 1963), pp. 115-116. L. W. Sumner makes the same point in *Welfare, Happiness, and Ethics* (Oxford, 1996), p. 129. Due to limitations of scope, I will not press this objection. For the sake of argument, I will assume that it makes sense to desire what we already have.

3 Two Problems for the Motivational Theory of Pleasure

Before presenting the feels good theory of pleasure, I want to raise two problems with the motivational theory. First, it is likely that we often do—and perfectly coherent to think that we could—intrinsically desire non-pleasures. And, second, the motivational theory of pleasure holds that experiences are pleasurable because we desire them, but this seems backwards. As a result, the theory has a very difficult time accounting for what makes some experiences more intensely pleasurable than others.

1. Painful Art and Desired Non-Pleasures

The biggest problem with any attempt to reduce pleasure to desire is that no such reduction can account for the fact that we sometimes intrinsically (and contemporaneously) desire experiences that are unpleasant if not outright painful. If this is the case, then having a contemporaneous desire for an experience for its own sake is not sufficient to call that experience pleasurable.

Good examples of desired non-pleasures can be found in the philosophy of art, where the *paradox of tragedy* has troubled theorists since Aristotle. The paradox of tragedy has often been framed as a question about pleasure: How is it that audiences can take pleasure in the portrayal of the suffering of others? Some find this question too limited and think that the paradox should take a more general form. The more important question concerns artworks that are putatively painful. In fact, the paradox of tragedy has been called a sub-problem of the *paradox of painful art*.¹¹ The fundamental question is this: Why do audiences seek out artworks that they know will arouse negative emotions, when people generally avoid situations that elicit such reactions in their normal lives?¹²

¹¹ For an overview of the various positions, see: Aaron Smuts, "Art and Negative Affect," *Philosophy Compass* 4.1 (2009): 39-55.

¹² There are a variety of answers on the table to the paradox of painful art. Control theorists argue that the putative painfulness of some artworks is mitigated by our ability to stop experiencing them at will (Morreall 1985). Compensation theorists argue that any painful reactions must be compensated for by other pleasures, either in the craft of the narrative (Hume) or in the awareness that we are sympathetic creatures responsive to the suffering of others (Feagin 1983). Conversion theorists argue that the overall experience of painful artworks is not one of pain but of pleasure, as the pain is converted into a larger, more pleasurable experience (Hume). Power theorists argue that we enjoy the feeling of power that arises from either the realization of the endurance of humanity (Price 1998), or through the overcoming of our fear (Shaw 2001). Rich experience theorists argue that there are many reasons why people do things other than to feel pleasure. The overall experience of painful art may be one of pain, but the experience can still be seen as valuable, and, as such, motivating (Smuts 2007).

See: Alex Neil, "On a Paradox of the Heart," *Philosophical Studies* 65 (1992): 53-65; Susan Feagin, "The Pleasures of Tragedy," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 20. 1

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The paradox of painful art is essentially a conflict between audience reports and a default assumption of motivational hedonism. If audiences really do find some artworks painful, why do they want to see them? Most theorists propose hedonic compensatory solutions to the problem, suggesting that audiences must find some pleasure to compensate for the pain. The problem with all hedonic solutions is that although there are surely many pleasures to be had from a well crafted narrative, audiences do not always describe their experiences as on the whole pleasurable. In fact there are many cases where people describe their experiences as genuinely painful.

Consider Ingmar Bergman's horribly depressing six hour series *Scenes from a Marriage* (1973). The third episode, "Paula," is one of the most excruciating stories ever told. Marianne (Liv Ullmann) is at the summer house for the week with the children. Her husband Johan is not expected home until the weekend. When he makes a surprise midweek visit, Marianne is overjoyed. A giddy child, she runs around the house merrily fixing Johan a snack, saying how happy she is that he came to the cottage earlier than expected. Her happiness makes Johan's news all that more crushing: He tells Marianne that he has fallen in love with another woman (Paula) and will be leaving that night with his mistress on a six month trip. Their conversation lasts for an excruciating half hour of screen time, during which Johan proceeds to show Marianne, albeit at her request, a wallet picture of his lover! Only a sadist could take joy in this episode.

I would not describe my experience of this episode as in any way pleasurable, but I find it to be one of the most effective affair fictions ever created. Indeed, pardon my gushing, it contains some of the most powerful moments in cinematic history. I would recommend it to others, largely for the experience. But it is not pleasurable. No, it is nothing less than emotionally devastating. And to use terms Heathwood thinks are indicative of pleasure, I am "into it," and give it a big "thumbs up."¹³ But I am "into" the work because of the decidedly non-pleasurable experiences it affords. I desire the overall sad experience while it is occurring. I am not merely retrospectively glad to have undergone the emotional turmoil. At several moments along the way, if you stopped the movie and asked me what I think, through a mist of tears, I would say that it is terrific and absolutely crushing.

In the sense of "like" that simply means that I think it is excellent and would recommend it to others, I like it. I like the work (in part for the experiences it affords); however, I hesitate to say that I "like" the work, since it carries connotations of pleasure. If "to like" means something closer to being pleased that something is the case, I certainly did not like watching *Scenes from a Marriage*. But you should see it if you have not already.

(1983); David Hume, "Of Tragedy" in *Essays Moral, Political, and Literary* (Liberty Fund; Indianapolis, 1985); Amy Price, "Nietzsche and the Paradox of Tragedy," *British Journal of Aesthetics* 4 (1998); Daniel Shaw, "Power, Horror, and Ambivalence", in *Horror, Special issue of Film and Philosophy* (2007); and Aaron Smuts, "The Paradox of Painful Art," *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 41.3 (2007): 59-77.

¹³ Heathwood, "The Reduction of Sensory Pleasure to Desire," p. 35.

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One might reply that although pleasure might not be the source of motivation, audiences must be seeking out some other source of value. The painful experiences are perhaps instrumental to this value, but the pain is not intrinsically valuable. The problem with this objection is that it does not accord with the way we talk about painful art. Audiences do not talk about even the most painful experiences had in response to art as having mere instrumental value. Watching *Scenes from a Marriage* is not like going to the dentist. We do not endure the drilling to end a throbbing ache. Certainly we may find value in the insightful portrayal of suffering and marriage, but that does not exhaust our motivation. Although audiences may find various forms of value in experiencing the work, no compensation is necessary for the negative experiences it engenders.

Although the painful emotional responses one feels in response to art are not instrumentally valuable, perhaps they are constitutive of other types of value, such as the cognitive value of recognizing humanity's profoundly depressing proclivity to cruelty. Somehow, one might argue, fully understanding such insights necessarily involves painful emotional experiences. Clearly, this style of explanation is highly plausible. Indeed, I think that it is part of the complete motivational story. But what it would have to show, if it were to unhorse my objection, is that audiences only desire painful emotional responses as constitutive of other kinds of value, and never for themselves. I find this highly implausible, especially since the kinds of cognitive value one can take from art are typically banal. We know all too well that the universe is indifferent to our desires and that people are capable of beastly acts of violence, cruelty, and gross insensitivity. It is hard to imagine that the desire to be reminded of such depressing trivialities is the primary source of audience motivation, one to which all negative affect must be subsumed. Surely it accounts for some of our motivation, but it seems that audiences do in fact desire the ultimately unpleasant experiences for the sake of having the experiences. At least that is how we often talk about such works: We praise Bergman's powers of emotional devastation in addition to his humanity and depth of insight.

My claim is that audiences seek out painful artworks at least in part for the painful experiences they afford. Narratives provide long and varied experiences. Most provide at least some pleasures. But overall, some works are best described as painful. I argue that although we seek out painful art for a variety of reasons, one reason is for the experiences themselves. When engaging with painful artworks one sometimes intrinsically and contemporaneously desires the non-pleasant experiences they afford. Perhaps this sounds odd, but there is good evidence for my claim: After the fact, we praise many works for their effectiveness at eliciting just such painful responses. We praise "Scenes from a Marriage" for its power to disturb—to elicit heart-wrenching, painfully felt sorrow. In part, this is what we intrinsically desire from the work.

If this claim is at least plausible, then it presents a significant problem for the motivational theory of pleasure. For current purposes, it does not have to be right, just plausible. Although Heathwood's version of the motivational theory

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of pleasure is strictly a theory of sensory pleasure, painful art poses a problem for a natural extension of the view. And since some of the painful experiences had in response to painful art are sensory, such as disgust felt in response to horror fiction, the problem hits Heathwood's formulation directly.¹⁴ If it is plausible to think that audiences sometimes intrinsically and contemporaneously desire painful experiences in response to art, then having a contemporaneous, intrinsic desire for an experience is not sufficient for pleasure.

But I will not rest my argument on a contentious solution to the paradox of painful art. Even if most, or even all, actual audiences never contemporaneously desire painful art experiences intrinsically, it is perfectly coherent to imagine that people could intrinsically desire non-pleasures. Imagine a super-hypnotist, Mesmeretes, who has the power to impart desires via hypnotic suggestion. It is perfectly coherent to imagine that Mesmeretes could give someone the desire to experience the sensation of chewing yarn, touching a 9-volt battery against the tongue, licking stamps, counting toothpicks, or simply tapping one's thumb and forefinger together for no reason at all. But we would not want to say that Mesmeretes' victims necessarily feel pleasure, even though they intrinsically desire such experiences. To make the thought more plausible, let me describe some of his victims.

The hand tapping victims of Mesmeretes simply stare at their hands and tap. They do not smile, or say how good it feels. They simply tap for five minutes after lunch every day. If asked why, they say that they want to tap. If we prevent them from tapping, holding their fingers apart, they develop a moderate urge. Afterwards, if we allow them to tap, the tension is released. They feel some pleasure in the release, but none in the tapping. They merely like to tap. They do not like it in the sense that they take pleasure from it. No, they like it in the sense that this is something they are motivated to do. This is something they just want to do for five minutes after lunch. They simply have the desire to experience the tapping of their fingers at this time of the day. But they do not take pleasure from the sensation. They are merely compulsively, yet only mildly, motivated to tap. The desire is not merely to avoid the frustration of not being able to tap; it is to feel the sensation of tapping. They have an intrinsic desire for a sensation, but take no pleasure in it. Sure, they are odd, but not inconceivable. I see no reason to think that this description is conceptually incoherent. Hence, there is no conceptual connection between pleasure and desire.¹⁵

¹⁴ More importantly, the problem hits several other formalizations of the motivational theory: Sidgwick talks of "feelings." Brandt, Alston, and Carson talk of "experiences," and so does nearly everyone else. It is potentially misleading to talk of sensations as pleasurable. It risks losing sight of the fact that it is sensory *experiences* that are pleasurable. I will return to this when discussing the Problem of Changing Tastes.

¹⁵ I find this example more compelling than others that have been discussed in the literatures, such as Feldman's Dizzy Doctor and masochists. Stuart Rachels discusses an intriguing example from Roger Trigg of someone who likes but takes no pleasure from tonguing a sore tooth. See: Stuart Rachels, "Is Unpleasantness Intrinsic to Unpleasant Experiences?" *Philosophical Studies* 99 (2000): 187-210, p. 194.

In fact, as noted above, I do not think that there is an actual, empirical connection either. Real live, normal people sometimes intrinsically and contemporaneously desire non-pleasures, often in response to art. Even if ultimately my solution to the paradox of painful art is wrong—if audiences do not really intrinsically and contemporaneously desire painful experiences in response to art—it is at least plausible that they might. The conceptual possibility of the hand tapping victims of Mesmeretes shows that it is possible that one could intrinsically and contemporaneously desire non-pleasures. But Mesmeretes is a far-fetched thought-experiment. Perhaps our intuitions are not so clear about such cases. Happily, the problem from painful art escapes such worries, since it does not involve a fanciful example, only the common experiences of reading fiction and going to the movies. Although we might not desire painful art experiences for their own sake, it is plausible that we could. My discussion shows at least that much. This provides clear support for my claim that there is no conceptual connection between pleasure and desire.

2. The Euthyphro Problem

Although pleasure is surely not the sole motivation for pursuing artworks or anything else, it would be strange to say that it plays no role whatsoever. But this is what the motivational theory of pleasure forces us to say. The theory holds that what makes something pleasurable is that we desire it, not the other way around. This is odd. Surely the reason why we desire a massage is because it is pleasurable. The motivational theory of pleasure gets the order of explanation backwards.

Further, if we accept the motivational theory we cannot say that people pursue experiences for pleasure. This would simply amount to saying that they pursue such experiences because they desire them. But we want to know why they desire them, not merely that they desire them. We knew that already. Hence, if we accept the motivational theory, pleasure cannot function in any informative motivational explanation. This is a very odd consequence. One that is too much to swallow if a compelling alternative theory is available.

The motivational theory of pleasure answers on the wrong side of this Euthyphro-style problem. Commonly, one describes an experience as pleasurable as a way of explaining why people would or should pursue it. For instance:

Have you ever run through a lawn sprinkler on a hot summer afternoon? Oh, well, you should try aiming a sprinkler over a swimming pool. The cool mist feels great. It's extremely pleasurable. Oh how I miss such simple summer pleasures living in the city. . . .

Now, if the motivational theory of pleasure is correct, this description of the pleasures of sprinkler-mist lacks much of the content that one might otherwise think is present. According to the motivational theory, describing the cool mist as pleasurable is just to say that it affords an experience that one would desire for its own sake. But that is not all that I meant to say. No, by calling it pleasurable, I meant to say that something about the experience is pleasurable.

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In the next section, I will argue that this something is feeling good. Of course, this is not incredibly descriptive, but it is far different from saying that I simply desire such experiences.

This is not necessarily a fatal problem for the motivational theory. To account for the desire, the defender of the motivational theory can supply additional details. Although some externalists may resist the suggestion, there is no reason why they cannot make recourse to aspects of the experience that give rise to desire. In fact they must. If the motivational theory precludes appealing to aspects of a pleasurable experience in order to account for the desire, then the theory is a non starter. The reason why we desire any given experience would be a complete mystery. But it is not at all mysterious why we intrinsically desire orgasms. If the externalist has to throw up her hands, we should throw out the theory. As far as I can tell, the externalist need do no such thing. She simply needs to deny that the aspects that explain the desire for any given experience are common to all pleasurable experience. She can describe the various aspects of a particular experience as a way of explaining our desire; she just cannot make recourse to pleasure.

Consider the desire for sprinkler mist: the defender of the motivational theory might say that the contrast between the hot sun and the cool mist gives rise to an experience that most people would intrinsically and contemporaneously desire. When it does, we call it pleasurable. But, of course, we can always ask: Why does such an experience engender a contemporaneous intrinsic desire? The defender of the motivational theory might try to say something more: the mist gives rise to a soothing sensation that is highly desirable, in the sense that desire is compelling. The problem is that it is very difficult to say much more without using the word "pleasure." The most comfortable sounding explanation for why we desire the feeling of cool mist on our hot, sun-baked bodies is that it the sensation is pleasurable. That is why we desire it, not the other way around. Again, saying that cool mist is pleasurable is not the most informative thing to say about the experience, but it is a more satisfying place to end the motivational explanation.

The Intense Euthyphro Problem

There is another way to get at the general problem. Although this path is slightly more complicated, it is worth tracing since it raises a much bigger difficulty for the motivational theory. The problem has to do with the role of desire in accounting for the intensity of pleasure. It is not clear that the motivational theory has anything plausible to say about what makes one experience more intensely pleasurable than another.

As noted above, it is not as if the defender of the motivational theory of pleasure cannot account for why we intrinsically desire a particular experience; she can point to aspects of the experience that make it appealing. She just cannot make recourse to pleasure in her explanation. This may be awkward and unnatural, but it can be done. She merely has to choose her words carefully. The awkwardness tells against the motivational theory, but it does not provide a decisive reason to reject the view. However, if the externalist takes this route,

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appealing to aspects of the experience that explain the desire, then the role of desire becomes somewhat unclear. The defender of the motivational theory of pleasure does not merely want to say that the presence of an intrinsic, contemporaneous desire is the common thread among all pleasurable experiences. She wants to say that it is the common thread because an experience cannot be pleasurable without an intrinsic, contemporaneous desire. The desire does more than merely conceptually unify; in some sense, the desire makes the feeling a pleasure. Defenders of the motivational theory hold that same feeling might be pleasurable on some occasions and not on others. It depends on the accompanying desires: no intrinsic, contemporaneous desire, no pleasure. But precisely how the desire makes the difference is not altogether clear. And why the desire is present on some occasions and not others is a lacuna in the theory that I will return to later.

For now, I want to emphasize that the role of desire becomes even more obscure when we consider how to describe the intensity of pleasure. The problem is that the motivational theory makes it nearly impossible to make sense of the fact that pleasure comes in degrees—some feelings are more intensely pleasurable than others. To see why, first consider what the opposing view can say: The internalist can say that the intensity of a pleasure is roughly the intensity of whatever it is that makes pleasurable experiences pleasurable, say, the good feeling. The intensity of the good, pleasurable feeling is the intensity of the pleasure. On an internalist view, we can explain the intensity of a desire for an experience partly by the intensity of the pleasure.¹⁶ However, the defender of the motivational theory cannot say anything of the sort. That would amount to a rejection of externalism. The problem is that what the motivational theorist can say turns out to be very odd.

The motivational theory of pleasure holds that an experience¹⁷ is pleasurable if and only if it is intrinsically and contemporaneously desired. What makes the experience pleasurable is that we have a certain attitude towards the experience. Most plausibly, the motivational theory also holds that the intensity of pleasure is somehow related to the intensity of the contemporaneous desire. It would be very odd if the theory held that what makes an experience pleasurable is the presence of the desire, but that what accounts for the intensity is something different. For instance, the motivational theorist could appeal to the overall intensity of the experience: The more intense a pleasurable experience, the more intense the pleasure. Even if such an explanation were generally compatible with the motivational theory, it suffers from a critical problem, namely, there are many intense experiences that are not intensely pleasurable. Bungee jumping is intense, but it can be only mildly pleasurable.

Since the intensity of the pleasure cannot be gauged by the intensity of the

¹⁶ I say "partly," because the intensity of desire does not always correspond to the intensity of actual or, even expected, satisfaction.

¹⁷ Again, Heathwood's theory only applies to sensations. I am assuming a natural extension of the view to include all pleasurable experiences. Nothing here rides on this point.

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experience as a whole, the pleasure has to be either some aspect of the pleasurable experience, or it must be external to the experience. The first option is not on the table for the motivational theory. If the intensity of the pleasure lies in some aspect of the experience, then why do we not appeal to that aspect to explain what makes it pleasurable, and not the desire? But this looks like internalism. Again, it would be very strange to say that what makes an experience pleasurable is a desire, but what makes it intensely pleasurable is something else. As expected, the defender of the motivational theory will most plausibly have to hold that the intensity of pleasure is a factor of the intensity of our intrinsic, contemporaneous desires for the experience. But this is strange.

It seems like a fair and natural extension of the motivational theory to say that pleasure should be measured by the intensity of the contemporary intrinsic desire. But desires are typically thought to be painful, or at least unpleasant. Further, on our ordinary understanding of the phenomenology of desire, the more intense a desire, the more unpleasant it is. Think of the desire for food, or any other intense desire: Extreme hunger is much worse than a desire for a snack. Desires motivate at least partly through this unpleasantness. To relieve the unpleasant feelings, we seek to satisfy our desires. Although anticipation can be pleasurable, occurrent desires are typically unpleasant.¹⁸ Hence, it would be extremely odd to say that the intensity of a pleasurable experience can be described in terms of the intensity of our desire. Sure, the degree of pleasure we take from some experiences is often proportionally related to the intensity of a pre-existing desire. But this does not make the desire pleasurable. When we have an occurrent desire, it is typically marked by a degree of unpleasantness. Contemporaneous desires do not seem to be the right kind of thing to explain the intensity of pleasure.¹⁹

Perhaps we are to think that the desires involved are of some special sort—desires that do not have the typical phenomenology of occurrent desires. Frankly, I am not sure what to make of the suggestion. It is not clear why we would want to call these kinds of things desires. They appear to be mere preferences or pro-attitudes. Regardless of what we call them, if they amount to

¹⁸ The most obvious counter-example, sexual desire, is not so obviously pleasurable. Sexual fantasy and anticipation may be pleasurable, but sexual desire is not.

¹⁹ Perhaps it is not the intensity of the desire that correlates with pleasure, but the intensity of our felt satisfaction. The theory would have to be that the satisfaction of a contemporaneous desire is the pleasure. But this would threaten to make the motivational theory an internalist theory. The felt satisfaction would be the common aspect internal to all pleasurable experiences. But this is not such a great candidate for the role. The problem is that we often describe desire felt satisfaction as pleasurable. However, if the motivational theory accounts for the intensity of pleasure based on the intensity of satisfaction, we will no longer be able to describe desire satisfaction as pleasurable. There is no way to account for the value of satisfaction without an infinite regress: saying that we experienced pleasure would amount to saying that we experienced the pleasure of a satisfaction, which would amount to saying that we had a experienced pleasure, which would . . .

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something close to mere preferences, then it is not clear how they could possibly be used to explain the intensity of pleasure. This is because it does not feel like anything to have a preference. And, you cannot explain the intensity of a feeling by reference to something that does not feel like anything. That does not make clear sense.

Contra the motivational theory, it seems obvious that the reason why we prefer some experiences more than others is because they are more pleasurable. The intensity of our preference is a product of the intensity of the pleasure. I cannot see how it could be the other way around. Here, the Euthyphro Problem shows its full strength.

A brief summary is in order: The externalist has an awkward time explaining why we desire what we desire. A natural line of explanation is that we desire some experiences because they are pleasurable. The externalist can offer a description of the aspects of the experience that give rise to the desire, but, uncomfortably, she cannot say that these aspects are pleasurable. This gives us some reason to be suspicious of the view. But it is not a decisive reason to reject the motivational theory. However, when it comes to accounting for the intensity of pleasure, the motivational theory faces a far more troublesome version of the problem.

It seems that the intensity of pleasure is a matter of how pleasurable an experience is. But the motivational theory has trouble saying anything of the sort. Most plausibly the theory holds that the intensity of a pleasurable experience is just the intensity of our contemporaneous intrinsic desires for the experience. But this is odd. Occurrent desires are typically as unpleasant as they are strong. It seems that a stronger desire would mean a less pleasurable experience, not more. Perhaps the kinds of desires at play are not normal desires, but some special kind that amount to nothing more than mere preference. But having a mere preference does not feel like anything. And you cannot explain the intensity of a feeling by reference to something that does not feel like anything.²⁰

Once again, we must ask: Why do we prefer some experiences much more than others? The natural thing to say is that we prefer some experiences more than others because they are more pleasurable. As far as I can tell, the externalist has no good answer. This gives us good reason to reject the motivational theory of pleasure.

In what follows, I defend an internalist theory of pleasure that avoids the Euthyphro Problem.

²⁰ Rachels discusses a related problem that our preferences are often stronger or weaker than the pleasure. Rachels, "Is Unpleasantness Intrinsic to Unpleasant Experiences?" pp. 192-6.

4 The Feels Good Theory of Pleasure

My simple proposal is that pleasurable experiences are those that feel good.²¹ It should be clear that I have the intuitive solution to the Euthyphro Problem on my side. Pleasurable experiences are not pleasurable simply because we prefer them, desire their continuance, or think them desirable; rather, we prefer them, desire their continuance, and think that they are desirable because they feel good. What's common about all these experiences? They feel good. To feel good is not simply to engender a contemporaneous intrinsic desire, though this often happens; it is, well, to feel good.

This is not an unilluminating suggestion, but to "feel good" is about as close to an experiential primitive as we get. We understand how to apply the concept and do so with great frequency. Although we might be able to describe the particular experience of something feeling good, we cannot be much more specific about what it is for an experience to feel good other than to say, like Louis Armstrong about jazz: "If you have to ask what it is for something to feel good, you'll never know." In any case, I will try to say a little more about what it is to feel good.

I am hesitant to describe pleasure as supervening on experience or emerging from the properties of experience, since a technical metaphysical description of the relationship between pleasure and experience would not clarify the experiential similarity. It would be more distracting than helpful. Phenomenology is likely our best tool. As in all areas of experiential description, if one wants to move beyond pounding on the table, one cannot help but make recourse to metaphors. Here are a few: we might say that the locus of the pleasurable sensation *glows*; we feel a *warm* feeling; the good feeling *hums* like the vibration of a tuning fork.²² Something about pleasurable experiences just feels good. The experience overall has this quality, this tone or hue. It cannot be cleanly extracted from the experience itself. My suggestion is that pleasurable experiences—whether of eating a peach or solving a puzzle—all have this, pick your metaphor, warm hum.²³

²¹ Roger Crisp argues for a similar theory of pleasure in *Reasons and the Good* (Oxford UP, 2006), p. 107-9. The view finds some precedent in two other places. David Bengtsson in "Pleasure and the Phenomenology of Value" argues that pleasures all "feel good," but it is not clear that he ultimately defends an internalist view, since he thinks that pleasures are necessarily connected with pro-attitudes. David Bengtsson, "Pleasure and the Phenomenology of Value," in *Patterns of Value*, eds. W. Rabinowicz and T. Rønnow-Rasmussen (Lund University, 2004): 21-35. A second precedent can be found in Stuart Rachels's excellent work on pleasure, particularly in "Six Theses about Pleasure," *Philosophical Perspectives* 18, *Ethics* (2004): 247-267, p.259 and p. 256; and "Is Unpleasantness Intrinsic to Unpleasant Experiences?," p. 187.

²² Elinor Mason presents a few similar descriptive phrases: "a feeling of lightness and ease, a warm feeling in the stomach" (p.380). See: Elinor Mason, "The Nature of Pleasure" *Utilitas* 19.3 (2007): 379-387.

²³ Shelly Kagan uses the metaphor of the volume of a sound. See: Shelly Kagan, "The Limits of Wellbeing," in *The Good Life and the Human Good*, eds. Ellen Frankel

The feels good theory of pleasure is a species of what Fred Feldman calls “felt quality theories.” In contrast to theories such as the motivational theory that identify pleasure by something external to the experience, felt quality theories hold that what makes an experience pleasurable is something internal to the experience, and that all pleasurable experiences share some common felt quality. There are two types of felt quality theories: the *hedonic tone theory* and the *distinctive feeling view*. It is important to understand the differences between the two theories. I will start with the latter.

The distinctive feeling view holds that pleasure is a distinct, common aspect of experiences that we call pleasurable. Pleasurable experiences, on this view, are those that give rise to the distinct feeling of pleasure. The distinctive feeling view suffers from two significant problems, both noted by Alston. First, Alston argues that if pleasure were a distinctive feeling, it would become distracting. During a pleasurable experience one would likely become focused on the distinctive pleasurable feeling and end up incapable of continuing the activity. This would amount to something akin to the paradox of happiness—try to be happy and you will likely fail; try to feel the distinctive feeling of pleasure and it will likely stop. If the distinctive feeling view were right, then we would frequently stop feeling pleasure because we would become focused on the distinctive feeling of pleasure. The distraction would be damning. But, this does not happen, or so Alston thinks. Hence, the distinctive feeling view must be wrong.

As a second criticism, Alston argues that the distinctive feeling view suffers from a variant of the heterogeneity problem, namely, if the feeling is so distinctive, why can’t we isolate it. If the theory is correct, we ought to be able to identify a distinct, common feeling across a range of different experiences. But we cannot. Hence the distinctive feeling view lacks phenomenological support.

Although I propose a felt quality theory of pleasure, I do not want to defend the distinctive feeling view. To give it a traditional label, I propose what—following C. D. Broad—might be called a “hedonic tone” theory of pleasure, about which the only compelling criticism is the heterogeneity problem.²⁴ Alston’s damning criticisms of the distinctive feeling view are inapplicable to the hedonic tone versions of felt quality theories: The feels good theory avoids both the distraction and isolation problems that afflict the distinctive feeling view.

Paul, Fred D. Miller, and Jeffrey Paul (Cambridge UP, 1992), pp. 172-3.

²⁴ C. D. Broad, *Five Types of Ethical Theory* (Littlefield, Adams and Co, 1959), pp. 228-230. Outside of Broad, I know of only one unambiguous, sustained defense of the hedonic tone theory of pleasure: Karl Dunker, “On Pleasure, Emotion, and Striving,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 1.4 (1941): 391-430. There are more defenses of general internalism about pleasure, for instance: G. E. Moore defends something like internalism in *Principia Ethica* (Dover, 2004), p. 12-3 and p. 78; Irwin Goldstein presents what might be an internalist view in “Hedonic Pluralism,” *Philosophical Studies* 48.1 (1985): 49-55; and Wayne Davis develops a form of internalism in “Pleasure and Happiness” *Philosophical Studies* 39 (1981): 305-317.

The feels good theory does not suffer from the distraction problem, since it does not propose that pleasure is a separate, distinct aspect of a sensation. Rather, the feels good theory holds that the sensation simply feels good overall. Hence, there is nothing to be distracted by. The experience overall has a tone that cannot be cleanly extracted or focused on apart from the experience itself. This is why it is so difficult to describe and why it does not distract from the overall experience. And since the pleasure is not distinct from the experience, there is no isolation problem. It is expected that one cannot isolate the good feeling from the experience if the two are intimately connected.

Hence, the feels good theory of pleasure does not suffer from the problems of the distinctive feeling theory. The putative lack of phenomenological support is the only pressing problem for the view. But this too can be put aside.

5 The Heterogeneity Problem Reconsidered

There are three reasons to think that the heterogeneity problem is not a genuine problem, and that no compelling objections remain to the hedonic tone theory. First, 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.

Our only hope is to look for an aspect as we go and to compare it to what little remains from the past. And here I think the results indicate that the heterogeneity problem lacks a clear impetus. Each time I test, pleasurable experiences do indeed feel good. I am not trying to have my cake and eat it too; merely, it seems that our memories are good enough to confirm this general observation, but not enough to be much more specific.

Second, the heterogeneity problem overstates the significance of our inability to express what it is like to feel pleasure. I suspect that this is largely a result of the paucity of our memories. Regardless, any request for us to describe the common aspects of pleasurable experiences results in befuddlement. Philosophers have assumed that our inability to express the similarity with any degree of explicitness supports the phenomenological claim that there must not be any similarity. But this is too hasty; befuddlement is not unique to pleasure. Just try to say what it is like to taste or to smell. When we describe what it is like to taste a particular food, we often have no recourse but comparison: "It tastes like chicken." When asked what it is like to taste, in general, one has even less to say.²⁵ But this does not mean that there is nothing it is like to taste, that

²⁵ David Sobel replies that although we can become more articulate about particular

there is no similarity in taste experiences except for our desire to keep chewing.

Third, the supposed strength of the heterogeneity problem is a product of bringing in too much with the phrase “pleased that.” There are many things about which one might say that they are “pleased”, but, if questioned, one would not describe the experience as pleasurable. Retrospectively, we might be glad (“pleased”) that something is the case, but this should not be taken to suggest that we are currently feeling pleasure.²⁶ Our language is somewhat misleading here: We say that we are pleased when we do not feel pleasure. Nevertheless, there are many cases of indisputable attitudinal pleasure that occur at the time when we learn that something good has taken place. These are unambiguous pleasures; they feel good. These are the cases where someone asks “Did that make you feel good?” and we say yes. Confusing non-pleasures with genuine pleasures has led philosophers to conclude that we need separate theories of attitudinal and sensory pleasure.²⁷ And trying to incorporate all cases where we say that we are “pleased that” such and such is the case creates false difficulties for felt quality theories. It is no surprise that we are unable to locate a common pleasurable feeling between pleasurable and non-pleasurable experiences.

Although we cannot isolate a distinctive feeling of pleasure, and we are laughably inarticulate when it comes to describing what it is like to feel pleasure, the situation is no different from other types of experiences. Rather than supporting the case against felt quality theories, as almost everyone has supposed, the phenomenology of pleasurable experiences provides support. When one reflects on various, recent pleasurable experiences of different sizes and shapes, there is indeed something common. It is not the experience of simply having an intrinsic desire; rather, it is the experience of something feeling good. I have tried to capture this commonality by metaphorical descriptions, noting the warm glow, the enticing hum of pleasure. But I am afraid that I cannot do the experience of pleasure justice: Neither my tongue nor my memory is up to the task.

tastes we cannot about pleasure. I think that this response relies on a disanalogy. Pleasure is to experience as taste is to eating. We can get more articulate about a particular eating experience or a pleasurable experience, but not taste or pleasure in general. See: David Sobel, “Varieties of Hedonism,” *Journal of Social Philosophy* 33.2 (2002): 240-256; p.254, n.8 .

²⁶ Goldstein makes a similar point in “Hedonic Pluralism,” p. 51.

²⁷ This mistake is the source of Feldman’s second question about pleasure—what is the relationship between attitudinal and sensory pleasure? See, Fred Feldman, “Two Questions about Pleasure.” If I am right, there is no essential difference between attitudinal and sensory pleasures. Similarly, Crisp argues that mere attitudes are not appropriate candidates for pleasure: *Reasons and the Good*, p.102, n. 22. Although she does not reject the distinction, Mason concurs in “The Nature of Pleasure”, p. 382, 384, and 386. For a reply, see: Fred Feldman, “Reply to Elinor Mason and Alastair Norcross,” *Utilitas* 19.3 (2007): 308-406. Wayne Davis makes a relevant distinction between “making happy” and being “happy that.” The latter, much like states about which we are “pleased that” are mere attitudes. They aren’t experiences. Davis, “Pleasure and Happiness,” pp. 306-8.

6 Objections

I. Too Narrow

One may concede that the concept of something “feeling good” applies fairly well to sensory pleasures, but object that it does not clearly apply to intellectual pleasures. Consider a massage: The masseuse begins to work a new muscle and asks “Does that feel good?” We perfectly understand the question and know how to reply. But when we consider intellectual pleasures, it is not so clear. Imagine working on a crossword puzzle before bed. Your spouse turns to you and asks, “Does that feel good?” In this case, we would certainly be confused. But it seems that working crossword puzzles can indeed be pleasurable. If so, the feels good theory of pleasure is too narrow, since it does not account for these kinds of intellectual pleasures.²⁸

Working crossword puzzles does not always feel good, but this is because it is not always a pleasurable activity. However, sometimes working crossword puzzles does indeed feel good, or at least solving puzzles does. It feels good to solve a puzzle. It is the kind of feeling that can put a smile on your face. People have been known to jump up and down and even to go so far as to run through town naked after solving a tricky intellectual problem. But typically, experiences that we are engaged in, especially those that involve what Csikszentmihalyi calls “flow,” are those in which we do not have much reflective awareness.²⁹ To use sports jargon, during such experiences one enters “the zone.” Sometimes highly focused intellectual activities are equally engrossing. All such experiences are highly unmediated. Accordingly, it is somewhat unclear how to describe them. When pressed, it is not so clear that we would describe them as pleasurable at all. So I am not worried that engrossing experiences might not exactly feel good, because I do not think that we want to say that we are feeling pleasure during such experiences.

We might want to say that experiences such as working crossword puzzles are “pleasant” because on such occasions we are generally free from worry. In some sense, the absence of pain is pleasant. But it is not very pleasurable. It does not feel very good to merely be free from worry. A little, maybe, but not much. Our reluctance to say that these experiences feel good does not indicate a problem with my view, but simply that these experiences are not very pleasurable.

II. Phenomenal-less Pleasures

If the feels good theory of pleasure is correct, there are no pleasurable experiences that lack the phenomenal aspect of feeling good—the aspect that I

²⁸ I owe this objection to Chris Heathwood, who raised it in his commentary on my paper at the first annual Rocky Mountain Ethics Congress at the University of Colorado at Boulder, August 2008.

²⁹ Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* (Harper Perennial, 1990).

have described in various metaphors such as a warm hum. But one might object that it is perfectly coherent to imagine that one could feel pleasure without such a feeling. Imagine a mad neuroscientist of the future who has been trying for years to concoct a formula that will inhibit whatever mechanism it is that produces such a good feeling. Since such a potion would have little benefit and carry heavy risks, he is unable to get IRB approval for his experiments. So, he decides to experiment on himself. He gulps down a beaker of his potion and proceeds to test the results. It quickly becomes clear that he has succeeded and that decades of effort have finally paid off. He feels tremendous pleasure in his accomplishment. That is he feels intellectual pleasure without the experience feeling good.³⁰

This story appears to show that the feels good theory is wrong, or at least too narrow. Perhaps the feels good theory might work as an account of sensory pleasure, but as the example purports to show, it cannot account for intellectual pleasures as well. However, I think that the counterexample shows no such limitation, since it is incoherent. It is inconceivable that the scientist could feel pleasure if he was incapable of having an experience that feels good. Through the ahedonic action of his serum he would be deprived of such experiences, thereby left with a flat, dull phenomenology. If it did not feel good, why would he smile his work to see? It does not beg the question to say that it is as incomprehensible to think that the scientist could feel any more joy than a robot.³¹ We would hear no cries of Eureka from this mad doctor.

III. The Value of Pleasure

One might object to internalist theories of pleasure on the grounds that such theories have the odd implication that sometimes pleasure is not intrinsically good. It seems plausible that an experience is of no value to a person if she has no interest in it, does not care about getting, and does not want to be getting it. But internalist theories of pleasure imply that one could experience pleasure and care nothing for it, perhaps not even want to be getting it. If so, these episodes of pleasure would have no value for the person. But this is absurd. Certainly experiencing pleasure is intrinsically valuable for a person. The intuition that pleasure is intrinsically value is stronger than the support for internalism, so we should reject internalism.

In response, I will briefly make two comments. First, it is not entirely clear to me that pleasure does always have intrinsic value for a person. In fact, I am less confident in the claim than that all pleasurable experiences feel good. But, I will not take issue with the claim. This is simply too big of a fish to fry here. It would be far out of scope to attempt to settle the issue around the intrinsic value of pleasure.³²

³⁰ Fred Feldman develops a similar, wonderful example in *Pleasure and the Good Life*, pp. 64-5.

³¹ I assume that there are qualia.

³² For more on the issue, see: Fred Feldman, "On the Intrinsic Value of Pleasures," *Ethics* 107 (1997): 448-466.

So, as a second avenue of reply, I might reject the claim that one must desire an experience in order for it to be intrinsically valuable. I take it that a reluctant drug addict may desire not to have an experience, but that it still might be intrinsically value. If it was pleasurable, then on my view, it felt good to them. Why wouldn't that be intrinsically valuable? Sure, it might also be extrinsically bad in that it destroys her liver and furthers her addiction. But that does not mean that it is not also intrinsically good.

Perhaps drug addicts are not the most forceful cases for the objection. I take it that a reluctant heroine addict takes great interest in the pleasure. I suppose we need an example where someone is indifferent to the pleasure. But these cases are hard to fathom for two reasons. First, it is hard to be indifferent to any experience of much magnitude. It is not clear to me that a feeling could be pleasurable without our noticing it. How could an experience feel good without our being aware of it? And if one is aware of an experience that feels good, then typically one wants it. It would be strange not to; strange, but not incoherent. In those cases, maybe it does, maybe it does not have intrinsic value. My intuitions break down in such strange cases. Due to limitation of scope, I cannot explore this problem further: Both of the assumptions behind the objection are far too complicated to further address here.

IV. Changing Tastes

Many people experience a change of taste as they get older. It is common for people to hate Brussels sprouts in childhood, but come to love them as adults. It is equally common that tastes diverge radically on such things as vegemite and fish paste. Annually, villagers along the seashore in Thailand mash piles of decaying fish into a fragrant paste. They relish the pungent odor and ripe taste that would turn the stomach of most of the inhabitants of the rest of the world. But certainly, the odiferous paste tastes no different to the Thai than it does to the British. People in Thailand are not born with a predilection for rotten-fish. Hence, it must be something external to the experience of eating fish paste that accounts for the pleasure that the Thai take from its consumption. The objection concludes: Externalist theories, such as the motivational theory of pleasure, are far better suited to explain such phenomena than internalist theories such as the feels good theory.³³

In reply, I think that we should first think more carefully about the examples. It is not clear that we have any reason to think that the same experience can be pleasurable on some occasions but not on others, or pleasurable to some people but not to others. Consider the friends and foes of fish-paste: It is most plausible to think that those who like fish paste and those who do not are having different experiences. Those who like it, who take pleasure in eating the revolting muck, have a different experience from those

³³ I thank Chris Heathwood for forcing me to clarify my form of internalism about pleasure.

who do not: The former enjoy a savory snack, but the latter encounter waves of gut-churning nausea. Their experiences are very different. Like many people, I now love Brussels sprouts, but I hated them as a child. I cannot remember exactly how Brussels sprouts tasted back then, but the overall taste experience is definitely different. And since the specific taste is not isolatable from the overall taste or eating experience, the experience is phenomenally very different from what it was when I was a child. The intrinsic qualities of the experience of eating Brussels sprouts are different for me than they were when I was a child.

Rather than posing a problem for internalist theories of pleasure, the Problem of Changing Tastes is actually a much bigger problem for externalists. The externalist suggests that an identical sensation can be pleasurable on one occasion and not on another. If so, it cannot be something internal to the feeling that makes it pleasurable. But, why we must ask, is it pleasurable on one occasion and not on the other? If the externalist cannot appeal to aspects of the experience that make it pleasurable to account for our desire, then the theory is absurd. This is because if the externalist cannot appeal to features of the experience, then she has to throw up her hands and appeal to mystery. But, again, there is nothing mysterious about why we desire the experience of an orgasm: it feels very good. And neither is it mysterious why some people enjoy eating Brussels sprouts: they taste good.

The *experience* of eating Brussels sprouts used to be far different for me than it is now.³⁴ Depending on how narrowly we draw the borders around the sensation, it is not the same. They taste delicious now. I find them sweet, savory, and pleasantly pungent. They are especially delicious when simply roasted with a bit of olive oil, salt, and pepper. But, as far as I can remember, they used to taste just awful—bitter and skunky. I do not owe an account of the physiology of taste to appeal to an obvious experiential difference. Regardless of the physiology, the experience is different. It seems incoherent to think that the same experience could be pleasurable and not pleasurable on different occasions. At least no one has given us any reason to think otherwise.³⁵

Although the feels good theory holds that what makes something pleasurable is something about the experience, the intrinsic / extrinsic distinction is far more difficult to draw than the objection assumes, since attitudes and experiences can influence each other. I reject the motivational theory of pleasure because I do not think that our attitudes are conceptually connected to the pleasantness of an experience, but I do think that attitudes are frequently causally connected. Our attitudes can clearly have a causal impact on the pleasantness of experiences. And vice versa—our experiences can affect our

³⁴ Stuart Rachels makes a similar claim in "Six Theses about Pleasure," p. 200.

³⁵ As for the analog with pain, I am not convinced that there are putatively painless pains. We should not be so trusting of the phenomenal reports of people high on drugs. For further criticism, see Rachels, "Six Theses about Pleasure," p. 199. Taking the opposite approach: Bengtsson argues that there is a dissimilarity between pleasure and pain: There are non-bothering pains, but no non-appealing pleasures. It would take me too far afield to deal with this issue here.

attitudes. It is plausible to think that someone eating a soft egg and the same person eating the same egg, but knowing that it was harvested from a dead hen before it was laid, would have different taste experiences—that is, if they were the least bit squeamish. Similarly, the taste or eating experience of a starving prisoner will change if he learns that he is eating his roasted child.

What makes something pleasurable, on my view, is the way the experience feels. The experience is one of pleasure, if and only if it feels good. However, our attitudes can alter our experiences. Pre-existing attitudes can dispose us to have different responses. And attitudes formed during an experience can alter the experience as it progresses. So, the feels good theory is a form of internalism about pleasure. But I deny what we might call “sensory/attitudinal phenomenal discreteness.” This does not reduce the feels good theory to the motivational theory, since the feels good theory holds that what makes an experience pleasurable is the way it feels, not simply an attitude one adopts toward the experience. Having an attitude can influence the experience, but it is the experience and not the attitude that counts according to the feels good theory.

7 Conclusion

The motivational theory of pleasure is not only counterintuitive; the reduction of pleasure to desire fails. Having a contemporaneous intrinsic desire for a sensation is not sufficient for an experience to be pleasurable. It is coherent to think that we can and do desire non-pleasures, as the case of Mesmeretes shows. In fact, it is plausible that there are many such cases involving painful art. Further the motivational theory proposes a radical revision to our concept of pleasure, a revision that makes it impossible to non-vacuously explain motivation by recourse to pleasure. More significantly, the externalist has great difficulty in accounting for what make some feelings more intensely pleasurable than others. Given these problems there is good reason to reject the theory, especially since it lacks a genuine impetus.

I have tried to show that the heterogeneity problem is not a genuine problem for the more intuitive, felt quality theories of pleasure. The feels good theory of pleasure escapes the difficulties of the distinctive feeling view and sits on the right side of the Euthyphro-style problem. Rather than lack of phenomenological support, the feels good theory suffers primarily from the paucity of our experiential memory and our inarticulateness when it comes to phenomenal descriptions.