

BECAUSE IT FEELS GOOD

A Hedonistic Theory of Intrinsic Value



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Because It Feels Good:
A Hedonistic Theory of Intrinsic Value

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To my parents,
for letting me think for myself

Intense, long, certain, speedy, fruitful, pure—
Such marks in *pleasures* and *pains* endure
Such pleasures seek if *private* be thy end:
If it be *public*, wide let them *extend*.
Such *pains* avoid, whichever be thy view:
If pains *must* come, let them *extend* to few.

– Jeremy Bentham

Memory verse
Principles of Morals and Legislation
Chap. IV, Note 1

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Preface

What things are worth having, not only as a means to promote a further good, but as goods in and of themselves? Hedonism is the theory that only one thing is good in and of itself: pleasure (Greek: *hēdonē*); and that only one thing is bad in and of itself: pain. Hedonists need not deny that things such as knowledge, friendship, honor, health, and justice are genuine goods. The only thing hedonists must deny is that these are goods in and of themselves. According to hedonism, these—and everything else worth having—are good only insofar as, and in that, they help promote pleasure and avert pain.

A bold and sweeping theory, hedonism is controversial, and several forceful arguments have been launched against it. Most famous, perhaps, are Robert Nozick's Experience Machine thought experiment, G. E. Moore's Open Question Argument, and the Paradox of Hedonism. Charged with being simplistic, with yielding too radical implications, and sometimes even with being inconsistent—thus purportedly failing even the most basic success criterion for a philosophical theory—hedonism is unpopular. In Ben Bradley's words: "[I]f a philosopher [today] is asked to point out examples of truths that philosophers have conclusively established, the first would probably be that justified true belief is insufficient for knowledge; the second that hedonism is false."¹

In this work I suggest that the rejection of hedonism is rushed. I make the case that the arguments against hedonism can be met, and that there are strong, and largely overlooked, positive arguments that count in its favor.

I would, of course, love to see my arguments convert even the most resilient opponent. Realistically, however, where an argument takes a reader

¹ Ben Bradley, *Well-Being and Death* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), xiv.

depends on where that reader starts out. For my close intellectual neighbors, such as desire satisfactionists, I hope to make a good case for endorsing hedonism. For the ones further away, I hope at least to make it clear that hedonism is a theory worthy of consideration.

As it is a doctoral dissertation, this is at times a technical work. I have tried, however, to keep technicalities to a minimum, to carefully introduce the terms that I use, and to make the text readable not only to academic philosophers, but also to researchers working in other fields. Philosophy is a general area of inquiry and, I hope, an area of general interest. As such, if the subject becomes insulated, an important part of its purpose is not fulfilled. The problem of what (if anything) is good in and of itself, moreover, is a perennial one, and a problem of interest not only to people working in philosophy departments. I hope my argument will be accessible, for instance, to economists, psychologists, and social scientists working in the emerging field of “happiness research,” and to intelligent laypeople with a serious interest in ethical theory. My aim has been to write as accessibly I can without sacrificing philosophical rigor.

This work is a collection of six self-standing essays and a substantial introduction. Jointly, the essays constitute an argument for hedonism. Two of the essays have been through peer-review: Essay 1, “The Unity and Commensurability of Pleasures and Pains,” is forthcoming in *Philosophia*; Essay 6 (appendix) has been published in *Reason Papers*. How the six essays relate, and how they jointly constitute an argument for hedonism, is explained in detail in the introduction. The introduction, I should add, contains the most technical issues, and non-philosophers should feel free to skip sections 3.2 and 3.3.

This work is the result of an intellectual journey, for had you asked me five years ago, I would have joined the majority in saying that hedonism is almost certainly wrong. Rather than being a hedonist, I held that the process of *living* is an end in itself, and that the value of pleasure lies in its being one of the many things that are constitutive of a good life. In the appendix essay (“Is Life the Ultimate Value?”) I discuss such a view in detail. For readers sympathetic to this view, I recommend starting with the appendix. For the rest, consider it optional reading at the end.

It takes more than a doctoral candidate to write a dissertation. I am grateful to the Faculty of Humanities at University of Oslo, which has given me a generous fellowship and has entrusted me to work on something as broad and controversial as a defense of hedonism. Thanks are also due to my advisers, Panos Dimas and Roger Crisp. They have not only helped improve this work

with their unfailingly thoughtful comments, but have also—one comment at the time—influenced the way I view and do philosophy. For that I am grateful.

Luckily for me, my advisers are favorably located in space: Panos in Athens, Roger in Oxford. I would like to thank Panos and the Norwegian Institute at Athens, and Roger and University of Oxford/Oxford Uehiro Centre for Practical Ethics, for the months that I have been welcome to stay at each fine place. Athens and Oxford are inspiring cities, and the latter is one of the few where a hedonist will occasionally bump into a fellow believer.

Most of the work has been done at University of Oslo, and this has also been a pleasure. When I started my doctoral studies in early 2010, I wondered if the reason why not more academic philosophers are hedonists could be that wise hedonists do not become academic philosophers. A supportive environment can make academic work joyful, however, and I would especially like to thank three of my fellow doctoral candidates, Hedda Hassel Mørch, Mathias Sagdahl, and Jacob Kristensen, for discussions that have made this work better and the process of writing it more fun. Outside of my department, I am grateful for comments and suggestions from Darryl Wright, Bill Glod, Elijah L. Armstrong, Mara Constantine, Martin Larsson, Morten Magelssen, Aksel Braanen Sterri, and Sascha Settegast. I would also like to thank Irfan Khawaja and Carrie-Ann Biondi for their diligent work on my appendix paper before it was published in *Reason Papers* – an excellent journal that they edit.

I have discussed value theory with more people than I can list. I would like, however, to single out and explicitly thank Alexander R. Cohen, David Pearce, and Ivar Labukt. Ivar, in particular, has been important to the development of my views. What I call the “cluster challenge” in Essay 2 is a variant of a point that is hinted to by J.S. Mill, T.L.S. Sprigge, and Roger Crisp, but that has been worked out in considerable detail and made into a forceful argument by Ivar. My views differ from his in some respects, but without his work and our discussions, Essay 2 would not have looked the way it does.

One learns a lot while writing a dissertation. One of things I have learned is that when authors use their prefaces to thank their family and close friends for their patience during the writing process, they do so not just to be polite. They do so because writing takes a lot of time and energy, and easily drains resources from other areas of life. For this reason, among several, I owe a heartfelt thanks Thomas M. Johanson, who has been an unfailing source of support, encouragement, and intellectual stimulation.

Oslo, Norway

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Introduction

1. The Problem of Intrinsic Value

Many things seem to be valuable, such as friendships, justice, prosperity, enjoyment, freedom, and knowledge. These seem to be *good* things and things *worthy of pursuit*. They seem better and more worthy of pursuit, at least, than do their opposites: enmity, injustice, poverty, suffering, slavery, and ignorance. A life filled with the former, it seems, will tend to be a *good* life, while a life filled with the latter will tend to be a *bad* life—or a *worse* life, at least, all else kept equal.

The things we consider valuable matter to us. Our values guide our choices and actions, and give our lives meaning and direction. Rather than being a mere peripheral matter, our values are as near and dear to us as anything.

Because of their central role in human lives, most of the humanities and social sciences are concerned with values in some respect. Literary theorists might study Hamlet's or Faust's values, or the ways in which Jane Austen's values are expressed in her novels. Sociologists and social psychologists might study how we absorb values from family and friends. Historians might study how Christian values spread in the Roman Empire.

The philosophical study of value is distinguished from other academic approaches in that it is concerned, not with the various values that people held and transmitted at various times and in various places, but with the phenomenon of value *as such*. What does this involve?

I take the most fundamental question in philosophical value theory to be this: Is value just a descriptive, psychological phenomenon or is the fact that we value certain things a response to value facts that in some sense exist independently of our evaluative practices?

If the former is correct, there might well be psychological, historical, and literary facts about the things we value and about how our evaluative practices work. There might not, however, be facts about what things *are really valuable* and *should be valued*. Only on the latter view are there such facts. On the latter view, our evaluative practices do not form a self-contained whole. Rather, an adherent of this view would say, when we talk about values, when we value things, and when we transmit values, we do so at least in part because we live in a world where some things are really valuable. Let us call the former view value anti-realism and the latter view value realism.

Value anti-realism is appealingly simple and naturalistic. It might also, however, be *appallingly* simple and naturalistic, for if we return to the values discussed above—friendship, justice, prosperity, enjoyment, freedom, and knowledge—it seems that these are genuinely good and that we should value them precisely because they are good.¹ Our evaluative practices seem to be responses to their goodness. Consequently, if we met someone who said that what is good is enmity, injustice, poverty, suffering, slavery, and ignorance—and, subsequently, that these are things we should strive to promote—we would think that they are mad or, at least, radically mistaken. They would be mistaken, we think, because those things are bad, they make the world worse, and we should struggle to avoid them. Such a difference, we would think, is not at all a matter of taste, but a matter of fact.

If value anti-realism is true, then philosophical value theory—at least as it is traditionally construed—does not get off the ground. On the anti-realist view, psychology, history, and sociology—perhaps in cooperation with certain natural sciences, such as neuroscience—would in theory be able to say everything there is to say about values. There would be no distinct room left for philosophy except perhaps to serve a role in clarifying conceptual issues (and to show that value realism is false).

If value realism is true, on the other hand—and values do exist in some sense independently of our evaluative practices—a long line of distinctively philosophical questions arise. What is value? How do values fit into the material world? What types of values are there and how do they relate to each other? By what means do we gain knowledge of the fact that something is valuable? How can value claims be justified?²

¹ I use the terms “good” and “valuable” as synonyms, and shall do the same with “bad” and “disvaluable.”

² If one struggles with the distinction between realism and anti-realism about value, it might help to observe the parallels between this distinction and the distinction between realism and

Several of these questions will be touched on over the course of this work. None of them, however, is the main concern. The main concern is the question of *what* is valuable, and in particular, what is *intrinsically* valuable—and *why*.

What does it mean that something is intrinsically valuable? To get an initial grip on the notion of intrinsic value, let us return to the commonly held values of friendship, justice, prosperity, enjoyment, freedom, and knowledge. When we examine these, we notice that at least some of them seem to be valuable, not for their own sake, but for the sake of contributing to something else. Take prosperity. Though we genuinely value prosperity, we seem to value it not merely so as to be prosperous, but so as to achieve something further, such as steady access to food, drink, and clothes. Were it not for the food, drink, and clothes—and the other things that prosperity brings about, such as transportation, medicines, and homes—a great deal, if not all, of the value of prosperity would be lost. Food, drink, and clothes, moreover, do not seem to be ends in themselves either. Though they are ends of prosperity, they are also—from another perspective—means to avoid hunger, thirst, and cold. Furthermore, avoiding hunger, thirst, and cold seems to be a means to yet another end: remaining in good health.

Where does the chain of values end? It seems that the chain must end somewhere, for though some values can be values by virtue of being means to or constituent parts of further values, not all values can be values of this kind. If they were, all values would be values only insofar as they contribute to something further, in a never-ending regress. In order to get a chain of values off the ground, it seems that something will have to be valuable by virtue of itself, not by virtue of anything further to which it contributes. Aristotle put this point as follows in the *Nicomachean Ethics*:

anti-realism about gods. If one is an anti-realist about gods (i.e. an atheist) one sees religious practices such as worship and sacraments as historical, sociological, and psychological phenomena. As such, they are properly (and in theory, exhaustively) studied by history, sociology, and psychology, perhaps in cooperation with certain other general sciences. If one is a realist about god or gods (i.e. a theist), by contrast, one views religious practices as more or less proper responses to something external, namely to one or more gods. On such a view, there is room for a distinct science that studies also that external thing: theology. Similarly, on the value realist view, values are something external to our evaluative practices, and as such, there is room for a distinct science that studies value as such: substantive philosophical value theory.

[T]hings achievable by action have some end that we wish for because of itself, and because of which we wish for the other things, . . . we do not choose everything because of something else—for if we do, it will go on without limit, so that desire will prove to be empty and futile.³

David Hume put it like this in *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*:

Ask a man *why he uses exercise*; he will answer, *because he desires to keep his health*. If you then enquire, *why he desires health*, he will readily reply, *because sickness is painful*. If you push your enquiries farther, and desire a reason *why he hates pain*, it is impossible he can ever give any. This is an ultimate end, and is never referred to any other object.

Perhaps to your second question, *why he desires health*, he may also reply, that *it is necessary for the exercise of his calling*. If you ask, *why he is anxious on that head*, he will answer, *because he desires to get money*. If you demand *Why? It is the instrument of pleasure*, says he. And beyond this it is an absurdity to ask for a reason. It is impossible there can be a progress *in infinitum*; and that one thing can always be a reason why another is desired. Something must be desirable on its own account[.]⁴

The subject of Hume's discussion is desires, not values, but Hume still provides a nice illustration of the notion of intrinsic value. I will elaborate considerably more on this notion below, but I hope for now that it is made clear enough to be applied.

What is intrinsically valuable? Eudaeonists of various stripes argue that such value can be found in developing oneself to the fullest or in cultivating one's character and one's virtues. Desire satisfactionists, on their part, propose that it is intrinsically valuable to have one's desires satisfied; sentimentalists suggest that intrinsic value is found in acting in accordance with one's sentiments; and hedonists suggest that intrinsic value is found only in pleasure. In contrast to all of the above, pluralists argue that there are several things that are worth having for their own sake, without any of these being reducible to one supreme value; perhaps pleasure, knowledge, friendship, and virtue are all

³ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. by Terence Irwin, 2nd ed. (Indianapolis, Ind.: Hackett Publishers, 1999), 1094a18–21.

⁴ David Hume, *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006), Appendix 1, §18.

intrinsically valuable. At least one contemporary philosopher argues that *everything* is intrinsically valuable, albeit to different degrees.⁵

My aim in this dissertation is to make the case for a hedonistic theory of intrinsic value. On this view, pleasure is intrinsically valuable and pain is intrinsically disvaluable, and everything else that is valuable or disvaluable is so exclusively by virtue of its contributory relationship to pleasure and pain.

How can we justify holding one theory of intrinsic value rather than another? This is a difficult question, because it is not clear how we must proceed to justify our views on what is intrinsically valuable. When we justify our view that something is *instrumentally* valuable (such as prosperity), we do so by showing what it contributes to—for example, to important goods such as food and medicine. This is a satisfactory justification for an instrumental value. It is not a satisfactory justification for an intrinsic value, however, since an intrinsic value—being truly intrinsic—is not valuable in virtue of anything further to which it contributes. If it were, the value would not be intrinsic, and we would merely move the problem one step ahead in the regress.

Just as examining instrumental relations seems to be of little help in determining what is intrinsically valuable, there is not much more help to be found in the social and natural sciences either. Examining what things people happen to value might give us a clue about where to look, but it will not provide us with sufficient justification for a theory of intrinsic value. After all, depending on where people are born and raised, they value widely different things and many hold contradictory views on value. Neither is it of much help to put someone in an MRI or CAT scanner and ask questions about values. Doing so might tell us something about how we reason about values and make value judgments, but it seems puzzling how brain areas lighting up in a brain scan could give us information about what things in the world (if any at all) are worth having for their own sake.

As such, our ordinary way of reasoning about values seems to break down when we reach the issue of intrinsic value. Luckily, however, the breakdown of ordinary reasoning is not where philosophy ends. Rather, it is where philosophy begins, and in this work I present a number of arguments for why we should favor hedonism over competing theories. As will become clear, I happen to believe that philosophical reasoning is continuous with scientific reasoning, and that empirical findings are relevant to arguments about intrinsic value.

⁵ Scott A. Davison, *On The Intrinsic Value of Everything* (New York: Continuum, 2012).

Before I sketch the particular ways in which I will argue, I will start by tracing the long lines of the history of the view that I defend. Although hedonism is presently unpopular, it has played a distinguished role in the history of philosophy. It was, for instance, a central theory of dispute in Ancient Greece and the default view among British and French philosophers in the 18th and 19th Century. Curiously, however, no one to date has written an overview of the history of hedonism. I shall write a brief version of this history. I shall do so, however, not merely in order to write history for history's sake, but in order to introduce the topic and to bring the reader up to date on current debate before I present my own arguments.

2. Hedonism in the History of Philosophy

2.1. *Early Hedonism*

Where does the history of hedonism begin? The answer hinges, naturally, on how strict we are in our employment of the term “hedonism.” If we use hedonism in its popular sense, to mean a way of life where one seeks to promote pleasure and avoid pain, hedonism is very old, for pleasure and pain attract and repel us irrespective of our philosophical views. If we require something more, like philosophical reflection about good and bad—and the idea that pleasure and pain are the end points in matters of value—the oldest example of hedonism is arguably Cārvāka, an atheistic, materialistic, and hedonistic intellectual tradition in early Indian philosophy (5th–6th Century BC) of which we now only have fragments. Some of these fragments are poetical, and encourage us to enjoy the short time that we are given:

That the pleasure arising to man
from contact with sensible objects,
is to be relinquished because accompanied by pain—
such is the reasoning of fools!⁶

While life is yours, live joyously
None can escape Death's searching eye
When once this frame of ours they burn
How shall it ever again return?⁷

⁶ Madhava-Acharya, *Sarva-Darsana-Sangraha* (London: Kegan Paul & Co., 1914), 4.

Other fragments are more practical:

By doing only what is considered practical, such as farming, attending to cattle, trading, and doing political and administrative work, a wise man should always strive to achieve pleasure in this world.⁸

In addition to the extant fragments, Cārvāka is discussed in the Vedas and the Upanishads. There its adherents are scorned for being *nāstika* (heretics): for ignoring gods and established customs, and for giving in to this-worldly pleasures.⁹

While hedonism was an undercurrent in early Indian thought, it became part of the mainstream in Ancient Greece. The poet Simonides wrote that not even the lives of the gods would be worth living were it not for pleasure; Pindar wrote that pleasure must never be squandered, for it is the best that we have.¹⁰ Hedonistic ideas also gained prominence among Greek philosophers. As Terence Irwin notes, the central question in Greek ethics is not whether happiness (*eudaemonia*) is the ultimate goal—so much is commonly taken for granted—but what happiness is and how we can achieve it.¹¹ Within this framework, hedonism is one of the central, possible answers, and J. C. B. Gosling and C. C. W. Taylor take a flirt with hedonism to be the rule, rather than the exception, among Greek ethicists.¹²

Democritus is the first hedonist among the Pre-Socratics. We have only fragments left from Democritus, but several of these are not to be misunderstood. “The best thing for a man,” he writes, “will be to live his life with as much joy as possible and as little grief,” for “joy and sorrow are the distinguishing mark of things beneficial and harmful.” Another fragment attributes to him that “what makes life really worthwhile is not one's possessions or any externals, but one's

⁷ Rangacarya, *The Sarva-Siddhanta Sangraha* (Madras: Madras Government Press, 1909), 6.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Amartya Sen, *The Argumentative Indian* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2005), 24.

¹⁰ Athenaeus, *The Deipnosophists* (Cambridge, Mass.: Loeb Classical Library, 1927), 512c-d.

¹¹ Terence Irwin, *The Development of Ethics: A Historical and Critical Study, Volume I: From Socrates to the Reformation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 22.

¹² J. C. B. Gosling and C. C. W. Taylor, *The Greeks on Pleasure* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), 6.

state of mind” and that only “fools live without enjoying life.”¹³

The first hedonist whose *arguments* we know is Aristippus of Cyrene, and even though all of Aristippus’ original writings have been lost, he is extensively quoted and discussed in Diogenes Laërtius’ *Lives of Eminent Philosophers* and Xenophon’s *Memorabilia*. According to Diogenes, Aristippus said the following about the relationship between pleasure and happiness:

Particular pleasure is desirable for its own sake, whereas happiness is desirable not for its own sake, but for the sake of particular pleasures. That pleasure is the end is proved by the fact that from our youth up we are instinctively attracted to it, and, when we obtain it, seek nothing more, and shun nothing so much as its opposite, pain. Pleasure is good even if it proceed from the most unseemly conduct ... For even if the action be irregular, still, at any rate, the resultant pleasure is desirable for its own sake and is good.¹⁴

Aristippus was controversial, and Diogenes explains that he was accused of defending a form of *Sybaritic* hedonism – a hedonism that places value only on the pleasures of the moment without regard for the future. Sybaritic hedonism got its name from the city-state Sybaris, where the inhabitants, according to Herodotus, celebrated and partied their way into their own demise.

Some antique texts can be interpreted in ways that support the accusation that Aristippus was a sybaritic hedonist. According to Atheneaus’ *Deipnosophistae*, Aristippus claimed that “past and future enjoyment had no relevance to himself, because the first no longer had being, the second had no being as yet, and was uncertain.”¹⁵ Claudius Aelianus, in *Varia Historia*, writes that Aristippus told people “to pay attention to each day as it comes, and similarly to that part of the day in which the individual's action or thought takes place. For he said that only the present is ours.”¹⁶ Accordingly, some interpret Aristippus as holding a very radical position: that we should be indifferent to the future and only live in and for the present. To make the case for such an interpretation, Terence Irwin argues that Aristippus was most likely skeptical of

¹³ Ibid., 27-37. See H. Diels and W. Kranz, *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker*, 6. utgave, (Berlin: Weidmann, 1951), 68 A 1, §§45, 170, 188, 189, 200.

¹⁴ Diogenes Laërtius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers* (Cambridge, Mass.: Loeb Classical Librar, 1925), II.88.

¹⁵ Athenaeus, *The Deipnosophists* (Cambridge, Mass.: Loeb Classical Library, 1927), XII, 544–588.

¹⁶ Aelian, *Historical Miscellany* (Cambridge, Mass.: Loeb Classical Library, 1997), 14.6.

the idea of a lasting self—skeptical, that is, of the idea that Aristippus today would be the same person as Aristippus tomorrow—and that this made him hold that we have no reason to be concerned with the future.¹⁷

It is also possible, however, to interpret Aristippus in a less radical manner, as holding that although pleasures only have value in the moments when they are experienced, we still have reason to be concerned with securing future pleasures and avoiding future pains, since we will be present also in the future and thus enjoy or suffer as a consequence of what we do today. Support for such an interpretation is given by the fact that Aristippus emphasized that “the things which are productive of certain pleasures are often of a painful nature, the very opposite of pleasure”¹⁸—which indicates that he took a diachronic perspective—and by a point he makes in the Atheneaus quote, namely that future pleasures are “uncertain.” If the future were irrelevant anyway, why would our level of certainty be of interest?

It is also important to keep in mind that Aristippus was an esteemed philosopher, not a charlatan. In *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, Diogenes Laërtius gives Aristippus as elaborate a treatment as he gives Aristotle, and Speusippus, who led the Academy after Plato’s death, wrote a now lost dialogue titled *Aristippus*. In the *Phaedo* (59c) Plato finds it worth noting that Aristippus could not be present.¹⁹

Aristippus founded a philosophical school, the Cyrenaic school, and this school continued to exist for three generations after its founder. Its thinkers departed from some of Aristippus’ ideas, but they all remained hedonists. Theodorus, who had been Aristippus’ disciple, claimed, according to Diogenes, that Aristippus was right when “he considered joy and grief to be the supreme good and evil,” but that he failed to see that the world is too brutal and unfriendly for pleasure to be achievable.²⁰ Diogenes says of Theodorus that “[f]riendship he rejected because it did not exist between the unwise nor between the wise; with the former, when the want is removed, the friendship disappears, whereas the wise are self-sufficient, and have no need of friends.”²¹ Theodorus purportedly claimed that “theft, adultery, and sacrilege would be allowable upon occasion, since none of these acts is by nature base, if once you have removed prejudice against them,” and that we should not be ashamed of indulging our passions

¹⁷ Terence Irwin, “Aristippus Against Happiness,” *The Monist*, Vol. 74, No. 1., 1991, 62-6.

¹⁸ Diogenes Laërtius, II. 90.

¹⁹ Aristippus, we are told, was in Aegina. Diogenes Laërtius, II.65, II.72., II.5.

²⁰ Ibid. II.98.

²¹ Ibid.

openly, for the beautiful exists to be enjoyed, and “he who uses anything for the purpose for which it is useful does no wrong.”²² Theodorus, it seems, was the stereotypical hedonist.

Hegesias, who was also a Cyrenaic, advocated a hedonism that was less stereotypical, but no less as dark-minded, than Theodorus’. According to Hegesias, pleasure is the sole ultimate good, but it cannot be achieved, for “the body is infected with much suffering, while the soul shares in the sufferings of the body and is a prey to disturbance, and fortune often disappoints. From all this it follows that happiness cannot be realized.” The best we can achieve is living free of pain. If this is the best, Hegesias admitted, it follows that “life and death are each desirable in turn.”²³ According to Cicero, Hegesias wrote a book, *Death by Starvation*, which led to a wave of suicides and was banned by king Ptolemy II Philadelphus.²⁴ The Cyrenaic school died with Hegesias.

2.2. Plato

Plato was of the same generation as Aristippus, and in several of his dialogues, he discusses hedonism in detail. Aristippus never takes part in the dialogues, but Socrates himself sometimes comes very close to defending hedonism. In the *Protagoras*, Socrates gives the following explanation of how we should proceed to determine what actions to take:

[Y]ou put the pleasures together and the pains together, both the near and the remote, on the balance scale, and then say which of the two is more. For if you weigh pleasant things against pleasant, the greater and the more must always be taken; if painful things against painful, the fewer and the smaller. And if you weigh pleasant things against painful, and the painful is exceeded by the pleasant—whether the near by the remote or the remote by the near—you have to perform that action in which the pleasant prevails; on the other hand, if the pleasant is exceeded by the painful, you have to refrain from doing that.²⁵

Gosling and Taylor interpret Socrates as advancing a purely hedonistic thesis: that pleasure is the sole good and pain is the sole evil, and therefore that pleasure

²² Ibid. II.99–100.

²³ Ibid. II.94.

²⁴ Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations* (New York: Harper & Brothers: 1888), I.34.

²⁵ Plato, *Protagoras*, trans. by Stanley Lombardo and Karen Bell, *Plato: Collected Works*, John M. Cooper (ed.), (Indianapolis, Ind./Cambridge, Mass.: Hackett, 1997), 356a-c.

and pain are the only things that ultimately matter in practical deliberation.²⁶ This might seem like a plausible interpretation, but it is also possible to interpret Socrates less hedonistically, as discussing how we should deliberate when *only* the pleasure and pain variables are taken into account. If this is the correct interpretation, Socrates needs not hold that pleasure is the only good and pain the only evil (i.e. hedonism); he can claim, more modestly, that pleasure is one of several goods and pain one of several evils (i.e. pluralism). Support for this is found in formulations where Socrates speaks of pleasure as “a good” rather than “the good” (i.e. 315e).

In *Gorgias*, which is a later dialogue, Socrates is less favorable in his treatment of hedonism. Socrates asks the hedonist Callicles the following: “Tell me now too whether you say that the pleasant and the good are the same or whether there is some pleasure that isn’t good.” Callicles answers: “I say they’re the same.”²⁷ Socrates says that he disagrees, claims that shameful things will follow from Callicles’ thesis (495b), and proceeds to present a line of arguments against hedonism.

First Socrates makes Callicles agree with him that nothing can be good and bad at the same time. Thereafter, Socrates points out that when we drink, we are pained (because we are thirsty) and at the same time we are pleased (because we drink). Accordingly, drinking can be pleasurable and painful at the same time. But if something can be pleasurable and painful at the same time, yet nothing can be good and bad at the same time, then the good cannot be identical with pleasure and the bad cannot be identical with pain (496a-497d). Second, Socrates argues that even though courage is good and cowardice is bad, a courageous man may suffer and a cowardly man may enjoy—and here again, he claims, hedonists would be forced to say that they are good and bad at the same time, which is impossible (497e-499b). Socrates also argues that certain pains can be beneficial and certain pleasures can be harmful, and that the medical craft is better than the craft of pastry baking even though pastry baking is the greater source of pleasure. Finally, Socrates argues that tragedies can be good even though they are painful and that orators can be bad even if they make their audience feel good (499d-500d). After Socrates’ tirade Callicles admits that he does not know how to respond.

Gosling and Taylor propose that Socrates in *Gorgias* can be interpreted as

²⁶ Gosling and Taylor, 50.

²⁷ Plato, *Gorgias*, trans. by Donald J. Zeyl, *Plato: Collected Works*, John M. Cooper (ed.), (Indianapolis, Ind./Cambridge, Mass.: Hackett Publishers, 1997), 495a.

arguing against only a shortsighted, sybaritic hedonism, and not against hedonism as such. This view has some plausibility, as most of what Socrates says it is possible for more sophisticated hedonists than Callicles to concede. Such an interpretation would also contribute to bringing *Protagoras* and *Gorgias* into less conflict, granted that Gosling and Taylor are right that Socrates defends hedonism in *Protagoras*. Gosling and Taylor's is a controversial interpretation, however, and at one point, Socrates explicitly says that he does not identify the good with pleasure (495d-e). Admittedly, it is possible to claim that this is also compatible with hedonism, for goodness can be different from pleasure but still attached to pleasure and pleasure only, and this is sufficient for hedonism to be true. It is doubtful, however, if Socrates would have formulated his view the way he does if he were in fact defending hedonism.

Irrespective of how we interpret *Protagoras* and *Gorgias*, however, Socrates argues explicitly against hedonism in the late dialogue *Philebus*. Here Philebus and Protarchus defend hedonism, and Socrates starts out by summarizing their disagreement:

Philebus holds that what is good for all creatures is to enjoy themselves, to be pleased and delighted, and whatever else goes together with that kind of thing. We contend that not these, but knowing, understanding, and remembering, and what belongs with them, right opinion and true calculations, are better than pleasure and more agreeable to all who can attain them.²⁸

In addition to arguing for the value of things other than pleasure, Socrates advances two new arguments against hedonism. The first argument is that pleasures are a manifold group of experiences that share no unifying characteristic (12c-d). If this is right, it is unclear whether they constitute a natural kind, and if so, it is unclear how hedonists can claim that pleasure, and pleasure only, is the good. Socrates also argues that if hedonism is correct, one should prefer to be an oyster rather than a human being granted that the oyster's life is slightly more pleasant—and this, Socrates claims, is obviously wrong (21a-d).

Even though Socrates (or at least the late Socrates) was no hedonist, he was a Greek ethicist, and even in the *Philebus* he claims early on, that “each of us will be trying to prove some possession or state of the soul to be the one that

²⁸ Plato, *Philebus*, trans. by Dorothea Frede, *Plato: Collected Works*, John M. Cooper (ed.) (Indianapolis, Ind./Cambridge, Mass.: Hackett Publishers, 1997), 11b-c.

can render life happy for all human beings.” (11d) Accordingly, Socrates does not discuss whether the goal of life is happiness; he discusses what happiness is and how we can best achieve it. Moreover, in the *Republic*, Socrates claims that the best life of all is a philosopher’s life—not only in the sense that this is the life most filled with wisdom, but also that it is the most pleasant of lives.²⁹ In fact, a philosopher’s life is 729 times (!) more pleasurable than the life of an unjust tyrant (587e). Admittedly, Socrates thinks that it is not solely by virtue of being the most pleasant life that the philosopher’s life is the best, as a hedonist would have claimed. In Socrates’ view, the explanation also goes the other way around: It is in part by virtue of being the best life that a philosopher’s life is the most pleasant.

2.3. Aristotle

Aristotle discusses hedonism at length in the *Nicomachean Ethics*.

Early in Book VII Aristotle claims that the arguments that philosophers have advanced so far have failed to disprove hedonism. Thereafter he defends the view that pleasures are ends in themselves (1153a10) and necessary parts of a good life (1153b18), that bodily pleasures are also good (1145a10-14), and that pleasures that do not bring with them pains are things of which one cannot get too much (1154b16-17). None of this need imply an endorsement of hedonism, but as Roslyn Weiss points out, Aristotle “comes dangerously close to committing himself to the position that pleasure is indeed the supreme good.”³⁰

In Book X, however, Aristotle argues against hedonism, and he criticizes the arguments for hedonism put forth by Eudoxus of Cnidus. Aristotle, who is our primary source for Eudoxus’ ethics, tells us that Eudoxus held that pleasure is the good (1172b9), and goes on to discuss four arguments that Eudoxus is supposed to have presented in defense of his view. Eudoxus’ first argument, according to Aristotle, is that

all [animals], both rational and nonrational, seek it [pleasure], and in everything, he [Eudoxus] says, what is choiceworthy is good, and what is most choiceworthy is supreme. The fact that all are drawn to the same thing [i.e. pleasure], indicates, in his view, that it is best for all, since each [kind of animal] finds its own good, just as it

²⁹ Plato, *Republic*, trans. by G.M.A. Grube and C.D.C. Reeve, *Plato: Collected Works*, John M. Cooper (ed.) (Indianapolis, Ind./Cambridge, Mass.: Hackett Publishers, 1997), 581e-583a.

³⁰ Roslyn Weiss, “Aristotle’s Criticism of Eudoxian Hedonism,” *Classical Philology*, Vol. 74, No. 3, 1979, 214.

finds its own nourishment; and what is good for all, what all aim at, is the good.
(1172b, 10-17)

In Aristotle's context, this is a weighty argument, for as Aristotle has conceded earlier in Book VII, "[t]he fact that all, both beasts and human beings, pursue pleasure is some sign of its being in some way the best good" (1153b25-26). Famously, the *Nicomachean Ethics* opens with the statement that "[e]very craft and every line of inquiry, and likewise every action and decision, seems to seek some good; that is why some people were right to describe the good as what everything seeks" (1094a, 1-4). It is interesting to note, moreover, that Aristotle does not argue against Eudoxus at this point. Instead of arguing, Aristotle writes that "These arguments of his were found credible because of his virtuous character, rather than on their own [merit]" (1172b16-19). Flattering as this might be, it is an *ad hominem*, and Aristotle fails to explain what is wrong with Eudoxus' first argument.

Eudoxus' second argument is an inversion of the first. Eudoxus, Aristotle explains, claims that pain is what everyone seeks to avoid, and since pain is the opposite of pleasure, this supports the theory that pleasure is that towards which everyone strives. This is also something that Aristotle earlier has conceded—"the contrary to that which is to be avoided, insofar as it is bad and to be avoided, is a good" (1153b3-4)—and again Aristotle does not explain what is wrong with Eudoxus' argument.

Eudoxus' third argument is that "when pleasure is added to any other good, to just or temperate action, for instance, it makes that good more choice worthy" (1172b24-26). Accordingly, pleasure must be good. Here Aristotle agrees, but points out that this need not show us that pleasure is the *sole* good, as hedonists hold, for the argument is compatible with pleasure being one of *several* goods. He also points out that a similar argument can be used against Eudoxus' own view, for we can imagine that everything—pleasure included—can be made better if, in addition to it, we have another good, such as justice or wisdom. If this is true, hedonism must be false, for "nothing can be added to the good to make it more choiceworthy" (1172b33-34). This is Aristotle's first substantial argument against Eudoxus.

Aristotle further argues that there are pleasures that we should not seek. He claims that "pleasures are choice worthy, but not if they come from [disgraceful] sources, just as wealth is desirable, but not if you have to betray

someone to get it, and health is desirable, but not if it requires you to eat anything and everything” (1173b25-27). Here Aristotle appeals to the common sense view that there are unworthy pleasures, and he claims that hedonism must contradict common sense in this respect. Finally Aristotle writes the following:

And no one would choose to live with a child's [level of] thought for his whole life, taking as much pleasure as possible in what pleases children, or to enjoy himself while doing some utterly shameful action, even if he would never suffer pain for it. Moreover, there are many things that we would be eager for even if they brought no pleasure, e.g. seeing, remembering, knowing, having the virtues. Even if pleasures necessarily follow from them, that does not matter, since we would choose them even if no pleasure resulted from them. It would seem clear, then, that pleasure is not the good ...” (1174a1-10)

Even though it becomes clear that Aristotle, in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, distances himself from hedonism, it is unclear if the work, in this respect, achieved its full purpose: The work is written to Aristotle's son, but in spite of his attacks on hedonism, Diogenes Laërtius can tell us that “Nicomachus, Aristotle's son, has said that he declares pleasure to be the good.”³¹

2.4. Epicurus

Epicurus is arguably the most famous ancient hedonist, and according to Eusebius and Diogenes, Epicurus got many of his ideas from Democritus, Aristippus, Theodorus, and Eudoxus.³² There are, however, aspects of Epicurus' ideas that make him original. First, Epicurus thought that ultimately, no argument is necessary to establish the value of pleasure. If we seek to argue for the value of pleasure by pointing, for example, to the fact that everyone strives to achieve it, we are weakening our case, for we argue for something obvious by means of something less obvious. According to Epicurus—this is Cicero's interpretation in *De Finibus*—we experience the goodness of pleasure and the badness of pain as directly as we experience the warmth of fire and the sweetness of honey.³³ Gosling and Taylor write that Epicurus thought that “the experience of pleasure is experience of its goodness,” and that “every perception involves being affected in one or other of these ways [pleasure or pain] and in such

³¹ Diogenes Laërtius, VIII.87-88.

³² Ibid., II.97, X.

³³ Cicero, *On Ends* (Cambridge, Mass.: Loeb Classical Library, 1914), I.IX.30.

perception a sentient being grasps the value or disvalue of being so affected.”³⁴

Epicurus is sometimes called a *negative* hedonist. A negative hedonist is one who, in some respect, holds that it is more important to minimize pain than to maximize pleasure. Epicurus writes in *Principal Doctrines* that “The amount of pleasure reaches its limit when all pain is removed. When pleasure is present, as long as it remains undisturbed, there is pain neither in body nor in mind.”³⁵

One possible interpretation of this is that Epicurus takes pleasure to be identical with the absence of pain. This seems puzzling, however, for a person who does not feel anything is in another mental state than a person who feels pleasure. It is possible, however, to interpret Epicurus’ differently. On one interpretation, Epicurus claims that human psychology is such that the absence of pain is positively pleasurable. Another (and compatible) interpretation is that our primary aim in life should be to free ourselves from pains, and that if we engage in strongly pleasurable activities, we will end up being pained by the negative consequences of our pursuit. We find support for such an interpretation in Epicurus’ letter to Menoeceus:

For it is not drinking bouts and continuous playing and enjoying boys and women, or consuming fish and the other dainties of an extravagant table, which produce the pleasant life, but sober calculation which searches out the reasons for every choice and avoidance and drives out the opinions which are the source of the greatest turmoil for men's souls.³⁶

According to Epicurus the best life is a plain and simple one where one’s well-being is not dependent on extravagant material goods:

Becoming accustomed to simple, not extravagant, ways of life makes one completely healthy, makes man unhesitant in the face of life’s necessary duties, puts us in a better condition for times of extravagance which occasionally come along, and makes us fearless in the face of chance.³⁷

Epicurus thus seems to deny neither that pleasures exist nor that they are good; he merely claims that to get the best life possible, what we need is the right mentality. If we have the right mentality, we can, even if we are poor, live more

³⁴ Gosling and Taylor, 347.

³⁵ Diogenes Laërtius, X.139.

³⁶ Ibid., 10.132

³⁷ Ibid., 10.131.

pleasant and less painful lives than wealthy emperors. If we lack it, all the power and wealth in the world cannot help us.

Being a full-fledged hedonist, Epicurus holds that the proper aim of every human undertaking—philosophizing included—is to avoid pain and, if possible, to secure pleasure. Although philosophizing can hardly free us from bodily pains, other than by reminding us that they will only be temporary, it can, in Epicurus' view, play a crucial role in freeing us from pains that originate in the mind. Philosophy can help us remove fears, and the fear that Epicurus takes to pain people the most—the fear of death—is a fear that, in Epicurus' view, can be demonstrated by philosophy to be groundless. Why is fear of death groundless? First, Epicurus claims that if we take hedonism to be true, then everything good and everything bad lies in sensation, and death is the end of sensation. Therefore death can neither be good nor bad, and what is neither good nor bad cannot be bad. Second, Epicurus argues that we are always outside the reach of death. The reason why is that as long as we are present, death does not exist in our lives, and when death is present, we are no longer here to suffer from it. Death, therefore, can never reach us, and what can never reach us we have no reason to fear.³⁸ Fear of death, which pains us so much, can be removed by philosophical reflection, and philosophy can therefore help us live tranquil, fearless lives. This underscores Epicurus' view that philosophizing—like any other human endeavor—is not an end in itself, but a means to secure pleasure and avoid pain.

2.5. Hedonism in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages

Epicurus' influence is vast. In antiquity, a large number of Epicurean societies were founded and here adherents of Epicurus' philosophy gathered to live peaceful and contemplative lives, as Epicurus himself sought to do in his garden in Athens. Amafinius, Philodemus, Colotes, Hermarchus, Metrodorus of Lampsacus and Zeno of Sidon were all Epicureans, and the devout follower Diogenes of Oenoanda made a stone inscription of Epicurus' works—amounting to over 25,000 words—in the city of Oenoanda in today's Libya. Through such popularization, Epicurus reached a wider audience than most philosophers do.

Epicurus did, however, also have a strong influence on fellow philosophers. Lucretius' *De Rerum Natura* is a poetic defense of Epicurus' philosophy, and Lucretius—acknowledging his admiration for Epicurus—wrote on the topic of his master's death that “even Epicurus passed when his life's way came to an end, he who with his genius far exceeded everyone else, just as the

³⁸ Ibid., X.124–126.

sun darkens the stars when it enters.”³⁹ For Lucretius, Epicurus is the savior. In addition to defending Epicurus’ philosophy, Lucretius supplies an additional argument for why we need not fear death. According to Lucretius, our condition after we are dead is just like our condition before we were born, and just as the time before we were born was not bad for us, neither is the time after we die.

De Rerum Natura was highly regarded by Cicero, Ovid, and Virgil, and as a result of reading Lucretius’ work, Virgil was an Epicurean in his youth. Later in life, however, he abandoned hedonism, and wrote the *Aeneid* as a critical response to *De Rerum Natura*.⁴⁰ Another criticism of hedonism is found in Plutarch’s *Against Colotes, Epicurus’ Disciple and Favorite*, where Plutarch attacks Epicurus for holding that rather than devoting one’s life to public affairs, one should withdraw from the feuds of social life and live in peace and tranquility with a select group of friends. Such a life, Plutarch argues, is not a virtuous life. A related criticism is found in Cicero’s *De Finibus*, which is a detailed discussion of the problem of what is ultimately valuable. The first two books of *De Finibus* deal with hedonism, and Cicero argues that no version of hedonism is compatible with human dignity. Men who fight for their country, Cicero claims, fight not because this brings them pleasure, but because of virtue; though such fights are obviously noble, hedonism cannot account for their nobility, and is therefore an impoverished doctrine.⁴¹

As Christianity became the dominant intellectual force in the Roman Empire, the criticisms of hedonism changed. Ambrose of Milan said the following to the Christian congregation in Vercelli in 396:

it is certain then that Adam, being deceived by the desire of pleasure, fell away from the commandment of God and from the enjoyment of grace. How then can pleasure recall us to paradise, seeing that it alone deprived us of it?⁴²

In addition to being theologically founded, the attacks on hedonism also became less sober. Clement of Alexandria writes in *Stromateis* that Epicurus advocated simple gratification of all bodily desires; St. Jerome claimed that Lucretius was

³⁹ Lucretius, *On the Nature of Things*, (Cambridge, Mass.: Loeb Classical Library/Harvard University Press, 1924), 3.1042–1044

⁴⁰ Stephen Greenblatt, *The Swerve: How the World Became Modern* (New York: Norton, 2011), 51–52.

⁴¹ Cicero, *On Ends* (Cambridge, Mass.: Loeb Classical Library/Harvard University Press, 1914), I.IX.

⁴² Ambrose of Milan, “Letter to Theodosius (LXIII),” *Letters* (Oxford: James Parker & Co, 1881), 356.

mad, and that every day, Epicurus ate until he vomited.⁴³ Arnobius, in the fourth century, wrote that if things are “as is laid down in the doctrine of Epicurus ... it is not only a very great mistake, but shows stupid blindness, to curb innate desires, to restrict your mode of life within narrow limits, not yield to your inclinations, and do what your passions have demanded and urged...”⁴⁴ In one sense, the harsh criticism of Epicurean hedonism is understandable, for though Christian culture, particularly Christian monasticism, was influenced by the Epicurean societies, Epicurus’ values were very different from Early Christian values: Epicurus recommends everything but praising God and obeying God’s laws, and upholds very different ideals than the suffering Jesus. Still the smearing of Epicurus is striking, and as Howard Jones writes, the Epicureans were accused of “swinish gluttony, drunkenness, fornication, adultery, homosexuality, sodomy, incest – Theophilus, Clement, Pseudo-Clement, Ambrose, Epiphanius, Peter Chrysologus, Filastrius, and Augustine each contributing a little to the list.”⁴⁵

It is worth noting, though, that Augustine has a more interesting relationship to Epicurean hedonism than do the rest of the church fathers. In his *Confessions*, Augustine writes:

And I discussed with my friends, Alypius and Nebridius, the nature of good and evil, maintaining that, in my judgment, Epicurus would have carried off the palm [i.e. been right] if I had not believed what Epicurus would not believe: that after death there remains a life for the soul, and places of recompense. And I demanded of them: ‘Suppose we are immortal and live in the enjoyment of perpetual bodily pleasure, and that without any fear of losing it—why, then, should we not be happy, or why should we search for anything else?’⁴⁶

In a letter to archbishop Nectarius of Constantinople he writes:

[contrary to the] opinion of the Epicureans ... the soul is not annihilated, but removes from its tenement, and continues in existence for a state of blessedness or

⁴³ Clement of Alexandria, “Miscellanies,” John Ferguson, *Clement of Alexandria* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1974), ii, 21; Greenblatt, 53-54; 76.

⁴⁴ Arnobius, *Adversus Nationes*, The Latin Library, URL = <<http://www.thelatinlibrary.com/arnobius.html>> [April 28, 2012], II.30.

⁴⁵ Howard Jones, *The Epicurean Tradition* (Florence, Kent.: Routledge, 1992), 102.

⁴⁶ Augustine, *City of God* (London: Penguin Classics, 1984), Book 6, chapter VII, 11.

misery, according to that which a man's actions, whether good or bad, claim as their due recompense.⁴⁷

The reason why this is interesting is that it hardly contradicts hedonism. First, Augustine concedes that if there is no god who punishes us in the afterlife, hedonism is correct. Here Augustine and Epicurus agree. Second, Augustine claims that depending on how we act in this life, we will get a blessed or a miserable afterlife. This, at least on one interpretation, is as much a reaffirmation as a denial of hedonism, for the difference between Augustine and Epicurus need not be their ethical views, but their views on what happens when we die. If Epicurus had been convinced that such horrors as eternal hellfire might await us after death, we have little reason to believe that he would take issue with Augustine's recommendations. If it is the joys of heaven we should act to achieve, and the suffering of hell we should act to avoid, this is hedonism as good as any.

Hedonism is not discussed extensively after Augustine, and when Justinian forced the philosophical schools of Athens to close in 529, he closed Epicurus' school after more than 700 years of continual activity. Thomas Aquinas does not seem to have been familiar with Epicurus, and does not discuss him in *Summa Theologiae*. He does, however, discuss Aristotle's treatment of pleasure in *Nicomachean Ethics*, and arrives at the view that pleasures can be good, but that they gain their goodness, not just by virtue of being pleasures, but by virtue of indicating that one acts in a way that realizes one's nature.⁴⁸ Dante, was aware of Epicurus, and his treatment of Epicurus in the *Divine Comedy* was harsh: While Dante placed Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle in the outer circle of Hell, in *Limbo*, he placed Epicurus in a burning tomb in the sixth circle.⁴⁹

2.6. Renaissance and Early Modern Hedonism

As the Middle Ages came to an end, hedonistic ideas became subject to more scholarly attention. In 1400 Francisco Zaberella published *De Felicitate*, in which he explicitly discusses Epicurus' hedonism. Although Zabarella criticizes Epicurus, he praises him for putting more emphasis on mental than bodily

⁴⁷ Augustine, *Select Letters* (Cambridge, Mass.: Loeb Classical Library/Harvard University Press, 1989), Letter 104.3.

⁴⁸ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Vol. 20, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), Question 34, Articles I-II, 65–70.

⁴⁹ Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy* (London: Penguin Classics, 2002), 10.13-14.

pleasures.⁵⁰ Poggio Bracciolini, who was a major collector of Greek and Latin manuscripts, rediscovered and published Lucretius' *De Rerum Natura* in 1471, and thereby contributed to making hedonistic ideas known. Initially, Poggio is said to have been convinced by Lucretius' arguments, but came to abandon them ideas later on. Fourteen years after the rediscovery of *De Rerum Natura*, Lorenzo Valla wrote *De Voluptate* (On Pleasure), where he let the spokesman "Vegio" defend Epicurean hedonism. Since Valla laid out the view convincingly, Poggio accused him of being a hedonist. In 1473 Cicero's *De Finibus*, which contains a detailed discussion of hedonism, was rediscovered, and in 1533 Epicurus' letter to Menoeceus was published. With the invention of the printing press, these works were quickly spread, and they were widely read. Michel de Montaigne's *Essays* contains more than one hundred quotes from *De Rerum Natura*.⁵¹

Hedonism was unpopular, however, especially among theologians. Philip Melanchton, in *Philosophiae Moralis Epitomes*, agreed with Poggio that Valla was probably guilty of being a hedonist. Martin Luther, in church fatherly tradition, interpreted Epicurus as advocating surrender to all bodily lusts, and used "Epicureanism" repeatedly as a derogatory term.⁵² In his letter exchange with Erasmus, Luther accused Erasmus of giving in to "Epicurus' drunkenness."⁵³ More interesting than Luther's misrepresentation of Epicurus' views is the way Erasmus responds. Erasmus responds, in the dialogue "Epicurus," not by denying that he has hedonistic sympathies, but by presenting Epicurean hedonism as enlightened and tempered. One of the characters in the dialogue, named "Hedonius," analyzes Epicurus' theory and explains that Epicurus does not advocate "shameless love, unlawful lust," for this brings only "the ague, the headache, the grips, dullness of wit, disgrace, forgetfulness, vomiting, gastric ulcers, and the tremors."⁵⁴ Though Hedonius' list is different from Epicurus', it brings to the discussion one of the central points in Epicurus' ethics.

The history of hedonism in modern times starts with the mathematician and astronomer Pierre Gassendi. Gassendi was a devout Epicurean who translated and edited several of Epicurus' texts. We know from Gassendi's letters that he intended to write a comprehensive defense of Epicurus' philosophy, and

⁵⁰ Jones, 144.

⁵¹ Greenblatt, 221–249.

⁵² Jones, 162–3.

⁵³ Martin Luther, *Dr. Martin Luthers Werke, Kritische Gesamtausgabe. Briefwechsel*. Weimar: Verlag Hermann Böhlau Nachfolger, 1930–1985, 626.

⁵⁴ Erasmus, *Familiar Colloquies* (London: J. J. and P. Knapton etc., 1733), 884F–885A.

he exchanged letters with many—among them Galileo—about his plans. In 1647 he published *De Vita et Moribus Epicuri*, where he defended Epicurus against the accusation of recommending giving in to bodily pleasures, and two years later, in 1649, Gassendi published *Animadversiones in Decimum Librum Diogenis Laertii* in three volumes, which contributed to both Epicurus' and Aristippus' fame in French intellectual life. Samuel Sorbier, Jean Francois Sarasin, and Francois Bernier learned of Epicurus through Gassendi, and several of the most central French philosophers in the 17th and 18th centuries—such as Helvetius, La Mettrie, Holbach, and Condorcet—were hedonists. To a large extent due to Gassendi, hedonism became a leading theory in late 17th and early to mid 18th century French thought.

Hedonism also came to play a central role in Modern British intellectual history, and as Roger Crisp writes, hedonism was the default theory among the British empiricists.⁵⁵

In 1654, Walter Charleton published *Physiologia Epicuro-Gassendo-Charletonia*, which was a revised translation of Gassendi's *Animadversiones*. Two years later he published *Epicurus' Morals*, which made hedonism well known in British philosophical circles. John Locke, who came to know Epicurus' ideas through Charleton's writings, wrote the following in *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*:

Things then are Good or Evil, only in reference to Pleasure or Pain. That which we call *Good*, which is *apt to cause or increase Pleasure, or diminish Pain in us; or else to procure, or preserve us the possession of any other Good, or absence of any Evil*. And on the contrary we name that *Evil*, which is *apt to produce or increase any Pain, or diminish any Pleasure in us; or else procure us any Evil, or deprive us of any Good*.⁵⁶

Other empiricists also came to hold views that were close to hedonism. In *Human Nature, or the Fundamental Elements of Policy*, Thomas Hobbes, who was a friend of Charleton's, wrote the following:

Every man, for his own part, calleth that which *pleaseth*, and is delight to himself, *good*; and that *evil* which *displeaseth* him: insomuch that while every man *differeth*

⁵⁵ Roger Crisp, *Reasons and the Good* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 98.

⁵⁶ John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), Book 2, Chapter 20, §2. Italics in the original.

from another in *constitution*, they differ also from one another concerning the common distinction of good and evil. ... And as we call *good* and *evil* the *things* that please and displease; so we call *goodness* and *badness*, the *qualities* or powers whereby they do it.⁵⁷

David Hume, in *Treatise of Human Nature*, also took a position that is very close to hedonism:

[M]oral distinctions depend entirely on certain peculiar sentiments of pain and pleasure, and that whatever mental quality in ourselves or others gives us a satisfaction, by the service of reflection, is of course virtuous; as every thing of this nature, that gives us uneasiness, is vicious.⁵⁸

It is interesting that there is a strong historical connection between empiricism and hedonism. One reason can be that both empiricism and hedonism are crucially influenced by Epicurus. Another reason can be that if we take for granted that all knowledge must be derived from sense experience, then where, if not from our experiences of pleasure and pain, could our notions of good and evil come?

Hedonism also found an admirer in Thomas Jefferson. We know that Jefferson owned five copies of *De Rerum Naturae*,⁵⁹ and John Quincy Adams reported the following after a dinner with Jefferson:

Mr. Jefferson said that the *Epicurean* philosophy came nearest to the truth, in his opinion, of any ancient system of philosophy. He wished the work of Gassendi concerning it had been translated. It was the only accurate account of it extant. I mentioned Lucretius. He said that was only a part—only the *natural* philosophy. But the *moral* philosophy was only to be found in Gassendi.⁶⁰

In a letter to William Short, Jefferson himself wrote the following:

⁵⁷ Thomas Hobbes, “Human Nature, or the Fundamental Elements of Policy,” *The English Works of Thomas Hobbes*, William Molesworth (ed.) (Darmstadt: Otto w. Strecker, 1966), Vol. 4, Section 7.3, 32.

⁵⁸ David Hume, *Treatise of Human Nature* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1886), Book III, Part III, Section 1, 557.

⁵⁹ Greenblatt, 262.

⁶⁰ John Quincy Adams, “Dinner with President Jefferson,” *Memoirs of John Quincy Adams*, Charles Francis Adams, ed., (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1874), 60–61.

As you say of yourself, I too am an Epicurean. I consider the genuine (not the imputed) doctrines of Epicurus as containing everything rational in moral philosophy which Greece and Rome have left us. ... I take the liberty of observing that you [William Short] are not a true disciple of our master Epicurus, in indulging the indolence to which you say you are yielding. One of his canons, you know, was that ‘the indulgence which prevents a greater pleasure, or produces a greater pain, is to be avoided’⁶¹

Jefferson’s Epicurean sympathies might be useful to keep in mind when reading about “the pursuit of happiness” in the U.S. Declaration of Independence.

2.7. Utilitarianism

In the 19th century, hedonism is primarily associated with utilitarianism: The idea that we should act so as to bring about the greatest happiness for the greatest number—happiness usually used in a way that is synonymous with pleasure.

According to Bentham we should, as Plato advises us in the *Protagoras*, perform a hedonic calculation when we seek to determine what action to perform, and we should choose the action that in the long term will result in the largest balance of pleasure over pain.⁶² In Bentham’s view, pleasures are quantifiable, and the more “pleasure units” the world contains, the better the world is. The right action to perform, then, is the one that produces the largest number of pleasure units. Since all pleasure units are equal in pleasurable value, they are also equal in value, and their worth does not depend on how they are obtained. Bentham is famous for the claim that “push-pin is as good as poetry” (pushpin being a 19th century children’s game). Of course, it might be that in a long-term perspective, poetry gives us more pleasure than pushpin does, but if so, it is precisely because of the pleasure—and not because the poetry is valuable for its own sake—that the poetry is better.

Since all pleasures are of equal value, Bentham argued that it is of no moral significance which subjects enjoy them: it is pleasure as such that is valuable, and it is valuable whether it is experienced by oneself, by other

⁶¹ Thomas Jefferson, “Letter to William Short, from Monticello, October 31, 1819” in Merrill D. Peterson, ed., *Thomas Jefferson: Writings* (New York: Library of America, 1994), 1433. The letter also includes a reading list, assembled by Jefferson, for introducing William Short to Epicurus’ ideas.

⁶² Jeremy Bentham, *Principles of Morals and Legislation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1780/1907), Chapters 1–5.

humans, or by animals. The relevant question to ask when we shall determine whether a being should be taken into account in moral deliberation, Bentham claimed, is not whether the being can reason, but whether the being can suffer.

From one perspective, Bentham's philosophy brings animals up to a human level. From another perspective, it brings humans down to the level of animals, and according to Thomas Carlyle, Bentham's philosophy was a "philosophy of swine."⁶³ Independently of the merits of Carlyle's objection, critics of hedonism have a long tradition of claiming that hedonism is a theory suitable for animals, not for humans. Socrates spoke of the life of an oyster. Cicero accused Aristippus of advocating "a pleasing, nice sensation, which is what even stupid cows, if they could talk, would call pleasure," and also claimed that hedonism is a theory for "boring, dumb sheep."⁶⁴ Carlyle's pig argument will be discussed in detail later on.

John Stuart Mill—whose father, James Mill, was one of Bentham's closest friends—grew up under the guidance of Bentham's ideas. In *Utilitarianism* Mill claimed, as Bentham had claimed before him, that "actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness, wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness. By happiness is intended pleasure, and the absence of pain; by unhappiness, pain, and the privation of pleasure."⁶⁵ Mill came to break with Bentham's hedonism, however, on the point that Carlyle had opposed: that all pleasures are of equal value. According to Mill, "some *kinds* of pleasures [are] more desirable and more valuable than others."⁶⁶ A simple, bodily pleasure will, in Mill's view, have less value than an equally intense pleasure brought about by things such as friendship, art, and philosophy. Mill defends a qualitative, rather than merely a quantitative, hedonism, and claims that if we accept his view, we need not accept the implication that humans are no more important than animals.

Henry Sidgwick, in *The Methods of Ethics*, gives a more systematic and sophisticated defense of hedonism.⁶⁷ While Bentham and Mill both worked outside of academia, and had social reform as an important aim, Sidgwick was an academic philosopher. According to Sidgwick, there are three ways to approach

⁶³ Thomas Carlyle, *Latter-Day Pamphlets*, (Boston: Phillips, Sampson, and Company, 1850), Part VIII.

⁶⁴ Cicero, *De Finibus*, II 18, 40.

⁶⁵ John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism*, edited by Roger Crisp (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 55.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 56.

⁶⁷ Henry Sidgwick, *The Methods of Ethics*, 7th ed. (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing, 1907/1981).

ethics. One is the view that we have an intuitive faculty that gives us access to ethical rules. This, according to Sidgwick, is problematic, for it is prone just to serve as a justification for views we already hold, and when various principles come in conflict, it is unclear how we may resolve them. The two others are variants of hedonism: Utilitarianism, an impartial form of hedonism according to which we all have reason to act to promote pleasure impartially; and egoistic hedonism, according to which we all have reason to promote our own pleasure. Sidgwick admits, reluctantly, that it is probably not possible through arguments to make an egoistic hedonist convert to utilitarianism, and Sidgwick ends up accepting what he calls a “dualism of practical reason”: the view that we have reason both to place our own pleasure over the pleasure of others at the same time as we have reason to consider all pleasures to be of equal importance. With Sidgwick’s *Methods of Ethics*, hedonism reaches its climax.

2.8. Hedonism in the 20th Century

When we enter the 20th Century, hedonism’s popularity declines, and the first major attack on hedonism comes from G. E. Moore. In *Principia Ethica*, published three years after Sidgwick’s death, Moore presents several objections to hedonism, the two most influential of which we shall look at here.

Moore’s first objection is an argument against Mill’s attempt at saving hedonism from the accusation that hedonism is a “philosophy of swine.” Moore claims that Mill’s qualitative hedonism is inconsistent, for if one holds that only pleasure is valuable, as hedonists claim to do, one cannot at the same time hold that some pleasures are more valuable than others. In order to hold that some pleasures are more valuable than others, one must accept that there are other standards of evaluation than the hedonic one, and if one does, one is no longer a hedonist. Accordingly, hedonists face the choice of being either swinish or inconsistent, neither of which is attractive.

Moore’s second objection is the Open Question Argument. According to Moore, pleasure cannot be the same as goodness, for the question “X leads to pleasure, but is X good?” seems to be an open question, and a question that it makes sense to ask. It is not a question where the answer is analytically given, such as “X is a circle, but is it round?” This, Moore claims, shows that pleasure cannot be the same as goodness, and as such, that hedonism must be false.⁶⁸

The perhaps most influential 20th century objection to hedonism is

⁶⁸ G. E. Moore, *Principia Ethica*, Thomas Baldwin (ed.), 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 89–110.

Robert Nozick's Experience Machine thought experiment. In *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*, Nozick invites us to imagine that we are given the opportunity to live in a virtual reality created by an experience machine.⁶⁹ In this virtual reality we will have intensely pleasurable experiences, and we can take for granted—as part of the thought experiment—that we are guaranteed a more pleasant life inside than outside of the machine. Nozick's question, then, is this: Should we plug into the machine and live life there instead of in the real world? Hedonists, Nozick claims, have to answer “yes,” since they hold that ultimately, nothing but pleasure and pain is relevant to what is good and bad. According to hedonists, knowing that Option A in sum leads to more pleasure and less pain than Option B gives us all the information we need in order to be justified in choosing Option A rather than Option B; accordingly, we should plug into the machine. This, however, Nozick argues, is clearly wrong. For example, Nozick claims, it is obvious that living in the real world and forming relationships with real humans is valuable in and of itself—and since hedonism denies this, it is an implausible theory.

Both the Open the Question Argument and the Experience Machine thought experiment will be discussed below. Irrespective of their merits, however, their arguments have been influential, and to a large extent as a consequence of their influence, hedonism has been unpopular among 20th century philosophers.

Still, hedonism has not died out. Fred Feldman argues for what he calls “attitudinal hedonism”: a hedonism according to which pleasure is identified, not with an experience, but with an intentional state, such as a belief or a desire, directed at a feature of oneself or the wider world.⁷⁰ Others, such as Torbjörn Tännsjö and David Pearce, defend versions of utilitarian hedonism that are close to Bentham's. Both Tännsjö and Pearce admit that their strict, quantitative utilitarianism has radical implications. Rem B. Edwards defends a qualitative hedonism resembling John Stuart Mill's. Roger Crisp also defends hedonism, and argues for a sufficiency principle that is neither egoistic nor utilitarian. In Crisp's view, we have reason to prioritize our own well-being over the well-being of others, but when the well-being of others is sufficiently low—below a certain threshold—this gives us stronger reason to help elevate their well-being up to that threshold than to continue raising our own well-being above it. Joseph

⁶⁹ Robert Nozick, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* (New York: Basic Books, 1977), 42–45.

⁷⁰ Fred Feldman, “The Good Life: A Defense of Attitudinal Hedonism,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, Vol. 65, No. 3, 2002.

Mendola defends an intuition-based hedonism, Michel Onfray defends hedonism as a form of cultural criticism, and Ben Bradley has recently built a theory of death's badness on a hedonistic view of well-being.⁷¹

Though the popularity of hedonism goes in waves, and it is currently in a slump, there seems always to be philosophers who—perhaps in frustration over what other value theories can offer—ask “but what about hedonism?”

3. Overview of the Argument

I join the minority that asks “but what about hedonism?” Let me now explain how, over the course of this work, I will defend a hedonistic theory of intrinsic value.

3.1. *Pleasure and Pain*

The first essay is concerned, not with value theory, but with a preliminary issue: the nature of pleasure and pain. The nature of pleasure and pain is relevant to a defense of hedonism most obviously for the reason that if one claims that pleasure is the only intrinsic value and that pain is the only intrinsic disvalue, one needs to tell at least a rough story about the properties of the things to which one ascribes intrinsic value and disvalue, and indicate what it is about them that one takes to explain their value significance.

Not all questions about pleasure and pain, however, are relevant. On the one hand, there are scientific questions, such as questions about the neurological basis of pleasure and pain. Though it might be interesting how C fibers and Aδ fibers work, how pains can effectively be blocked, how pleasure and pain experiences look on MRI and CAT scans, etc., no such questions are directly relevant to the truth or falsity of hedonism. The reason why is that the neurological basis of pleasure and pain can be whatever it is, and pleasure can still be intrinsically good and pain can still be intrinsically bad. What hedonists are concerned with, importantly, is not serotonin release and C fiber firings, but

⁷¹ See Fred Feldman, *Pleasure and the Good Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006); David Pearce, *The Hedonistic Imperative* URL = <www.hedweb.com> [September 28, 2012]; Torbjörn Tännsjö, *Hedonistic Utilitarianism* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997); Rem B. Edwards, *Pleasures and Pains: A Theory of Qualitative Hedonism*. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1979); Roger Crisp, *Reasons and the Good* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006); Joseph Mendola, “Intuitive Hedonism,” *Philosophical Studies*, Vol. 128, No. 2, 2006; Michel Onfray, *Atheist Manifesto* (New York: Arcade Publishing, 2007); Ben Bradley, *Well-Being and Death* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

pleasure and pain as phenomenal qualities. Of course, the neurological basis of pleasure and pain is crucial for hedonists who seek to understand how pleasures and pains are brought about and how we can manipulate them, but none of that is relevant to the question of whether pleasure is intrinsically good and pain is intrinsically bad.

Related to this are social science questions about pleasure and pain, such as questions about what actions, attitudes, and social and political contexts tend to promote pleasant lives. This area—roughly, happiness research—is, again, something that hedonists might have very good reason to be concerned with. It is crucial to hedonists who do applied ethics. Still, what gives us pleasure and what gives us pain is not relevant to whether pleasure is intrinsically good and pain is intrinsically bad.

Not only are natural and social scientific questions of limited relevance to the truth or falsity of hedonism; some philosophical questions are irrelevant as well. There is a voluminous literature on pleasure and pain—especially pain—in philosophy of mind and perception. This literature points to fascinating philosophical puzzles: How can pleasures and pains at once be spatio-temporally located and experientially private? Is there an appearance/reality distinction in the case of pleasure and pain, or does the appearance of either guarantee its reality? Can phenomenal pleasure and pain be causally efficient? These questions do not matter much to a defense of hedonism either, since—as in the case of the natural and social scientific questions—we can hold whatever view we want on these and still be hedonists. Our views in philosophy of mind and perception might play a role in shaping our particular hedonistic theories, but they are not relevant to whether hedonism is true or false.

So what questions about pleasure and pain are relevant to a defense of hedonism?

One relevant question is whether pleasures and pains form unified groups: Whether there is a common, unified characteristic that runs through all pleasures, by virtue of which these are pleasures, and whether there is a common, unified characteristic that runs through all pains, by virtue of which these are pains. Let us call the problem of whether or not this is so the unity problem.

The unity problem is relevant to hedonism since if pleasures and pains are not unified, it is puzzling how hedonists can be justified in claiming that pleasures, and pleasures only, are intrinsically valuable, and that pains, and pains only, are intrinsically disvaluable. The reason why is that, strictly speaking, there would be no such thing as pleasure and no such thing as pain: Pleasure and pain

would not form kinds onto which we could ascribe any exclusive characteristic, be it intrinsic value or anything else. This, as we remember, was one of Socrates' objections to hedonism in the *Philebus* (12c-d). In Socrates' view, hedonism is wrong, one reason for which is that pleasures and pains are disunified. Though we speak of "pleasure" as if it were one and "pain" as if it were one, Socrates claims, there are no such things.

Socrates seems to have a point. Consider, for example, these three experiences, all of which we would classify as pleasures: the taste of chocolate, the sound of good music, and the feeling of being appreciated. These experiences appear to be qualitatively very different, and it is far from obvious that they share a single experiential quality. Similarly, consider these three experiences, all of which we would classify as pains: a headache, a paper cut, and a muscle cramp. These experiences also appear to be qualitatively very different, and it is far from obvious that they share a single experiential pain quality either. As such, though we speak of "pleasure" and "pain" as if they were unified, we might discover, upon scrutiny, that they are not.

Related to the unity problem is the problem of whether pleasures and pains are commensurable: Whether pleasures and pains can be quantified and weighed against each other, either in terms of absolute value or in terms of "more" and "less." This is relevant since if we are to be able to compare various outcomes, we must in some sense be able to compare pleasures and pains, and perform a so-called hedonic calculation. Let us call this the commensurability problem.

In some sense pleasures and pains do seem to admit of quantification and comparison. We commonly say that one thing is *more* pleasant or *less* painful than another. Such quantitative comparisons make sense to us and, as hedonist Fred Feldman writes:

We assume that it is possible in principle to compare the amount of net pleasure in some combination of pleasures and pains to the amount of net pleasure in some other combination of pleasures and pains. ... It makes sense to subtract the number of dolours of pain that a person feels during a stretch of time from the number of hedons of pleasure that he feels during that time. The resulting number indicates some sort of 'hedono-doloric balance'⁷²

⁷² Fred Feldman, *Pleasure and the Good Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 26. While *hēdonē* is the Greek word for pleasure, *dolor* is the Latin word for pain.

But are comparisons such as Feldman's really possible? It is not evident that they are, one reason for which is that commensurability presupposes unity. If pleasures do not share a unifying characteristic by virtue of which they are pleasures, and pains do not share a related unifying characteristic by virtue of which they are pains—and/or if pleasures and pains are not perfect opposites—it seems that they cannot be measured against each other on a quantitative, hedonic scale. Mainly for this reason, the commensurability thesis has fallen into disrepute. Franz Brentano, for example, writes:

A foot is divisible into twelve inches; but an intense joy is not divisible in the same sense into twelve less intensive joys. Consider how ridiculous it would be if someone said that the amount of pleasure he has in smoking a good cigar is such that, if it were multiplied by 127, or say by 1,077, it would be precisely equal to the amount of pleasure he has in listening to a symphony of Beethoven or in viewing one of Raphael's madonnas. This is enough, I think, to suggest the further difficulties involved in trying to compare the intensity of pleasure with that of pain.⁷³

If Brentano is right, then although we conceptually treat “pleasure” and “pain” as if they were unified and commensurable, they might be too disunified for this practice to be justifiable.

In the first essay, “The Unity and Commensurability of Pleasures and Pains” (pp. 53–72), I argue that pleasures and pains *are* in fact unified and commensurable. I start by laying out the two problems, and argue that our intuitions draw us in opposite directions.⁷⁴ I then examine three different theories of pleasure and pain that can help us reconcile the apparent heterogeneity of hedonic experiences with unity and commensurability. I first present and examine “response theory,” which is the view that pleasures and pains are unified, not by virtue of having a unifying experiential quality, but by virtue of being experiences that we desire or toward which we are averse. The unification, on this view, is secured by our responses: pleasures are those, and only those, experiences that we desire; pains are those, and only those, experiences to which we are averse. Since we can desire and be averse in degrees, moreover, pleasures and pains are not only unified but also commensurable. I argue that this view,

⁷³ Franz Brentano, *Origin of Our Knowledge of Right and Wrong*, trans. by Cecil Hauge (Westminster: Archibald Constable, 1902), 30–31.

⁷⁴ When I speak of “intuition” here and in what follows, I do not appeal to a special intuitive faculty. I merely appeal to how things seem to be.

though it could potentially solve the unity and commensurability problems, is almost certainly false, for pleasures are not pleasures because they are experiences that we desire and pains are not pains because they are experiences toward which we are averse. Rather, I argue, we desire pleasures and are averse to pains because of the way pleasures and pains feel, and this is incompatible with response theory.

I then present and examine “split experience theory,” which, though it is Bentham’s view, is not at all present in current debate. According to split experience theory, our experiences are split in two: We have various heterogeneous experiences, but in addition to these, we have hedonic experiences, and these experiences vary solely in terms of pleasure and pain. On this view, if I cut my finger, I feel not just one but two things: a qualitative feeling in my finger and, in addition to that, a negative shift in general hedonic level. If Bentham is right, then pleasures and pains are unified by virtue of being experiences on the hedonic experiential scale, and they are commensurable because this scale varies solely in terms of more and less. I argue that this view as well, though it offers a possible solution, is very likely mistaken, for our hedonic experiences do not seem to be split the way this theory suggests.

Having examined these, I present my own position, which I call “dimensionalism.” Dimensionalism is the theory that pleasure and pain have the ontological status as opposite sides of a hedonic dimension along which our experiences vary. On this view, we do not have two simultaneous but distinct of experiences the way split experience theory claims; rather, we have all sorts of qualitative experiences, but one of the dimensions along which these experiences vary is a hedonic dimension. This view has earlier been suggested by C. D. Broad, Karl Duncker, Shelly Kagan, and John Searle, but it has not been worked out in detail. I work out the dimensionalist view in some detail, and then explain how it inherits the virtues of both response theory and split experience theory yet avoids their vices.

If my argument succeeds, then pleasures and pains, in spite of their phenomenal heterogeneity, are perfectly unified and commensurable. They are unified by virtue of being experiences that belong on opposite sides of the hedonic dimension. This is genuine unity, since it is by virtue of being on their respective sides of the hedonic dimension that a pleasure is a pleasure and a pain is a pain. Since dimensions are quantitative, moreover, pleasures and pains are commensurable.

Even if pleasures and pains are unified and commensurable, however, it does not follow that it is easy to quantify and commensurate them. The only thing that follows is that the problem of doing so is not metaphysical, but epistemic. On the dimensionalist view, it is our limited epistemic capacities that explains why we have trouble quantifying and commensurating pleasures and pains, so if we had perfect knowledge, my view entails that we could have commensurated pleasures and pains perfectly. If pleasures and pains were disunified and incommensurable, on the other hand, not even perfect knowledge would be enough, since on this view, commensuration problems would (at least in part) result from the metaphysics of pleasure and pain, not from our epistemic limitations.

With dimensionalism I hope to give a hedonism friendly theory of pleasure and pain. Parenthetically, I also hope to give a theoretical foundation for *hedonometrics*: The controversial science of reducing pleasures and pains to “hedons” and “dolors”—a hedon being any fixed amount of pleasure and a dolor being any fixed amount of pain—and of weighing different outcomes by means of a so-called “hedonic calculus.” Though my arguments in this work do not depend on the notions of “hedons” and “dolors,” I think there is nothing wrong with them, so hedonists should not be ashamed of using them when needed. If dimensionalism is correct, speaking of hedons and dolors is as justified as speaking of centigrades, lumen, and meters. The only disanalogy is that whereas we have precise instruments that help us measure temperature, light, and length, hedons and dolors—being qualities of experience—are not (yet) measurable with the same degree of precision.⁷⁵

⁷⁵ The most extensive work on hedonometrics is Francis Edgeworth’s inaptly titled *Mathematical Physics* (London: C. Kegan Paul & Co, 1881). Edgeworth defends hedonism and looks forward to the day when we will have invented “hedonometers”: measuring devices that will “continually [be] registering the height of pleasure experienced by an individual, exactly accounting to the verdict of consciousness, or rather diverging therefrom according to the law of errors.” (101) When we have hedonometers, then to do applied ethics, “[w]e have only to add another dimension expressing the number of sentiments, and to integrate through all time and over all sentience, to constitute the end of pure utilitarianism.” (102) As such the hedonometer will make ethics a branch of science. Currently, however, ethics “may still be in the state of heat or electricity before they became exact sciences” (98).

Mathematical Physics is primarily a book on economics, and Edgeworth uses his views on hedonometrics to lay the foundations for his economical theories, and for the idea of the indifference curves, which he invented. The relationship between hedonism, hedonometrics, and modern economics—in Bentham, James Mill, John Stuart Mill, and Francis Edgeworth—is a fascinating and, to my knowledge, underexplored area in modern intellectual history.

3.2. Value and Intrinsic Value

After having discussed the unity and commensurability of pleasures and pains, I turn, in the rest of the dissertation, to questions concerning value.

What is value? One suggested definition is that value is something worth having or something that, by virtue of being realized, makes things go better. Proposals along these lines are good descriptions of value, but they are problematic as definitions, as they make value conceptually dependent on “worth” and “better.” It is doubtful whether we have a more solid grasp of “worth” and “better” than we have of “value,” however, since “worth” and “better” are evaluative concepts the same way as “value.” An alternative strategy is to define value in terms of reasons for action: Perhaps a thing is valuable by virtue of being something that we have reason to act to pursue or realize. I think this is also an apt description, but it is doubtful whether this works any better as a definition, as it makes value conceptually dependent on the notion of reasons for action – and at least on most consequentialist accounts, reasons for action are in turn dependent on value, and in that case, we have come just as far. My own suggestion is that value is the foundational concept in evaluative matters, that it is graspable only ostensively, and that we grasp it ostensively by experiencing pleasure and pain.

Irrespective of how we define value, however, we can make progress in defining *intrinsic* value in relation to general value. I have already touched on this issue, and the way “intrinsic value” is employed in ethics, the term refers to things that are valuable *for their own sake* and *as ends in themselves*. The things that are intrinsically valuable, then, are contrasted with the things that are valuable *for the sake of something else* and *as means*.

In this work I shall defend hedonism on a compatible but more committing definition, namely G. E. Moore’s, according to which something has intrinsic value only in case “the question whether a thing possesses [value], and in what degree it possess it, depends solely on the intrinsic nature of the thing in question.”⁷⁶ An intrinsic value, on this view, is something that is valuable by virtue of its intrinsic properties. By “intrinsic property” is meant a property that something has by virtue of what it is, not by virtue of any of its relationships to other things. On a hedonist version of this view, pleasure and pain are valuable and disvaluable regardless of the context in which they occur.

⁷⁶ G. E. Moore, “The Conception of Intrinsic Value,” reprinted in *Principia Ethica*, Thomas Baldwin (ed.), 2nd edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 260.

Defending hedonism on Moore's definition, I disagree with hedonists such as Fred Feldman, who argue that the value of pleasure is context dependent. In Feldman's view, pleasure is valuable as an end in itself and for its own sake, but pleasure has this value status only in cases where it is also deserved.⁷⁷ On such a view, the value of pleasure is conditional on a relational property. This is a fancier view than the one I will defend, my view being that any fixed amount of pleasure (any hedon, if you like) is just as valuable as any other similarly fixed amount of pleasure, irrespective of contextual matters such as how it is obtained

Values that are not intrinsic are extrinsic, and these are valuable, not by virtue of their intrinsic properties, but by virtue of their relational properties. A typical example is money. Money is valuable, not by virtue of simply being money, but by virtue of standing in certain relationships to things external to itself – for example, the relationship of enabling us to buy various goods and services. The value of money, we can therefore say, is inherited from its relationships. If we take for granted that money is not at all intrinsically valuable, and thus assume that all its value is inherited, then if money were to lose its relations, its value would be lost as well. This seems to apply to all extrinsic values: Since their value is supplied by their relationship to something external, then if the relevant relationship is cut off, then so is the value supply.

Though it is possible for one extrinsic value (such as money) to inherit its value from another extrinsic value (such as a commodity), the chain of values cannot forever be pointing to something beyond itself, but has to terminate in something that does not point any further, which in matters of value would be a thing that is valuable by virtue of itself. This is the same principle that plays out in more familiar cases of inheritance. Let us say that you inherit a painting from your father. Many years ago, he inherited it from his own father, who, at an even earlier stage, inherited it from his father again. At some point, someone had to make the painting, for no mere chain of inheritance will bring a painting into existence. Indeed, without the painting, there would be no chain of inheritance at all. The same goes for values, so if nothing is valuable for its own sake then nothing can be valuable for the sake of something else. As Ramon Lemos writes, if state of affairs *x* "has positive or negative extrinsic value, then there must be some other state of affairs, *a*, the obtaining of which has or would have positive or negative intrinsic value, and that it is from its relation to *a* that *x* acquires

⁷⁷ Fred Feldman, "The Good Life: A Defense of Attitudinal Hedonism," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, Vol. 65, No. 3, 2002, 604–628.

whatever extrinsic value it has.”⁷⁸ I specify this, not so much to convince those who might disagree with my metaphysical views, but to clarify the theoretical underpinnings of the view that I defend.

Though the term “extrinsic value” is precise, it is hardly used in ethics, and for this reason, I have chosen to speak of “instrumental value” in the essays below. For the sake of precision, however, let me point out that it is not exclusively by virtue of their instrumental relations that extrinsic values can be valuable; extrinsic values can also be valuable by virtue of being constitutive of an intrinsic value. Constitutive extrinsic values are first and foremost associated with organic whole theories, such as G. E. Moore’s. On such views, an individual tree can be one of the constitutive parts of a larger whole, such as a beautiful forest, and this larger whole can be intrinsically valuable. It is possible on hedonistic theories—at least when they are coupled with a dimensionalist theory of pleasure and pain—to concede something closely related. Take values such as being in love and tasting a cookie. These are not intrinsically valuable, for they are not valuable by virtue of themselves. Rather, they are valuable by virtue of their relationship to pleasure, for were it not for bringing about pleasure, they would (if hedonism is right) be worthless. As such, hedonists must hold that they are extrinsic values. Still, it is not clear that their relationship to pleasure is *instrumental*, for neither being in love nor tasting a cookie seems to stand in a contributory *causal* relationship to pleasure. Though they might do so on a Benthamite view, where qualitative experiences are independent of and cause shifts in general hedonic level, on a dimensionalist view, rather than causing pleasure, being in love and tasting cookies *are* pleasures: they are experiences on the positive side of the hedonic dimension, and this, a dimensionalist would say, is all that pleasures ever are. As such, dimensionalist hedonists need not say that all values other than pleasure itself are instrumental values; they can say that a lot of things are non-instrumentally good and worth pursuing as ends, the only requirement being that they must be pleasant. I do not address this issue in the essays below, however, and as such, I am precise when I speak of instrumental rather than extrinsic values.

Let me also say something about the role of a theory of intrinsic value within the broader field of ethics. A theory of intrinsic value is not a complete ethical theory, but a component in a complete ethical theory. I take a complete ethical theory to be a theory that specifies a criterion of rightness, which is a

⁷⁸ Ramon Lemos, *The Nature of Intrinsic Value: Axiological Investigations* (Miami: University Press of Florida, 1995), 39.

collection of necessary and sufficient conditions for an action to be right. It is contested what role a theory of intrinsic value plays in specifying a criterion of rightness. If consequentialism is correct, then intrinsic value plays a critical role, since on such a view, what determines whether an action is right or wrong is solely the action's relationship to what is valuable. Even on consequentialist views, however, several principles must in place in addition to a theory of intrinsic value in order to get a criterion of rightness. One must specify, for example, if one goes for a maximizing or sufficientarian view, how one aggregates, whether one cares about subjective or objective time, whether the right action is the one that one that actually stands in the correct relation to intrinsic value or the one that one is justifying in believing that stands in the correct relation, whether one should be an egoist or a utilitarian or hold some intermediary view, and whether one should hold a binary or scalar view of rightness. If one holds a deontological rather than a consequentialist view, moreover, there are considerations other than the relationship to intrinsic value that matters for the rightness of an action. Perhaps one's pursuit of value should be held back by certain deontological constraints.

These issues belong to normative ethics, and in this work I am not concerned with that. I am concerned with intrinsic value, and specifically, with the question of what things are intrinsically valuable, and I will remain neutral on how such a theory fits into ethics as a whole. In the essays, though, I do on occasion discuss reasons for action, and I do so in order to be able to compare and contrast hedonism with competing views. When I do this, I try to take for granted only rather uncontroversial views on reasons, such as the view that values give rise to reasons and that a reason will tend to grow in strength in proportion to how much value it helps realize.

3.3. Metaethics

While I will remain agnostic on most issues in normative ethics, let me briefly say something about what I take to be an attractive metaethical framework for the kind of hedonism that I will defend.

Hedonism is a species of value realism, at least in the broad sense of the term that I have employed. If hedonism is true, then there are facts about values: Some things are really valuable, other things are not. If this is the criterion for realism, then hedonism is a realist theory.

Is hedonism a subjectivist or an objectivist realist theory? If we follow a suggestion made by Geoffrey Sayre-McCord, we should label "subjective" any

value theory according to which values “depend on mind.”⁷⁹ On this criterion, hedonism is a subjective theory, since hedonism—being a view according to which only a certain mental state has intrinsic value—is committed to the view that a world without minds would be a world without values. Hedonism is also subjectivist in the sense that it holds that what is good for an individual being is to a large extent an individual, or subjective, matter. Some people find the taste of red wine pleasurable; others do not. Hedonists must also recognize that what gives rise to pleasure depends on the context in which it occurs. Drinking red wine might give me a lot of pleasure on a relaxing Saturday night, but give me no pleasure at all right after a marathon.

In spite of this, I do think of hedonism as an *objectivist* theory. For one, even if values depend on certain mental states, when the relevant mental states are in place, there are values, and to the extent that there can be objective facts about these mental states, there can be objective facts about values. By objective fact, in this context, is meant a fact that does not depend on what anyone thinks, wishes, endorses, or likes. This, presumably, is close to what Sayre-McCord has in mind when he grants that even on his conception of subjectivism, there can still be an “objective fact to the matter” of what is valuable and what is not.⁸⁰ This is a pretty straight forward matter, for if I am in pain, then even if the pain is experienced only by me, it is (sadly!) still an objective fact that I am in pain. No matter what people think, wish, endorse, or like; when I am in pain I am in pain. I can influence my pain by, say, listening to cheerful music, taking paracetamol, or focusing on something that I enjoy. In that case, however, I work to causally influence my hedonic level, and my pain would not go away merely because I decided that it should go away. As T. L. S. Sprigge notes, it is “an objective fact whether a certain experience is pleasurable or unpleasurable, and relatedly whether a particular conscious individual is presently experiencing something pleasurable or painful. It is an objective fact, so we may put it, about a subjective state.”⁸¹ John Searle’s way of phrasing this is that experiential qualities, though they are ontologically subjective, are epistemically objective.⁸²

Likewise, there are objective facts about hedonistic instrumental values, the reason for which is that there are objective facts about what stands in what

⁷⁹ Geoffrey Sayre-McCord, “Introduction,” *Essays on Moral Realism*, Geoffrey Sayre-McCord (ed.) (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), 15.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 17.

⁸¹ T. L. S. Sprigge, *The Rational Foundations of Ethics* (London: Routledge, 1988), 225.

⁸² John Searle, *The Mystery of Consciousness* (New York: New York Review of Books, 1997), 95–131.

causal or constitutive relationships to pleasure and pain. In any given situation, it is a fact of the matter of what will give me pleasure and what will give me pain, and this is an objective fact even if what gives me pleasure and what gives me pain depends on my own condition and on the particular context in which I am placed. In this sense, questions in applied hedonism are like questions about, say, how to heal a broken bone. Which procedure works best on a given patient depends on the condition of the patient as well as on the context in which the patient is situated. Still, we think of how to heal a broken bone as a factual matter, since how to do it does not depend on what anyone thinks, wishes, endorses, or likes; it merely depends on taking a lot of different facts into account.

The version of hedonism that I defend is also objectivist in a deeper metaethical sense. The reason why is that on this view, pleasure is good and pain is bad, not by virtue of these being experiences that we endorse or reject, like or dislike, but by virtue of the very things that they are. If pleasures and pains were valuable and disvaluable but by virtue of being endorsed or liked, rejected or disliked, then the theory in question would be a preference or a desire view, since the ultimate reason why something is valuable or disvaluable would be that it is endorsed or liked, rejected or disliked. “Like” and “dislike,” or some variant thereof, would be the ultimate determinants of value. Such a view could still be substantively hedonistic, but it could be so only on the premise that the only things liked or disliked for their own sake are pleasure and pain. Independently of whether the latter premise holds, this would be a weaker form of hedonism than the one that I defend. On the view that I defend, rather than pleasure being good because it is liked and pain being bad because it is disliked, pleasure is liked because it is good and pain is disliked because it is bad. This version of hedonism is a metaethically objectivist view. It is even an “objective list theory,” albeit one with a very short list.

Taking a strong objectivist stance, I am committed to the view that so-called pain asymbolia experiences are not genuinely painful. Pain asymbolia is a condition, resulting from head injuries and morphine analgesia, where patients are said to experience severe pain, but without experiencing it as bad or hurtful. I am doubtful if, in the absence of its badness and hurtfulness, these experiences can really be pains. From a dimensionalist and objectivist perspective, an explanation could be that these experiences have the sort of content that we otherwise find only in pains—they’re sharp, intense, and tearing, say—but on these rare occasions, these are not accompanied by a negative hedonic tone.

According to Michael Smith, objectivist theories face a problem in accounting for motivational internalism. Motivational internalism is the view that if you judge something to be valuable, then this fact, by itself, has at least some motivational force. It is often viewed as a puzzle, however, how facts about the world—facts that do not depend on any endorsement on our part—could be motivating. I think hedonism has the power to avoid this problem. Even when construed as an objectivist theory, there is something about pleasure and pain facts that make them stand out from other facts, and part of what makes them stand out seems to be their power to motivate.⁸³

How are we justified in holding that pleasure is intrinsically good and pain is intrinsically bad? On a coherentist hedonistic account, such as Torbjörn Tännsjö's, we are justified in holding this ultimately because such a view is supported in a reflective equilibrium.⁸⁴ I take a central reason for endorsing a coherentist view such as Tännsjö's to be skepticism about the idea that any belief in matters of value can be justified directly and immediately. In the case of pleasure and pain, however, it seems that we have what we need for a foundationalist theory to work. The reason why is that we do not seem to need a web of supporting beliefs in order to grasp that pleasure is good and pain is bad. As James Rachels writes, "[s]uffering is so obviously an evil, just on account of what it is like, that argument would be superfluous; and the same goes for enjoyment as a good."⁸⁵ When one feels pain one immediately feels its badness.

For a foundationalist hedonistic theory to work, it must be the case that the value of pleasure and the disvalue of pain are self-evident. The alternative to self-evidence is evidence by inference, and if one holds that the value of pleasure and the disvalue of pain are known by inference, one's view is no longer a foundationalist view (or, at any rate, pleasure and pain are not its foundations). I would like to suggest, however, that self-evidence is precisely what we have in the case of pleasure and pain. The value of pleasure and the disvalue of pain seem to lie in how these experiences *feel*, and it seems to be by virtue of feeling them that we become justified in believing that pleasure is good and pain is bad. If anything is self-evident in matters of value, it seems to be the goodness of pleasure and the badness of pain. Indeed, if one tries to think of what self-evidence in matters of value could possibly look like, something like the way pleasure and pain feel seem like prime candidates. I am sympathetic, therefore, to

⁸³ Michael Smith, *The Moral Problem* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), 1–14.

⁸⁴ Torbjörn Tännsjö, *The Relevance of Metaethics to Ethics*, Doctoral dissertation (Stockholm: Stockholm University, 1976), Chap. 1.

⁸⁵ James Rachels, *The End of Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 46.

Epicurus' claim that if we appeal to something further to account for the value of pleasure and the disvalue of pain, we weaken rather than strengthen our case, since in such cases, we try to account for something self-evident by means for something only derivatively evident.

Of course, on a view such as this one cannot argumentatively force along someone who claims that they just do not feel goodness in pleasure and badness in pain. If someone claimed this, I think I would have to conclude one of three things: That she is insincere; that she has very bad hedonic memory (does she remember how it feels to spill hot coffee on her fingers?); or—alternatively—that she has a different metaphysical makeup than I have, and does not have the hedonic experiences that I have. None of these conclusions, however, need threaten the fact that for those who have hedonic experiences, pleasure is good and pain is bad.

Wherein lies the goodness of pleasure and the badness of pain? Are goodness and badness natural or non-natural properties? This depends on what we take “natural” and “non-natural” to mean. In G. E. Moore's definition, something is natural if it is the subject matter of “natural sciences or psychology.”⁸⁶ This a problematic way to draw the line between the natural and the non-natural, as it presupposes an answer to the question of what is properly the subject matter of the natural sciences and psychology, and if this in turn hinges on what is natural and what is not, we have come just as far. Another definition, which points to something substantial, is that something is natural if and only if it is part of the causal order. On such a view, it seems that—barring epiphenomenalism—pleasures and pains are natural. But are pleasures and pains themselves evaluative in nature, or are pleasures and pains connected to a further non-natural evaluative property?

It is sometimes assumed that for something to be genuinely valuable or disvaluable, it cannot be part of the natural, causal order. I find this assumption puzzling, for what are our reasons for holding that nothing can be part of the natural, causal order and also be evaluative? Admittedly, if one requires that a thing be non-evaluative before one agrees to call it “natural,” one rules out evaluative naturalism from the outset. This, however, seems unmotivated, and even if it could be argued that the natural world somehow resists evaluative properties, it is unclear why it is of any help to posit a non-natural realm and push the evaluative properties into this realm. Why is it easier for non-natural things to be evaluative than for natural things to be evaluative?

⁸⁶ Moore, *Principia Ethica*, 92.

If one is a naturalist, one can hold, as I think is an attractive view, that it is impossible to give a complete description of the way pleasure and pain feel without mention of their goodness and badness. As Joseph Mendola writes:

the *phenomenal* difference between pain and pleasure seems to be at least in part that the phenomenal component of the former is nastier, intrinsically *worse*, than that of the second ... No one, not even a Martian, could give a complete and adequate characterization of [pain] without talking about its nastiness, without making a committing mention of its intrinsic disvalue.⁸⁷

If non-naturalism is true, by contrast, then it should at least in principle be possible to give a complete description of how pleasure and pain feel without mention of their respective goodness and badness. This goodness and badness would be something added to pleasure and pain, and as such, it should be something that, at least in principle, could be subtracted. That, however, seems wrong, for there seems to be something about the very way pleasure and pain feel that is good and bad. On a naturalistic view one may claim, as does David Brax, that “pleasure is evaluative in nature,” and that this is not the result of any further fact about such experiences.⁸⁸

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, accepting a naturalistic version of hedonism allows us to be foundationalists without being intuitionists. On a non-naturalistic view, we need to be intuitionists, for if value properties are non-natural and we are able to gain knowledge of them, then we must possess a capacity to gain knowledge of non-natural properties. Accepting the reality of such an intuitive capacity is something that we have good reason to resist, at least if non-natural facts are causally inefficient, making it puzzling how we could gain knowledge of them. If we accept naturalism, on the other hand, foundationalism does not commit us to intuitionism. Instead, we can stick to some version of empiricism and hold that rather than there being non-natural value properties that supervene on pleasure and pain and that we gain knowledge of through intuition, pleasure and pain are themselves good and bad, and we gain knowledge of their goodness and badness by feeling them. If such a view is correct, then we are spot on when, in daily speech, we say of pleasurable experiences that they “feel good” and painful experiences that they “feel bad.”

⁸⁷ Joseph Mendola, “Objective Value and Subjective States,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, Vol. 50, No. 4, 702.

⁸⁸ David Brax, *Hedonism as the Explanation of Value*, Doctoral dissertation (Lund: Lund University, 2009), 97.

This view, which is broadly Epicurean, is the metaethical view that I deem most attractive for a hedonistic theory of intrinsic value. My aim here has not been to defend this view at any length, but to illustrate why it is attractive and to cast light on the underpinnings of the particular substantive theory of value that I shall defend.

3.4. Nothing but Pleasure and Pain

In the first half of Essay 2, “Hedonism and the Cluster Challenge” (pp. 73–88), I argue that pleasure is intrinsically valuable and pain is intrinsically disvaluable. I do so by means of thought experiments, and stick to the substantive issue without taking a stance on its metaethical underpinnings. I examine three objections to this view: that the value of pleasure is instrumental rather than intrinsic; that pleasure gains its value by virtue of being desired; and that there are certain pleasures (“evil pleasures”) that are not intrinsically good and certain pains (“noble pains”) that are not intrinsically bad. I explain why none of these objections work, and why we are justified in accepting the following premise:

P1: Pleasure is intrinsically valuable and pain is intrinsically disvaluable.

Even if we accept P1, however, we are not committed to hedonism. While many (perhaps even most) value theorists would agree that pleasure is intrinsically valuable and pain is intrinsically disvaluable, they would claim that this is not the whole story about what is intrinsically valuable and disvaluable. They would claim that pleasure is one among several intrinsic values and pain one among several intrinsic disvalues. If they are right, then hedonism is wrong, hedonism being the view that pleasure is the only intrinsic value and pain the only intrinsic disvalue. For hedonism to be true, we need the following premise in addition to P1:

P2: Nothing other than pleasure is intrinsically valuable and nothing other than pain is intrinsically disvaluable.

After I have argued for P1, I argue for the following conditional: If we accept P1, we have reason to oppose the introduction of any further intrinsic values and disvalues, and as such, we should endorse P2 and thus endorse hedonism. I present four arguments.

The first two arguments are presented in the second half of “Hedonism and the Cluster Challenge,” and both of these arguments rest on an observation that has hitherto been given insufficient attention: That the values that philosophers take to be intrinsic values in addition to pleasure (and intrinsic disvalues in addition to pain) have a strong tendency to be crucial instrumental values if pleasure were the only intrinsic value and pain the only intrinsic disvalue, and as such, that these values can plausibly be explained in terms of hedonic values. This observation, I claim, gives rise to two arguments for why we should endorse hedonism.

The first argument is that if the suggested non-hedonic intrinsic values are all potentially explainable by reference to pleasure and pain, then—following Occam’s razor—we have at least a *pro tanto* reason to resist the introduction of any further intrinsic values and disvalues. The reason is that it is ontologically more costly to posit a plurality of intrinsic values, and if all values admit of explanation by reference to the one intrinsic value that we already agree on (cf. P1), we need strong reasons to embrace more complicated accounts.

The second and related argument is that what I call the “clustering” of suggested non-hedonic intrinsic values/disvalues around hedonic intrinsic value/disvalue gives rise to an explanatory problem for value pluralists: If the suggested non-hedonic intrinsic values/disvalues are really intrinsic values/disvalues in their own right, then why do they happen to cluster around pleasure and pain the way they do? I make the case that pluralists are hard-pressed to account for this clustering. I suggest that hedonists, on the other hand, can account for the clustering by appeal to hedonic association: The fact that we tend to conflate intrinsic values and important instrumental values.

The third argument in support of hedonism is presented in a separate paper, titled “Value Monism” (pp. 89–102). In this paper I make the case that irrespective of which substantive theory of intrinsic value we accept, we have reason to believe that there is only *one* intrinsic value and only *one* intrinsic disvalue. To make the case for this, I first examine three aspects of our evaluative practices that are often taken to count in favor of pluralism. These aspects are heterogeneity, incommensurability, and rational regret. I argue that all of these are in fact neutral between monism and pluralism. Then I examine a fourth and overlooked aspect, which I label the nominal-notable commensuration principle: The principle that a very large amount of any value can outweigh a very small amount of any other value. I argue that this principle aptly describes the way we reason about values, and make the case that this principle is

compatible with monism only. If we do not want to deny what seems to be a basic feature of the way we reason about values, I argue, we should accept the following premise:

P3: Only one thing is intrinsically valuable and only one thing is intrinsically disvaluable.

By itself, P3 does not tell us much about which substantive theory of intrinsic value we should accept; it just tells us that only one thing is intrinsically valuable and only one thing is intrinsically disvaluable. When we put P3 together with P1, however, we get a separate argument for hedonism that does not depend on the clustering hypothesis: If pleasure is intrinsically valuable and pain is intrinsically disvaluable (P1), and only one thing is intrinsically valuable and only one thing is intrinsically disvaluable (P3), then pleasure is the only intrinsic value and pain the only intrinsic disvalue, and this is the hedonist position.

In the fourth essay, titled “Unexpected Allies: How Value Anti-Realists Help Hedonists” (pp. 103–118), I present an argument for hedonism that is independent of both the clustering thesis and the argument for monism. I make the case that the central arguments advanced in favor of value anti-realism are, perhaps surprisingly, arguments that count in favor of hedonism. I first present John Mackie’s queerness objection, according to which values are metaphysically and epistemically queer—so queer, in fact, that they become incredible. Mackie uses this as an argument for value anti-realism. I also present what I take to be the “second wave” in value anti-realism: evolutionary debunking arguments. According to such arguments, value realism can be debunked because our evaluative practices seem to be best explained, not by the existence of value facts, but by evolution. This suggestion is supported, or so anti-realists like Richard Joyce argue, by the fact that the things we think of as valuable tend to be just those things that it would be evolutionarily useful for us to think of as worth pursuing. If evolution can explain our values, moreover, it seems that positing real values is unnecessary, and in light of such real values’ metaphysical and epistemic queerness, it is prudent to reject them. Recently, the evolutionary argument has been given a further boost by Sharon Street. Street argues that if our values are the ones that evolution would have instilled in us anyway, then this creates an explanatory challenge for value realists: If our evaluative practices are responses to real value facts, how come they happen to be just the ones that evolution would instill in us anyway? As the reader might

have noticed, this argument has a structure similar to the one that I employ in the second paper, “Hedonism and the Cluster Challenge.”

I find Mackie, Joyce, and Street’s arguments convincing. I suggest, however, that there is one realist value theory that their arguments do not have the power to undercut, namely hedonism. Hedonism can account for value without positing queer metaphysical properties and queer epistemic capacities. Hedonism is also immune to evolutionary debunking arguments, or so I argue, since even if evolution arguably created pleasure and pain—and connected various inputs from the environment to various hedonic responses in the organism—evolution never connected goodness to pleasure and badness to pain. If my argument in this paper works, then anti-realist arguments helps hedonism by slicing away hedonism’s realist contenders, yet leaving hedonism itself untouched.

Let me note that that while in “Hedonism and the Cluster Challenge” I argue that suggested non-hedonic intrinsic values are explainable in terms of hedonic association, in “Unexpected Allies: How Value Anti-Realists Help Hedonists” I express sympathy with Joyce and Street’s view that non-hedonic intrinsic values are explainable by evolution. These explanations are not mutually exclusive, as they explain the phenomenon at different levels. While evolution explains the connection between certain stimuli with certain responses, pleasure and pain is the main mechanism by which it does so. The details of these views are discussed in the relevant papers.

While I advance my positive arguments for hedonism in Essays 2, 3, and 4, in Essay 5, “The Classical Objections to Hedonism” (pp. 119–134), I deal with what I take to be the four most central arguments against my view: the Paradox of Hedonism, the Philosophy of Swine objection, the Open Question Argument, and the Experience Machine thought experiment. I present these objections in what I believe are their most convincing form and then explain, for each argument, how hedonists can rebut them. The Paradox of Hedonism and the Open Question Argument, I argue, work only on misconceptions of what a hedonistic theory is committed to. The Paradox works only on the faulty assumption that hedonists must hold that we always gain the best hedonic result by directly aiming for such results; the Open Question Argument works only on the faulty assumption that hedonists must hold that pleasure and value are synonyms. The Philosophy of Swine objection and the Experience Machine thought experiment, on the other hand, do not misrepresent hedonism, but they show much less than their originators, Carlyle and Nozick, take them to show.

The Philosophy of Swine objection, I argue, commits hedonists neither to the view that swinish actions are good for us nor that we should choose to become happy pigs if we got the opportunity; it only commits hedonists to the view that pigs have a similar potentials to live good lives as humans have. The Experience Machine thought experiment does not show what its originator takes it to show either, namely that we have strong and reliable intuitions that speak against living in virtual reality; it only shows, or so I argue, that we have a significant *status quo* bias. This can be shown if we turn Nozick's experiment on its head and present it in a way that prevents *status quo* bias from counting in Nozick's favor. To illustrate this, imagine that you were told that your entire life up until now has been lived connected to an experience machine. Your friends, your family, and your career; everything is virtual. In reality, you are an old farmer living in Siberia. You get the option of unplugging. Would you unplug? I, at least, would not.

* * *

In the appendix essay, titled "Is Life the Ultimate Value?" (pp. 135–170), I discuss, from a hedonistic perspective, the view on substantive value theory that I held prior to joining the hedonist camp: the view that *life* is the ultimate value. The version of the view that I discuss is Ayn Rand's.

In the essay I present Rand's value theory, and argue that though it offers a new and interesting take on how to justify evaluative objectivism, it faces a problem of its own in letting ethical obligation rest on a pre-evaluative choice – in Rand's words, "the choice to live." The problem with this choice is that it threatens the objectivity and bindingness of Rand's theory. I examine four suggested solutions to this problem—suggested by Douglas Rasmussen, Nathaniel Branden, Irfan Khawaja, and Allan Gotthelf, respectively—and argue that these solutions are unsatisfactory. I then sketch my own suggested solution, according to which "the choice to live" is a conditionally rational choice: It is rational if one has prospects for a happy life, irrational if one does not. Though such a suggestion might sound innocent enough, one can hold this view only if one rejects one of the senses in which Rand held that life is the ultimate value—or, at least, one of the senses that is commonly thought that she held. I briefly suggest a revisionary interpretation of Rand's works that is in line with the view that I defend.

In this essay, the debate is framed not in terms of “intrinsic value,” but in terms of “ultimate value.” The reason why is that Rand consistently uses the term “ultimate value,” and this is subsequently the term used in the commentary literature on Rand. “Intrinsic value” and “ultimate value” are two slightly different terms, for while intrinsicity is a metaphysical notion (referring to that which pertains to a thing by virtue of itself), ultimacy is an epistemic notion (referring to the end point of a justificatory chain). This does not make my discussion of Rand incommensurable with the rest of the dissertation. On the view that I defend, ultimate value and intrinsic value are coextensional.

Finally, in this essay I argue for a more moderate view than I do in the rest of my dissertation: I argue that what is ultimately valuable is “happiness.” This was a my transitory view, and it is the transition I justify in the appendix. In the rest of the dissertation (Essays 1–5) I go one step further, reject happiness, and argue that all that matters is pleasure and pain.

ESSAY 1

The Unity and Commensurability of Pleasures and Pains

1. Introduction: Two Opposing Intuitions

Think of these three pleasurable experiences: The taste of ice cream, the feeling of being loved, and the excitement of reading a detective story. Do these experiences share a single quality that accounts for why they are all pleasures? Similarly, think of these three painful experiences: The searing burn after having touched a hot stove, the sting of a pinprick, and the feel of a pressing headache. Do these experiences share a single quality that accounts for why they are all pains? This is the problem of pleasure and pain unity. Moreover: Can all pleasures and all pains be ranked on a single, quantitative hedonic scale? This is the problem of pleasure and pain commensurability. These two problems—which, as we shall see, are closely interrelated—are jointly the topic of this paper.

When we reflect on this issue, our intuitions seem to draw us in opposite directions. On the one hand, pleasures and pains seem unified. Looking at pleasures first, it seems that the taste of ice cream, the feeling of being loved, and the excitement of reading a detective story—although these differ in many respects—do share a certain quality (perhaps a certain kind of positive buzz), and it seems to be by virtue of sharing this quality that they are pleasures and that we are able to reliably pick them out as such. Pleasures, at least, do not seem to be an arbitrarily demarcated group of experiences, and children do not need to learn rules for figuring out what is pleasurable and what is not. Children sense what is pleasurable because of how pleasures feel. The same goes for pains: It seems that burns, pinpricks, and headaches—although they also differ in many respects—share a certain quality (perhaps a certain kind of negative buzz), and it seems to

be by virtue of sharing this quality that they are pains and that we are able reliably to pick them out as such.

We also seem to think of pleasures and pains as if they were in some sense commensurable, for we commonly rank them in terms of *more* and *less*. It makes sense to say that eating bread is *less* pleasurable than eating cookies, but *more* pleasurable than eating flour. It also makes sense to say that jamming one's finger is painful, but *less* painful than surgery without anesthetics, and *more* painful than a pinprick. It even makes sense to say of an activity such as eating bread that it moves from being pleasurable (the first four slices), to being neutral (the fifth and sixth slice), to becoming positively painful (stuffing in bread past the seventh slice). Pleasure and pain seem to exist on a continuum, and when people are asked to fill out the *McGill Pain Questionnaire*, they are presumably not dumbfounded when asked to rank their pain on a scale from zero to five.¹

There is something intuitive about the view that pleasures and pains are unified and commensurable. Murat Aydede summarizes this view as follows:

Since [pleasure and pain] are opposites of each other in some sense and admit of degree, they are thought to constitute a continuum at the one end of where there is the pleasure-sensation of increasing intensity, and at the other, there is the pain-sensation of varying degrees again. As you move toward the middle, the intensity of both pleasure and pain decreases till the vanishing point which constitutes indifference.²

Our intuitions do not exclusively draw us toward unity and commensurability, however, and particularly among philosophers, the view that pleasures and pains are unified and commensurable has fallen into disrepute. The standard objection is that though we might speak of pleasures and pains as if they share a unifying property, they do not, and since they do not, they can hardly be commensurated in terms of this (non-existent) property. This objection is sometimes called the *heterogeneity objection*.

To understand the force of the heterogeneity objection, one must understand the inclusive usage of the terms "pleasure" and "pain" that is common in philosophy (and that I shall take for granted in this paper). John

¹ The *McGill Pain Questionnaire* is a standard questionnaire for measuring pain. See Robert Melzack, "The McGill Pain Questionnaire: From Description to Measurement," *Anesthesiology*, Vol. 103, No. 1, 2005, 199–202.

² Murat Aydede, "An Analysis of Pleasure vis-à-vis Pain," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, Vol. 61, No. 3, 2000, 540.

Locke is a proponent of this inclusive usage: Locke explains in *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* that he uses the terms “pain” and “pleasure” to refer “not only [to] bodily pain and pleasure, but [to] whatsoever delight or uneasiness is felt by us.”³ Henry Sidgwick similarly explains in *Methods of Ethics* that “pleasure” includes “every species of ‘delight,’ ‘enjoyment’ or ‘satisfaction’ ..., the most refined and subtle intellectual and emotional gratifications, no less than the coarser and more definite sensual enjoyments.”⁴ Leonard Katz, on a similar note, explains that “Pleasure, in the inclusive usages most important in moral psychology, ethical theory, and the studies of mind, includes all joy and gladness — all our feeling good, or happy. This is often contrasted with similarly inclusive pain, or suffering, which is similarly thought of as including all our feeling bad.”⁵

This inclusive usage gives the heterogeneity objection momentum. Consider and compare the pleasures we get from the following activities, all of which are pleasures in the inclusive sense of the term: Being massaged, eating candy, smelling fragrance, scoring a goal in a football match, listening to Rachmaninoff, having self-esteem, reading a well-crafted philosophy paper, and being in love. These experiences appear to be qualitatively very different. So is it clear that there is a single quality running through all of them? Socrates, in the *Philebus*, thought not:

If one just goes by the name, then pleasure is one single thing, but in fact it comes in many forms that are quite unlike each other. Think about it: we say that a mad man gets pleasure, and also that a sober-minded person takes pleasure in his very sobriety. Again, we say that a fool, though full of foolish opinions and hopes, gets

³ John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1690/1975), II, XX, §15.

⁴ Henry Sidgwick, *The Methods of Ethics*, 7th ed. (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing, 1907/1981), 93; 127.

⁵ Leonard Katz, “Pleasure,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2009 Edition). Edward N. Zalta (Ed.), URL = <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2009/entries/pleasure/>>. Some philosophers oppose this wide usage of the terms “pleasure” and “pain.” Roger Crisp suggests that rather than speaking of “pleasure” and “pain” in this wide sense, we should speak of “enjoyment” and “suffering.” Stuart Rachels suggests that we can keep “pleasure,” but that we should not use “pain” as its antonym. “Pain,” Rachels suggests, should more narrowly be reserved for the negative experiences brought about by nociception, and he argues that the proper antonym for pleasure is “unpleasure.” I have no principled reason to oppose such word usage, but for the sake of simplicity I keep to the wide usage of “pleasure” and “pain” in this paper. See Roger Crisp, *Reasons and the Good* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 103–109; Stuart Rachels, “Six Theses About Pleasure,” *Philosophical Perspectives*, Vol. 18, No. 1, 2004, 247–48.

pleasure, but likewise a wise man takes pleasure in his wisdom. But surely anyone who said in either case that these pleasures are like one another would rightly be regarded as a fool.⁶

Derek Parfit would avoid being regarded as a fool:

Compare the pleasure of satisfying an intensive thirst or lust, listening to music, solving an intellectual problem, reading a tragedy, and knowing that one's child is happy. These various experiences do not contain any distinctive common quality.⁷

So would Fred Feldman:

Consider the warm, dry drowsy feeling of pleasure that you get while sunbathing on a quiet beach. By 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.⁸

Turning from pleasures to pains, imagine and compare the following: headaches, car sickness, muscle cramps, paper cuts, nightmares, toothaches, hangovers, hunger pangs, guilt, freezing, burning, boredom, and the smell of milk gone sour. These experiences also appear to be qualitatively very different, and it seems no clearer in the case of pains than in the case of pleasures that they share a unifying quality. As Rem B. Edwards writes, "[t]he disagreeable feeling of intense grief over the death of a loved one is just not the same kind of disagreeable feeling as that of a burn, a bee sting, or toothache."⁹ Pains seem to be radically different from one another, and even simple sensory pains—pains as recognized by Crisp and Rachels (see footnote 5)—vary in ways that seem to defy strict quantification. Sensory pain is not a single feeling that, when present, varies solely in terms of more and less. Sensory pain can be pulsing, throbbing, flashing, shooting, pricking, stabbing, wrenching, sore, numb, tearing, etc., and these differences are qualitative, not quantitative.

⁶ Plato, *Philebus*, trans. by Dorothea Frede, *Plato: Complete works*, J. Cooper (ed.) (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishers, 1997), 12c-d.

⁷ Derek Parfit, *Reasons and Persons* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), 493.

⁸ Fred Feldman, *Pleasure and the Good Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 79.

⁹ Rem B. Edwards, *Pleasures and Pains: A Theory of Qualitative Hedonism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1979), 40.

In light of such considerations, Edwards suggests a pluralist account according to which “pleasure” and “pain” have a “variety of referents rather than a single referent.” The belief that pleasures and pains are unified, he claims—echoing Socrates—stems from the naïve assumption that what goes under one name must share one unifying quality. In Edwards’ view, “the word ‘pleasure’ refers to *many different* inner qualities of feeling which we find interesting and desire to sustain, cultivate, and repeat; and the word ‘pain’ refers to many different inner qualities of feeling which we find objectionable and desire to terminate and avoid.” The best we can hope for, in Edwards’ view, is therefore a Wittgensteinian family resemblance relation between various pleasures and pains.¹⁰

If the best we can hope for is family resemblance, then unity and commensurability are threatened, since on this view, not all members of the group pleasures (or pains) share a property that accounts for why these, and only these, are members of the group pleasures (or pains). Moreover, if pleasures (or pains) do not share a unifying property, they cannot be commensurated in terms of this (non-existent) property.

One way to respond to this is to concede that pleasures and pains are in fact not unified and commensurable, and that in treating them as such, we make a mistake. If, however, we are not willing to give up on unity and commensurability, there are logically two ways to proceed. The first option is to claim that the heterogeneity objection is without merit, and that pleasures and pains are in fact homogeneous. I believe this option is off the table, since it is undeniable that there is a great diversity among pleasures and pains. A second option is to argue that, in some sense, heterogeneity is compatible with unity and commensurability. I believe this is a more tenable approach, and in the following I shall present and assess three theories that seek such reconciliation. I shall first look at response theory and split experience theory, and argue that these are unsuccessful. Thereafter I shall introduce a third theory, dimensionalism, and argue that this theory succeeds.

2. Response Theory

Response theory is a cluster of views according to which pleasure and pain experiences are unified and commensurable, not by virtue of sharing a unique

¹⁰ Edwards, 34–35, 73.

experiential quality, but by virtue of how we respond to them.¹¹ To my knowledge, the earliest formulation of response theory is found in the Henry Sidgwick's *Methods of Ethics*. Sidgwick writes:

[W]hen 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 term “desirable” ... I propose to define Pleasure ... as a feeling which, when experienced by intelligent beings, is at least implicitly apprehended as desirable or—in cases of comparison—preferable.¹²

There are several versions of response theory. William Alston argues that pleasure is a unified experience by virtue of being “an experience which, as of the moment, one would rather have than not have.”¹³ A similar view is defended by L. W. Sumner, who argues that “what all pleasures share is not a homogeneous feeling tone, but the fact that they are ... objects of some positive attitude on our part.”¹⁴ This view is also suggested by Rem B. Edwards alongside his family resemblance view. “‘Pleasures’ and ‘pains,’” Edwards writes, “are feelings which in the former case we wish to sustain and repeat and in the latter we wish to eliminate and avoid.”¹⁵

Response theory offers a possible way to reconcile heterogeneity with unity and commensurability. First, response theory has no problem accounting for heterogeneity. Since it locates unity not in the quality of our experiences, but in our responses to our experiences, it places no restrictions on how diverse our experiences may be. Admittedly, the response in question can be glossed in different terms (in terms of affect, want, like, desire, etc.). Regardless of what our favorite gloss is, however, response theory seems to offer a way out of the problem, since all likely glosses appear to admit of unity and commensurability. Let me exemplify this using “desire.” All species of desiring have a property in common that accounts for why these, and only these, are desires: a certain attraction and repulsion. This unifying property, moreover, admits of

¹¹ This view is sometimes referred to as “externalism.” See L. W. Sumner, *Welfare, Happiness, and Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 87–91.

¹² Sidgwick, 127.

¹³ William Alston, “Pleasure,” *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, P. Edwards, ed., (New York: Macmillan Publishers, 1967), 345.

¹⁴ Sumner labels this the “attitude model.” See Sumner, 90.

¹⁵ Edwards, 35.

commensuration, since every attraction and every repulsion, regardless of its other properties, has a certain strength or pull, and this strength or pull exists in terms of more or less. As such, it seems that response theory can reconcile heterogeneity with unity and commensurability.

A problem with response theory, however, is that it appears to be the solution to the wrong problem: It appears to be the solution to the problem of whether or not attraction and repulsion (or whatever response one chooses) are unified and commensurable, not the problem of whether pleasures and pains are unified and commensurable. The only way in which response theory could account for the unity and commensurability of *pleasures* and *pains* is if pleasures and pains were just responses: if a pleasure were a pleasure by virtue of its attractive force and a pain were a pain by virtue of its repulsive force.

This position, which I shall label *strong* response theory, is held by some. Richard Brandt, for example, argues that “for an experience to be pleasurable is for it to make the person want its continuation.”¹⁶ Similarly, Richard Hall argues that “The unpleasantness of pain sensations consists in their being disliked,”¹⁷ and Chris Heathwood suggests that “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*.”¹⁸ Christine Korsgaard also defends a version of strong response theory. Korsgaard writes:

The painfulness of pain consists in the fact that these are sensations which we are inclined to fight ... 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?¹⁹

Strong response theory, as suggested by Brandt, Hall, Heathwood, and Korsgaard, does offer a possible solution to the problem of the unity and

¹⁶ Richard Brandt, *A Theory of the Good and the Right* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), 38.

¹⁷ Richard Hall, “Are Pains Necessarily Unpleasant?” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, Vol. 49, No. 4, 1989, 649.

¹⁸ Chris Heathwood, “The Reduction of Sensory Pleasure to Desire,” *Philosophical Studies*, Vol. 128, No. 3, 2007, 32.

¹⁹ Christine Korsgaard, *The Sources of Normativity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996, 147–8.

commensurability of pleasures and pains. It does so, however, at a high cost, and I shall now argue that the view is almost certainly false.

A first problem is that strong response theory appears to get things backwards. To see why, we can approach the relationship between pleasure and desire with a Euthyphro question: Do we desire things because they are pleasurable, or are things pleasurable because we desire them? Think of pancakes. When you desire pancakes, do you desire them because they are pleasurable or are they pleasurable because you desire them? Introspection seems to favor the former over the latter: You desire pancakes because of their pleasurable taste. Indeed, accepting the alternative view seems to have an awkward implication: If things are pleasurable by virtue of being desired, then we can never use “because it is pleasurable” as an explanation of why we desire something, and the statement “I desire pancakes because they are pleasurable” would be empty, amounting to “I desire pancakes because I desire them.” The only explanation that could be given granted strong response theory is an explanation of this form: “I desire pancakes because of their sweetness.” This is an explanation, but it leads to a regress, for why does one like sweetness? At every point, the strong desire theorist must answer “because I desire it.” In criticizing this view, Andrew Moore argues that it is “hard to see how merely directing one joyless entity at another might constitute a joyful whole,”²⁰ and in T. L. S. Sprigge’s view, strong response theory ends up with “a strikingly joyless picture of pleasure.”²¹ The picture is joyless since, if it is correct, the reason why we desire something is never that it feels good, but always merely the fact that we are drawn towards it.²²

A second problem is that strong response theory makes it a necessary truth that we desire all pleasures and are averse to all pains. Though pleasure and desire, and pain and aversion, are intimately related, it seems that we can both fail to desire a pleasure and fail to be averse to a pain. Think, for example, of masochism. It also seems that we can experience (mild) pain without desiring to end or weaken it and (mild) pleasure without desiring that it continues. If this is

²⁰ Andrew Moore, “Hedonism,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2008 Edition). Edward N. Zalta (Ed.). URL = <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2008/entries/hedonism/>>.

²¹ T. L. S. Sprigge, *The Rational Foundations of Ethics* (London: Routledge, 1988), 131–132.

²² Similar criticisms have been raised by Stuart Rachels and Elinor Mason. See Stuart Rachels “Is Unpleasantness Intrinsic to Unpleasant Experiences?” *Philosophical Studies*, Vol. 99, No. 2, 2000, 187–210; Elinor Mason, “The Nature of Pleasure: A Critique of Feldman,” *Utilitas*, Vol. 19, No. 3, 2007, 379–87.

right, then pleasure and pain are conceptually independent of desire and repulsion.

A third problem is that response theory makes desire-satisfactionism and hedonism identical theories. Though this might not be a fatal implication, it is an odd one, since having one's desires satisfied seems to be different from experiencing pleasure. I can imagine feeling pleasure without having my desires satisfied (if I am pleasantly surprised, say, and I do not have time to form any desires) and having my desires satisfied without feeling pleasure (if I have long desired something, yet find that having my desire satisfied does not give me the pleasure I expected). In conjunction with the three earlier worries, this mounts a considerable weight against strong response theory.²³

We should ask, however, what could plausibly motivate strong response theory. I see three sources of motivation. The first source of motivation is that desires often correlate with, and sometimes contribute to elevating, the hedonic level of an experience. If one strongly desires a bottle of special French wine—say, one has been waiting a month to have it delivered and has dreamed about it at night—one's desiring is likely to influence how good one finds that the wine tastes. If one pays attention to such cases, however, I believe one will realize that what goes on is that the desiring works causally as a factor that raises the hedonic level of the experience. It is by virtue of altering the way one experiences the wine that the desire becomes significant. In and by itself, the desire would not be pleasurable. As Aaron Smuts has pointed out, desiring by itself is often more painful than pleasurable.²⁴

A second source of motivation is that strong response theory helps solve cases such as the *coffee paradox*. The coffee paradox is the curious fact that coffee tends to taste bad when you are a child but good when you are an adult, even though qualitatively, coffee seems to taste the same at both stages. Coffee, it appears, has the same taste when you are a child and when you are an adult—it is just that when you are an adult, you find its taste pleasurable. This paradox might lend support to the view that the pleurability of an experience is not intrinsic to the experience. If pleurability were intrinsic to our experiences, then presumably the pleasure and pain element in the experience could not change without the quality of the experience changing. If response theory is correct, however, the coffee paradox is not a paradox at all: As adults, we simply

²³ For a more in-depth discussion of these points, see Aaron Smuts, "The Feels Good Theory of Pleasure," *Philosophical Studies*, Vol. 155, No. 2, 2010, 241–265.

²⁴ Ibid.

come to desire a new gustatory quality. This might count in favor of response theory, but as I shall argue below, response theory is not the only theory that has resources to resolve the coffee paradox.

Apart from the fact that desire satisfaction tends to be pleasurable and its solution to the coffee paradox, it therefore seems that the central motivation for holding strong response theory is that it helps solve the heterogeneity problem. That, however, is not a motivation that lends epistemic support to the theory. Thus, if neither the fact that desires correlate with pleasures nor the coffee paradox provides us with a strong reason to favor response theory over competing theories, it seems that strong response theory should be rejected in light of its oddities. If so, we might retreat to weak response theory, but that theory is not relevant in this context, since weak response theory is a theory about desire and repulsion, not about pleasure and pain.

3. Split Experience Theory

Let us now turn to a theory that seeks to reconcile heterogeneity with unity and commensurability without locating unity and commensurability in our responses to our experiences: split experience theory. According to split experience theory, our experiences have two components: One qualitative component (which is heterogeneous, disunified, and incommensurable) and one hedonic component (which is homogeneous, unified, and commensurable). The most famous advocate of split experience theory is Jeremy Bentham. In *Principles of Morals and Legislation*, Bentham concedes that in one respect, our pleasure and pain experiences are heterogeneous. There are, he writes, “pleasures of sense, pleasures of wealth, pleasures of skill, pleasures of power, pleasures of piety,” and these all have different qualitative feels.²⁵ The crux, however, is that although they all have a qualitatively different feel, they differ only quantitatively with respect to their pleurability. The “pleasure part” of an experience, Bentham argues, is something separate from the qualitative experience; it “accompanies,” is “derived from,” “results from,” or is “produced by” our qualitative experiences. If Bentham is right, then if you have a headache, you do not just have one experience, but two experiences: A certain qualitative feeling in your head in conjunction with a certain hedonic level attached to that qualitative feeling.

²⁵ Jeremy Bentham, *Principles of Morals and Legislation*, J. H. Burns and H. L. A. Hart (eds.) (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1781/1996), 43–46.

To visualize Bentham's theory, imagine that you have an inner *hedonometer*. Depending on what sensory inputs you have, the marker on the hedonometer goes either up or down, or it stands still, giving you an experience at a certain hedonic level. The hedonometer can be bombarded with all kinds of heterogeneous information from your senses, but it still makes a sum of these experiences, so that the hedonometer, at any given time, marks a certain hedonic level. In this respect, the hedonometer is just like a thermometer. A thermometer can also receive a lot of heterogeneous information—from, say, sunbeams, boiling water, and ice cubes—but irrespective of the heterogeneity of the input, condense all the information into a certain point on a quantitative scale.

If our experiences of pleasure and pain are like Bentham suggests, then we can have non-hedonic experiences that vary qualitatively and hedonic experiences—produced by and attached to these—that vary quantitatively. Bentham's theory can thus save heterogeneity since it makes room for heterogeneity on the qualitative side of our experiences. It can save unity, moreover, since it makes room for unity on the quantitative side. Pleasures and pains, on this view, are unified since there is something that all pleasures and all pains have in common that accounts for why these and only these are pleasures and pains, namely being either high or low on the hedonic scale. As Rem B. Edwards explains Bentham's view, this is how Bentham can claim that “the quality of pleasure is always the same no matter how it is obtained.”²⁶ Being high or low on the hedonic scale, moreover, is a property that exists in terms of more and less and thus it allows for commensuration. For this reason, Bentham can claim that pleasures and pains are unified and commensurable without rejecting heterogeneity.²⁷

Though I think we should concede that this view, if true, would account for unity and commensurability, it is doubtful if it is true. Human nature could perhaps have been like Bentham describes it, but as it happens to be, it probably

²⁶ Edwards, 34.

²⁷ A first reading of Bentham might give the impression that he holds that pleasures and pains, *qua* pleasures and pains, vary qualitatively. Bentham lists seven axes along which pleasure and pain can vary: intensity, duration, certainty, propinquity, fecundity, purity, and extent. With the exception of intensity and duration, however, none of these concern matters intrinsic to the nature of pleasure and pain. The other axes concern the different causal roles that pleasures and pain can play, and the different ways in which they can be distributed. “Purity,” in Bentham's words, refers not to the phenomenological purity of a pleasure or pain, but to “the chance it has of *not* being followed by sensations of the *opposite* kind: that is, pains, if it be pleasure: pleasures, if it be pain.” “Extent” concerns the number of individuals who experience pleasure or pain. Bentham, 38–40.

is not.

Stuart Rachels has presented an introspective argument against Bentham's view, using the example of jamming one's finger. When you jam your finger, Rachels argues, you experience just one thing, not two things. You do not experience a certain feeling in the finger, which by itself is hedonically neutral, and in addition to that, feel a general shift in hedonic level. Rather, Rachels claims, the pain you feel is just as located and immediately present in the finger as is the qualitative sensation. Indeed, Rachels argues, you feel just one thing: *pain in the finger*.²⁸ This seems right, and if it is right, it creates an explanatory problem for split experience theory: If we have two experiences, why does it seem as if we have just one?

Karl Duncker has presented a similar argument, appealing to the phenomenology of wine drinking.²⁹ Duncker seeks to clarify what counts as a cause, and what does not count as a cause, of the pleasures we get from drinking wine. To do this, Duncker asks and answers a series of questions. First he asks: Is the wine a cause of the pleasure we get? His answer is yes. Second: Is the *drinking* of the wine a cause of the pleasure we get? Yet, again he argues that yes, the drinking of the wine is also a cause of the pleasure. Third: Is the *experience* of drinking the wine a cause of the pleasure we get? Here Duncker's answer is no. The experience of drinking the wine is not a cause of the pleasure of wine drinking. Rather, the experience *is* the pleasure of wine drinking; it is the very taste of the wine that *constitutes* the pleasure of drinking the wine. The pleasure, Duncker claims, is *in* the experience. If he is right, then split experience theory introduces one step too many.

A third objection has been raised by William Alston. Alston argues that if our experiences were split the way Bentham suggests, then feelings of pleasure would distract us from the particular things that we find pleasurable. Granted that our attention is generally drawn toward pleasures, it would seem, on Bentham's view, that intensely pleasurable experiences, such as having sex, would draw our attention away from what we are doing and over to the hedonic level itself, which is supposedly an experience separate from the qualitative experience of having sex. This, however, seems not to be the case. Rather, the opposite seems to be the case: The more pleasure we get from an activity, the more our attention tends to be drawn towards that activity.³⁰

²⁸ Rachels, "Is Unpleasantness Intrinsic to Unpleasant Experiences?," 196.

²⁹ Karl Duncker, "On Pleasure, Emotion, and Striving," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, Vol. 1, No. 4, 1941, 398–99.

³⁰ Alston, 345.

A fourth problem for split experience theory is to explain how different parts of our experiential field can simultaneously have different hedonic tones. Try eating a chocolate bar while pinching your finger. If you do, you will (if you are like me) feel pleasure and pain simultaneously in different parts of your experiential field. Though a sufficiently strong pain grabs one's attention and overrides other experiences, it seems that if both the pleasure and the pain in question are fairly mild, we can simultaneously feel both. This is mysterious if our pleasure and pain level is determined by an inner hedonometer. It seems that the only way Bentham could account for a plurality of hedonic tones is by positing several hedonometers or by holding that one hedonometer can record several different hedonic levels simultaneously. Such a move—although perhaps not impossible—would deprive the theory of the explanatory simplicity that makes it appealing in the first place. For these reasons, split experience theory seems unappealing.

Again however, we should ask what counts in this theory's favor. Although I do not believe split experience theory is as fundamentally mistaken as strong response theory is, I see few reasons to positively believe in it—except for the fact that split experience theory allows for heterogeneity while saving unity and commensurability. That, however, does not lend the theory epistemic support. The only additional reason could be that split experience theory also neatly explains the coffee paradox, and does so without resorting to response theory. If split experience theory is correct, the coffee paradox is explained by certain qualitative feels changing causal connections to our inner hedonometer. Split experience theory, however, is not the only non-response theory that can explain the coffee paradox. In lack of further supporting reasons, the theory should be rejected.³¹

If we reject both response theory and split experience theory, however, it seems difficult to account for unity and commensurability in face of the heterogeneity objection, for it seems that, in some sense, that which is unified and commensurable must be separate from that which is heterogeneous. Thus, to account for the unity and commensurability of pleasures and pains, it seems that

³¹ It should be said in Bentham's defense, however, that his theory fares somewhat better when it comes to pleasure than when it comes to pain. Pleasures have more of a holistic feel to them, and are not located in the same way as pains. While you can have a pain in your index finger, you can't really have a pleasure in your index finger; pleasures seem to be much more "inside" and "everywhere," as if the qualitative feel caused a higher hedonic level in us. I do not, however, think that this is sufficient to support split experience theory, and as such that the theory—though not obviously false—should be rejected.

pleasures and pains must be either extrinsic to our experiences (response theory), or at least, extrinsic to the qualitative part of our experiences (split experience theory). After all, it seems impossible that the very same phenomenon can be both heterogeneous and unified at the same time.

One theory, or quasi-theory, that might be seen as countering this, and that should be addressed parenthetically, has recently been suggested by Aaron Smuts. In Smuts' view, "pleasurable experiences are those that feel good." This is a refreshingly plain and obvious answer to the question of what pleasure (and conversely, pain) consists in, but as Smuts himself admits: "This is not an illuminating suggestion."³² The reason why is that it is closer to a restatement than to an explanation or an analysis. Smuts argues, however, that we cannot take for granted that it is possible to give an explanation or an analysis of what pleasure is. At a certain point, our explanatory and analytic regress must come to an end, and pleasure might be the natural place to stop. Phenomenally, pleasure seems to be a *sui generis* experience, and *qua sui generis* experience, it might well not permit further analysis. Perhaps James Mill was thus right in claiming that all we can really say about pleasure is that: "A man knows it, by feeling it; and this is the whole account of the phenomenon."³³ This might be right, and if so, Smuts might have given the most thorough explanation that can be given. Facing the heterogeneity problem, however, saying that "all pleasures feel good" is not an answer that is likely to move those critical of unity and commensurability. Smuts' theory amounts only to "look!" or "feel!" but we can neither see nor feel that pleasures and pains are unified and commensurable. If the "feels good" theory is the best we can hope for, therefore, the evidence for unity and commensurability is scant.

I believe, however, that a better account of the nature of pleasure and pain—and their unity and commensurability—can be given, and I shall now present and briefly defend this view. This view lies close to both split experience theory and Smuts' "feels good" theory, but avoids the central problems that these theories face.

4. Dimensionalism

Dimensionalism is the theory that pleasure and pain have the ontological status

³² Smuts, 256.

³³ James Mill, *Analysis of the Human Mind* (London: Longmans Green Reader and Dyer, 1869), Vol. 2, 184.

as opposite ends of a hedonic dimension along which experiences vary. Several philosophers have earlier hinted to this view, but none have worked it out in detail. I will now work it out in some detail, defend it, and explain how it offers a solution to the problem of the unity and commensurability of pleasures and pains.

An early hint towards dimensionalism is found in C. D. Broad's *Five Types of Ethical Theory*. Broad writes:

[T]here is a quality, which we cannot define but are perfectly acquainted with, which may be called 'Hedonic Tone.' It has two determinate forms of Pleasantness and Unpleasantness. And, so far as I can see, it can belong *both* to Feelings and to those Cognitions which are also Emotions or Connotations. ... 'A pleasure' then is simply any mental event which has the pleasant form of hedonic tone, and 'a pain' is simply any kind of mental event which has the unpleasant form of hedonic tone. There is not a special *kind* of mental events, called 'pleasures and pains;' and to think that there is is as if one should solemnly divide human beings into men, women, and blondes. It is of course true that the commonest, and some of the most intense, pleasures and pains are feelings, in my sense of the word. But remorse, which is memory of certain events, having a certain emotional tone, is plainly a pain as much as a toothache. And hope, which is expectation of certain events, having a certain emotional tone, is plainly as much a pleasure as the sensation of smell which we get from a rose or a violet.³⁴

What Broad suggests in this paragraph is that pleasures and pains, rather than being separate kinds of experiences, are "tones" or "qualities" of other experiences. This is emphasized by his further claim that "any mental event which has hedonic quality will always have other qualities as well."³⁵ Pleasure and pain, on Broad's view, do not ontologically belong on level with experiences such as experiential sweetness, greenness, and warmth. Rather, pleasure and pain are tones with which all experiences—including sweetness, greenness, and warmth—are imbued.

A similar view is proposed by Duncker, who argues that every pleasure and every pain is a "side," a "property," an "abstract part," or a "hedonic tone pervading an experience," and that in and by themselves, pleasure and pain are "essentially incomplete experience[s]" that cannot exist in the absence of any

³⁴ C. D. Broad, *Five Types of Ethical Theory* (London: Routledge, 1930), 229–30.

³⁵ Ibid.

particular experience being pleasurable or painful.³⁶

Clarifying the dimensionalist position by means of analogy, Shelly Kagan suggests that pleasure and pain are related to qualitative experiences the same way auditory volume is related to sounds. Auditory volume, Kagan observes, is neither a component nor an object of auditory experience, but rather, an “aspect of sounds.” Applying the analogy to pleasures, Kagan suggests that we should “identify pleasantness not as a component of experiences, but rather as a *dimension* along which experiences can vary.” The fact that pleasure is not a kind of experience, then—returning to the analogy—is just as “obvious” as the fact that “loudness is not a *kind* of sound.” Rather than being a “kind of sound,” loudness is a dimension along which sounds vary.³⁷ Thus *dimensionalism*.

Dimensionalism, as I defend it here, is the claim that:

- (1) Pleasure and pain are opposite sides of a dimension along which experiences vary.
- (2) All experiences belong at a certain point on a hedonic dimension.

This further claim has been proposed by John Searle, who argues in *The Rediscovery of the Mind* that a “general feature of each modality [of consciousness] is that it can occur under the aspect of pleasant or unpleasant.” One can always, Searle claims, ask about an experience: “Was it fun or not?,” “Did you enjoy it or not?,” “Were you in pain, exasperated, annoyed, amused, bothered, ecstatic, nauseous, disgusted, enthusiastic, terrified, irritated, enchanted, happy, unhappy, etc.?”³⁸ On this view, whenever you experience something—spotting a friend, tasting honey, feeling an itch, reading a paper, coughing, or seeing a blue dot—one of the dimensions along which that experience varies is a hedonic dimension.

In this paper I commit to (1), but not to (2). There are two reasons why. First, (2) is rendered less certain than (1) by the fact that the hedonic dimension, unlike most other dimensions, is a dimension with axes stretching out on both

³⁶ Duncker, 400.

³⁷ Shelly Kagan, “The Limits of Well-Being,” *Social Philosophy & Policy*, Vol. 9, No. 2, 1992, 170–72. Aaron Smuts might also be interpreted in this direction when he writes that pleasure is “a tone that cannot be cleanly extracted or focused on apart from the experience itself,” and that “pleasure is not a distinct form of experience.” Smuts, 16.

³⁸ John Searle, *The Rediscovery of the Mind* (Cambridge; Mass: MIT Press, 1992), 38; 129.

sides of the zero point. It is unclear, moreover, what the difference is between an experience being at the zero point on the scale and an experience not being on the scale—the latter of which would seemingly be incompatible with (2). Second, the problem of reconciling heterogeneity with unity and commensurability does not depend on the truth or falsity of (2). If (2) is false, this restricts the range of experiences that are pleasurable or painful. It does not, however, alter the fact that those experiences which are pleasurable or painful are also unified and commensurable.

What reasons do we have to believe in (type 1) dimensionalism? Providing a comprehensive defense would require work beyond the scope of this paper. I shall, however, indicate my reasons for favoring it over competing theories. Let me start by explaining how dimensionalism solves the challenges raised against response theory and split experience theory.

Dimensionalism faces none of the problems faced by response theory. Since dimensionalism holds that pleurability and painfulness are intrinsic to our experiences, it comes out on the intuitive side of the Euthyphro problem: It allows for explanations of liking in terms of pleasure and pain. For this reason, it has no problem accounting for hedonic surprises, and dimensionalism leaves open the question of whether there is a necessary connection between pleasure and liking.

At the same time, dimensionalism does not face the problems faced by split experience theory. First, dimensionalism has no problem explaining why pleasurable experiences are not distracting. If hedonic tones relate to experiences the same way auditory volume relates to sounds, then pleasure should distract no more from pleasurable experiences than volume distracts from sounds. On the contrary, it should attract attention, and this is what it does. For a similar reason, dimensionalism does not have a problem explaining why, when we jam a finger, we feel pain right there in the finger, since according to dimensionalism, it is the very feeling in the finger that is imbued with a negative hedonic tone. Moreover, dimensionalism has no problem explaining how we can simultaneously experience different hedonic tones in different parts of our experiential field, since there is nothing in dimensionalism that forbids different experiences from simultaneously having different hedonic tone.³⁹ This becomes clear if we formulate dimensionalism in terms of qualia. Formulated in terms of qualia,

³⁹ For an interesting discussion of this, favoring the same conclusion, see George Plochmann, "Some Neglected Considerations on Pleasure and Pain," *Ethics*, Vol. 61, No. 1, 1950, 54–55.

dimensionalism holds that rather than pleasure being a quale and pain being a quale, pleasure and pain are the opposite sides of a dimension along which qualia vary (or perhaps: exist). To the extent that we can simultaneously experience several qualia, we can also experience several hedonic tones.

Dimensionalism also offers a solution to the coffee paradox. It can solve the paradox since it does not hold that hedonic tone is part of the object or the content of an experience. Holding that hedonic tone is a dimension along which experiences vary, dimensionalism allows for a compatibility range between qualitative experiences and hedonic tones. Broad discusses the issue of compatibility range in *Five Kinds of Ethical Theory*. He asks:

[Is the] connexion between such and such non-hedonic quality *merely* causal and logically *contingent*, or is it intrinsically necessary? It is, e.g., logically possible that there should have been minds which had experiences exactly like our experiences of acute toothache in all their *sensible* qualities, but in whom these sensations were *pleasantly* toned?⁴⁰

Broad does not answer the question. Duncker does, however, and writes that “A feeling-tone of pleasantness may reside in any kind of experience.”⁴¹ I am not convinced that Duncker is right in holding that pleasantness may reside in *any* kind of experience. It is not certain that the qualitative feeling of being burned could ever have a positive hedonic tone. How wide the compatibility range happens to be, however, is not something that must be defined in order to defend dimensionalism; the crucial point is that dimensionalism allows for a compatibility range. To the extent that it does, it allows for an experience to be imbued with different hedonic tones at different points in time.

Dimensionalism can also explain how we are able to experience pleasure and pain, even though, as a puzzled James Mill noted in *Analysis of the Human Mind*, pleasure and pain have “neither organ, nor object.” We have no designated pleasure and pain organ, and pleasures and pains are not objects in our environment that we occasionally stumble upon. Rather, Mill notes, “We have pleasures and pains of the eye, the ear, of the touch, the taste, the smell...”⁴² Dimensionalism makes sense of why this is so. If pleasure and pain are dimensions of experiences as such, we need neither hedonic objects nor a

⁴⁰ Broad, 231.

⁴¹ Duncker, 412.

⁴² Mill, Vol. 1, 37; Vol. 2, 185.

designated hedonic sense. Rather, we should expect pleasurability and painfulness to be distributed along all sensory modalities—and this seems to be how it is, since both sound, sight, taste, smell, and touch can be hedonically valenced. It is unclear what other ontological status than dimensions of experiences could account for this.

For these reasons, dimensionalism appears introspectively plausible. I also believe it makes sense biologically, however, and here is a speculative explanation of why: Evolution operates by the rule that a trait tends to be selected if and only if it promotes survival and reproduction. If we take for granted that consciousness evolved, consciousness would somehow have to promote survival and reproduction in order to be selected. If consciousness did not promote survival and reproduction, it would not be selected, and to the extent that it were biologically costly, it would be selected against. The only way consciousness could promote survival and reproduction, moreover, is by virtue of guiding an organism's actions, prompting it to perform survival and reproduction enhancing actions – and the only way in which consciousness could prompt an organism towards survival and reproduction seems to be by imbuing experiences with a certain valence or a pro/con attitude. Without a valence or a pro/con attitude, it is unclear how an experience would be able to guide an organism's actions. Evolution, moreover, cares for action, not for experiences as an end in itself. It therefore seems that if consciousness were to ever get going, valence would have to be present from the very start. Otherwise, consciousness would disappear as fast as it occurred. This suggests that hedonic valence phylogenetically is as old as consciousness itself, which in turn lends support to the view that hedonic valence lies at the heart of consciousness. This supports dimensionalism, moreover, since according to dimensionalism, pleasure and pain—rather than being two things out of the many things we can experience—imbues all (or, if (2) is false, almost all) our experiences. Indeed, one might, from a dimensionalist approach to consciousness, argue that the first experience any organism ever had was an experience of either pleasure or pain, and that consciousness of the kind our species has today is a more fine-grained version of something that is most fundamentally a pleasure/pain mechanism. This, if true, gives supports the dimensionalist view.

This speculation concludes my argument in support of dimensionalism. Let me now turn to the question of how dimensionalism can help reconcile

heterogeneity with unity and commensurability.⁴³

Dimensionalism has no problem allowing for heterogeneity, since it places no restrictions on how heterogeneous our experiences may be. It places no more restrictions on how heterogeneous pleasures may be than our common assumptions about loudness place restrictions on how heterogeneous sounds may be. At the same time, dimensionalism allows for unity. Shelly Kagan touches on this point when discussing pleasure's parallel to auditory volume. Kagan writes that a "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... ."⁴⁴ What unites all pleasures, according to dimensionalism, is the fact that they belong within a certain range on the hedonic dimension. What unites all pains is that they belong on the opposite range on the hedonic dimension. These are both instances of genuine unity, moreover, since it is by virtue of being on a certain range of the hedonic dimension that an experience is either a pleasure or a pain.⁴⁵

For a unified group to be commensurable, the property by virtue of which the group is unified must be a property that exists in terms of more and less. This is the case with pleasures and pains, according to dimensionalism, since these mark different points on a hedonic dimension, and dimensions—by their nature—exist in terms of more and less and thus allow for commensuration.

Dimensionalism, therefore, is not only an introspectively and biologically plausible theory of pleasure and pain. It also helps reconcile our two opposing intuitions: It explains why, in spite of phenomenal heterogeneity, pleasures and pains are unified and commensurable.

⁴³ A more thorough defense of dimensionalism would require addressing several other issues. The most central of these, I think, is the problem of explaining what mechanism determines what experiences are imbued with what hedonic tone. That, however, must be the topic of a different paper. My aim in this paper is merely to argue that dimensionalism is a very plausible theory, and that—if true—it solves the problem of the unity and commensurability of pleasures and pains.

⁴⁴ Kagan, 172.

⁴⁵ I also believe that a dimensionalist can agree with the traditionally arch-heterogeneous claim that there is probably no such thing as pure "pleasure" or pure "pain," and that all we ever experience is particular pleasures and particular pains. This is so because on the dimensionalist view, "pleasure" and "pain" are abstractions: They are concepts by which we isolate the property of being on either the positive or the negative side of the hedonic dimension, while omitting the particular distance from the zero point as well as the particular content of the experience. The fact that there are only particular pleasures and particular pains, therefore, need not be a threat to the unity and commensurability of pleasures and pains any more than the fact that there are only particular heats and particular cools is a threat to the unity and commensurability of heats and cools.

ESSAY 2

Hedonism and the Cluster Challenge

1. Introduction

What things are worth having, not only as a means to promote a further good, but as goods in and of themselves? Hedonism is the theory that only one thing is good in and of itself: pleasure (Greek: *hēdonē*); and that only one thing is bad in and of itself: pain. If we call something that is good in and of itself “intrinsically valuable,” and something that is bad in and of itself “intrinsically disvaluable,” we can formulate hedonism as the view that the following two premises are true:

P1: Pleasure is intrinsically valuable and pain is intrinsically disvaluable.

P2: Nothing other than pleasure is intrinsically valuable and nothing other than pain is intrinsically disvaluable.¹

In this paper I argue for hedonism by arguing for both of these premises. I first argue for P1, which I take to be the least controversial premise. This premise is least controversial because it does not rule out the possibility that things beside pleasure and pain can be intrinsically valuable and disvaluable; it merely states that pleasure is among the things that are intrinsically valuable and pain among the things that are intrinsically disvaluable.

Having made the case for P1, I turn to argue for the more controversial premise, P2, and I do so by arguing for the following conditional: If we grant that P1 is true, then we should reject the introduction of any further intrinsic values.

¹ $P1 \wedge P2 \supset \text{hedonism}$; $P1 \wedge \neg P2 \supset \text{pluralism that includes hedonic value}$; $\neg P1 \wedge P2 \supset \text{value anti-realism}$; $\neg P1 \wedge \neg P2 \supset \text{monism or pluralism that excludes hedonic value}$.

My argument for this rests on an observation that has hitherto been given little attention: that the non-hedonic intrinsic values suggested in the philosophical literature tend to be values that are crucial instrumental values if pleasure is the only intrinsic value and pain the only intrinsic disvalue. This observation, I argue, should make us favor hedonism over pluralistic theories, and there are two reasons why. First, appealing to Occam's razor, if one underlying principle can plausibly explain a phenomenon, we ought not to introduce a plurality of underlying principles. Second, the observation creates an explanatory challenge for those who extend their value theories to include intrinsic values other than pleasure and intrinsic disvalues other than pain. The challenge can be phrased as the following question: If values other than pleasure and disvalues other than pain are truly intrinsic values and disvalues in their own right, then why do they happen to cluster around pleasure and pain the way they do? I make the case that value pluralists are hard pressed to account for the clustering. Hedonists, on the other hand, can account for it through what I shall call evaluative association: our tendency, over time, to conflate intrinsic and instrumental values.

My aim in this paper is neither to provide a comprehensive case for hedonism nor to rebut the standard objections. More modestly, my aim is to bring one specific argument for hedonism to the table.

2. P1: Pleasure is intrinsically valuable and pain is intrinsically disvaluable

One of the most widely shared judgments about intrinsic value and intrinsic disvalue is that pleasure is intrinsically valuable and pain is intrinsically disvaluable. Irrespective of what other things might also be intrinsically valuable or disvaluable, it seems that pleasure is definitely among the intrinsic values and pain is definitely among the intrinsic disvalues. This is understandable, for there is something undeniably good about pleasure and something undeniably bad about pain, and neither the goodness of pleasure nor the badness of pain seems to be exhausted by the further effects that such experiences might have. Experiences of pleasure and pain seem to be valuable and disvaluable even when they occur in isolation from anything further. If this is right, then the respective value and disvalue of pleasure and pain is intrinsic, not instrumental.

This point is manifested in how we treat pleasure and pain in ordinary reasoning about values. If you tell me that you are heading for the convenience store, I might ask "What is that good for?" This question makes sense, for when

you go to the convenience store you usually do so, not merely for the sake of going to the convenience store, but for the sake of achieving something further that you deem to be valuable. You might answer, for example, “To buy soda.” This also makes sense, for soda is a nice thing and you can get it at the convenience store. I might further inquire, however, “What is buying the soda good for?” This further question is also reasonable, for it need not be obvious why you want the soda. You might answer, “Well, I want it for the pleasure of drinking it.” If I then ask, “But what is the pleasure of drinking the soda good for?” the discussion is likely to reach an awkward end. The reason why is that the pleasure of drinking the soda is not good for anything; rather, it is that for which going to the convenience store and buying the soda is good. As Aristotle writes: “We never ask [a man] what his end is in being pleased, because we assume that pleasure is choice worthy in itself.”² Presumably, a similar story can be told in the case of pains, for if someone says “This is painful!” we never respond by asking: “And why is that a problem?” We take for granted that if something is painful, we do not need a further reason to account for why it is bad.

If we are onto something in our everyday reasoning about values, it seems that pleasure and pain are both places where we reach rock bottom in matters of value, and as such, it seems that pleasure is intrinsically valuable and that pain is intrinsically disvaluable.

Although pleasure and pain seem like good candidates for intrinsic value and disvalue, several objections have been raised. These objections fall into three main categories: (1) the objection that pleasure and pain have instrumental but not intrinsic value; (2) the objection that intrinsic value lies in closely associated mental states, but not in pleasure and pain themselves, and (3) the objection that even though most pleasures and most pains might have intrinsic value and disvalue, there are evil pleasures that are not intrinsically valuable and noble pains that are not intrinsically disvaluable, and thus that pleasure as such is not intrinsically valuable and pain as such is not intrinsically disvaluable. Let us examine these objections in turn.

² Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. by Terence Irwin, 2nd ed. (Indianapolis, Ind.: Hackett Publishers, 1999), 1172b21-24.

2.1 *The Instrumental Value Objection*

In “Against the Intrinsic Value of Pleasure,” Matthew Pianalto argues that “pleasure has value, but not intrinsic value.”³ In Pianalto’s view, the value of pleasure is instrumental because of “the evolutionary role of pleasure as an experiential signal that both tracks individual well-being enhancing activity and motivates an individual to pursue things which contribute to his or her well-being.”⁴ “Pleasant experiences,” Pianalto claims, “emerged as a way of tracking and signaling resources and behaviors which contribute to the organism’s fitness,” and since their value thus “depends on their stable relationship to things and activities that are conducive to [well-being]” it appears that “pleasure has only instrumental value.”⁵

It is almost certainly true that our ability to experience pleasure evolved to help us act in ways that enhance our reproductive fitness. This, in turn, explains why pleasures track things that are conducive of reproductive fitness, such as eating, drinking, and having sex. Contrary to what Pianalto takes for granted, however, this fact need not be in conflict with the theory that pleasure is intrinsically valuable. The reason why is that “X tracks reproductive fitness” is compatible with “X is intrinsically valuable.” These two statements would be in conflict only on the premise that reproductive fitness exhausts the room of possible intrinsic values. Such a premise, however, is implausible.

To see why, imagine that you are forced to take a pill, but you are allowed to choose between taking Pill A and Pill B. If you take Pill A, you will experience excruciating pain for ten hours, and then you are back to normal. If you take Pill B, you will not experience any pain at all, but you will run a 1% extra chance of catching a cold next week. Which pill would it be best to take, Pill A or Pill B? If Pianalto is right, it is best to take Pill A, for this pill best promotes that which pleasure ultimately evolved to track: reproductive fitness. Claiming this, however, seems wrong, and it seems wrong for the reason that it ignores the disvalue that pain has even in isolation from its further negative effects. Denying this apparent disvalue, Pianalto’s theory borders on the absurd, for experiencing excruciating pain is bad, and it is bad also in cases where it has no effect on one’s reproductive fitness.

³ Matthew Pianalto, “Against the Intrinsic Value of Pleasure,” *Journal of Value Inquiry*, Vol. 43, 2009, 33–39. Though Pianalto discusses only pleasure and intrinsic value, I assume that the argument generalizes to encompass pain and intrinsic disvalue.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 33.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 34–36.

2.2 The Desire Objection

A related way to argue against the intrinsic value of pleasure and the intrinsic disvalue of pain is offered by desire-satisfactionism. Desire-satisfactionism allows us to hold that it is better to take Pill B than to take Pill A, and that this is better for the reason that this is the most pleasant and least painful option. A desire-satisfactionist would explain this, however, not ultimately by reference to pleasure being intrinsically valuable and pain being intrinsically disvaluable, but by reference to our tendency to desire pleasure and be averse to pain. On this view, we reach rock bottom in matters of value when we reach desire satisfaction and desire frustration.

Plausible as desire theories might sound, they face a number of problems. One problem is that it is puzzling how desire-satisfaction in and of itself could have the power to make anything valuable, be it experiences or anything else. To make this point, Shelly Kagan has presented the willfully bizarre example of someone who desires that the number of atoms in the universe to be prime.⁶ If someone had such a desire, would it follow that for this person, life would be better if the universe in fact had a prime number of atoms? It seems not. Roger Crisp, along the same lines, asks us to “consider the case of the *angry adolescent*. This boy's mother tells him he cannot attend a certain nightclub, so the boy holds a gun to his own head, wanting to pull the trigger and retaliate against his mother.”⁷ It seems clear that this boy's life would not be better as a result of pulling the trigger, even if he desires this a whole lot. Or imagine a devout Muslim who has a strong desire never to eat pork, yet now and then accidentally gets small amounts of pork in her diet. She never notices. Granted that the Islamic prohibition against eating pork is not (or at any rate: is no longer) well founded: Is this Muslim woman harmed by eating pork? It is hard to see how she could be harmed, even though it seems plain that her desire has been frustrated. As such, it seems that whether or not a desire is fulfilled or frustrated is not, in and of itself, of value significance.

One way for desire theorists to respond to such counterexamples is to put restrictions on the theory, for example, a restriction stating that the agent must

⁶ Shelly Kagan, “The Limits of Well-Being,” *Social Philosophy and Policy*, Vol. 9, 1992, 171. A famous parallel case is John Rawls' example of the mathematician desiring to count the grass blades on the Harvard lawn.

⁷ Roger Crisp, “Well-Being,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2008 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2008/entries/well-being/>>.

know whether or not the desire in question is fulfilled.⁸ Such a restriction makes desire-satisfactionism more in line with common sense, since both in the case of the man who wants the number of atoms in the universe to be prime and the Muslim who eats pork, the agent in question does not know if the desire has been fulfilled. The same is arguably true of the angry adolescent: If he kills himself, he will be dead, and then he will not know that his desire was indeed fulfilled.

Adding the knowledge clause, however, makes desire-satisfactionism lose some of the simplicity that made it plausible in the first place: If it is desire satisfaction that has ultimate value significance, one would need an additional argument to add the knowledge clause. Moreover, it seems that a reason why this view is more in line with common sense is that it lies closer to the hedonist position. According to hedonism, it might well be true that our Muslim is harmed by discovering that she had eaten pork, but this would have to be cashed out by reference to the anger, frustration, and guilt that she would feel when she got to know this, not by the mere fact that she got to know that her desire had not been fulfilled.

To show that desire-satisfaction is not valuable in and by itself, even when the agent gets to know the consequences, Derek Parfit has presented a thought experiment in which we are offered a highly addictive drug that is such that after we have taken it, we will have a strong desire for it every morning for the rest of our lives. We are guaranteed ample supplies of the drug for free. Taking the drug will not, however, give us any pleasure. Would it be good to start taking the drug? It seems not, and yet taking the drug will create a lot of desire satisfaction.⁹

What I think Parfit's example and other examples show is that desire-satisfactionism gets things backwards. It seems that what makes desire satisfaction good and desire frustration bad is the pleasure that tends to result from desire satisfaction and the pain that tends to result from desire frustration. In the absence of any hedonic impact, whether a desire is fulfilled or frustrated seems irrelevant. If this is right, it is wrong to cash out the value of pleasure and the disvalue of pain by reference to desire and aversion. Rather, it seems, the value of desire satisfaction should be cashed in terms of pleasure and the disvalue of desire frustration should be cashed out in terms of pain.

⁸ E.g. Chris Heathwood, "Desire Satisfactionism and Hedonism," *Philosophical Studies*, Vol. 128, No. 3, 2006, 540.

⁹ Derek Parfit, *Reasons and Persons* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), 497.

2.3 The 'Not All Intrinsic' Objection

Even if one concedes that pleasure and pain are valuable and disvaluable by virtue of themselves, and not (solely) by virtue of something further to which they contribute—whether to evolutionary fitness or to desire-satisfaction or to anything else—one can still oppose the view that pleasure and pain *as such* have intrinsic value and disvalue. One can argue that there are some pleasures that are not intrinsically valuable and some pains that are not intrinsically disvaluable. If such an argument succeeds, then pleasure and pain are not as such intrinsically valuable and disvaluable; only a subset are.

The examples traditionally used to make this argument are so-called “evil pleasures” and “noble pains.” Evil pleasures are pleasures such as *Schadenfreude* or *malice*, or pleasure taken in cruel acts, such as the pleasure that a rapist enjoys while raping. If pleasure is intrinsically valuable, then these pleasures, in and by themselves, must be as valuable as any other pleasures. They have to be, for as G. E. Moore points out, “To say that a kind of value is ‘intrinsic’ means merely that the question whether a thing possesses it, and in what degree it possess it, depends solely on the intrinsic nature of the thing in question.”¹⁰ Moreover, as David Lewis writes:

The intrinsic properties of something depend only on that one thing; whereas the extrinsic properties of something may depend, wholly or partly, on something else. If something has an intrinsic property [e.g. value], then so does any perfect duplicate of that thing; whereas duplicates situated in different surroundings will differ in their extrinsic properties.¹¹

If pleasure is intrinsically valuable, therefore, so is any duplicate, irrespective of the further causal or constitutive relationships in which it takes part.

This, however, seems to push hedonists toward accepting counterintuitive implications. To make this point, Irwin Goldstein asks us to “[t]hink of Austrian *Schutzstaffel* [SS] volunteers, who, after machine-gunning and mass-graving non-Aryan villagers in the ‘40s go on, in anonymity, to enjoy lives rich in pleasure and happiness.”¹² It does not seem good that they experience pleasure. Or, as is analogous, take sadistic torturers. As Jonathan Dancy argues, it seems very

¹⁰ Moore, “The Conception of Intrinsic Value,” Reprinted in *Principia Ethica*. Thomas Baldwin (ed.), 2nd edition, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 260.

¹¹ David Lewis, “Extrinsic Properties,” *Philosophical Studies*, Vol. 44, No. 2, 1983, 197.

¹² Irwin Goldstein, “Pleasure and Pain: Unconditional Intrinsic Values,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, Vol. 50, No. 2, 1989, 256.

counterintuitive to see any value in sadistic torturing; indeed, if we hear that a torturer actually *enjoyed* causing pain in his victims, we do not respond by saying, “Oh, at least it’s good that *he* enjoyed it.” Contrary to what should be expected if pleasure were an intrinsic value, the presence of pleasure in this scenario does not make it better. If anything, it makes it worse.¹³

The inverse story can be told in the case of pain. Though most pains might be bad, some pains seem to be good. It might be good, for example, to suffer along with someone who is subject to unjust harm or to grieve when in a funeral. In such contexts, suffering is better than enjoyment. Neglecting a victim of unjust harm for the sake of reading a comic book or entertaining a sexual fantasy while in a funeral might both be sources of pleasure, but it nonetheless seems that doing such things would be bad, not good. Moreover, there are more trivial everyday examples of pain being good, such as the pain you feel if you touch a hot stove. This pain is good because it makes you withdraw your hand and thus it helps you avoid serious injury. Our ability to feel pain evolved, after all, because it helps us avoid harm.

How might a hedonist respond? First, she might respond by emphasizing that she is not committed to the view that all pleasure is valuable and all pain is disvaluable. The only thing to which she is committed is that pleasures are *intrinsically* valuable and pains *intrinsically* disvaluable, and this is a more modest claim. It is more modest because it opens up for the possibility that though a certain pain might be intrinsically bad when viewed in isolation, it might have further effects that make it overall good. Similarly with pleasure: Though every pleasure is intrinsically good when seen in isolation, it might be situated in a context that makes its occurrence overall bad.

As such, and to take the simplest case first, someone who holds that pleasure is intrinsically good and pain is intrinsically bad can claim that it is good that we feel pain when our skin is burned—not because feeling the pain is good in and by itself, but because this helps us avoid skin damage and helps us stay clear of hot stoves in the future. This, however, does not challenge the fact that in isolation, the pain we feel when burned is bad indeed. Had it not been for

¹³ Jonathan Dancy, “Ethical Particularism and Morally Relevant Properties,” *Mind*, Irwin Goldstein, “Pleasure and Pain: Unconditional Intrinsic Values,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, Vol. 92, No. 368, 1983, 534. Aristotle makes the same point in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1175b27; See also Franz Brentano, *Origin of our Knowledge of Right and Wrong*, trans. by Cecil Hauge (Westminster: Archibald Constable, 1902), 90; Judith Jarvis Thomson, *Goodness and Advice* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 12.

the good consequences that followed, the pain would have been exclusively bad, and, as Irwin Goldstein argues, it seems to be precisely because of its badness that pain is able to play its protective role.¹⁴

I believe a strong case can be made that this explanatory model generalizes to other forms of good pains and bad pleasures. Take the case of entertaining a sexual fantasy while in a funeral. Someone who believes in the intrinsic value of pleasure would have to concede that when seen in isolation from the context in which it occurs, that pleasure is good. Importantly, however, they may also hold that it is bad in many other ways. It is bad, for example, because it results from and might help reinforce a serious lack in ability to value people and/or to deal with grief. Or take the sadistic torturer: Although someone who claims that pleasure is intrinsically good would have to maintain that when seen in isolation, this pleasure is good (for the torturer), she could also point out that the overall value of the occurrence of this pleasure is almost certainly negative. Most obviously, it is bad for the victim, since the pleasure gives the torturer a motivation to continue torturing. Also, it might be bad for the torturer, for it results from and might help reinforce a harmful psychological tendency. A similar explanation goes for the SS officers enjoying life in South America. If pleasure is intrinsically valuable, these officers' pleasure is also valuable (for them) when seen in isolation from the context in which it occurs. This, however, is not a bad thing to concede, since it is precisely the *context* that is supposed to make it bad, and by referring to this context, someone who believes in the intrinsic goodness of pleasure has ample resources for cashing out the badness both of their actions and of the fact that they are getting away with it. The pleasure in question, both in this case and in other cases, is instrumentally bad, and instrumental badness is as genuine a form of badness as is intrinsic badness.

It is understandable why we are reluctant to admit that the SS officers' pleasures are intrinsically good. It is, after all, bad that they are allowed to enjoy life after the atrocities that they have committed, and for this reason, we want their pleasure to be *really* bad and *thoroughly* bad. Wanting intrinsic badness as well as instrumental badness is overkill, and upon reflection, it seems very implausible that the things that are otherwise intrinsically valuable lose their intrinsic worth just in the contexts where they happen to be instrumentally disvaluable. It would be too lucky a coincidence, and the best explanation of our intuitions in such cases seems to be that in making the judgment that something

¹⁴ Goldstein, 258. Goldstein assumes that badness can be causally efficient.

is *really* bad, we conflate various forms of badness. Becoming aware of this, we should conclude that even in cases of great instrumental disvalue, pleasure is still intrinsically valuable, and even in cases of great instrumental value, pain is still intrinsically disvaluable.

So much for P1.

3. P2: Nothing other than pleasure is intrinsically valuable and nothing other than pain is intrinsically disvaluable

Though many would agree that P1 is true, they would claim that it is too restrictive if taken as an exhaustive account of what is intrinsically valuable and disvaluable. They would accept P1 but reject P2, arguing that there are intrinsic values besides pleasure and intrinsic disvalues besides pain. W. D. Ross, for example, claims that pleasure is indeed intrinsically valuable, but adds that so is knowledge and artistic activity.¹⁵ Noah Lemos adds consciousness, morally good actions, beauty, and flourishing to the list.¹⁶ The perhaps most complete list of suggested intrinsic values is provided by William Frankena:

life, consciousness, and activity; health and strength; pleasures and satisfactions of all or certain kinds; happiness, beatitude, contentment, etc.; truth; knowledge and true opinions of various kinds, understanding, wisdom; beauty, harmony, proportion in objects contemplated; aesthetic experience; morally good dispositions or virtues; mutual affection, love, friendship, cooperation; just distribution of goods and evils; harmony and proportion in one's own life; power and experiences of achievement; self-expression; freedom; peace, security; adventure and novelty; and good reputation, honor, esteem.¹⁷

These all seem to be reasonable suggestions of things worth having, not only for the sake of other things, but as goods in and of themselves. So what should we make of them? Is it clear, as G. E. Moore asks, that a hedonist can show “that all other things but pleasure, whether conduct or virtue of knowledge, whether life

¹⁵ W. D. Ross, *The Right and the Good* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1930), 134; *Foundations of Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1939), 270.

¹⁶ Noah Lemos, *Intrinsic Value* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 80, 92.

¹⁷ William Frankena, *Ethics* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1973), 87–88. Presumably, one could compile a similar list of disvalues.

or nature or beauty, are only good as a means to pleasure or for the sake of pleasure, never for their own sakes or as ends in themselves”?¹⁸

I think there are several things that should be said in response to the pluralistic challenge to hedonists. First, I do not believe that the burden of proof lies on hedonists to explain why these are *not* intrinsic values. If someone claims that *X* is intrinsically valuable, this is a substantive, positive claim, and it lies on him or her to explain why we should believe that *X* is intrinsically valuable. Possibly, this could be done through thought experiments roughly analogous to those that I employ in the previous section.

Second, I think there is something interesting about the list of additional intrinsic values that counts in hedonism’s favor, namely that the listed values are all potentially explainable as things that help promote pleasure and avert pain. To go through Frankena’s list, life and consciousness are necessary presuppositions for pleasure to occur; activity, health, and strength bring about pleasure; and happiness, beatitude, and contentment are regarded by Frankena himself as “pleasures and satisfactions.” The same seems true of beauty, harmony, and “proportion in objects contemplated,” and also, arguably, of affection, friendship, harmony, and proportion in life, experiences of achievement, adventure and novelty, self-expression, good reputation, and honor and esteem. Other things on Frankena’s list, such as understanding, wisdom, freedom, peace, and security, although they are perhaps not themselves pleasurable, are prime hedonistic instrumental values. Morally good dispositions and virtues, cooperation, and just distribution of goods and evils, moreover, are things that, on a societal level, contribute a happy society, and thus the traits that would be promoted and cultivated if this were something sought after. To quite some extent, the suggested non-hedonic intrinsic values cluster around the hedonic values. Indeed, they all seem to *point toward pleasure*, for while the other values are reasonably explainable as means toward pleasure, pleasure itself is not reasonably explainable as a means toward any of the other values.

Some have taken notice of this clustering. G. E. Moore, for example, writes that though his pluralistic theory of intrinsic value is opposed to hedonism, its applications would, in practice, look very much like hedonism’s: “Hedonists,” Moore writes “do, in general, recommend a course of conduct which is very similar to that which I should recommend.”¹⁹ Ross similarly writes that, “[i]t is quite certain that by promoting virtue and knowledge [which Ross

¹⁸ Moore, 115.

¹⁹ Moore, 114.

take to be intrinsically valuable] we shall inevitably produce much more pleasant consciousness. These are, by general agreement, among the surest sources of happiness for their possessors.”²⁰ As Roger Crisp notes, “those goods cited by non-hedonists are goods we often, indeed usually, enjoy.”²¹

What Moore and Ross do not take notice of is that this clustering counts in hedonism’s favor. For one, there is Occam’s razor, according to which entities should not be multiplied beyond necessity. If the suggested non-hedonic intrinsic values are at least plausibly explainable in terms of pleasure and pain, and we concede that pleasure and pain have intrinsic value and disvalue, then we have at least a *pro tanto* reason not to postulate additional intrinsic values. Doing so would come at an ontological cost.

What I will emphasize here, however, is the fact that the clustering creates an explanatory problem for value pluralists. The problem is this: If the non-hedonic values suggested by value pluralists are truly intrinsic values in their own right, then *why* do they happen to cluster around pleasure the way they do? This is what I call the cluster challenge.

I think there are two main ways to respond to this challenge. One response is to claim that the clustering is accidental: That it is a brute fact about the world that non-hedonic intrinsic values are hedonic instrumental values. This is a weak response, for even though we cannot rule out *a priori* the possibility that intrinsic values just happen to be values that are crucial means toward living pleasurable lives, it seems like too lucky a coincidence to be believable. If values other than pleasure were intrinsic in their own right, it is puzzling why these would cluster around pleasure the way they do.

The other response is to claim that the proposed intrinsic values cluster around pleasure because our ability to feel pleasure tracks intrinsic value. On this account, things are pleasurable because they are good, which is the hedonist view turned on its head, the hedonist view being that things are good because they are pleasurable. The problem with this response is that granted that we are evolved beings, pleasure has presumably tracked reproduction-enhancing traits, not value. Unless value just is that which promotes survival and reproduction (which I argue against in Section 2), it is wildly implausible that evolution tracked value. It seems that at every step in the evolutionary process, reproductive advantage provides an exhaustive explanation of why certain traits are selected, and there seems to be no other force doing work in biology,

²⁰ Ross, 152.

²¹ Crisp, 120.

especially not a value force strong enough to overrule reproductive advantage time and again. The only way to argue that pleasure tracks value and pain tracks disvalue would be to do as Thomas Aquinas does when arguing for a similar view: rely on an intelligent designer who designed our pleasure and pain mechanism so that it came to track values.²² That, however, gives pluralism a shaky foundation indeed.

If pluralists cannot provide a good explanation for the clustering other than appealing to intelligent designers, it seems that pluralism has an explanatory problem.

While pluralists seem to have an explanatory problem, hedonists have a way of accounting for this clustering. To see how, remember that above, we saw that it is easy to deny that pleasures are intrinsically good in cases where they are instrumentally bad and easy to deny that pains are intrinsically bad in situations where they are instrumentally good—even though, upon reflection, we become aware of the fact that when making such judgments, we conflate instrumental and intrinsic value. Similarly, it could be that we conflate instrumental and intrinsic value in other cases as well. It could be that when something has a significant instrumental value, and we are constantly reminded of its significant instrumental value, we easily come to think that its value is intrinsic.

Associative psychology tells us that if two things occur together repeatedly, we tend to lump them together mentally. If you see a certain person and, simultaneously, experience a certain feeling—and this happens again and again—you are likely to start associating the person with the feeling. This has an obvious learning benefit: In reacting to other human beings, this helps you stay clear of people who once frightened you. The next time you see the man who frightened you, say, you don't need to embark on an elaborate reasoning process about the ways in which he might harm you again; instead, you immediately think "Bad person!" and run away. Such a mechanism is also of help in reacting to inanimate objects. If you have gotten sick by eating a certain kind of mushroom, say, chances are that the next time you see a mushroom of the same kind, you will feel aversion. Using a similar explanatory model, it seems plausible that we associate with intrinsic value and disvalue things that repeatedly have been vital in bringing about intrinsic value and disvalue. This, at least, makes a lot of evolutionary sense, for if something is dangerous to you, it

²² Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Vol. 20 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), Question 34, Article I-II, 65-70.

might be too complicated to keep in mind that the thing is only instrumentally bad. It's better just to perceive it as evil and get away.

This might well be what goes on when we ascribe intrinsic value to things that are crucial instrumentally values. That we have the ability to ascribe intrinsic value to things that are clearly not intrinsically valuable should be evident, for it is common that people ascribe intrinsic value to all sorts of things, such as cultural practices and cultural symbols. John Stuart Mill discusses the well-known phenomenon that many people treat money as an intrinsic value, even if, upon reflection, it becomes obvious that the value of money is wholly instrumental, and he points out that we often slide from valuing something as a means to pleasure to valuing it as an end in itself.²³ T. L. S. Sprigge touched on this point, and wrote that we engage in an “illusory projection on things at large of the sparkling or dreadful qualities which pertain most undeniably to pleasures and pains ...”²⁴

Philosophers do not seem to be immune from making such judgments either. Joseph Raz, for example, argues in *Engaging Reason* that

[p]laying tennis is intrinsically good. It can also be good instrumentally, as a way of keeping fit, making friends or money, or gaining prestige. But apart from any beneficial consequences playing tennis may or may not have it is a valuable activity; it is an activity with intrinsic value.²⁵

Admittedly, it could be that adhering to the rules of a Western ball game has intrinsic value. It seems, however, rather unlikely. It seems more likely that Joseph Raz likes to play tennis a lot and has come to associate playing tennis with good feelings, and that this has slipped over into a judgment that playing tennis is intrinsically good.

If this is the way our evaluative psychology works, hedonists need not deny that phenomenologically, it very likely seems to people like Raz as if playing tennis has intrinsic value. We need not doubt that when they reflect upon playing tennis, the game *beams value*. For me as well, certain things—especially knowledge and justice—beam value. They seem to be *such great things*. Being

²³ John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p 83. A similar argument, appealing to projection rather than mere association, is presented in Ivar Labukt, *Hedonistic Egoism: A Theory of Normative Reasons for Action*, Doctoral Dissertation, (Bergen: University of Bergen, 2010).

²⁴ Sprigge, 240.

²⁵ Joseph Raz, *Engaging Reason*, 1999, 296, quoted in Labukt, 140.

aware of our ability to conflate instrumental and intrinsic value, however, this “seeming” should not be trusted, and as long as the values we consider can at least plausibly be explained in terms of pleasure and pain, we should conclude that they are most likely not intrinsic values and disvalues after all, and stick to the intrinsic value of pleasure and the intrinsic disvalue of pain. At such, we should accept hedonism.

ESSAY 3

Value Monism

1. Introduction

Many things seem to be valuable, such as friendships, knowledge, beauty, money, and health. These seem to be *good* things and things *worthy of pursuit*; we seem to be better off when we have them and worse off when we do not. Things that are valuable, moreover, seem to come in at least two different kinds. Some valuable things are valuable, not in and of themselves, but by virtue of being of help in bringing about other things of value. A typical example is money: Money is valuable, not in and of itself, but by virtue of being of help in bringing about goods such as food, medicine, spare time, vacations, houses, and computers. Call a value such as money an *instrumental* value. Though many values can be instrumental values, not all values can: If all values were instrumental, all values would be values by virtue of contributing to something further, in a never-ending regress. For there to be values at all, it seems that at least one thing must be valuable in and of itself, and must retain its value even in isolation from any further values that it might help bring about. Call a value of this kind an *intrinsic* value.

The topic of this paper is intrinsic value, and the question I seek to answer is one of *quantity*: How many intrinsic values are there? Granted that there are intrinsic values at all—a premise that I take for granted in this paper—a certain positive number must be the correct answer to this question. But what positive number is it? One? Two? Four? Nineteen? Thousands? For the present purpose I shall distinguish between two views that jointly exhaust the realm of possible answers: Value monism, the view that there is only one intrinsic value, and value pluralism, the view that there are two or more intrinsic values. In the following I refer to value monism as “monism” and value pluralism as “pluralism.”

I shall argue that monism is true and pluralism is false, doing so by arguing that only monism is compatible with a principle deeply entrenched in how we intuitively reason about values: That a very large amount of any one value can always outweigh a very small amount of any other. Call this the nominal-notable commensuration principle (abbreviated NNC). Having presented this principle and argued that it is compatible with monism only, I make the case that rejecting it comes at an unacceptably high cost, and that for this reason, we should endorse monism and reject pluralism.

Some might find it odd to appeal to how we intuitively reason about values to find support for monism. Most often, our intuitions and our evaluative practices are taken to favor pluralism, not monism (those who look for reasons in support of monism commonly look elsewhere, such as to monism's theoretical simplicity).¹ In order to challenge this assumption, I begin by examining three aspects of our evaluative practices that are commonly taken to count in favor of pluralism, and explain why these are in fact neutral between monism and pluralism. Thereafter I shall examine a fourth aspect, the nominal-notable commensuration principle, and argue this aspect is compatible with monism only.

2. Heterogeneity, Incommensurability, and Rational Regret

These three aspects that are commonly taken to count in favor of pluralism:

Heterogeneity: Values seem to be heterogeneous. Knowledge, happiness, life, freedom, and friendship are all valuable, but they seem very different, and it not clear that they share a unifying property. This seems to lend support to the view that there is not one single intrinsic value by virtue of which all valuable things gain their worth (monism), but rather, a plurality of values that are intrinsic values in their own right (pluralism).

¹ See for example John Finnis, *Natural Law and Natural Rights* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980); Bernard Williams, "Conflicts of Value" in *Moral Luck* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981); Charles Taylor, "The Diversity of Goods" in *Utilitarianism and Beyond*, Bernard Williams and Amartya Sen (eds.) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982); Joseph Raz, *The Morality of Freedom* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986); John Kekes, *The Morality of Pluralism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993); Michael Stocker, "Abstract and Concrete Value: Plurality, Conflict and Maximization" and David Wiggins, "Incommensurability: Four Proposals" in Ruth Chang, *Incommensurability, Incomparability, and Practical Reason* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997).

Incommensurability: Many values seem to be incommensurable. If we are asked to determine the relative worth of, say, knowledge and friendship, it is not clear how we might proceed. Indeed, it seems unclear if this can even be done. As such, it seems that at least some of our values are incommensurable. This, in turn, seems to lend support to pluralism, for if pluralism is true, it is very clear why many values are incommensurable: Values are incommensurable because they are intrinsic values in their own right. If monism is true, by contrast, it is not so clear why some values would be incommensurable, for according to monism, all values are values exclusively by virtue of contributing to one supreme value. If monism is true, therefore, all values should be commensurable according to how much they contribute.

Rational regret: It sometimes seems that even if we have chosen the most valuable of two competing values, we regret—and have reason to regret—that the lesser value was not realized. This phenomenon has come to be known as “rational regret,” and rational regret is commonly taken to count in favor of pluralism, since, as Michael Stocker argues, if there were only one intrinsic value, then

there is no ground of rational conflict because the better option lacks nothing that would be made good by the lesser. Correlatively, the lesser good is not good in any way that the better is not also at least as good. There is no way, then, that the lesser option is better than the better one. And thus, there is no rational reason to regret doing the better—i.e. to regret doing it rather than the lesser.²

John Kekes makes a similar point, concretizing the issue using the example of happiness as a proposed sole intrinsic value:

If, say, we thought that all values derived from whatever they contributed to happiness, then we would simply choose the value that gave more happiness, and we would not regret having forgone lesser happiness, since what we want is greater happiness.³

² Michael Stocker, *Plural and Conflicting Values* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), 272. Arguments along the same lines have been advanced by Bernard Williams, “Ethical Consistency,” in his *Problems of the Self* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), 172–75; Ronald de Sousa, “The Good and the True,” *Mind*, Vol. 83, No. 332, 1974, 534–51; Susan Hurley, *Natural Reasons* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 171–74; and Jonathan Dancy, *Moral Reasons* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), 120–23.

³ Kekes, *The Morality of Pluralism*, 57.

For this reason, “rational regret” is taken to count in favor of pluralism, since only if pluralism is true does it seem to make sense to ever regret that the lesser of two competing values was not realized. If monism is true, the lesser value would never have anything of worth that the greater value lacked, and as such, there would be nothing to regret once the greater value had been realized.

How might a monist respond? There are logically two paths open to the monist. One path is to deny that values are heterogeneous, incommensurable, and apt to cause rational regret. This path, I think, is off the table, for there is undeniably some truth to all of the above considerations. The other path, which I shall pursue, is to argue that heterogeneity, incommensurability, and rational regret—being real aspects of our evaluative practices—are compatible with both monism and pluralism, and as such, that they do not count one way or the other in the monism/pluralism debate.

Heterogeneity (monist reply): Monists may concede that our values are heterogeneous without abandoning monism. The reason why is that monism is a theory, not about values as such, but about intrinsic value, and although monism is (arguably) committed to the view that what is intrinsically valuable is homogeneous, it is not committed to the view that instrumental values are homogeneous. Let’s concretize this by means of a specific monistic theory: hedonism. According to hedonism, pleasure is the only intrinsic value. If hedonism is correct, moreover, it makes a lot of sense why knowledge, life, happiness, freedom, and friendship, in spite of their heterogeneity, are all crucial values. They are all crucial values, on a hedonist account, because they are all either pleasurable (like happiness), preconditions of pleasure (like life), or things that are instrumental in gaining pleasure (like knowledge, freedom, and friendship). Monism, therefore, is not the claim that all values are equal, or even similar, in nature. The only thing all values must have in common is a contributory relationship to an intrinsic value (in the case of hedonism, a contributory relationship to a certain mental state). Things can stand in a contributory relationship to an intrinsic value, moreover, even though they have very little (else) in common. For this reason, the fact that many of our everyday values are heterogeneous is not, by itself, a fact that gives us reason to endorse pluralism and reject monism.

Incommensurability (monist reply): Monists also have resources to account for why we sometimes, or even often, face commensuration problems. First, monists may concede, without abandoning monism, that weighing

knowledge against friendship is impossible, for while certain forms of friendship are more valuable than certain forms of knowledge, certain forms of knowledge are more valuable than certain forms of friendship. There might, accordingly, be no definite answer to the question of what, in the abstract, is most valuable of friendship and knowledge. This helps the monist account for incommensurability. Even if we focus on particular instances of values, however—say, your knowledge of Ancient history vs. a particular friendship of yours—a monist could admit that we face an enormous commensuration challenge. The only thing a monist would have to concede *qua* monist is that in all particular cases, commensuration problems are epistemic, not metaphysical. Metaphysically, there would, barring the possibility of metaphysical vagueness, be a definite answer to the question of the relative worth of any two particular competing values. The reason why is that granted monism, all values inherit their worth by virtue of standing in a contributory relation to the one intrinsic value, and as such, they can be commensurated according to how much they contribute. It is compatible with monism, however, that this fact might be extremely hard to discover or even be epistemically inaccessible. The question of what is most valuable, your knowledge of Ancient history or a particular friendship of yours, might have the same epistemic status as questions such as “How many times did Socrates scratch his head?” and “How many mosquitoes died in Russia last week?” Though there is a definite answer to both of those questions, our limited epistemic capacities make it impossible for us to gain anything close to precise knowledge of them. The fact that commensuration problems are epistemic, not metaphysical, do not make them any less daunting. For this reason, both monism and pluralism have resources to account for incommensurability.

The monistic case for incommensurability is further strengthened by its case for rational regret.

Rational regret (monist reply): There are several ways by which a monist can account for rational regret. First, as Thomas Hurka argues in “Monism, Pluralism, and Rational Regret,” Stocker is wrong in claiming that on monistic accounts, the better option never lacks any of the virtues of the lesser option.⁴ This is most obvious in cases where the values of different subjects are involved. To use hedonism for the sake of illustration again, a hedonist may well hold that if we are forced to choose between giving subject A 10 units of pleasure and giving subject B 8 units of pleasure, then the better option (giving A 10 units of

⁴ Thomas Hurka, “Monism, Pluralism, and Rational Regret,” *Ethics*, Vol. 106 (April 1996), 555–575.

pleasure) does in fact lack something of value that the lesser option has: *B*'s 8 units of pleasure. This, in turn, can account for rational regret: Though we did realize the greater value, *B*'s pleasure—which is also valuable—was not realized. The point is perhaps made even clearer in cases where we are forced to choose, not between realizing *A*'s or *B*'s pleasure, but between alleviating *A*'s or *B*'s pain. Even if *A*'s pain were more intense than *B*'s, and we managed, thankfully, to alleviate *A*'s pain, *B*'s pain might still be a significant evil that we might rationally regret not having been able to alleviate.

Monistic hedonism can also account for agent-internal rational regret. Hurka touches on this point, and invites us to compare the pleasure of eating a bagel with the pleasure of discussing philosophy.⁵ If one holds what I take to be a plausible view on pleasure—that pleasure, rather than being a separate experiential quality, is an aspect of or a dimension along which our experiences vary—a monistic hedonist could say that we seldom, if ever, experience “pure pleasure.” Rather than experiencing pure pleasure, we have particular experiences that count as pleasures by virtue of being pleasurable. If this is right, and monistic hedonism is correct, something is intrinsically valuable to the extent that it is pleasurable. If so, one might regret that one pleasure (say, the pleasure of drinking beer with an old friend) was forsaken for another pleasure (say, the pleasure of playing with one's child for an afternoon), even though the latter pleasure was, all things considered, the largest pleasure of the two.

This borders to the monist's perhaps simplest response to the rational regret objection, namely that in every case where we are given the option of realizing only one out of two competing values, we might—even though we have in fact chosen the greater value—regret the fact that not both values could be realized. It is regrettable, even granted monism, that we often find ourselves in situations where one value must thus be sacrificed in order to secure another. This, moreover, helps explain rational regret.

In assessing the strength of the rational regret objection, we must also keep in mind that we often develop fond emotions for things, and that we can regret their absence even in cases where it seems obvious that these things are not intrinsically valuable. Houses, for example, are presumably not intrinsically valuable. Still it seems plausible that if I had just sold my house, I could, over the next few days or weeks, experience regret over no longer being able to live in my old house. I could feel this, moreover, even if I were convinced that houses are not intrinsically valuable and that my new house, all things considered, is

⁵ Ibid., 569.

superior to my old house. Emotional attachment, it seems, can explain why we sometimes regret that a lesser value was not realized even though a larger value was. Our ability to be emotionally attached, moreover, is compatible with both pluralism and monism.

For these reasons, we should conclude that heterogeneity, incommensurability, and rational regret are compatible with both pluralism and monism, and as such, that they do not settle the monism/pluralism debate. Let's now turn to a fourth aspect of our evaluative practices, the nominal-notable commensuration principle (NNC), and examine how pluralism and monism, respectively, are able to account for it.

3. The Nominal-Notable Commensuration Principle (NNC)

Though it seems plain that we sometimes face commensuration problems, it also seems plain that under certain circumstances, we do not. One example of such a circumstance is when one of the values in question is very large and the competing value is very small. In such cases it seems that regardless of how different the two values are, we are always able to determine which is more valuable.

Ask yourself, for example: What is most valuable of your closest friendship and your knowledge of contemporary American soap operas? Here, I assume, it seems plain that the friendship is more valuable than the knowledge. Consequently, if you had to forsake one in order to keep the other, you should—all else equal—forsake the knowledge and keep the friendship. As such, it seems that in this case we are able to arrive at a clear verdict regarding the relative worth of the two competing values.

We also seem to be able to arrive at a clear verdict when we switch which sort of value is made large and which sort of value is made small. Ask yourself: What is most valuable, a peripheral friendship of yours or all of your knowledge of philosophy? Here, I assume, it seems clear that your knowledge of philosophy is the greater value, so if you could keep the knowledge only by forsaking the friendship, it seems that—again, all else equal—forsaking the friendship is what you should do. Once again we seem to have been able to arrive at a clear verdict regarding which value is the greater.

Now imagine a different case involving two other values that are often deemed to be intrinsic values in their own right: achievement and freedom. Here again it is true that in many cases, we are unable to commensurate. For example:

What is most valuable: making a significant scientific breakthrough or being free to travel abroad for the next six years? For most of us (or for me, at least), it is hard to tell, for the two options appear to be approximately equal in value. If we make one value sufficiently large and the competing value sufficiently small, however, it is no longer hard to tell. Would it be worthwhile to give up your freedom to travel abroad for a week in exchange for making a Nobel Prize level scientific breakthrough? It seems that it would. Switching which value is made large and which value is made small, we might ask: Would it be worthwhile giving up your freedom to leave your bedroom for the rest of your life in exchange for the achievement of inventing a slightly better tasting chewing gum? It seems that it would not. Your freedom to move outside of your bedroom for the rest of your life is clearly more valuable than the achievement of making a small contribution to the science of chewing gums. Again, we seem to be able to arrive at a clear verdict.

The point I am aiming at is that when we seek to commensurate two values, then no matter how different they are, we always seem to be able to arrive at a clear verdict when one value is made sufficiently large while the competing value is made sufficiently small. Moreover, it seems not merely that we are drawn, psychologically, to arrive at a verdict, but that we are justified in doing so. To make this point clear, I suggest that you to come up with two values that you yourself consider to be very different in kind, and then conduct a thought experiment in which you make one value very small and the other value very large. Having done so, ask yourself if it has been made clear that one is greater in value than the other. Then change which value is large and which value is small, and ask the same question again. My prediction is that though you might get into many commensuration problems along the way, you will always manage to make such problems disappear once you make one value very large and the other value very small—and this is what the NNC says: That a very large amount of any one value can always outweigh a very small amount of any other.

NNC, it seems, is a fact about the way we intuitively reason about values. Indeed, it seems to be an aspect of our practice of valuing on par with heterogeneity, incommensurability, and rational regret. Let us now ask: How can monism and pluralism, respectively, account for NNC?

4. Monism, Pluralism, and NNC

If monism is true, it is understandable why nominal-notable cases work the way they do. On monistic accounts, different values gain their worth exclusively by virtue of standing in a contributory relation to a single intrinsic value, and for this reason, all values can in principle be ranked according to how much they contribute. Though we might face commensuration problems on monistic accounts, monism holds that such problems are epistemic, not metaphysical. When one value is made very large and another very small, moreover, the limitations to our epistemic capacities are no longer significant: The contrast is so great that we see it through the epistemic blur.

If pluralism is true, however, it is not clear how nominal-notable cases could be of help in solving commensuration problems. The reason why is that on pluralist accounts, the values we seek to commensurate will sometimes be intrinsic values in their own right, and in such cases, our commensuration problems will be metaphysical, not epistemic. In that case, it is puzzling how nominal-notable comparisons could have the power to clear things up, for if the problems are metaphysical, removing epistemic blur will not do the trick. If achievement and freedom are both intrinsic values in their own right, the two values are not on the same value scale, and as such, it is not clear how the two could ever be weighed against each other. To weigh two things against each other, one needs a single scale on which both can be weighed. Pluralism, however, is the view that in value matters, we have not one single scale, but rather, a plurality of scales. As such, if pluralism were true and we tried to commensurate two different values that are both intrinsic values in their own right, it seems that we should never be able to do it, even in nominal/notable cases. Pluralism, therefore, appears to have a problem accounting for the fact that in nominal/notable cases, we seem to be able to arrive at clear verdicts.

Most pluralists deny that their doctrine faces problems of this kind. Bernard Williams, for example, writes that radical incommensurability allegations are “utterly baseless,” and that pluralism can in fact account for commensuration across intrinsic values.⁶ Williams does not, however, explain how pluralism can account for it, and as we shall see, pluralists seem to have a tendency to turn vague when explaining how their theory is compatible with commensuration across different intrinsic values. In *The Right and the Good*, W. D. Ross writes:

⁶ Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1985), 17.

The ‘greatest wave’ now awaits us—the question whether virtue, knowledge, and pleasure [Ross thinks that these are all intrinsically valuable] can be compared with one another in value, whether they can be measured against one another. I do not pretend that the views I shall express are certainly true, still less that I can prove them to be so. I will only say that they are the result of a good deal of reflection about the comparative value of these things, and that they agree, so far as I can judge, with the views of many others who have reflected on it. I think, then, that pleasure is definitely inferior in value to virtue and knowledge.⁷

What does Ross’ “reflection” consist in? What does it mean that pleasure is “inferior” in value to virtue and knowledge? “Inferior,” in Ross’ context, presumably means “lower in value.” But what does “lower in value” mean when we face, not a single value scale, but a plurality of value scales? This is not clear. On the subsequent page, Ross writes:

[A] certain larger amount of pleasure would more than outweigh the given amount of virtue and intelligence. But if we take this view we are faced by the question, *what* amount of pleasure is precisely equal in value to a given amount of virtue or of knowledge? And to this question, so long as we think that *some* amount is equal, I see no possibility of an answer or of an approach to one.⁸

It is understandable that Ross cannot give a general answer to how much pleasure you need to weigh up for virtue or knowledge or intelligence. In the abstract, such questions presumably have no answer. The relevant question, however, is how, even in particular cases, a “larger amount of pleasure would more than outweigh the given amount of virtue and intelligence,” for if value *A* shall ever outweigh value *B*, it seems that there must be a common scale on which both *A* and *B* can be weighed, and where *A* is weightier than *B*. In the absence of such a scale, weighing *A* against *B* is like weighing speed against size or liquidity against mass. This, moreover, must surely be impossible, for no amount of speed can outweigh any amount of size. Not even the speed of a jet-plane can outweigh the size of a peanut.

⁷ W. D. Ross, *The Right and the Good* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 149.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 150.

James Griffin argues that value pluralists can account for commensurability because a plurality of intrinsic values is compatible with the existence of a unified value scale. Griffin writes:

It does not follow from there being no super-value that there is no super-scale. To think so would be to misunderstand how the notion of ‘quantity’ of well-being enters. It enters through ranking; quantitative differences are defined on qualitative ones. The quantity we are talking about is ‘prudential value’ defined on informed rankings. All that we need for the all-encompassing scale is the possibility of ranking items on the basis of their nature. And we can, in fact, rank them in that way. We can work out trade-offs between different dimensions of pleasure or happiness. And when we do, we rank in a strong sense: not just choose one rather than the other, but regard it as worth more. That is the ultimate scale here: worth to one’s life.⁹

Griffin’s reasoning is not clear. I, at least, do not understand what it means that a notion of “‘quantity’ of well-being ... enters through ranking,” nor do I understand what it means that “quantitative differences are defined on qualitative ones” or that these constitute “informed rankings.” I do understand the idea of holding “worth to one’s life” as one’s ultimate value scale. The problem, however, is that if pluralism is correct, “worth to one’s life” is not a unified scale.

Michael Stocker argues, in a manner resembling Griffin’s, that we can commensurate values even if there is no supreme value as long as we introduce what he calls a “higher level synthesizing category”:

Suppose we are trying to choose between lying on a beach and discussing philosophy—or more particularly, between the pleasure of the former and the gain in understanding from the latter. To compare them we may invoke what might be called a higher-level synthesizing category. So, we may ask which will conduce to a more pleasing day, or to a day that is better spent. Once we have fixed upon the higher synthesizing category, we can often easily ask which option is better in regard to that category and judge which to choose on the basis of that. Even if it seems a mystery how we might ‘directly’ compare lying on the beach and

⁹ James Griffin, *Well-Being: Its Meaning, Measurement and Moral Importance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 90.

discussing philosophy, it is a commonplace that we do compare them, e.g. in regard to their contribution to a pleasing day.¹⁰

It is indeed commonplace that we compare different values, but if it “seems a mystery” how this can be possible granted pluralism: Does not this count in pluralism’s disfavor? Very little in Stocker’s argument sheds light on how commensuration is possible granted pluralism, and Stocker does not make clear how anything can work as a higher level synthesizing category without being a unified intrinsic value. In virtue of what does the category synthesize? Wherefrom does it get its authority? It does seem that the only way in which a higher level synthesizing category could be effective is if this category is a unified intrinsic value. To the extent that Stocker’s argument shall succeed, therefore, it seems that it must collapse into a monistic theory. The collapse into a monistic theory is hinted at in Stocker’s claim that “we may ask which will conduce to a more pleasing day...” Here Stocker isolates one single value, the hedonic one, and evaluates the phenomenon in question (the day) according to this scale. This is fine if monistic hedonism is true. If pluralism is true, however, the extent to which a day is pleasing will only be part of the story about the day’s value.

An argument similar to Stocker’s has been advanced by Ruth Chang. Chang suggests that we can commensurate values as long as we have a “covering value” under which the values that we seek to commensurate are subsumed.¹¹ Like Stocker, however, Chang does not explain how anything can play the role of a synthesizing or covering value without being a unified intrinsic value. Indeed, Chang does not wrestle with this problem, for she takes as her starting point that there exists a plurality of intrinsic values and that these can be commensurated, and then infers that since both of these premises are true, there must be a covering value. She does not provide independent support for the view that a covering value exists, nor does she say much about the supposed nature of this value, other than suggesting that other values might properly be described as “parts” of the covering value. Saying little else, she concedes that a covering value is an “axiological mystery” and that we do not have a name for it in our everyday value vocabulary. For this reason, Chang refers to the covering value as a “nameless value,” and writes:

¹⁰ Stocker 1990, 72.

¹¹ Ruth Chang, “Putting Together Morality and Well-Being” in *Practical Conflicts*, P. Baumann and M. Betzler (eds.) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 118-159.

Whether in the end one believes that there are such nameless values depends on whether more traditional accounts of rational conflict resolution can do the job of putting together values instead. ... Even if at the end of the day one remains skeptical of nameless values, the case for them, I believe, raises a serious challenge to the usual way in which the determination of rational conflict resolution is understood.¹²

I think Chang is right that in the absence of a nameless covering value, pluralist theories face a commensuration problem. If covering values do not exist in our ordinary value vocabularies, however, and they are axiological mysteries, it seems that the most natural conclusion to draw is that pluralism cannot account for the ways in which we commensurate values.

The only way in which a pluralist could account for commensurability seems to be by holding that there is a non-natural value property attached to various things such as pleasure, knowledge, and friendship, and that a certain amount of pleasure has value equal to that of a certain amount of knowledge and a certain amount of friendship. On such a view, the value of various pleasures, items of knowledge, and friendships could be added together to a total value, and every particular value could be commensurated by reference to its contribution to this total value. The problem with this proposal, however, is that it is monistic, not pluralistic. It is monistic because it holds that value is exclusively one single thing (a single non-natural property), and it is by virtue of its monism that it can account for commensuration. Had the theory been pluralistic—i.e., if it had held that there are several different non-natural values—it would still be puzzling how the value of pleasure and value of knowledge could be added together and weighed against each other.

A move thoroughly discussed in recent value theory is a retreat from commensurability to comparability. Commensurability refers to cardinal rankability, i.e. rankability in terms of absolute values. Comparability refers to ordinal rankability, i.e. rankability in terms of relative value (“more” or “less”). In our debate, however, such a retreat is a non-starter, for though comparability might be less demanding than commensurability, it cannot possibly help the pluralist account for commensuration across intrinsic values. The reason why is that the question of cardinality versus ordinality concerns solely whether the scale in question is relative or absolute. Cardinal and ordinal rankings, therefore,

¹² Chang, 120.

equally presuppose the existence a unified scale. The existence of a unified scale, moreover, is exactly what I argue that pluralists must reject—and that is what makes it puzzling how pluralists can account for commensurations across different intrinsic values.¹³

5. Conclusion

If pluralists cannot account for commensuration across different intrinsic values, not even in nominal-notable cases, this counts heavily in pluralism's disfavor. The reason why is that it seems plain wrong to claim, as pluralists must claim, that one's knowledge of philosophy is not more valuable than a peripheral friendship and that a Nobel Prize-level scientific breakthrough is not more valuable than one's freedom to travel abroad for a week.

Since the three aspects of our practice of valuing discussed in Section 2 are compatible with both monism and pluralism, and the nominal-notable commensuration principle discussed in Sections 3 and 4 is compatible with monism only, we have reason to reject pluralism and endorse monism.

¹³ For a recent discussion of the retreat to comparability, see Anthony Marc Williams, "Comparing Incommensurables," *Journal of Value Inquiry*, Vol. 45, No. 3, 2011. In Williams' view, "Lacking a common measure or standard for comparison, it is ostensibly false that one item is better than another, and it is false that the two are equal in value." Williams, 267.

ESSAY 4

Unexpected Allies: How Value Anti-Realists Help Hedonists

1. Introduction

In *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*, John Mackie argued for value anti-realism by arguing that values, to be anything recognizably value-like, presuppose too much metaphysical and epistemic queerness to be believable. For this reason, Mackie concluded, we are well advised to leave values out of our ontology. More recently, value anti-realism has been given a new boost by philosophers like Richard Joyce and Sharon Street. Joyce argues that our beliefs in values are features of our psychology that have evolved because they enhance our reproductive fitness. This, Joyce claims, should lower our confidence in the realist view that our value beliefs correspond to value facts, for if the evolutionary explanation is correct, we would have held our value beliefs even in the absence of such facts. Street adds strength to Joyce's case against value realism by arguing that the similarity between the values that evolution instilled in us and the values claimed by realists to be real values (achievement, friendship, cooperation, life, etc.) creates an explanatory problem for realists. Phrased in the form of a question, the problem is this: If our value beliefs are the products of evolutionary forces, then why do our value beliefs match the realists' proposed *real* values so remarkably well?¹

In this paper I suggest that the arguments offered by Mackie, Joyce, and Street are convincing. Instead of converting realists to anti-realism, however, they should convert realists to hedonism. The reason why is that the arguments

¹ John Mackie, *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong* (London: Penguin, 1977); Richard Joyce, *The Evolution of Morality* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2006); Sharon Street, "A Darwinian Dilemma for Realist Theories of Value," *Philosophical Studies*, Vol. 172, No. 1, 2006.

help slice away hedonism's realist contenders, yet leave hedonism itself untouched. In Sections 2 and 3 I lay out the case for value anti-realism. In Section 4 I explain how hedonism survives the anti-realist onslaught.

2. The Queerness of Value

Many things seem to be valuable, such as friendship, knowledge, beauty, and health. These seem to be *good* things and things *worthy of pursuit*; we seem to be better off when we have them and worse off when we don't. This seems to be a factual matter, moreover, for if I suggested the opposite—that these are bad things, and that we would be better off with enmity, ignorance, ugliness, and disease—you would think that I am mad or, at least, radically mistaken. There is something about friendship, knowledge, beauty, and health, it seems, that makes such a view inappropriate, for surely these are good things, they make the world better, and we should act to promote them.

Though most of us are intimately familiar with the idea of values facts, such facts look queer upon scrutiny.

(1) *Ontology*. What ontological status do value facts have? The easiest way to circle in on an answer might be through elimination: by noting, for example, that values, though they do seem to exist, do not seem to exist as separate objects or entities. It does not seem to be the case that the world is populated by objects such as houses, works of art, friends, books, *and values*. Rather, value appears to be something that is tied to objects such as houses, works of art, friends, and books, and it seems to be by virtue of this “something” that the objects qualify as values.

In spite of being tied to valuable objects, however, value curiously does not seem to be a physical part of valuable objects. It is not the case that if you dig deep enough into something valuable, you will find its value component. As Risieri Frondizi writes:

[Values] do not constitute part of the object in which they are embodied, as extension, shape, and other [...] qualities do. You may take value out of a physical object without destroying it; you cannot do the same with extension, for instance.²

Though value is not a physical part of valuable objects, value does seem to be tied to valuable objects' physical properties. Arguably, there is even a

² Risieri Frondizi, *What is Value?* (La Salle, Ill.: Open Court, 1971), 9.

supervenience relation between an object's physical properties and its status as a value. In Brian McLaughlin and Karen Bennett's definition, "A set of properties *A* supervenes upon another set *B* just in case no two things can differ with respect to *A*-properties without also differing with respect to their *B*-properties."³ This seems to describe the relationship between an object's physical properties and its value, for if an object is valuable, it seems that it will continue to be so as long as all its physical properties, including its relational physical properties, remain. It would be puzzling if the value of a thing had changed if there had been no physical change whatsoever. If I said that two things were exactly the same with respect to all their physical properties, including their relational physical properties—but that one is valuable while the other is not—you would wonder what I mean, for we always seem to assume that there is a physical difference responsible for every difference in value. Thus it seems that even though value is not found anywhere among the physical properties of valuable things, the things' status as values is in some way tied to their physical properties. Value, it seems, has a puzzling ontology, being tied to entities and their physical properties, yet not being found anywhere among those properties.

(2) *To-be-pursuedness*: Though value ontology is puzzling enough in its own right, something even more puzzling is that values appear to have what John Mackie called "to-be-pursuedness somehow built into [them]."⁴ In contrast to other features of the world, it seems that values in some sense draw us toward them. If we believe that having children is valuable, this will tend to draw us toward having children. Admittedly, there might be other things that we deem to be valuable as well, such as money, freedom, and peace of mind, and these might conflict with having children and thus draw us in other directions. That, however, reaffirms rather than denies that values have an attractive force. Moreover, it seems that it is not merely a descriptive fact that we are attracted to pursue values; it seems that pursuing values is something appropriate and something that we ought to do, and that there is a shortcoming on our part if we fail in this regard. Value, it seems, is something that gives rise to normative reasons. How, however, could anything give rise to normative reasons? It is unclear how any constellation, no matter how complex, could ever gain "to-be-pursuedness" in

³ "Supervenience," McLaughlin, Brian and Bennett, Karen, "Supervenience," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2010 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2010/entries/supervenience/>>. See also Simon Blackburn, "Supervenience Revisited" in *Essays on Moral Realism*, Geoffrey Sayre-McCord (ed.) (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), 59–75.

⁴ Mackie, 40.

the sense that values appear to have. It is thus understandable why Mackie writes that values, *qua* things with “to-be-pursuedness” built into them, must be “entities or qualities or relations of a very strange sort, utterly different from anything else in the universe.”⁵

(3) *Epistemic access*: A third puzzle is how we gain knowledge of values. If we know, for example, that having children is valuable, this knowledge presumably has a source. It is not clear, however, what that source could be. Through our senses it seems that we can pick up information about the objects that surround us and about these objects’ physical properties. We can, for example, see that the candle is lit, hear that the child is crying, and smell that the dinner is burned. If an object’s value is not a physical property of that object, however, it is not clear how we can gain knowledge of its value status. How can something that is seemingly not a physical property engage in the kind of causal interaction that goes on in perception? This question seems hard to answer, since, as Mackie writes, if values are not physical properties, it appears that “if we were aware of [values], it would have to be by some special faculty or moral perception or intuition, utterly different from our ordinary ways of knowing anything else.”⁶

These three characteristics make values look queer, and in Mackie’s words, values stand out as “utterly unlike” anything else—perhaps, he speculates, they must be “something like Plato’s forms.”⁷ Much can be said in Mackie’s favor, for the above-mentioned features all seem to be necessary features of values: If you take away one of them, what you will be left with will look very different from what we think about when we think about values. For values to be values, it seems that they must reside to varying degrees in objects that surround us, be tied in some way to these objects’ physical properties, and provide us with normative reasons. Presumably, they must also be knowable, and there must be a way to discriminate between things that are valuable and things that are not.

How should one respond to such queerness?

One way to respond is to admit that values are queer indeed, as is G. E. Moore’s strategy. In Moore’s view, “value” is a simple, unanalyzable, non-natural property that supervenes on certain physical objects and practices. Being non-natural, values are not part of the causal order. As such, our means of

⁵ Mackie, 24.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 38.

⁷ *Ibid.*

gaining knowledge of values is not perception, but an intuitive faculty that grasps value facts.⁸

Accepting the existence of non-natural facts that we get access to by means of intuition, however, is not the only possible response to the queerness of value. A very different response is to claim that values, as we tend to think of them, are a tall order—such a tall order, in fact, that the goods, so to speak, cannot be delivered. This, Mackie argues, is by far the cheapest solution, since it saves us from populating our ontology with queer non-natural properties and correspondingly queer epistemic capacities. For these reasons, Mackie concludes, we are well advised to leave values out of our ontology. Instead, we should view human evaluator processes as nothing more than psychological, social, and historical phenomena. Real values do not exist.

3. The Evolution of Values

Accepting that values do not exist is easier said than done, and a problem for value anti-realists is that even in light of arguments such as Mackie's, there still *seems* to be values. Friendship, for example, seems to be valuable, and this and other “seemings” draw us toward accepting that values exist irrespective of their queerness. After all, queer metaphysical properties and correspondingly queer epistemic capacities *might* exist; we only need weighty evidence to believe in them. To be tenable, therefore, anti-realists need a way to account for our intuitions and our value phenomenology, and to provide a way to plausibly explain these without reference to the existence of real values. Richard Joyce and Sharon Street provide such explanations, and thus add strength to the anti-realist case.

Joyce argues that we have beliefs about values, not because we live in a world with value facts, but because such beliefs have proved to be evolutionarily useful. Joyce's argument goes like this: Granted that we are evolved beings, our psychology, like our physiology, has been brought about and shaped by natural selection. Our traits have been selected according to their impact on our ancestors' reproductive fitness. To the extent that a trait made our ancestors more reproductively fit, the trait tended to spread in the population; to the extent that it made our ancestors less reproductively fit, it tended to disappear.

⁸ G. E. Moore, *Principia Ethica*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), Chapter 4.

One factor that is of crucial importance to reproductive fitness is what things we are inclined to pursue and what things we are inclined to avoid. For this reason, Joyce argues, we have evolved beliefs, or proto-beliefs, about what things are worth pursuing and what things are worth avoiding. For humans, forming beliefs of this kind is crucial: Insofar as our actions are guided by our beliefs, or proto-beliefs, our beliefs or proto-beliefs about what we should act to promote are an evolutionary *sin qua non*. Many of our basic evaluative beliefs and attitudes, moreover, seem to admit of an evolutionary explanation. The fact that we value our own offspring more than we value the offspring of others, that we think our partner's sexual fidelity is worth protecting, and that we think that incest is bad, all seem to admit of an evolutionary explanation: Those who judged things accordingly in our evolutionary past tended to have their genes more effectively spread in the population than those who did not. Evolution presumably also explains such things as why we are abhorred by the idea of cannibalism, yet find it okay to kill and eat members of other species. Since humans are social animals, moreover, certain social rules also seem to have evolved. Cheating and theft, which destroy cooperation, is considered *bad*. Reciprocity, which facilitates cooperation, is considered *good*. This seems to be best explainable, moreover, not by reference to these things having a value property to which we are responsive, but by reference to the fact that societies that condemn cheating and theft, and reward reciprocity, have tended to be more successful than those who did not. A long line of our value judgments, it seems, are explainable as results of evolutionary forces.

Importantly, Joyce's point is not that all of our particular value judgments admit of a direct evolutionary explanation. The widespread opposition to euthanasia and abortion, for example, is unlikely to admit of a direct evolutionary explanation, since these are fairly recent phenomena, and there is nothing in Joyce's argument that denies an important role for culture in explaining our particular values.⁹ Joyce's point is more modest, namely that our basic evaluative attitudes seem to admit of an evolutionary explanation. In the case of euthanasia and abortion, the widespread opposition seems to be tied to a general opposition to death and a strong conviction that children should be protected, and these clearly admit of an evolutionary explanation. Indeed, Joyce argues at length in *The Evolution of Morality*, our evaluative attitudes, regardless of which culture we look at, seem to depend on and be shaped those evaluative

⁹ See Peter J. Richardson and Robert Boyd, *Not By Genes Alone* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

attitudes that we should expect to be selected granted what we know about human evolution. Rather than discussing Joyce's (descriptive) argument in detail, I will here proceed on the premise that it succeeds.

How do Joyce's observations translate into arguments for value anti-realism? I think they do so in three different ways. First, they offer value anti-realists an explanation of why we believe that there are values even if, as anti-realists claim, there are none. This strengthens the anti-realist position, for it rescues anti-realists from having to disregard our value phenomenology. What anti-realists can claim, granted that Joyce is correct, is that our value phenomenology was brought about because it helped advance our reproductive fitness, and as such, that our value phenomenology, including our value beliefs, need not give us reason to believe in the existence of real values.

Second, Joyce's theory offers anti-realists not only a different explanation than realists offer, but a cheaper explanation: It explains our value phenomenology in a naturalistic manner without positing queer value facts and correspondingly queer epistemic capacities. For a concrete example of the virtues of the anti-realist explanatory model, consider Thomas Scanlon's realist claim in *What We Owe Each Other* that achievement is valuable for its own sake.¹⁰ In fear of being condescending, we might ask: What best explains the fact that people like Scanlon hold this view? That achievement has a value property to which they are responsive? Or that those among their ancestors who valued achievement were more likely to survive and reproduce than those who did not? The latter seems to be the simpler explanation, and if that explanation is correct, we should lose confidence in the view that achievement is valuable. If this generalizes, then claiming that values exist seems to be an unwarranted postulate, which, in light of its metaphysical and epistemic oddities, should be rejected.

Third, Joyce's observations add strength to value anti-realism by virtue of creating an explanatory problem for realists. This explanatory problem has been explored in detail by Sharon Street. Street argues that if we acknowledge that many of our basic evaluative beliefs have been instilled in us by evolution, then a realist should be able to give us an explanation, or at least an indication, of why these evolved beliefs correspond so well with the value facts that the realist claims that exist. How can it be, Street asks, that achievement, friendship, cooperation, and human life, for example—all of which are values that evolution

¹⁰ Thomas Scanlon, *What We Owe Each Other* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999), 123.

would have made us believe in anyway—also happen to be among the allegedly real value facts?¹¹

Confronted with this challenge, Street argues that a realist faces two options, neither of which is appealing.

On the one hand a realist might explain why real values correspond so well with the value beliefs that evolution brought about by arguing that we evolved to be responsive to value facts. According to this explanation we have, for example, come to value human lives over animals' lives at least in part because humans lives are in fact, and independently of our evolved attitudes, more valuable.

This is not an attractive position, Street points out, for it seems to be the wrong kind of explanation in the context of evolution. It seems that at every step in the evolutionary process, reproductive advantage provides an exhaustive explanation of why certain traits are selected. There seems to be no other force doing work in biology, especially not a value force strong enough to overrule evolution time and again. The discovery of such a force, at least, would turn biology on its head (and philosophers should think twice before turning biology on its head). Moreover, if Moorean non-naturalism is correct, this option is ruled out from the outset, since on this view, values are non-natural and therefore causally inefficient. As such, it does not seem that our evaluative faculties could have evolved track values.

The other path the realist might take, according to Street, is to say that there is no causal connection between values and the evolution of our psychology. If so, the realist—as long as he accepts the correlation—is forced to say that it is accidental that the alleged real values correspond so well with the value beliefs that evolution instilled in us. That, however, is suspiciously convenient for the realist. The reason why, Street explains, is that betting on such a match

is analogous to setting out for Bermuda and letting the course of your boat be determined by the wind and tides: just as the push of the wind and tides on your boat has nothing to do with where you want to go, so the historical push of natural selection on the content of our evaluative judgments has nothing to do with evaluative truth. [...] Of course it's possible that as a matter of sheer chance, some large portion of our evaluative judgments ended up true, due to a happy coincidence [...] but this would require a fluke of luck that's not only extremely unlikely, in view

¹¹ Street, 109–106.

of the huge universe of logically possible evaluative judgments and truths, but also astoundingly convenient to the realist.¹²

Though these are the two realist replies discussed by Street, I think there are two further possible realist replies that should be addressed.

One reply is to identify value with that which promotes reproductive fitness. If one holds that “value” is identical with “that which promotes reproductive fitness,” then one can explain without much difficulty why our values look very much like the values that evolution instilled in us. The reason why is that on this view, evolution did in fact track value by virtue of tracking reproductive fitness. The problem with this suggestion, however, is that by reducing value to reproductive fitness, we seem to empty the notion of value of its normative force. If we identify “value” with “that which promotes reproductive fitness,” what we do is to put the label “value” on a particular biological phenomenon. It is not clear, however, how such a phenomenon could ever give rise to normative reasons. Evolution, it seems, can explain many of our actions, but it is puzzling how it could prescribe them.¹³

A last thing the realist could say in his defense is that the vast majority of our value judgments are in fact radically mistaken. The realist could suggest that perhaps value lies in something to which we do not feel attracted all, but in something completely different for which we have evolved no affinity. Perhaps it is valuable to move one’s limbs in circles in the dark and to make high-pitched nasal sounds whenever one encounters something blue. Believing that having children and protecting one’s family are important values is just a mistake; it’s hand waving and nasal sounds that count. This is a coherent realist position that avoids Street’s challenge. It is also, however, a highly revisionist position, and a position that disregards what seems to be our very reason for believing in values in the first place: our value phenomenology. This creates a problem, for if we disregard our value phenomenology, then why should we believe in values at all? Having disregarded our value phenomenology, it seems arbitrary to claim that there are real values at all, and in that case it seems more prudent to join the anti-realist camp.

¹² Street, 121-22.

¹³ It was recently revealed that the owner of a British fertility clinic has fathered up to 600 children. This clearly gave that man a great reproductive advantage. It seems odd, however, to claim that because of his reproductive success, this man’s life went more than hundred of times better than the lives of the rest of us. (*Telegraph*, April 8, 2012).

For these reasons, evolutionary arguments make a strong case against value realism. Our evaluatory practices do seem to have been brought about by evolution, and as Street argues, this implies the disturbing fact that if either our biological nature or our environments had been different, our values would have been different as well. Had we been like lions, we would have seen the occasional eating of children as a noble act; had we been like bonobos, we would have seen nothing wrong in incest; and had we been like ants, we would have not hesitate before crushing individuals for the sake of the collective. Charles Darwin, in *The Descent of Man*, made the same observation:

[If] men were reared under precisely the same conditions as hive-bees, there can hardly be doubt that our unmarried females would, like other worker-bees, think it a sacred duty to kill their brothers, and mothers would strive to kill their fertile daughters; and no one would think of interfering.¹⁴

This seems to give us reason to distrust the intuition that our own value judgments are responses to real values, for why should our value judgments be responses to real values any more than are the lions' inclination sometimes to kill and eat offspring? It seems that most likely, beliefs in values are mental projections brought about by evolution to enhance our reproductive fitness. On this view, there might well be descriptive facts about what things we act to promote, or believe or feel that are worth promoting. After all, our value phenomenology remains intact regardless of which value theory we end up accepting. There might not, however, be value facts to which we are responsive, that give us normative reasons, and that there is a failure on our part if we do not promote or honor. As such, it seems that we have a strong case for value anti-realism.

4. The Hedonist Solution

I shall now argue that although the anti-realist arguments discussed above are effective against most realist theories, there is at least one realist theory that they do not undercut: hedonism. Hedonism, I argue, is a realist theory that can account for and demystify the three seemingly queer characteristics of value described in Section 2, and that is immune to the evolutionary debunking arguments described in Section 3.

¹⁴ Charles Darwin, *The Descent of Man* (London: Dover Publications, 2010), 42.

What is hedonism? Hedonism, as I shall use the term, is the theory that only thing that is valuable in and of itself, pleasure, and the only thing is disvaluable in and of itself, pain. According to hedonists, typical examples of values are things such as love, health, aesthetic experiences, food, happiness, and friendship. These are valuable, according to hedonists, by virtue of being pleasurable. Importantly, however, pleasurable things do not exhaust the range of positive values according to hedonism. An education, for example, can also be valuable, not by virtue of being pleasurable, but because by virtue of bringing about future pleasures. Even a visit to the dentist can be valuable on hedonist grounds, certainly not by virtue of being pleasurable, but by virtue of being a prerequisite for gaining future pleasures and for avoiding future pains. Conversely, eating candy, although pleasurable, might all things considered be bad, since it might bring about toothache and obesity, and these in turn are sources of pain.

A more precise way to formulate the hedonist position is to say that pleasure is the only intrinsic value and pain the only intrinsic disvalue. Values that are not intrinsic are instrumental. The visit to the dentist is a typical example of an instrumental value since all of its value lies in the effects that result from such a visit.

My aim here is not to discuss the hedonist position in detail, much less to defend it against its many criticisms. My aim is to explain how hedonism survives the anti-realist onslaught, starting with how hedonism demystify the three queer features pointed out by Mackie.

(1) *Ontology*: As discussed above, there seems to be facts about values, values seem to be tied to objects, and an object's status as a value seems to supervene on that object's physical properties.

Hedonism makes sense of why this is so. According to hedonism, there are facts about intrinsic value and intrinsic disvalue because there are facts about pleasure and pain. If you are in pain, then even if this is something to which only you have direct access, it is still a fact that you are in pain. The same is true of pleasures. There are facts about instrumental value and disvalue, moreover, because there are facts about what causes pleasure and what causes pain. If, right now, you were to be stung with a needle, you would feel pain. Similarly, if you were to be eating ice cream, you would feel pleasure. This simple model gives hedonism a straight-forward way of accounting for why there are facts about values, both intrinsic and instrumental.

Hedonism can also help us explain why values are tied to physical objects. The reason why is that physical objects stand in contributory causal relationships to pleasure and pain. A needle is a physical object of a certain kind, and it is by virtue of being such an object that it can sting and cause pain. Similarly, ice creams are physical objects of a certain kind, and it is by virtue of being such objects that they cause a gustatory pleasure. Presumably, a similar explanatory model can be expanded to other values: Friendship, knowledge, beauty, money, and health are all values, according to hedonism, because they have features that are either pleasurable or conducive of pleasure; enmity, ignorance, ugliness, poverty, and disease, similarly, are disvalues because they have features that are either painful or conducive of pain.

For the same reason, hedonism also helps us account for supervenience. Supervenience, in the context of values, is the fact that even though value does not seem to be a physical property of things that are valuable, value is tied to physical properties and every change in value must be explainable in terms of a change in physical properties. If hedonism is true, the value of an object is tied to the object's physical properties because it is by virtue of having those properties that the object has the power to bring about pleasure or pain. For this reason, hedonism can explain why it is true that if two situations are physically identical, then they are also identical with respect to their value, and that a change in value must be explainable in terms of a physical change. For this to be a truth without exception, it will have to be true that whether or not something is pleasurable or painful ultimately is determined solely by physical factors, and that two subjects that are physically identical must have the same hedonic level. Even if this is ultimately false, however, it would still be the case that, for all practical purposes, a change in value would be explainable by a physical change. This, moreover, seems to be sufficient to save the intuition that value facts supervene on physical facts. For these reasons, hedonism can give a straightforward explanation of why values have the ontology that they seem to have.

(2) *To-be-pursuedness*: The second queer feature of values is that they appear to have “to-be-pursuedness” built into them. There is something about values that attract us, and there seems to be something right or appropriate about being attracted by them.

If anything in the world has “to-be-pursuedness” built into it, it is pleasure, and if anything has “to-be-avoidedness” built into it, it is pain. There is something about pleasure that attracts us and something about pain that repels us, and—echoing what is the true in the case of values—the attraction and repulsion

is not merely magnetic: It is not merely the case that we happen to be drawn toward pleasure the same way a piece of iron is drawn toward a magnet. Rather, it *matters* to us whether we experience pleasure or pain. There is something about pleasure that is *good* and something about pain that is *bad*, and this seems to be tied to the essence of what pleasures and pains are. As Joseph Mendola notes:

the *phenomenal* difference between pain and pleasure seems to be at least in part that the phenomenal component of the former is nastier, intrinsically *worse*, than that of the second ... No one, not even a Martian, could give a complete and adequate characterization of [pain] without talking about its nastiness, without making a committing mention of its intrinsic disvalue.¹⁵

Admittedly, it requires arguments beyond the scope of this paper to argue for the intrinsic value of pleasure and the intrinsic disvalue of pain. Pleasure and pain, however, do seem like prime candidates for intrinsic value and intrinsic disvalue. Indeed, when something is pleasurable we often say that it *feels good* and when something is painful we often say that it *feels bad*. This, a hedonist would say, is not just a matter of convention, but a response to how pleasures and pains really feel.

For this reason, there is an important sense in which hedonists need not take issue with Mackie's claim that values are "entities or qualities or relations of a very strange sort, utterly different from anything else in the universe."¹⁶ This is so because pleasure and pain are in fact very strange and utterly different from anything else in the universe. In spite of their strangeness, however, accepting that pleasure and pain exist and feel good and bad does not imply accepting a new ontological category, for we already know that pleasures and pains *do* exist and that they *do* feel good and bad. There is thus no ontological cost involved in hedonism; rather, hedonism is ontologically economical because it reduces two oddities to one: It explains the oddity of value and disvalue in terms of the oddity of pleasure and pain.

(3) *Epistemic access*: The problem of epistemic access is the problem of accounting for how we gain knowledge of values. If hedonism is correct, we gain knowledge of values through experience: We gain knowledge of intrinsic value

¹⁵ Joseph Mendola, "Objective Value and Subjective States," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, Vol. 50, No. 4, 1990, 702.

¹⁶ Mackie, 24.

and disvalue by experiencing pleasure and pain, and knowledge of instrumental value by observing how various actions, objects, and events causally relate to pleasure and pain. All of this is at least potentially available to us without any extraordinary epistemic capacities.

For these reasons, hedonism seems to be a realist theory of value that is not vulnerable to the queerness objections raised in Section 1.

Is hedonism vulnerable to anti-realist debunking arguments? According to Street, hedonism is vulnerable, since there is

...no mystery whatsoever, from an evolutionary point of view, why we and the other animals came to take the sensations associated with bodily conditions such as these to count in favor of what would avoid, lessen, or stop them rather than in favor of what would bring about and intensify them. One need only imagine the reproductive prospects of a creature who relished and sought after the sensations of its bones breaking and its tissues tearing; just think how many descendants such a creature would leave in comparison to those who happened to abhor and avoid such sensations.¹⁷

For this reason, Street concludes that we are unreflectively inclined to think that pain experiences are bad. This works as a debunking argument, she further claims, because “The realist tells us that it is an independent evaluative truth that pain sensations (however he or she defines them) are bad, and yet this is precisely what evolutionary theory would have predicted that we come to think.”¹⁸

What should we make of Street’s argument? First, it is almost certainly true that evolution connected pleasure and pain to actions that tend, respectively, to enhance and threaten our evolutionary fitness. It is probably also true that it was evolution that brought about our ability to feel pleasure and pain in the first place. But is it true that evolution connected goodness to pleasure and badness to pain? This claim, on which Street’s argument crucially depends if it shall create a problem for hedonism, is not as obviously true as are the two other claims. Indeed, it is doubtful if it is true, for there has presumably never been a time when pleasure and pain existed, yet were not good and bad, followed by an evolutionarily induced transition stage when this connection was made. Rather than being brought about by evolution, the goodness of pleasure and the badness

¹⁷ Street, 150.

¹⁸ Presumably, a similar story can be told in the case of pleasures. Street, 151.

of pain seem to be independent facts, and it seems that these facts are something that evolution in turn made use of in guiding organisms' actions to promote evolutionary fitness.¹⁹

A hedonist, therefore, is not unreflectively inclined to follow evolution's commands. Someone who unreflectively follows evolution's commands would hold that things such as achievement, friendship, cooperation, and life—i.e. things that evolution made sure would give us warm and fuzzy feelings—are intrinsically valuable, and that failure, death, and incest—i.e. things that evolution made sure would bring about suffering and horror—are intrinsically disvaluable. Hedonists, by contrast, see through evolution's cunning association game and hold that the only things intrinsically valuable and disvaluable are pleasure and pain themselves, and that other things, such as achievement, friendship, cooperation, life, failure, death, and incest, have value significance only to the extent that they bring about either pleasure or pain. Hedonists, one might say, are not fooled by evolution any more than a donkey is fooled by its owner if it breaks its owner's sticks and eats his supply of carrots.

If my reasoning here is sound, then hedonism is a viable form of value realism: It demystifies the metaphysical and epistemic queerness that motivated Mackie's anti-realism, and it accommodates for Joyce's and Street's evolutionary debunking arguments. Importantly, moreover, this does not only save hedonism from the anti-realist attack. To the extent that Mackie, Joyce, and Street's arguments are effective against competing realist theories, the argument helps bolster hedonism by virtue of slicing away its realist contenders.

Admittedly, it is an open question whether other realist theories can also deal with the challenges raised by anti-realists. That, however, must be up to other realists to show. Until or unless that is shown, it seems that Mackie, Joyce, and Street's arguments should make realists turn, not to anti-realism, but to a particular realist theory: hedonism.

¹⁹ An argument along these lines has recently been advanced by Knut Olav Skarsaune in "Darwin and moral realism: survival of the iffiest," *Philosophical Studies*, Vol. 152, No. 2, 2011, 229–243. Skarsaune's aim is to save realism from Street's Darwinian argument. Interestingly, Skarsaune – although he is not a hedonist – uses the example of hedonic value to make his point.

ESSAY 5

The Classical Objections to Hedonism

1. Introduction

Hedonism is the theory that pleasure is the only intrinsic value and pain the only intrinsic disvalue. A plain and simple view, hedonism has played a distinguished role in the history of philosophy: It was a central theory in Ancient Greece and the default position in Anglophone philosophy from Hobbes to Sidgwick. Over the last century, however, hedonism has fallen into disrepute. In Roger Crisp's diagnosis, this has been due mainly to John Stuart Mill's problematic attempt in *Utilitarianism* at saving hedonism from Thomas Carlyle's Philosophy of Swine objection; G. E. Moore's Open Question Argument; and perhaps most famously, Robert Nozick's Experience Machine thought experiment.¹ The result is, as Ben Bradley notes, that "if a philosopher [today] is asked to point out examples of truths that philosophers have conclusively established, the first would probably be that justified true belief is insufficient for knowledge; the second that hedonism is false."²

In this paper I argue that the rejection of hedonism is rushed. My aim is not to provide a positive argument for hedonism, but to rebut what I take to be the four most influential arguments against it. I shall begin with an argument that is not on Crisp's list: the Paradox of Hedonism, which is arguably the most common objection to hedonism outside of academic philosophy. Thereafter I turn to the Philosophy of Swine objection and the Open Question Argument, and

¹ Roger Crisp, *Reasons and the Good* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 98–99. See also John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism*, Roger Crisp (ed.) (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 2, 3–8, G. E. Moore, *Principia Ethica*, Thomas Baldwin (ed.) 2nd edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), and Robert Nozick, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* (New York: Basic Books, 1977), 42–43.

² Bradley, *Well-Being and Death* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), xiv.

finally, to the Experience Machine thought experiment. The sections below can be read independently.

2. The Paradox of Hedonism

The paradox of hedonism is the paradox that if we consciously pursue pleasure, we are likely to fail in our pursuit, but if we pursue other goals instead, we are likely to gain pleasure as a byproduct. This observation was given its current name by Henry Sidgwick who wrote the following in *The Methods of Ethics*:

A man who maintains throughout an Epicurean mood, keeping his main conscious aim perpetually fixed on his own pleasure, does not catch the full spirit of the chase; his eagerness never gets just the sharpness of edge which imparts to the pleasure its highest zest. Here comes into view what we may call the fundamental Paradox of Hedonism, that the impulse towards pleasure, if too predominant, defeats its own aim.³

There are at least three different versions of the Paradox of Hedonism. Let me discuss these separately, advancing from the simplest to the most advanced version.

In its simplest form—simpler than how it is described by Sidgwick—the Paradox of Hedonism states that by engaging in intensely pleasurable activities such as excessive eating, indiscriminate sex, and drug use, we are likely to end up harming ourselves, even on hedonism's own standard: We are likely to be obese, sick, and addicted, and these are painful states, not pleasurable ones. As such, if we act hedonistically, we are likely to fail to reach hedonism's proposed aim: pleasure, and the absence of pain.

The problem with this argument is that for it to be an argument against hedonism, hedonism would have to recommend excessive eating, indiscriminate sex, and drug use, even in cases where these lead to significant pains. That is not something hedonism recommends, however, for hedonism is not the view that whatever feels good to do should be done. At least, this is not what hedonism means in any philosophically interesting sense. Hedonism is the view that pleasure is the only intrinsic value and pain the only intrinsic disvalue. Accordingly, if it were true, as is taken for granted in the objection, that

³ Sidgwick, *Methods of Ethics*, 7th ed. (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing, 1907/1981), 48.

excessive eating, sex, and drug use leads to pains, a hedonist would be among the first to recommend against it.

Rather than being an argument against hedonism, the simple version of the paradox of hedonism adds to hedonism's credibility by showing that hedonism is largely in line with common sense. The simple version of the paradox helps emphasize that G. E. Moore, a stark non-hedonist, was right in claiming that hedonists "do, in general, recommend a course of conduct which is very similar to that which I should recommend."⁴

According to a more advanced version of the paradox of hedonism, it is not only true that by engaging only in pleasurable activities we will fail to live pleasurable lives; on this view, even holding pleasure as the ultimate aim of our actions is self-defeating.

To concretize this, think of two fathers: Father A and Father B. Father A is a hedonist who has had a child because he believes that this will be pleasurable. The child is taken by Father A to be an instrumental value toward the promotion of pleasure, and in his interaction with the child, the father—trying to be a good hedonist—seeks to promote pleasure. Father B, on the other hand, does not think nearly as much in terms of pleasure promotion and pain elimination. He wants to raise a healthy and virtuous child, and strives for this without much concern for pleasure. If a diaper must be changed, he changes it, not only as a necessary means to avoid nasty odors, but also as something that must be done because that's what the situation requires of him. Which father is likely to experience his fatherhood as most satisfying in the long run, Father A or Father B? Here I believe most people will opt for Father B. Father B, we think, will be likely to find his fatherhood rewarding, and gain a deep-felt pleasure as a byproduct of his striving to promote his child's health and virtue. Father A, on the other hand, will be likely to find his fatherhood dull and unsatisfying. If this is right, it seems that by seeking to promote pleasure, we will fail to reach it, while if we forget about the pleasure, we tend to gain pleasure as a byproduct. This, moreover, seems to be an argument against hedonism, since it seems that if we follow hedonism's own advice of pursuing pleasure, we will fail in reaching the goal that hedonism advises us to pursue. I take it to be this version of the paradox of hedonism with which Sidgwick is concerned.

One way for a hedonist to respond to this challenge is to deny that we tend to fail to gain pleasure by consciously pursuing it. I believe this response fails, for though consciously pursuing pleasure certainly works on some

⁴ Moore, *Principia Ethica*, 114.

occasions, it seems evident that at least on some occasions, consciously pursuing pleasure will give a lesser hedonic outcome than consciously pursuing other goals. Even explicitly pleasurable experiences such as watching a movie, reading a novel, and having sex are arguably less pleasant if one consciously aims for pleasure maximization. Second, whether or not we tend to fail if we consciously pursue pleasure is an empirical question, and it seems that hedonism becomes an empirically vulnerable theory if it depends on uncertain psychological findings.

Another way to respond to this version of the paradox is to say that it is not an argument against hedonism at all, since hedonism is not committed to the view that we should always hold pleasure as the immediate goal of our actions. I believe this is the right way to respond, for as Ralph Mason Blake writes, “The fact that hedonists judge the value of acts by reference to their consequences in pleasure by no means commits them to the view that such consequences are best attained by making them directly the sole human motive and the sole object of human desire.”⁵ Accordingly, if consciously pursuing pleasure is self-defeating, this is something that hedonists would have reason to advise against. What hedonists would positively advise, then, is to pursue a range of different goals, and if you ask a hedonist what are her aims in life, she would be unlikely to answer just “pleasure.” Perhaps she’ll say that her main aims are to be a mother and a dancer. Only when pressed on why being a mother and a dancer are choice worthy would she say that the reason why is that they are means toward—and constitutive parts of—a pleasurable life, that this is what justifies her in choosing these, and if she were told that being a mother and a dancer would lead to misery, she would reconsider her goals.

Roger Crisp makes this point as follows, appealing to tennis playing:

The tennis player who forgets about enjoyment and focuses on winning will enjoy the game more than were she to aim explicitly at enjoyment. What the hedonist has to note in addition is that the player who thinks that winning really matters is going to find it easier to focus on that as a goal, and to be more strongly motivated to achieve it. Thus, over time, human beings have developed dispositions and understanding of goods that, though apparently non-hedonistic, are in fact securely based on their capacity for the promotion of enjoyment.⁶

⁵ Ralph Mason Blake, “Why Not Hedonism? A Protest,” *The International Journal of Ethics*, Oct. 1926, Vol. 37, No. 1, Oct. 2006, 5.

⁶ Crisp, 120.

Just as with the simplest version, the advanced version of the paradox of hedonism also helps make hedonism a more believable theory. The reason why is that it shows that if we want to live pleasant lives, we are well advised to engage in various non-hedonic pursuits. This makes hedonism more in line with common sense, and gives hedonism the resources it needs to explain why we should aim at being like Father B rather than Father A and why we should engage in pursuits such as, say, being a parent or being an artist.

While neither the first nor the second version of the paradox poses a real challenge to hedonism, the third and most advanced version is a bit trickier.⁷ It is possible, namely, that it is harmful, not just to keep pleasure as one's aim when engaging in practical reasoning, but harmful even to be a hedonist. It could be that we live more pleasant lives if we are not hedonists. If so, then according to hedonism, we should not to be hedonists, and this seems paradoxical.

To make this point clear, imagine a researcher who is thrilled about her research on, say, the origins of life. Part of the reason why she enjoys her research is that she believes that gaining such knowledge has intrinsic value. This is what makes her get up in the morning and what makes her smile all the way to campus. Now, if hedonism is true, her enthusiasm rests on a false premise, for according to hedonism, knowledge does not have intrinsic value. In fact, according to hedonism, whether your beliefs are true or false is, in isolation, irrelevant, and the researcher's knowledge would be valuable only insofar as it is conducive to pleasure, whether her own or that of others. If she realized that there was nothing more of value to her research than a contributory relationship to pleasure, she might lose much of her enthusiasm, and as a result, she might stop being eager to get up in the morning and might stop smiling while walking to campus. If this is right, it seems that it might be imprudent, according to hedonism, to become a hedonist. Becoming a hedonist could make you less pleased that you otherwise would have been, and this seems like all the reason you could have—according to hedonism—for not being a hedonist. It is paradoxical, however, if hedonism recommends against believing in itself.

How might a hedonist respond? One response is to point out that if this argument makes hedonism guilty of a contradiction, hedonism has many companions in guilt, for this objection is just as much an argument against competing value theories as it is an argument against hedonism. If what is intrinsically worth having is accomplishment, then in all situations where it is

⁷ I am not aware that anyone has raised this objection. It is an objection with some merit, however, so I raise it myself.

contingently true that one will accomplish more by believing that accomplishment does not have intrinsic value, this theory will advise its adherents not to believe in it. Even if knowledge has intrinsic value, it could be the case that even though believing that knowledge has intrinsic value would itself be intrinsically valuable (because it would constitute knowledge), there could be cases where, due to the causal make up of the world, you would gain more knowledge overall by having a false belief on this one issue.

Having companions in guilt does not settle the issue, however, for the argument could show that a long line of value theories, hedonism included, are false. Or at least, it could show that these theories cannot without contradiction be coupled with the premise that our beliefs should be formed by reference to promoting value. I think, however, that it can be shown that even the most advanced version of the paradox of hedonism is unsuccessful, for it does not show that hedonism involves a contradiction, and as long as it does not, the objection fails as an argument that hedonism is wrong.

Consider these two claims:

- (1) Pleasure is the only intrinsic value.
- (2) We get most pleasure from *not* believing that pleasure is the only intrinsic value.

The first of these two claims, to which hedonism is committed, is a metaphysical claim: It is a claim about what things in the world have intrinsic value. The latter claim is a claim about contingent causal relationships in the world: It is a claim about which beliefs will lead to which hedonic outcomes. When we see that these are claims about things with different ontological status, it becomes clear that (2) cannot have any impact on (1). How could a theory about contingent causal relations either verify or falsify a metaphysical claim? It could not.

If the advanced version of the paradox of hedonism could show that there is a contradiction inherent in hedonism, hedonism would have to be committed to the premise that we should not believe in hedonism. Hedonism, however, is not a theory about what we should believe, but a theory about what has intrinsic value, and there is nothing in hedonism that implies that believing in hedonism must have a good hedonic outcome. This might be tragic, and it might add to utilitarians' reasons not to spread utilitarianism, but it does not involve a paradox in the sense that it forces hedonists to accept a contradiction.

2. Philosophy of Swine

Thomas Carlyle, in the *Latter Day Pamphlets*, argued that hedonism is a “philosophy of swine.”⁸ The reason why, he explains, is that hedonists must hold that a pig’s wallowing in the mud is as good as human philosophizing or poetry writing. This is so because value, according to hedonism, is exhausted by pleasure, and presumably, pleasure is perfectly achievable by pigs. Accordingly, if a pig’s life that consists primarily of wallowing in the mud is just slightly more pleasant than a human life of philosophizing and writing poetry, then that pig’s life must be the better one and one that we should prefer over a human life. This, moreover, seems like a *reductio ad absurdum* of the hedonist position, since obviously, philosophizing and writing poetry is better than wallowing in the mud.

How might hedonists respond? One response, suggested by John Stuart Mill, is that you need not, on hedonist grounds, judge a pig’s life to be the better than a human life even if the pig’s life is more pleasurable. The reason Mill provides is that “some *kinds* of pleasures [are] more desirable and more valuable than others.”⁹ We can, Mill claims, “assign to the pleasures of the intellect, of the feelings and imagination, and of the moral sentiments, a much higher value as pleasures than those of mere sensation.” As such, a human pleasure can, because of its high quality, outweigh a more intense pig pleasure. Thus, Mill famously concludes that “It is better to be a human dissatisfied than a pig satisfied; better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied.”¹⁰

A long-standing objection to Mill’s response, first presented by G. E. Moore, is that the view is inconsistent, for if one holds that only pleasure is intrinsically valuable, as hedonists do, one cannot simultaneously hold that some pleasures are more intrinsically valuable than others. In order to hold that some pleasures are more intrinsically valuable than pleasures (apart from being more pleasurable), a hedonist must accept that there are standards of evaluation other than the hedonic one, and if she does, she is no longer a hedonist. Accordingly, hedonists may use this response only at the cost of ceasing to be hedonists. I think Moore is right, and as such, I take Mill’s reply to be unsuccessful.

A different way to resist Carlyle’s *reductio* is presented by Laurence Lafleur.¹¹ Lafleur argues that humans have larger selves than pigs, and as such,

⁸ Thomas Carlyle, *Latter-Day Pamphlets*, (Boston: Phillips, Sampson, and Company, 1850), Part VIII.

⁹ Mill, *Utilitarianism*, 56.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 56–57.

¹¹ Laurence J. Lafleur, “In Defense of Ethical Hedonism,” *Philosophy and*

that there is substantially more to be pleased in a human being than there is in a pig. Explaining this by means of a metaphor, Lafleur claims that “a large cup, partly filled, may contain more than a small one filled to the brim.”¹² In the same way, even if we grant that hedonism is true, it might still be better to be a human not so pleased than to be a pig very pleased.

What should we make of Lafleur’s reply? First, Lafleur avoids abandoning hedonism the way Mill does, and his view has some plausibility: It seems that human selves are in some sense bigger than pig selves. I think it is doubtful, however, if Lafleur’s reply is satisfactory. One reason why is that it is not clear how a larger self would be relevant on hedonist grounds, for in the case of humans, a larger self would include many things that are hedonistically irrelevant, such as the ability to form abstractions, recall memories, comprehend art, reason, etc. Hedonism, however, cares about experiences, not about abstractions, memories, and art. The only sense in which “bigness” could be relevant, it seems, is if the human experiential field were bigger and/or more intense than the experiential field of a pig. In this sense of “big,” however, it is no longer clear that humans have bigger selves than pigs. Admittedly, it is not easy to know what it is like to be a pig, but this lack of information should count neither way, and granted that pigs have similar senses and a similar neuronal system to what we have, there is no good reason to believe that a pig’s experiential field is much smaller than our own. It would have to be *significantly* smaller, moreover, for the argument to work, since otherwise, only moderately more pleasure on the part of the pig would make that pig’s life better than a human life.

As such, I think Lafleur’s rebuttal fails, and even if his argument succeeds, it is unclear how it could have the power to support Mill’s claim that “it is better to be a human dissatisfied than a pig satisfied.” If human selves are in fact bigger in the relevant sense, there should presumably also be more room for suffering, so a human dissatisfied would not be better than a pig satisfied. In fact, a human dissatisfied would be such a horrible thing that it would be better to be a pig dissatisfied.

I think, however, that it is possible for hedonists to properly answer Carlyle. To see how, a few points must be kept in mind.

First, and as a background for assessing the “swinishness” of hedonism, it is important to understand that hedonism is not the view that we should pursue

Phenomenological Research, Vol. 16, No. 5, 1956, 547–550.

¹² *Ibid.*, 548.

the greatest intensity of pleasurable experiences. What matters is not the *intensity* of a pleasurable experience, but the *pleasurability* of a pleasurable experience. Roger Crisp suggests that the intensity of a pleasurable experience is not relevant at all, since even a very mild experience can be extremely pleasurable. Formulating this in terms of enjoyment, Crisp writes that “[e]njoyment itself is not something that can be more or less intense. Enjoyed experiences can be so, and this, as we just saw, can affect enjoyableness. But one not very intense experience ... may be found far more enjoyable than some quite intense experience”¹³ This helps give a more accurate view of what hedonists are committed to and, as importantly, what hedonists are not committed to.

Second, one must keep in mind that the “philosophy of swine” objection does not show that it would be good for human beings to adopt swinish behavior. Humans and pigs have different physiologies and psychologies, and as a result, what gives a pig pleasure is different from what gives a human being pleasure. While wallowing in the mud, say, gives a pig pleasure, this does not usually give a human being pleasure. Indeed, we find the practice rather disgusting. As such, it is understandable that we think low of a theory that advises us to wallow in the mud. Hedonism, however, is not such a theory, for it does not advise humans to wallow in the mud. If anything, hedonism advises pigs to wallow in the mud (which is not very radical). Believing that swinish actions are what tend to give humans pleasure is to admit to holding a strange view of what gives humans pleasure. Such a view is vulnerable to John Stuart Mill’s reply that “it is not they, but their accusers, who represent human nature in a degrading light; since the accusation supposes human beings to be capable of no pleasures except those of which swine are capable.”

Third, even on hedonist accounts, it is very understandable that we would not want ourselves to be pigs wallowing in the mud. If we imagine ourselves as pigs, we imagine *ourselves*—with human psychologies and human needs—as condemned to the life of a pig, constantly lacking human values such as friendship, philosophy, esthetic experiences, etc.

¹³ Crisp, 114. Jens Timmermann argues that there can be too much pleasure, and claims that this poses a problem for hedonists. Timmermann takes for granted, however, an intensity conception of hedonism. If what is at stake is pleasurability, it is no longer clear that there can be too much pleasure. After hours of pleasure, we might perhaps be exhausted and sick of it, but those states have a negative hedonic valence. In the absence of any negative hedonic impact, I at least do not share Timmermann’s worry. See Jens Timmermann, “Too Much of a Good Thing? Another Paradox of Hedonism,” *Analysis*, Vol. 65, No. 284, 2005, 144–146.

Closely related to this, it is also very understandable that we would not want to *become* pigs, even if we were guaranteed a full package that gave us not just a pig physiology, but also a pig psychology. The reason why is that it is unclear what would be left of our selves if we were to become pigs. Though we can arguably undergo some changes and still preserve our personal identity, it is unclear how we could survive becoming pigs. Indeed, it is unclear what it would even mean that a human being (with a human body and a human psychology) *becomes* a pig (with a pig body and a pig psychology). It seems instead that the human being in question would stop existing and a new pig would start existing, so becoming a pig would mean committing suicide. That we have reason to resist this is something hedonists have ample resources to explain.

Keeping these things in mind, we can see that the “swinishness” to which hedonism is committed is that a pig’s life has a similar potential to be good (on its premises) as does a human life (on its premises). It is not clear, however, why this would be a bad thing to concede. Human beings almost certainly have a different repertoire of thoughts and emotions than pigs have, and we are very fond of our own repertoire. Pigs, however, neither want nor need any of these particularly human thoughts and emotions, nor do they miss them when they are absent. Accordingly, to judge the absence of human thoughts and emotions as bad, not just for humans, but also for pigs, is a suspicious form of anthropocentrism. Believing that our own life-form is better, not just *for us*, but impersonally—better for all beings, irrespective of their psychology and physiology—is, if anything, a result of a failure to appreciate that different beings have different needs and that we humans ended up with our particular needs and particular traits because of evolutionary natural selection. We did not get these needs and traits because they are noble; we think of them as noble because these were the needs and traits that happened to evolve in our particular case. Pigs, therefore, are not defective beings; they are different beings, and it is not at all clear that goodness or value is something one should hold that humans are especially well equipped to reach.

3. The Open Question Argument

In *Principia Ethica*, G. E. Moore argues that hedonists must be wrong in holding that goodness can be defined in terms of pleasure, for the question “X is pleasurable, but is X good?” is an open one, and a question that it makes sense to ask even for someone who is a competent user of all the concepts involved. It is

not a question where the answer is analytically given to any competent language user, such as “X is a circle, but is it round?” or “X is good, but is it good?” This openness, Moore claims, shows that though pleasure might well be a good thing, goodness cannot be the same as pleasure, and as such, it shows hedonism must be false.¹⁴

According to Moore, the Open Question Argument is an argument, not specifically against hedonism, but against all forms of value naturalism, i.e. against all theories according to which values are natural entities or properties. Moore’s argument, therefore, is meant to generalize to include other naturalistic views as well, such as desire satisfactionism and eudaemonism. For the same reason that it makes sense to ask “It is pleasurable, but is it good?,” it makes also sense to ask “It satisfies desire, but is it good?” and “It is an instance of eudaemonia, but is it good?” Though I think Moore is right in claiming that the argument works against a wider group of theories than just hedonism, it is imprecise to construe the Open Question Argument as an argument against naturalism. In one sense, this is too bad for hedonists, for if it were solely an argument against naturalism, hedonists could avoid the Open Question Argument by opting for a non-naturalistic version of hedonism. I do not think the argument is that easily avoided, however, the reason being that the Open Question Argument is not really an argument against naturalism, but an argument against reductionism, irrespective of whether this reduction is naturalistic or non-naturalistic. Take Divine Command Theory. This is arguably a non-naturalistic theory, but it is nonetheless a reductionist theory, for the claim “The good is that which the Divine endorses” is a reduction of “good” to “that which the Divine endorses.” As such, one may appeal to the Open Question Argument and ask: “The Divine endorses X, but is it good?” This seems like an open question, for it is not analytically given that the good is that which the Divine says is good.

How might hedonists respond? One way to respond is to deny that hedonism is a reductionist theory. A reductionist theory is a theory that reduces goodness to non-goodness. If hedonism is true, however, pleasure is what goodness consists in, so arguably, hedonism does not reduce goodness to something that is non-goodness: It “reduces” goodness to something that is good through and through, so hedonists could claim that on their view, value is *sui generis*. This has much in common with William Frankena’s, which is that the Open Question Argument begs the question against hedonism.¹⁵ It begs the

¹⁴ Moore, 15–17.

¹⁵ William Frankena, “The Naturalistic Fallacy,” *Mind*, Vol. 48, No. 192, 1939, 464–477.

question, Frankena claims, since only on the premise that hedonism is false is the question “It is pleasurable, but is it good?” genuinely an open question. If hedonism is true, the question is closed. As such, Frankena claims, Moore’s argument against hedonism works only on the presupposition that hedonism is false.

I believe Frankena is right, but that he does not address an important part of Moore’s point, namely that the Open Question Argument *does* show that “pleasure” and “value” are not synonyms: The question “It is pleasurable, but is it good?” *is* different from the question “It is big, but is it large?” Whereas “big” and “large” have the same meaning, “pleasure” does not have the same meaning as “goodness.” As such, “It is big, but is it large?” amounts to “It is big, but is it big?,” but “It is pleasurable, but is it good?” does not amount to “It is pleasurable, but is it pleasurable?”

What the Open Question Argument therefore shows is that “goodness” and “pleasure” are not synonyms. This need not be a problem for hedonists, however, since hedonists need not commit such a view. Instead of claiming that “goodness” and “pleasure” are synonyms, which would make hedonism analytically true, hedonists could claim that the relationship between goodness and pleasure is synthetic, such as the relationship between water and H₂O. “Water” and “H₂O” are not synonyms, for it is not analytically true that “water is H₂O;” when Thales claimed that everything is water, he certainly did not *mean* that everything is H₂O. We have laboriously discovered aposteriori that water is H₂O. Similarly, we have laboriously discovered that heat is molecular kinetic energy. In an analogous way, a hedonist could argue that we have discovered that pleasure is the only thing that is intrinsically good. On such a view, “goodness” is conceptually distinct from pleasure, but it is a matter of fact that only pleasure is intrinsically good.

An obvious objection to this move is that if we have discovered aposteriori that pleasure is the only thing that is intrinsically good, the relationship between pleasure and goodness must be contingent, not necessary. I think this depends on the broader philosophical question on whether there can be necessary truths known aposteriori. That, however, is an issue on which hedonists (*qua* hedonists) do not need to take a stand. If there are no necessary aposteriori truths, it seems unproblematic to hold that hedonism, being a posteriori, is only contingently true.

5. The Experience Machine

The most influential 20th century objection to hedonism is arguably Robert Nozick's experience machine thought experiment. In *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* Nozick invites us to imagine that we are given the opportunity to plug into an experience machine and live life in a virtual reality that is created and sustained by the machine.¹⁶ Nozick writes:

Suppose there were an experience machine that would give you any experience you desired. Superduper neuropsychologists could stimulate your brain so that you would think and feel you were writing a great novel, or making a friend, or reading an interesting book. All the time you would be floating in a tank, with electrodes attached to your brain. Should you plug into this machine for life, preprogramming your life's experiences?¹⁷

Hedonists, Nozick claims, have to say that, yes, you should plug into the machine. The reason why is that if hedonism is true, nothing but pleasure and pain is relevant in practical deliberation, and since we can take for granted—as part of the thought experiment—that we will have a more pleasant life in the machine than outside, this is all a hedonist would need to reach his conviction. According to hedonists, knowing that Option A in sum leads to more pleasure and less pain than Option B gives us all we need in order to be justified in choosing Option A rather than Option B. Accordingly, we should plug into the machine. But plugging into the machine, Nozick argues, seems wrong. It is evident, he claims, that living in the real world and forming relationships with real humans has independent value, and since hedonism denies this, it is a strongly counterintuitive theory.

How might hedonists respond? One response, suggested by Harriet Baber, is that Nozick presupposes preferentialism or desire satisfactionism in his attack on hedonism.¹⁸ According to Baber, Nozick shows that many of us prefer or desire to stay in touch with reality, but in Baber's view, this needs not bother hedonists, since hedonists do really not care about preference or desire satisfaction: They care only about pleasure. As such, desire satisfactionists can choose not to enter, and can be justified in that, while hedonists can enter, and can be justified in that.

¹⁶ Nozick, 42–45.

¹⁷ Ibid., 42.

¹⁸ Harriet Baber, "The Experience Machine Deconstructed," *Philosophy in the Contemporary World*, Vol. 15, No. 1, 2008.

I think Baber is right, but this needs not invalidate Nozick's point. Nozick's tries to show that we have strong intuitions against entering the experience machine, and that in advising us to enter the machine, hedonism has a very counterintuitive implication. This, moreover, counts in hedonism's disfavor. Being confronted with this, hedonists must either bite the bullet and accept that the view is counterintuitive, reject that hedonism commits one to plugging into the machine, or find a way to undermine our intuitions by showing that we are mislead.

One way to undermine our intuitions is to suggest, as does Wayne Sumner, that we have difficulties taking into account the presupposition that the machine works perfectly. "[T]his is very difficult to do," notes Sumner, "since we know that in real life we cannot eliminate all possible malfunctions and screw-ups. For the thought experiment to yield any results at all we must therefore imagine ourselves in a world quite alien to our own—and who knows what we would choose in a world like that?"¹⁹ I think this is a good point: To some extent, people's unwillingness to plug in can be explained by reference to distrusting the machine. To the extent that this is the case, it is not clear that the thought experiment shows that we value staying in touch with reality; we just don't want our mental lives controlled by an unreliable machine, and we might have excellent hedonistic reasons not to want this.

A supplementary explanation has been given by Felipe de Brigard, who argues that Nozick's thought experiment, rather than showing that we strongly value acting in the real world and interacting with real people, shows that we have a significant *status quo* bias. To show this, de Brigard suggests that we may flip Nozick's thought experiment on its head. De Brigard asks us to imagine that we were told that we *now* live in an experience machine, and that everything we have experienced up until now has been a simulation. He then asks: Would we unplug and go back to reality? Conducting experiments on this, de Brigard found that 46 percent of his respondents claimed that they would rather stay in the virtual world in cases where they were given no information about what the real world is like. When the respondents were told that in the real world, they are in prison, 87 percent responded that they would stay plugged in. Even if they were told that they're a multi-millionaire artist living a high life in the real world, half of the respondents said that they would prefer to live in their current virtual reality. De Brigard argues that this shows that Nozick's thought experiment

¹⁹ L. W. Sumner, *Welfare, happiness, and ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 95.

merely establishes that we are prone to *status quo* bias: We are very skeptical of the idea of stepping into unknown worlds.²⁰ I believe this is a forceful response, and since *status quo* bias is a well known phenomenon, it does not involve a high cost to invoke it.

Admittedly, even when we keep Heathwood's and de Brigard's points in mind, we might still feel that we should not enter the machine. I think, however, that the intuitions have been significantly weakened, and that it is no longer unacceptably revisionistic for hedonism to advise us to plug in. It also seems to be the case that after thinking through the case, we get used to the idea and our intuitive reaction changes. Torbjörn Tännsjö reports that when he considers the thought experiment, plugging into the experience machine seems like the right thing to do.²¹ For what it's worth, I tend toward the same view. Being plugged in, moreover, one would presumably come to deeply value the virtual reality in which one lives. As says Cypher in *The Matrix*: "I know this steak doesn't exist. I know that when I put it in my mouth the Matrix is telling me it tastes juicy and delicious. After nine years you know what I realize? Ignorance is bliss."²²

6. Conclusion

For the reasons explained above, I think the four classical objections to hedonism fail to show that hedonism should be rejected. Surely, this is neither to say that hedonism is well-founded nor that other objections are bound to fail as well. It shows, however, that to the extent that hedonism is rejected on the basis of hedonism Paradox of Hedonism, the "Philosophy of Swine" objection, the Open Question Argument, or the Experience Machine thought experiment, the rejection is rushed.

²⁰ Felipe De Brigard, "If You Like It, Does It Matter If It's real?," *Philosophical Psychology*, Vol. 23, No. 1, Feb. 2010, 43–57.

²¹ Torbjörn Tännsjö, *Hedonistic Utilitarianism* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997), 92–95.

²² *The Matrix* (movie), directed by Larry and Andy Wachowski (Hollywood, CA: Warner Brothers, 1999).

Is Life the Ultimate Value?

1. Introduction: The Problem of Ultimate Value

We all value things. For example, we value friendships, prosperity, and knowledge. These seem to be good things and things worthy of pursuit. They seem better and more worthy of pursuit, at least, than do their opposites: enmity, poverty, and ignorance.

An interesting fact about the things we consider valuable is that most of them appear to be valuable not merely as things worth having for their own sake, but as things worth having for the sake of something else. Consider prosperity: Though we genuinely value prosperity—we want it, we think it is good, and we act to gain and keep it—we value it not merely so as to be prosperous, but so as to achieve something further, such as steady access to food, drink, and clothes. Were it not for the food, drink, and clothes—and the other things that prosperity brings about, such as transportation, medicine, and homes—a great deal, if not all, of the value of prosperity would be lost. Food, drink, and clothes, moreover, do not seem to be ends in themselves either. Though they are *ends* of prosperity, they are also—from another perspective—*means* to avoid hunger, thirst, and cold. Furthermore, avoiding hunger, thirst, and cold seems to be a means to yet another end: remaining in good health.

Where does the chain of values end? It seems that the chain of values must end somewhere, for though *some* values can be values by virtue of being means to or constituent parts of further values, not *all* values can be values of this kind. If they were, all values would be values only insofar as they contribute to something further, in a justificatory regress. In order to get a chain of values off the ground, it seems that something will have to be valuable by virtue of itself, not by virtue of that to which it contributes. Aristotle puts forth this point as

follows in the *Nicomachean Ethics*:

[T]hings achievable by action have some end that we wish for because of itself, and because of which we wish for the other things, . . . we do not choose everything because of something else—for if we do, it will go on without limit, so that desire will prove to be empty and futile.¹

Ayn Rand states the point like this in “The Objectivist Ethics”:

Without an ultimate goal or end, there can be no lesser goals or means: a series of means going off into an infinite progression towards a nonexistent end is a metaphysical and epistemological impossibility. It is only an ultimate goal, an *end in itself*, that makes the existence of values possible.²

What is ultimately valuable? There are many proposed answers. Some propose that ultimate value can be found in developing oneself to the fullest or in cultivating one’s character and one’s virtues. Others argue that it is ultimately valuable to have one’s preferences or desires satisfied, to act in accordance with one’s sentiments, or to experience enjoyment or pleasure. Still others argue that there are *several* things worth having for their own sake, without any of these being reducible to one supreme value; perhaps pleasure, knowledge, friendship, and virtue are all ultimately valuable.

Rand’s suggested answer is that life is the ultimate value. Life, in Rand’s view, is the only thing worth having for its own sake, not for the sake of something else. All things, Rand maintains—from friendship, prosperity, and knowledge to enmity, poverty, and ignorance—are valuable or disvaluable (to an agent) in proportion to whether they enhance or undermine (that agent’s) life.³

How can Rand’s view—or, for that matter, any view—on what is ultimately valuable be justified? This is a difficult question, because it is not

¹ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. by Terence Irwin, 2nd ed. (Indianapolis, Ind.: Hackett Publishers, 1999), I.2.1094a18–21.

² Ayn Rand, “The Objectivist Ethics,” in Ayn Rand, *The Virtue of Selfishness: A New Concept of Egoism* (New York: Signet, 1964), 17.

³ Rand’s own presentation of this point, which I discuss in detail below, is found primarily in her “This Is John Galt Speaking,” in Ayn Rand, *For the New Intellectual* (New York: Signet, 1963), 117–92; Rand, “The Objectivist Ethics,” in Rand, *The Virtue of Selfishness*, 13–35; and Ayn Rand, “Causality versus Duty,” in Ayn Rand, *Philosophy: Who Needs It* (New York: Signet, 1982), 95–101.

clear how we must proceed to justify an ultimate value. When we justify a non-ultimate value, such as prosperity, we do so by showing what it contributes to—for example, important goods such as food and medicine. This is a satisfactory justification for a non-ultimate value. It is not a satisfactory justification for an ultimate value, however, since an ultimate value—being truly ultimate—is not valuable in virtue of that to which it contributes. If it were, it would not be ultimate, and we would merely move the problem one additional step in the regress. When we seek to justify an ultimate value, therefore, we have to show that something is valuable irrespective of that to which it contributes. How, if at all, can this be done?

My aim in this article is to present and assess Rand's justification for her view on this issue. I first (Section 2) present Rand's argument, with emphasis on her appeal to a specific dependence relationship between values and life. In order to explain the procedure involved in Rand's reasoning, and to bring out the distinctive force of her argument, I start by briefly discussing certain aspects of her epistemology. I thereafter (Section 3) raise a challenge to Rand's theory. This challenge concerns the reconciliation of two of the theory's features: on the one hand, its dependence on a pre-rational choice (the "choice to live"), and on the other hand, its objectivity and bindingness. I will refer to the tension between these two features as "the problem of subjectivity." I then (Section 4) examine four different attempts to solve this problem. These are, respectively, the solutions suggested by Douglas Rasmussen, Nathaniel Branden, Irfan Khawaja, and Allan Gotthelf. For each of these suggestions, I explain why I believe it is unsatisfactory. I then (Section 5) present my own position on the issue. In a nutshell, the view for which I will argue is that the claim "life is the ultimate value" can be understood in two different ways: either as a claim about the ultimate purpose of valuing or as a claim about the proper ultimate standard of practical reasoning. In the latter sense, I argue, we are justified in holding that life is the ultimate value. In the former sense, however, we are not. In the former sense, *happiness*, not life, is the ultimate value—and grasping this, I further argue, is crucial to grasp how "life is the ultimate value" in the latter sense can be justified. At the end of the article I indicate my reasons for believing that this view might also have been Rand's own, and I offer, in support of this, a new interpretation of her distinction between an "ultimate purpose" and a "standard of value."

2. The Dependence of “Value” on “Life”

Rand writes:

What is morality, or ethics? It is a code of values to guide man’s choices and actions—the choices and actions that determine the purpose and the course of his life. Ethics, as a science, deals with discovering and defining such a code.

The first question that has to be answered, as a precondition of any attempt to define, to judge or to accept any specific system of ethics, is: *Why* does man need a code of values?

Let me stress this. The first question is not: What particular code of values should man accept? The first question is: Does man need values at all—and why?⁴

What Rand urges in these three short paragraphs is to search for what gives rise to the distinction between the valuable and the disvaluable. We should not, Rand claims, merely take this distinction and these concepts for granted. We should ask *why* we need them; we should seek to identify what purpose, if any, drawing this distinction and forming these concepts serves.

So as to understand what such a procedure involves and why Rand deems it helpful, we must see it as part of the epistemological background from which Rand approaches the problem of value. In *Introduction to Objectivist Epistemology*, Rand presents what Darryl Wright has coined her “basing requirement for concepts.”⁵ This requirement states that when using concepts, “one must be able to retrace the specific (logical, not chronological) steps by which they were formed, and one must be able to demonstrate their connection to their base in perceptual reality.”⁶ This holds for the concept “value” as for all other concepts. In order to understand this requirement, we must understand, at least in outline, what Rand thinks on a more general level is the nature and purpose of concepts.

Rand is an epistemic foundationalist who holds that all knowledge is ultimately based on perceptual experience. Concepts, within this framework, are tools we use to organize and draw inferences from our perceptual experiences. More specifically, concepts are mental groupings of the entities we perceive,

⁴ Rand, “The Objectivist Ethics,” in Rand, *The Virtue of Selfishness*, 13.

⁵ Darryl F. Wright, “Evaluative Concepts and Objective Values: Rand on Moral Objectivity,” *Social Philosophy & Policy*, Vol. 25, No. 1, 2008, 168.

⁶ Ayn Rand, *Introduction to Objectivist Epistemology*, expanded 2nd ed. (New York: Meridian, 1990), 51.

based upon these entities' intrinsic or extrinsic similarities.⁷ Even though we can form complex concepts—and we can use concepts as the basis of forming new concepts (say, we form “furniture” on the basis of “chair,” “table,” and “sofa”)—all concepts must ultimately refer back to entities that we perceive. If they don't, they fail to fulfill the purpose for which we need them, namely, helping us to organize and draw inferences from our perceptual experiences.

Tracing concepts back to their perceptual basis is a crucial component in Rand's philosophical methodology, the motivation for which is to ensure that we have our concepts firmly anchored in reality. When we use concepts that we are *not* ultimately able to trace back to perceptual experiences, we are using what Rand calls “floating abstractions.”⁸ Floating abstractions are abstractions that we have taken over from others without having gone through the mental steps of forming them for ourselves. The reason why such conceptual second-handedness is problematic is that when we merely take concepts over from others, we do not grasp first-hand what things in reality they refer to, and we are doomed to use our concepts in the same way children use concepts from the adult world which they lack the necessary experiential background to form. Though children might have a vague and associative understanding of what, say, “mortgage” means, and though they can parrot it and apply it correctly in some contexts, they do not grasp it. As philosophers in search of a sound theory of value, we should ensure that we do not treat the central concept “value” as a six-year-old treats “mortgage.”

What, then, is the observational foundation of the concept “value”? According to Rand, the concept “value” rests on observations of intentional action, which is action performed in order to reach a goal. We observe intentional action when we observe that someone goes to bed *in order to sleep*, lifts a cup *in order to drink*, turns on the air conditioner *in order to cool the room*; that is, when we observe that someone acts so as to achieve certain effects. Values, as we first and in an elementary sense encounter them, are the goals of intentional action. As Rand defines it, a value is “that which one acts to gain and/or keep.”⁹

⁷ For a discussion of Rand's view on what similarities are, and how similarities can give rise to concepts, see Rand, *Introduction to Objectivist Epistemology*, chaps. 1–3; and Allan Gotthelf, “Ayn Rand on Concepts,” <<http://www.bristol.ac.uk/metaphysics/science/naicpapers/gotthelf.pdf>> [April 28, 2011]

⁸ Leonard Peikoff, *Objectivism: The Philosophy of Ayn Rand* (New York: Meridian, 1991), 96.

⁹ Rand, “This Is John Galt Speaking,” in Rand, *For the New Intellectual*, 121. Rand operates with two definitions of “value,” one descriptive and one normative. These, importantly, are

Having grasped “value”—the *goal* of an intentional action—Rand claims that we are in a position to form two other concepts that are intimately related to “value”: “valuer,” which refers to an *agent* performing an action, and “valuing,” which refers to an *action* performed by an agent for the sake of reaching a goal. Indeed, these three concepts are interdependent: None makes sense without the others.

Most of us form the concepts “value,” “valuer,” and “valuing” from observing human behavior, both our own and that of others. These concepts, however, also apply to animal behavior. To the extent that a cat runs *in order to* catch a mouse, there is a valuer (the cat), a value (catching the mouse), and valuing (the chasing). Also, and as far as the mouse runs *in order to* escape the cat, there is—from the mouse’s perspective—a valuer (the mouse), a value (avoiding being caught by the cat) and valuing (the running away). This provides us with an observational basis for evaluative terms.

Having grasped “value” and its corollaries “valuer” and “valuing,” Rand claims that we can identify an important relationship between the phenomenon of “value” and another phenomenon, “life”—namely, that it is only within the realm of living things that values exist. Non-living things—such as stones, rivers, windows, cigarettes, and application forms—do not value anything, nor are they able to. Though such non-living things are involved in various goal-directed actions, they do not themselves pursue goals.

This correlation between “value” and “life” is not accidental. On the one hand, life seems to be what makes values possible, since it is only living things that can pursue goals. On the other hand, life seems not only to make values possible, but also to make values necessary. Life can only be sustained under certain conditions, and actions are required on the part of living organisms in order to meet these conditions.

Most values, moreover, seem to be geared toward different organisms’ lives: chasing mice (as cats do) is vital to cats, and escaping cats (as mice do) is vital to mice. Cats that stop chasing mice and mice that stop escaping cats will die. They are unlikely to die at the very instant they stop valuing, but they will nonetheless fail to do what is required by them to remain alive, thus staying temporarily alive only for so long as the surplus of past actions can carry them. It

not two different concepts referred to by the same word. The normative definition, as Rand sees it, is a development of the descriptive definition. I discuss this issue in more detail below. For Rand’s view on the contextual nature of definitions, see Ayn Rand, “Definitions,” in Rand, *Introduction to Objectivist Epistemology*, 40–54.

is in this sense that life seemingly makes values not only possible, but also necessary—necessary, if life is to be sustained.

Following Rand’s reasoning one step further, we may observe that the relationship between values and life is not only a means/end relationship, but also a constituency relationship. Valuing is both what sustains life *and* a crucial part of what constitutes life. This is important to Rand, and it is made clear by her definition of life as “a process of self-sustaining, self-generated action.”¹⁰ This definition can be rephrased in terms of values. In terms of values, life is a process where a *valuer* (an agent) *values* (runs a process in order to) a *value* (sustain itself). Values, therefore, seem to be as deeply interconnected with *life* as they are to valuers and valuing, because valuing both constitutes and sustains life.

According to Rand, it is only within the context of a living being, whose life must be sustained by this being’s own actions, that the phenomenon of values occurs. To illustrate this principle, Rand invites us to imagine “an immortal, indestructible robot, an entity which moves and acts, but which cannot be affected by anything, which cannot be changed in any respect, which cannot be damaged, injured or destroyed.” Such an entity, Rand maintains, “would not be able to have any values; it would have nothing to lose; it could not regard anything as *for* or *against* it, as serving or threatening its welfare, as fulfilling or frustrating its interest. It could have no interests and no goals.”¹¹ Her point is that without the fundamental alternative of life or death, values are impossible. Without an organism that is vulnerable—in the sense that its life can be threatened or, alternatively, enhanced—the question of value does not arise. Moreover, in adherence with the grounding requirement for concepts, this is the only context in which Rand believes it makes sense to speak of values. Values occur because we have a life that can be threatened or enhanced—and because we, through our actions, can affect this.

To speak of values apart from a life that can be threatened or enhanced, and for other purposes than enhancing life, is to treat “value” as a floating abstraction not anchored in facts of reality. Rand thus rejects all claims of what she calls “free-floating value,” that is, value that is not tied to a valuer and a life being valued. The reason why is that this sort of claim “divorces the concept of ‘good’ from beneficiaries, and the concept of ‘value’ from valuer and purpose—

¹⁰ Rand, “The Objectivist Ethics,” in Rand, *The Virtue of Selfishness*, 15.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 16. I discuss this example in detail below.

claiming that the good is good in, by and of itself.”¹² A paradigmatic example of a free-floating value is G. E. Moore’s “Beautiful World.” According to Moore, a beautiful world has value in and of itself, and would retain its value even if there were no valuers there to benefit from its beauty.¹³ Speaking of value in such a sense is, in Rand’s view, to use the concept “value” in the absence of that which gives the concept meaning: a life that can be enhanced or threatened. Speaking of values in the absence of lives, therefore, is tantamount to speaking of “libraries” in the absence of “books” or of “funerals” in the absence of “deaths.” “Value” is a derivative phenomenon made possible by the phenomenon of life, so “value” is hierarchically dependent upon “life” in the same way “library” is dependent on “book” and “funeral” is dependent on “death.” Rand explains:

Metaphysically, *life* is the only phenomenon that is an end in itself: a value gained and kept by a constant process of action. Epistemologically, the concept of “value” is genetically dependent upon and derived from the antecedent concept of “life.” To speak of “value” as apart from “life” is worse than a contradiction in terms. “It is only the concept of ‘Life’ that makes the concept of ‘Value’ possible.”¹⁴

Thus Rand speaks of values only *in relation to individual living entities*. “It is only,” she argues, “to a living entity that things can be good or evil.”¹⁵ To the extent that friendships, books, hospitals, computers, and kindergartens are valuable, they are valuable *to* someone. If they are not valuable to someone, they are not valuable at all, since in the absence of a relation to someone, the question of value or disvalue does not arise—and speaking of “value” in such a sense is to speak of “value” in a context in which one is not justified in using it. To do so would be to commit what Rand calls the “fallacy of the stolen concept,” which is to use a concept outside of the context in which one is justified in using it.¹⁶

So far, we have discussed values in relation to living organisms in general.

¹² Ayn Rand, “What Is Capitalism?” in Ayn Rand, *Capitalism: The Unknown Ideal*, Centennial ed. (New York: New American Library, 1967), 13. Rand sometimes called a value that is divorced from any beneficiary an *intrinsic value*. This terminological choice might be confusing to some contemporary readers. Today, such value is commonly referred to as “value *period*,” or “absolute value,” and is contrasted with “value *for*.” On Rand’s view, all values are values *for*.

¹³ G. E. Moore, *Principia Ethica*, ed. Thomas Baldwin, rev. ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 132–47.

¹⁴ Rand, “The Objectivist Ethics,” in Rand, *The Virtue of Selfishness*, 17.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 16.

¹⁶ Rand, “Axiomatic Concepts,” in Rand, *Introduction to Objectivist Epistemology*, 59–61.

How does Rand get us from descriptive biological values—which concern all living organisms—to human values and to ethical values? In order to understand this, we must understand in what relevant respects Rand takes humans to be different from other animals. Rand writes that

an animal has no choice in the knowledge and the skills that it acquires; it can only repeat them generation after generation. And an animal has no choice in the standard of value directing its actions: its senses provide it with an *automatic* code of values, an automatic knowledge of what is good for it or evil, what benefits or endangers its life. An animal has no power to extend its knowledge or to evade it. In situations for which its knowledge is inadequate, it perishes—as, for instance, an animal that stands paralyzed on the track of a railroad in the path of a speeding train. But so long as it lives, an animal acts on its knowledge.¹⁷

Animals are automatic value-seekers in that they have instincts that guide their actions toward survival. Human beings are not like animals in this respect. As humans, we have a much more complex and plastic repertoire of actions, and are thus *not* automatic value-seekers. Though we have a pleasure/pain mechanism that roughly prompts us to perform basic life-enhancing actions, we can also err and evade, and indeed, we have the ability systematically to pursue courses of actions that harm us. We can become hermits, terrorists, Nazis, or bums who merely live from moment to moment according to what feels good at the time. Doing such things, however, will not promote a human life. In order to promote our lives, Rand claims, we need long-term plans and principles, and we need guidance in the process of forming such principles. Providing such guidance is what morality, in Rand's view, is about. As we saw in the definition quoted above, morality is “a code of values to guide man's choices and actions.” Because of our nature, we need morality for the same reason that birds need nests and trees need sunlight; we need morality so as to sustain and enhance our lives.¹⁸ (For more about the practical consequences of Rand's normative ethics—

¹⁷ Rand, “The Objectivist Ethics,” 19.

¹⁸ Implicit in this lies a distinctive metaethical position. On the one hand, Rand's theory of value is agent-centered and agent-relative. In her view, an object that is good for me need not be good for you. This, however, does not make Rand a moral subjectivist. Rand is an objectivist. The reason why is that even though “valuable” and “disvaluable” do not refer to objects, they refer to relationships between agents and objects. What is valuable to an agent is that which stands in a beneficial relationship to the agent; the disvaluable is that which stands in a harmful relationship to that agent. What things and actions stand in such a relationship, moreover—though it might vary from one agent to another—is a factual matter

which I will not discuss here—see Rand’s *The Virtue of Selfishness* and Tara Smith’s *Ayn Rand’s Normative Ethics*.¹⁹)

3. The Problem of Subjectivity

So far I have surveyed Rand’s arguments for three main claims:

- (1) Values are made possible by life.
- (2) Life, in turn, is constituted by and depends upon valuing.
- (3) Values exist only in relation to living agents.

I think these observations are all correct, and that they have important implications for value theory and philosophy of biology. Still, none of these observations, either alone or in conjunction, establishes that life is the ultimate value. These observations are compatible with but do not establish it.

First, they do not establish that, descriptively, life is the goal of all valuing. Though the ultimate reason organisms need to pursue values might be that such activity is required to sustain their lives—and though a great many of our actions are in fact life-enhancing—we are clearly able to pursue values that harm our lives. The most obvious example is suicide.

This, though, is not what Rand claims to establish. Rand does not defend the view that we in fact *do* value only that which is life-promoting (a psychological thesis), but rather the view that we *should* value, or have reason to value, only that which is life-promoting (an ethical thesis). This ethical thesis, moreover, is very different from the psychological thesis. In fact, the two theses seem incompatible. If all of our actions were automatically to promote life, we would not need guidance to reach that goal. It is precisely because the psychological thesis is false that we need the ethical thesis.

What, then, is needed in addition to the argument above in order to ground the view that life is the ultimate value in the prescriptive sense? According to Rand, what is needed is a *choice to live*—a commitment to continue living.

open to empirical investigation. This is why, in the definition quoted above, Rand speaks of ethics as a “science.” Note also that for Rand, “value” is the fundamental normative concept. “Right,” “good,” “virtue,” “reason for action,” “ought,” and “should” are all ultimately defined in terms of “value.”

¹⁹ Tara Smith, *Ayn Rand’s Normative Ethics: The Virtuous Egoist* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

In John Galt's speech in *Atlas Shrugged*, Rand writes that her morality "is contained in a single axiom: existence exists—and in a single choice: to live."²⁰ In "Causality versus Duty" she writes, "Life or death is man's only fundamental alternative. To live is his basic act of choice. If he chooses to live, a rational ethics will tell him what principles of actions are required to implement his choice. If he does not choose to live, nature will take its course."²¹ As is expressed in the latter quotation, the choice to live is a pre-moral, pre-rational choice. Rather than this choice itself being either moral or rational, the choice to live opens up the realm of ethics and of reasons for action. Ethics provides rules for living, so if living is not a goal, the science of ethics does not arise.

Rand did not write extensively on the choice to live. This is unfortunate, for the choice to live, at least on some interpretations, appears to cast doubt on the binding force of moral obligations. It might seem, as Douglas Rasmussen writes, that if morality depends on a *choice* to live—a choice which is not rationality-apt—then "obligation is hypothetical" (rather than categorical), since by making a different pre-moral choice an agent might "choose to opt out of the 'moral game'."²² This, Rasmussen argues, is problematic, for moral obligations are supposed to be obligations that we cannot opt out of. We do not accept "Well, I chose otherwise" as a satisfying excuse if we blame someone for not living up to his moral obligations. The "choosing otherwise" is not supposed to be the solution in such cases. It is supposed to be the problem.

Still, some of Rand's formulations do seem to point in a direction that suggests it is indeed possible to opt out of morality. In Galt's speech, Rand explicitly writes that "you do not have to live."²³ In "The Moral Revolution in *Atlas Shrugged*," written by Nathaniel Branden and approved by Rand, we read that "[t]he man who does not wish to hold life as his goal and standard is free not to hold it."²⁴ On such a view, we could still blame, for their lack of consistency, those who choose to live yet who do not take the required actions. But, as notes Darryl Wright, there are

²⁰ Rand, "This Is John Galt Speaking," in Rand, *For the New Intellectual*, 128.

²¹ Rand, "Causality versus Duty," in Rand, *Philosophy: Who Needs It*, 99.

²² Douglas Rasmussen, "Rand on Obligation and Value," *The Journal of Ayn Rand Studies*, Vol. 4, No. 1, 2002, 71.

²³ Rand, "This Is John Galt Speaking," in Rand, *For the New Intellectual*, 124.

²⁴ Nathaniel Branden, "The Moral Revolution in *Atlas Shrugged*," in *Who Is Ayn Rand?* ed. Nathaniel Branden and Barbara Branden (New York: Random House, 1962), 27.

individuals, such as suicide terrorists, who could only be described as patently life-hating, obsessed with destroying themselves and innocent others. It would be hard to view them as choosing to live, and yet it seems equally as unacceptable to hold that they have no moral obligations, as if their nihilism were a moral dispensation.²⁵

A similar worry is raised by Irfan Khawaja, who argues that, granted morality's dependence on a choice to live, obligations appear merely "hypothetical," and thus "arbitrary" and "escapable." In a question that aptly formulates the problem, Khawaja asks: "If the Objectivist view is really 'objective', how can morality's binding force rest on a choice? Doesn't it then collapse into subjectivity?"²⁶ If Rand's theory is to be firmly supported, this problem—which I call the problem of subjectivity—must be solved.

4. Four Suggested Solutions to the Problem of Subjectivity

I shall now examine four different attempts to solve the problem of subjectivity, and provide my reasons for believing that these attempts are unsuccessful. Thereafter, I sketch my own position on the issue.

4.1. *The Argument from Denying the Choice to Live (Douglas Rasmussen)*

Rasmussen seeks to solve the problem of subjectivity by arguing that morality in fact does *not* rest on a pre-moral choice to live. Rasmussen's view is that "[l]ife is not a value because we choose it, but rather because of what it is." As such, he maintains, it is mistaken to believe that "there can be no obligation without the choice to live."²⁷ In his view, it is rather the other way around: admitting that a choice is needed opens the door for subjectivism, as well as opting out of the moral game. Rasmussen, we might say, favors choice/obligation incompatibilism, and seeks to save obligation by throwing out choice.

There are two issues at stake here. The first issue is whether or not this is a proper interpretation of Rand. According to Rasmussen, it is a proper interpretation, since in his view, "the choice to live," as Rand uses the expression, refers not to a choice that is necessary for life to be valuable, but

²⁵ Darryl Wright, "Reasoning about Ends: Life as a Value in Ayn Rand's Ethics," in *Metaethics, Egoism, and Virtue: Studies in Ayn Rand's Normative Theory*, ed. Allan Gotthelf and James G. Lennox (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2010), 26.

²⁶ Irfan Khawaja, "Review: Tara Smith's *Viable Values: A Study of Life as the Root and Reward of Morality*: A Discussion," *Reason Papers*, No. 26, 2003, 83.

²⁷ Rasmussen, "Rand on Obligation and Value," 76, 74.

rather to a choice or a commitment that we need to make in order to carry out what we ought to do independently of this choice. I believe this is a mistaken interpretation of Rand, and I believe a convincing argument against Rasmussen's interpretation has been offered by Allan Gotthelf.²⁸ Since my main concern in this article is value theory, however, rather than interpretation of Rand, I will not discuss this issue further. Let me instead assess the second issue at stake, the philosophical soundness of Rasmussen's argument.

Although my own position, as will become clear, is similar to Rasmussen's in several respects, I do not find his arguments convincing as they stand. Rasmussen speaks at length of the close relationship between life and values, and then recapitulates points (1) through (3) in Section 3 above.

The first new (or semi-new) argument presented by Rasmussen is that the ultimate value is "set by our nature" because "metaphysically, life is . . . an end in itself: a value gained and kept by a constant process of action."²⁹ This, however, is macrobiology, not normative theory, and it remains unclear how the biological root of value, by itself, can issue binding obligations. Macrobiologically, it is true that life exists for its own sake. If we take for granted the biological teleology favored by Rand, life (in an inclusive sense that includes reproduction) is roughly the *telos* of our actions.³⁰ Moreover, there seems to be no further *telos* to which life is the means. Such an argument, however, is doomed to fail as an argument for life's being the ultimate value in an ethically relevant sense. If our *non-volitional* actions are bound to aim toward life, this is irrelevant, since it is not the case that the right thing to do is that to which our body prompts us. If our *volitional* actions are bound to aim toward life, we have psychological egoism, which not only fails to support the desired conclusion, but is incompatible with it. Gotthelf advances a similar line of argument against Rasmussen.³¹

Rasmussen's second argument is that "[c]hoice is not the cause of the ultimate value of life, but life as the ultimate end is the cause—in the sense of creating the need for—the activity that is choice."³² This is true, but trivial. It is true that in order to live, we must choose certain actions before other actions, and

²⁸ Allan Gotthelf, "The Choice to Value," in *Metaethics, Egoism, and Virtue*, ed. Gotthelf and Lennox, 33–46.

²⁹ Rasmussen, "Rand on Obligation and Value," 78, 76.

³⁰ See Harry Binswanger, "Life-Based Teleology and the Foundations of Ethics," *The Monist*, Vol. 75, No. 1, 1992, 84–103; Harry Binswanger, *The Biological Basis of Teleological Concepts* (Los Angeles, CA: Ayn Rand Institute Press, 1990).

³¹ Gotthelf, "The Choice to Value," 39.

³² Rasmussen, "Rand on Obligation and Value," 77.

we must also (at least implicitly) make the decision to remain alive and pursue values. This, however, does not settle the issue of what is ultimately valuable.

A similar problem is present in David Kelley's rendering of Rand's argument:

In regard to point (ii),^[33] Rand observed that *all* living organisms are capable of initiating goal-directed action, unlike rocks, rivers, and other inanimate things, which act mechanically in response to outside forces. In regard to point (iii), she observed that life versus death is the fundamental alternative that living organisms face, because it is the alternative of existing or not existing—than which you can't get more fundamental. In light of points (ii) and (iii), an organism's own life is the only thing that can be an ultimate value for it.³⁴

This argument is invalid, for it does not follow from the premises laid out by Kelley that life is the only thing that can be an ultimate value. What Kelley does is first to recapitulate Rasmussen, and then add the fact that the alternative of life and death is the most fundamental alternative we face. Rand presents the latter point as follows:

There is only one fundamental alternative in the universe: existence or nonexistence—and it pertains to a single class of entities: to living organisms. The existence of inanimate matter is unconditional, the existence of life is not: it depends on a specific course of action. Matter is indestructible, it changes its forms, but it cannot cease to exist.³⁵

Adding this, however, does not suffice. It is true that all particular values—whatever they are—exist on the side of life and not on the side of death. This, however, shows only that values *presuppose* life. Moreover, the fact that we face an alternative in this regard does not solve the problem of ultimate value. This point is well captured by Wright, who writes, “By definition, an alternative

³³ Kelley refers to three enumerated points; see David Kelley, “Choosing Life,” <<http://www.atlassociety.org/choosing-life>> [December 2, 2011]:

- (i) A value is a goal, something that is sought.
- (ii) A value requires a valuer capable of initiating action for the goal.
- (iii) The valuer must face an alternative: success or failure in achieving the goal must make a difference; achieving the goal must confer some benefit on the valuer and failure must bring some loss.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Rand, “The Objectivist Ethics,” in Rand, *The Virtue of Selfishness*, 15.

presents one with two or more possible pathways, but the mere existence of multiple pathways does not usually settle the question of which one of them an agent ought to take; on the contrary, it usually *raises* this question.”³⁶

A possible counter-argument could be that what Kelley presents is not a deductive argument, but an inductive argument. As far as I can see, however, Kelley draws no inductive generalization. As such, I believe that both Rasmussen’s and Kelley’s arguments fail; the choice to live cannot be seen as superfluous to the justification of the principle that life is the ultimate value.

4.2. *The Argument from Performative Contradiction (Nathaniel Branden)*

Branden acknowledges that ethics rests on a choice, yet argues that this does not jeopardize its objectivity and binding force. He does this by arguing that as long as one acts and values, “*not* to hold man’s life as one’s standard of moral judgment is to be guilty of a *logical contradiction*.”³⁷

Unfortunately, Branden does not present this argument in detail. Rasmussen does, however, and although Rasmussen’s aim is to reject Branden’s argument in favor of his own incompatibilism, he sketches Branden’s argument charitably. Rasmussen writes: “If life is the basic value that makes all other values possible, including even one’s valuing not to live, then a person who prefers not to live is implicitly accepting the value of life.”³⁸ He continues: “If it is true that logically one cannot value anything without valuing that which makes such valuation possible, and if life is the very thing that makes valuation possible, then the value ‘life’ is implicit in any choice or valuation a person makes, and thus in making *any* choice, one chooses to live.”³⁹ If this is the case, it follows that when one acts, one chooses life. Acting against life, then, is acting in a way that defies the purpose one has accepted by acting. As such, to act against life is to engage in a performative contradiction.

For the sake of argument, I will take for granted that Branden is right in claiming that every agent who chooses to act does, at least to some extent, value his life. An agent who acts has chosen to act, which implies valuing acting, which implies valuing life for the reason that life is constituted by actions. What weakens Branden’s argument, however, is that to the extent one can say that all valuing presupposes valuing life, one speaks of “valuing life” in a much weaker

³⁶ Wright, “Reasoning about Ends: Life as a Value in Ayn Rand’s Ethics,” 23.

³⁷ Branden, “The Moral Revolution in *Atlas Shrugged*,” in *Who Is Ayn Rand?* Branden and Branden (eds.), 26.

³⁸ Rasmussen, “Rand on Obligation and Value,” 72.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 73.

sense than Branden needs for his argument to be effective. In order to avoid contradiction, it is only required that the agent values his life to *some* extent. It is not required that he holds his life as his ultimate value. As such, a man who acts for any goal other than enhancing life—say, he is a hedonist, and aims at maximizing his long-term pleasure—could say that there is no contradiction in his actions, since of course, he values life. Indeed, he would probably say that he values life passionately. He does not, however, hold it as his ultimate value. If he says this and puts his theory into practice, one can argue against him, but one will need to do so on grounds other than an alleged performative contradiction inherent in his actions. So even though we should perhaps grant that Branden’s argument is effective against a nihilist who rejects all values,⁴⁰ it fails as an argument against competing value theories.

A variant of this argument could be that if one does not choose life, one in effect chooses death, since everything but life is death. If one chooses death, moreover, one does not need values at all since, as Rand notes, “nature will take its course.”⁴¹ Such an argument fails for the same reason that the above argument fails, however, since it is wrong to assume that not choosing A as one’s ultimate value means that one chooses the opposite of A as one’s ultimate value. If this premise were true, a hedonist—who holds that pleasure is the ultimate value—would be right in claiming that Rand’s theory, in choosing something other than pleasure as the ultimate value, is tantamount to “choosing pain.” This is not a fair criticism of Rand, and the criticism is not fair the other way either, since a hedonist does not hold death as his ultimate value. A hedonist, though he disagrees with Rand, probably abhors death, seeing it as a fundamental threat to everything he values. After all, every pleasure, like every value, exists on the side of life. Accordingly, we should acknowledge that life can be (and is) an important value for many value theories. To the extent that it is, the argument from performative contradiction does not work.

4.3. *The Argument from Axiomaticity (Irfan Khawaja)*

Irfan Khawaja argues that we should understand “the binding force of an ultimate value by analogy with the binding force of a logical axiom.” He suggests this analogy since, as he states, “an axiom can be thoroughly conditional in its binding force without being either escapable or arbitrary.”⁴²

⁴⁰ This can also be doubted. A performative contradiction need perhaps not be a problem for a nihilist.

⁴¹ Rand, “Causality versus Duty,” in Rand, *Philosophy: Who Needs It*, 99.

⁴² Khawaja, “Review: Tara Smith’s *Viable Values*,” 84.

This, moreover, seems to be exactly what we are looking for in arguing for a binding ultimate value. What Khawaja sets out to argue is that although morality is conditional on the choice to live, this does not mean that the choice is escapable or arbitrary, and as such, that it is, *ipso facto*, binding.⁴³

Drawing the parallel between justifying axioms and justifying the choice to live, Khawaja appeals to Aristotle's Principle of Non-Contradiction,⁴⁴ which states that a thing cannot both be and not be at the same time and in the same respect. This principle, Khawaja notes, cannot be justified in the sense that it is possible to *prove* it. It is also, in some sense, possible to abandon it. At the same time, however, this principle is neither "optional" nor "arbitrary." The reason why is that anyone who opposes the principle must take it for granted in his opposition, so in any attempt to refute the principle, the principle is reaffirmed. The principle of non-contradiction is a presupposition for all reasoning. Therefore, the only way to abandon the axiom is not to reason at all. A non-reasoner cannot make a counter-argument, however, so as long as we reason, we are bound by the axiom. Linking this to the choice to live, Khawaja writes:

As a matter of non-prescriptive fact, life can only be kept in existence by a constant process of self-sustaining action. Moreover, life is unique in this respect: it's the underlying generator of practical requirements that explains why there are practical requirements at all, themselves requiring self-sustaining action. [So life is the ultimate value.]⁴⁵

As in the case of Kelley, the conclusion does not follow. Neither does it help when Khawaja further argues that the choice to live is "escapable in the sense that one can, in principle, fully opt out of the task of aiming at one's self-preservation," but that it is escapable only in this sense.⁴⁶ Here, Khawaja's argument suffers from the same problem as Branden's: He constructs a false alternative by suggesting that to hold anything but life as one's ultimate value

⁴³ Tara Smith can perhaps be interpreted as holding the same view. See Tara Smith, *Viable Values: A Study of Life as the Root and Reward of Morality* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000), 107. I agree with Khawaja, however, that based on *Viable Values*, it is hard to say where Smith stands, for she does not address this issue head on; see Khawaja, "Review: Tara Smith's *Viable Values*," 84.

⁴⁴ See Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, trans. W. D. Ross, in *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, ed. Jonathan Barnes, vol. 2 (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), IV.3.1005a19–b33.

⁴⁵ Khawaja, "Review: Tara Smith's *Viable Values*," 86.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

implies not valuing life at all. Since Khawaja offers no further argument, I believe he fails to show that there is an important parallel to be drawn between the choice to live and the axiom of non-contradiction. Gotthelf presents a similar criticism of Khawaja. Gotthelf writes that contrary to axiomatic facts, “moral obligations (‘shoulds’) are not categorical or intrinsic aspects of reality”; as such, “there is no such thing as discovering the obligatoriness of the choice to live as there is discovering the truth of a metaphysical or epistemological axiom.”⁴⁷ This is another way to explain why there need be no contradiction involved in choosing an ultimate value other than life.

Khawaja does suggest that it might be instructive to look to the ways in which Rand’s view on axioms is distinct from Aristotle’s in order to see how the choice to live is axiomatic. I doubt, however, that the difference between Rand and Aristotle in this respect is relevant. If Khawaja thinks it is, he should explain how.

4.4. The argument from denying the applicability of “optionality” (Allan Gotthelf)

The last argument that I shall discuss is presented by Allan Gotthelf. He is concerned both to show that Rasmussen’s interpretation of Rand is mistaken and to offer a separate way out of the problem of subjectivity. My discussion addresses the latter concern.

Gotthelf argues, contra Rasmussen, that the choice to live is not a *necessary* choice. He writes: “When one asks what facts necessitate a choice, one can mean only one of two things: what causally necessitates the choice or what morally necessitates the choice. In either sense, the answer from an Objectivist standpoint is ‘*Nothing* necessitates.’”⁴⁸ The reason for this, Gotthelf explains, is that on the first reading of “necessitates,” human volition falsifies it. On the second reading, no moral necessitation is possible with regard to the choice to live, since morality first arises after the choice is made. As such, asking what morally necessitates the choice to live, granted Rand’s context, is tantamount to asking for the weight of a number: It is the application of a concept to a context in which the concept has no meaning.

The fact that the choice to live is not necessary, however, does not imply, in Gotthelf’s view, that it is optional. His argument for this is that in the same way that “necessary” is an inapplicable concept in the present context, so is

⁴⁷ Gotthelf, “The Choice to Value,” 45.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 43.

“optional.”⁴⁹ Gotthelf presents three arguments for this.

His first argument is that for optionality to be an applicable concept, there must be an overarching evaluative principle by reference to which two possible outcomes of a choice, although different in nature, are identical or roughly identical in worth. Gotthelf’s example is the optionality present in the choice of vanilla or chocolate ice cream. Provided that one should buy ice cream, and provided that one has no relevant allergies, both the vanilla and the chocolate option will serve one’s purposes, and as such, they are “optional values.” Such is not the case, however, with regard to the choice to live. The choice to live is prior to any evaluative principle. As such, and even though the choice to live is not necessary, it is not optional either.

I find this argument unconvincing, for Gotthelf uses the concept “optional” in a problematically restrictive sense when he equates it with Rand’s concept of the “optional” as used in the case of optional values. In Rand’s use, optionality does indeed seem to presuppose a further evaluative principle, but it is not clear that Rand’s use of the term exhausts the term’s meaning. It seems plain that we face an option when we are to choose whether we shall hold life or something else as our ultimate goal, and in this wider sense, the choice to live is undeniably optional (else this debate would not arise). As such, Gotthelf’s first argument does not rule out the possibility that the choice to live is optional in the relevant sense.

The second argument offered by Gotthelf is that under normal circumstances, you are—when given an option—present after you have made the choice. With regard to choosing life you are not present after choosing not to live, and thus it seems that the choice to live is not optional in any normal sense of the term “optional.”

I believe that both of the central premises in this argument can be contested. First, it can be contested that it is a requirement for optionality that the agent shall be present regardless of which option he chooses. One could imagine cases of euthanasia where, granted the low quality of life, choosing to live or choosing to die seems optional. If so, it could be that although we are usually alive after having made optional choices (this has an obvious explanation), survival is not a formal requirement for the application of the concept “optional”—it is just an often-present characteristic of such choices.

⁴⁹ Gotthelf claims that what is true for “optional” is also true for “arbitrary,” “irrational,” and “arational”; see *Ibid.* He does not, however, provide reasons for this being the case other than for “optional.” I assume that Gotthelf supposes that his argument generalizes.

Regardless of this, however, the argument fails because it takes for granted that not choosing life as one's ultimate value means choosing (imminent) death. This is a mistake, since one can commit and adhere to a wide range of ethical views without being wiped out of existence; even if one does not choose life as one's ultimate value, one can be present after that choice is made. Both Kantians and utilitarians, it seems, stay alive. As such, I believe that both Gotthelf's first and second arguments are insufficient.

Gotthelf's third argument seems unclear to me, and I am not certain that I fully grasp it. For this reason, I will quote the argument in full before examining it. Gotthelf writes:

Third, an optional choice is a choice of the normal, non-basic (or nonfundamental) type: it is a situation in which you consciously reflect on both options, and if necessary deliberate about them—a situation in which you initiate a process of *evaluation*. But if you do that in the case of a choice to live, if you consciously choose to think about the issue, you are asking its relationship to your already existing ultimate value. Barring the cases of justifiable suicide referred to by Rasmussen, where the ultimate value is actually unachievable . . . , once you ask whether you *should* continue to live, i.e., should take the actions your continued survival requires, there is no option. The only answer, on any reasonable interpretation of Objectivism, is *yes, of course*. Have I reason to take the actions which my continued existence as a rational being requires? Yes, precisely because my continued existence requires them. A basic (or fundamental) choice not to live is not a deliberated choice; it is simply a shutting down. And if it should be the case psychologically that no one reaches that stage without first, across some time, consciously acting against his life (an issue on which I reserve judgment), then it follows that no one can exit the realm of morality guiltlessly. But once he closes down completely, he is, from that point on, as I see it, outside the moral realm.⁵⁰

This paragraph initially restates the first two arguments. Thereafter, Gotthelf states that, barring possible extreme cases of justified suicide, the only answer to the question of whether one should live, is “*yes, of course*.” This is not argued for, and Gotthelf's query and response—“Have I reason to take the actions which my continued existence as a rational being requires? Yes, precisely because my continued existence requires them”—are not an argument, but a restatement. Since I see no further argument presented, I fail to see how Gotthelf saves

⁵⁰ Gotthelf, “The Choice to Value,” 44.

Rand's theory from the problem of subjectivity.

As will become clear below, however, I am in partial agreement with Gotthelf, especially taking into account another claim of his, namely, that we have "all the reason in the world" to live.⁵¹ This claim implies that there are in fact reasons for living, and that once these reasons are identified, we are given reason to pursue values exactly because our continued existence requires them. As it stands, however, Gotthelf's argument is not convincing, and it remains to be explained why one cannot, without making a mistake, choose something other than life as one's ultimate value. This includes choosing death, and more interestingly, something else as one's ultimate value. As such, the problem of subjectivity remains in need of a solution.

5. My Solution: The Value of Happiness

Let me preface my own suggested solution to the problem of subjectivity by stating that I agree with Gotthelf, Khawaja, and Branden (contra Rasmussen) that ethics rests on a pre-rational choice or, at least, on a pre-rational move or a pre-rational acknowledgement.⁵² Moreover, I agree that this pre-rational choice, move, or acknowledgement is neither optional nor arbitrary nor escapable. At the same time, I agree with Rasmussen (contra Gotthelf, Khawaja, and Branden) that there is something to life that makes it valuable by virtue of what it is, rather than by virtue of our choice to value it.

The solution for which I shall argue is that choosing to live is conditionally rational: it is rational insofar as certain conditions are met, irrational insofar as these conditions are not met. As such, I contest Tara Smith's claim that "the choice to live is not subject to rational appraisal."⁵³ The condition on which the rationality of the choice to live depends, I argue, is the prospect for happiness for the agent making the choice. It is rational for an agent to choose to live if and only if she has reason to believe that life will bring more happiness than unhappiness; irrational if and only if she has reason to believe that life will bring more unhappiness than happiness.

One can imagine two immediate challenges to this proposed solution. The first challenge is that in treating the choice to live as something to be judged by reference to a further standard, I do not approach a real solution; rather, I move

⁵¹ Ibid., 43.

⁵² I speak of "pre-rational" in a wide sense, to include "pre-moral."

⁵³ Smith, *Viable Values*, 107.

the problem one additional step in the regress. The second challenge is that in holding happiness as the justification for living, I deny rather than affirm that life is the ultimate value, and give in to a form of subjectivism and emotionalism that is fundamentally at odds with Rand's position. I will answer both of these challenges below. First, however, let me motivate my view.

5.1. Happiness as the ultimate value

If we take a step back from philosophical theorizing, and examine first-hand our lives and how we assess them, it seems plain that some lives are more worth living than others. A life of happiness and excitement, for example, seems more worth living than a life of suffering. It also seems that if one's suffering is sufficiently severe, and there are few prospects for future happiness, life might no longer be worth living. This is granted by Smith, who claims that under certain conditions, "the decision to commit suicide could also be rational."⁵⁴ If this is the case, then it seems that some features of life have the power to make it more worth living (say, friendship, love, excitement, pleasure, and health) while other features make life less worth living (say, failure, agony, pain, and disease). How can this be accounted for if life is the ultimate value? Interestingly, it is not obvious that it can. If life is the ultimate value, then how can some lives be more worth living than others, granted that "worth," like every other evaluative concept, is parasitic on "value" and "value" is parasitic on "life"? Arguably, a longer life would be better than a shorter life, but this seems not to exhaust what we are looking for. It seems that a happy life that is one day shorter than a life in misery is still a better life—but this, one might object, seems to be outside of what the theory that life is the ultimate value can explain. The problem Rand's theory faces in this respect is similar to the problem hedonists face in seeking evaluatively to differentiate between "valuable" and "disvaluable" pleasures. If pleasure is that which is ultimately valuable, there cannot (ultimately) be "valuable" and "disvaluable" pleasures, since if there were, something other than pleasure would be ultimately valuable. A hedonist who speaks of "valuable" and "disvaluable" pleasures uses those concepts outside of the context in which he is justified in using them, and commits the fallacy of the stolen concept. But if a hedonist cannot discriminate between valuable and disvaluable pleasures, how can someone who holds life as the ultimate value discriminate between valuable and disvaluable lives? How can it be, granted that life is the ultimate value, that happiness and joy are so important?

⁵⁴ Ibid., 144.

There seem to be two main ways to account for the value of happiness within Rand's view that life is the ultimate value, both of which I think are unsatisfactory. One way is to appeal to the fact that mental well-functioning (which Rand sometimes refers to as "psychological survival"⁵⁵), which crucially involves happiness, is vital for sustaining life. If Rand is right that our minds are our most crucial means of survival,⁵⁶ and that we must be happy and motivated for our minds to serve our lives, it is vital that we pursue happiness. Rand writes:

A chronic lack of pleasure, of any enjoyable, rewarding or stimulating experiences, produces a slow, gradual, day-by-day erosion of man's emotional vitality, which he may ignore or repress, but which is recorded by the relentless computer of his subconscious mechanism that registers an ebbing flow, then a trickle, then a few last drops of fuel—until the day when his inner motor stops and he wonders desperately why he has no desire to go on.⁵⁷

I believe that it is consistent, on the premise that life is the ultimate value, to hold happiness as an important non-ultimate value. This, however, cannot account for why happiness is important to the extent and in the way we are looking for, since appeals to psychological survival cannot explain why some lives are more worth living than others. In seeking to ground the value of happiness in psychological survival, one treats happiness as an instrumental value—as something that has value by virtue of being needed in order to support and promote life. One cannot, however, decide whether or not an ultimate value is truly valuable by reference to whether or not an instrumental value is present. As long as we have merely argued that happiness is instrumentally valuable, we would need to accept that a life filled with unhappiness and pain is quite alright if we were only able to clench our teeth and grudgingly go on living. This, however, seems wrong, since a life of happiness—by virtue of being a life of *happiness*—undeniably is more worthwhile than a life without happiness. The harmfulness of unhappiness, in other words, seems not to be exhausted by its effects on one's survival. If this is right, we cannot appeal to the importance of psychological survival to cash out

⁵⁵ See Ayn Rand, "The Goal of My Writing," in Ayn Rand, *The Romantic Manifesto* (New York: Signet, 1975), 169; see also Rand, "The Psycho-Epistemology of Art," in *Ibid.*, 16–17.

⁵⁶ See Rand, "The Objectivist Ethics," in Rand, *The Virtue of Selfishness*, 21.

⁵⁷ Ayn Rand, "Our Cultural Value-Deprivation," in *The Voice of Reason: Essays in Objectivist Thought*, ed. Leonard Peikoff (New York: Penguin Plume, 1990), 104.

why some lives are more worth living than others, and why some lives are perhaps not worth living at all.

A second suggestion could be that I misunderstand what Rand means by “life.” Perhaps life, in the context of Rand’s ethics, means not only a process of self-sustaining, self-generated action (to which happiness is extrinsic), but a form of flourishing (to which happiness is intrinsic). Perhaps the goal of ethics is not life as such, but what Rand calls a life suitable for man *qua* man: a life of happiness, ambition, achievement, and so on.⁵⁸

This seems like a plausible suggestion, and Rand does often operate with an enriched understanding of “living” that includes happiness. Rand explains that life’s being the ultimate value does not mean “*momentary* or a merely *physical* survival . . . Man’s survival *qua* man means the terms, methods, conditions and goals required for the survival of a rational being through the whole of his lifespan—in all those aspects of existence which are open to his choice.”⁵⁹ The same point is made by Rasmussen, who states that “[t]hat which is required for man’s survival *qua* man is the standard of value for a human being.”⁶⁰ This could explain, Rasmussen notes, why “[t]here can be times in which choosing to die is better, because there might be no chance to live a life proper to a human being.”⁶¹ Rand herself, in a 1936 letter, wrote that “any form of swift physical annihilation is preferable to the inconceivable horror of a living death,”⁶² “living death” presumably referring to a life without happiness, ambition, achievement, and so on.

I do not doubt that there are proper and improper lives. I do, however, doubt if this position is open to Rand, granted the macrobiological rationale offered in support of her view. The reason why is that it is unclear what the concepts “proper” or “*qua* man” refer to in this context, since “proper” and “*qua* man”—just as “worth,” which I discussed above—are parasitic on “value,” and “value,” in turn, is parasitic on “life.” Thus it seems that in order to attain the desired result of the “man *qua* man” argument, the expression “man *qua* man” must be used equivocally.

In one sense of the statement that man must live a life proper to “man *qua*

⁵⁸ Rand, “The Objectivist Ethics,” 24–25.

⁵⁹ Ibid, 24.

⁶⁰ Rasmussen, “Rand on Obligation and Value,” 76–77.

⁶¹ Ibid, 84 n. 9.

⁶² Ayn Rand, “Letter to John Temple Graves” (July 5, 1936), in *Letters of Ayn Rand*, ed. Michael Berliner (New York: Penguin Plume, 1997), 33.

man,” the statement is obviously true. Man has a certain nature, and if he is to live, he must live in accordance with this nature. If he tries to live life not as a man, but as a snail, a hippopotamus, or a bed bug, he will fail to perform the actions that his nature requires, if he is to go on living.

This is uncontroversial, however, and seems not to exhaust what Rand means by the claim that man must live a life proper for man *qua* man. Rand seems to mean something stronger, namely, that within the realm of lives open to and possible for man, some lives are better than others—not just that some lives are impossible.

Here is the equivocation: In justifying the “*qua* man” hypothesis, Rand seems to use the descriptive sense of “man *qua* man,” stating that a man must live in accordance with his nature in order to live. When applied, however, the expression is used in the prescriptive sense, to point to certain ways—among those open to him—in which he *should* live and certain other ways in which he *should not* live. Rand leaps, or so it seems, from a description to a prescription—and this prescription seems to lie outside of what can be justified by the strict doctrine that life is the ultimate value.⁶³ I think it is easy to accept Rand’s theory that life is the ultimate value—and to accept in conjunction with it the view that happiness is intrinsically more valuable than unhappiness—without asking whether the latter follows from or is consistent with the former. On the standard understanding of Rand’s theory of ultimate value, I believe they are inconsistent. In another understanding, however—an understanding which grants that in one sense, *happiness is the ultimate value*—the problem is resolved.

In order to justify this, let me start by re-examining one of the cases discussed above: that of the indestructible robot. As we saw, Rand uses the example of an indestructible robot—“which moves and acts, but which cannot be affected by anything, which cannot be changed in any respect, which cannot be damaged, injured or destroyed”—as an example of a being that “would not be able to have any values.”⁶⁴ Rand’s aim with this thought-experiment seems to be to illustrate that without the fundamental alternative of life or death, there can be no values.

Insofar as this is Rand’s aim, her thought-experiment fails. It fails because

⁶³ A similar objection has been raised by Michael Huemer in his “Critique of ‘The Objectivist Ethics’,” < <http://home.sprynet.com/~owl1/rand5.htm> > [September 25, 2011] Huemer describes “*qua* man” as a “fudge word” that can be bent to “mean whatever it is convenient for [it] to mean at a particular time.”

⁶⁴ Rand, “The Objectivist Ethics,” in Rand, *The Virtue of Selfishness*, 16.

it seems that we can have destructible robots without values and indestructible robots with values. We can see this if we carefully examine the example.

Imagine, first, that we have a robot that is destructible, and that must (and can) act in certain ways in order to avoid destruction. Do we know, solely from this description of the robot, that the robot has a reason to act in some ways rather than others? I believe we do not. For practical reasons to enter the picture, the robot would need something more, like the ability to feel happiness and unhappiness, joy and suffering. Without such an ability, none of its actions would seem to be of significance to the robot. Its actions would merely be various instances of moving stuff around, and its life—the aggregate of its stuff-moving activities—would also be an instance of moving stuff around. It is not clear how engaging in stuff-moving, however, would have any meaning or significance to the robot, and thus it seems hard to grasp why its life would be of any value to it. After all, it would not *care*. If this is right, then it seems that we can have a destructible robot without values. If we can have a destructible robot without values, moreover, destructibility (in conjunction with the option of avoiding destruction by acting in a certain way) is insufficient for value.

In order to illustrate that destructibility is not only insufficient, but also unnecessary, we need an example of a robot that is *indestructible* yet has values. I believe that we can find such an example, if we imagine that the robot is sentient. Imagine, therefore, a robot that cannot go out of existence, but that has a full repertoire of human emotions. It can feel happiness and joy, agony and pain. It will, for example, experience strong sadness if its house burns down. Would this robot, in spite of never being able to go out of existence, have a reason not to burn down its house? Would its house be a value to the robot? It seems plain that it would.

An objection to this thought-experiment could be that a robot that does not confront the alternative of life or death could not be sentient either. Sentience, it could be argued, has the function of prompting us toward life-promoting actions, and without the option of life or death, the pleasure/pain mechanism would be purposeless. My reply to this objection is that the purposelessness of sentience does not imply the impossibility of sentience—and as such, that there is nothing formally wrong with the thought-experiment. In a functional and evolutionary sense, it is true that the *telos* of sentience is to promote life and reproduction, so if we all suddenly became indestructible, sentience would (to the extent that it is biologically costly and thus taxes resources that could be used for reproduction) gradually wither away. This does not, however, have any impact on the

metaphysical possibility of a being that is indestructible yet experiences happiness and suffering.

Alternatively—and this is sufficient for the present purposes—we can imagine a normal human being who is placed in a position where none of her actions can affect her life, and not because she is metaphysically indestructible, but because her range of action has been severely restrained. Even under such conditions, it seems that her actions would have value-significance for her, insofar as she is sentient and her actions affect her hedonic level, regardless of whether the end result of her actions could promote or destroy her life.

Here is a scenario to consider.⁶⁵ Imagine that you are about to undergo surgery and you are given the option of buying anesthetics for \$5. If you choose to do so, you will feel a tiny pin prick, fall asleep, and wake up again after the surgery. If you choose not to buy anesthetics, the surgery will be excruciatingly painful. The end result, however, will not be affected by what you choose, since if you do not buy anesthetics, the nurses will skillfully strap you to the hospital bed so that you cannot move a limb, and the surgeon will use earplugs so that your screams will not disturb him. Apart from the excruciating pain, therefore, nothing hinges on whether or not you buy the anesthetics. (Imagine, for the sake of the thought-experiment, that you will not suffer any psychological problems after the operation.) Granted this, would you have a reason to spend \$5 of your savings on anesthetics, even if this affects nothing but your pain level? It seems plain that you would. At the same time, it seems plain that in the relevant sense, you would be in the same situation as a sentient indestructible robot.

We can also think of other examples. Imagine, for instance, that you know that you will be executed tomorrow at noon. You are given a choice, however, regarding the execution method. You can choose between being executed with a lethal injection—which will make you die in ten minutes—or by crucifixion—which will make you die in two days. Which execution method should you choose? It seems plain that you should choose lethal injection, even if you get a longer life by choosing crucifixion, and the reason why you should choose lethal injection seems to be that crucifixion is extremely painful, while lethal injection is much less painful.⁶⁶

As a last example, imagine that you have caught a vicious disease. The disease will kill you in two years, but it will not be painful until the last days before you die. You then get the option of buying a medicine that halts the

⁶⁵ I owe this example to Ivar Labukt.

⁶⁶ Thanks to Alexander R. Cohen for suggesting this example.

development of the disease. It costs 75% of your salary, so buying the medicine will make you very poor; it has bad side-effects, so you will feel constantly nauseated; and it will only extend your life by two to three months. Should you buy the medicine? Here, it seems that if the poverty and the nausea are sufficiently bad, you should not buy the medicine. Instead, you should enjoy your last two years in health with enough money to live comfortably—even if this means saying “no” to two to three additional months of living.

If these examples illustrate what I believe they do, it seems that sentience is crucial to value—perhaps so crucial that what is ultimately valuable is not life as such, but a certain kind of mental state—happiness or enjoyment—and that what is ultimately disvaluable is not death as such, but unhappiness or suffering. Can this be right?

5.2. The “Moving the Problem” Challenge

The first challenge raised above was that positing that happiness rather than life has ultimate value, cannot be a solution to the problem of ultimate value, since it merely moves the problem one step ahead in the regress. Rather than facing the problem of justifying life as the ultimate value, the objection states, we would—if we suggest that happiness is the ultimate value—face a similar problem of justifying happiness instead, with all of the same problems still ahead.

Within the limits of this article, I cannot expect to settle the dispute. I will be content with explaining why it is argumentatively less costly to justify the ultimate value of happiness than the ultimate value of life.

The first reason is that the view that happiness is the ultimate value seems to be much more in line with both how we view our lives and how we view imaginary cases. It seems very clear that there are lives worth living and lives not worth living. It seems far from clear, however—keeping all else equal—that there is happiness worth having and happiness not worth having. Unless we are misguided in holding such priorities, it seems that happiness is a value according to which life should be evaluated.

The second reason concerns the prerequisites for being committed to values at all. I concede that regardless of whether happiness or life is that which is ultimately worth having, a pre-rational move or a pre-rational acknowledgement is required to be bound by values. There is a crucial asymmetry, however, between the pre-rational move required for life to be the ultimate value and the pre-rational move required for happiness to be the ultimate value.

If life is the ultimate value, this pre-rational move is—in Rand’s words—a “choice.” “Choice” is an apt word, since what one faces is genuinely a choice: Among all the things that it is possible to hold as one’s ultimate value, one is urged to choose one among these, namely, life. In the case of happiness, however, it seems that one would not make a choice, but rather, acknowledge a fact. I, for one, do not *choose* that happiness is better for me than suffering is. I *acknowledge* that happiness is better than suffering, and granted the kind of being I am, I cannot acknowledge otherwise. This is why there is a sense in which I side with Rasmussen, who holds that there is something intrinsic to that which is ultimately valuable that makes it valuable, and that this value does not hinge upon an act of choice. Of course, I am forced to admit that if someone truly does not acknowledge or experience the fact that happiness is better than suffering, he or she does not enter the realm of values and could not be argued into doing so. Stepping outside of the realm of values, however, seems harder in the case of happiness than in the case of life as the ultimate value, since in the case of happiness, the bar for entering the realm of values has been lowered. One would need to be a metaphysically different being from the one I am in order to be neutral with respect to happiness and suffering. Thus, if happiness is the ultimate value, even the life-hating terrorist in Wright’s example would be bound by values, insofar as he is able to experience happiness and suffering, and he sees that happiness is better than suffering. Only if he truly does not experience that happiness is better than suffering could we say that he is beyond good and evil.⁶⁷ Since the goodness of happiness is less escapable than the goodness of life, the view that happiness is the ultimate value seems more apt at ending the regress than does the view that life is the ultimate value. So much for the first challenge.⁶⁸

⁶⁷ This is so, I believe, because the view that happiness is the ultimate value is more in line with a Humean moral psychology than is the view that life is the ultimate value. Humean moral psychology holds that to get motivation into a chain of reasons, one must ultimately appeal neither to a state of affairs in the world nor to causal relations in this world, but to an emotional state or to some form of valenced experience. If one believes that happiness is that which ultimately benefits an agent, one holds that that which ultimately supplies us with reasons for action is indeed a form of hedonically valenced experience. If life is the ultimate value (in the strict sense), the ultimate value is a certain state of affairs (the functioning of the organism according to certain ideals). This suggests that the view that happiness is the ultimate value is compatible with a Humean view of moral motivation, whereas the view that life is the ultimate value is not.

⁶⁸ Clearly, more work must be done in order to ground securely the identification of ultimate value with happiness or enjoyment. One path to doing so using Rand’s methodology could be to seek to establish that our concepts of “good” and “bad,” “valuable” and “disvaluable,”

5.3. The “Surrender” Challenge

The second challenge is that the view that happiness is the ultimate value, rather than being a vindication of Rand’s view, constitutes surrender to the very emotionalism and subjectivism that Rand attacks. I believe that this is false and, in fact, that the view that happiness is the ultimate value—in one specific sense of that statement—is compatible with, and might be, Rand’s view.

Let me start by surveying some examples of where happiness is treated as an ultimate value in Rand’s writings and in the secondary literature on Rand. In *The Virtue of Selfishness*, Rand seems to hold that happiness is the ultimate reason for living when she writes, “It is by experiencing happiness that one lives one’s life, in any hour, year or the whole of it. And when one experiences the kind of pure happiness that is an end in itself—the kind that makes one think: ‘This is worth living for’.”⁶⁹ Branden, in the same collection of essays, writes, “Through the state of enjoyment, man experiences the value of life, the sense that life is worth living, worth struggling to maintain.”⁷⁰ That happiness gives life value is also conceded by Wright, who claims, “To find one’s life worth living, then, must be to experience the process of living—the activities that define and give substance to one’s life—as intrinsically motivating, as a source of pleasure and fulfillment.” Wright concludes by saying (giving the most explicit formulation of this point in the secondary literature on Rand), “Of course, it is primarily for the psychological rewards of living that we do want to live; merely soldiering on as a physical organism has no independent value for us.”⁷¹

Smith, after having argued that there is no rational answer to the question of what makes life worth living, claims that “[m]y point is not to deny that life is worthwhile,” and writes that “the choice depends on what kind of experience a given individual finds satisfactory.” This seems to allow for the possibility that we can judge whether or not a life is worth living by reference to a further standard, and later in the same paragraph, Smith writes that we can judge the value of life according to “the prevalence of unhappiness or pain in the world.”⁷²

Kelley seems to embrace the same position when discussing a poster listing “50 Reasons for Living,” where these reasons include things such as balloons,

have their source not in observing biological processes, but in experiencing enjoyment and suffering. That, however, is a project for another occasion.

⁶⁹ Rand, “The Objectivist Ethics,” in Rand, *The Virtue of Selfishness*, 29.

⁷⁰ Nathaniel Branden, “The Psychology of Pleasure,” in Rand, *The Virtue of Selfishness*, 61.

⁷¹ Wright, “Evaluative Concepts and Objective Values: Rand on Moral Objectivity,” 174, 176.

⁷² Smith, *Viable Values*, 107.

ice cream, hugs, Thanksgiving, and flowers. He uses this example to illustrate that you cannot reason someone into choosing life other than ostensibly, by pointing to the different things that bring happiness—just as the poster does. The interesting question to pose in response to Kelley’s position is the following: How could such pointing make sense, if the value of life does not hinge on happiness? In both the view that life, in the biological sense, is the ultimate value and in the view that happiness is the ultimate value, it is true that one could never non-ostensively reason a person into choosing to live. If life, in the biological sense, were the ultimate value, however, it is not clear how the ostensive would be of any more help than the non-ostensive. If the value of life does not hinge upon happiness, how could an act of pointing to elicitors of happiness help to justify choosing life? It seems that in the strict sense of the doctrine that life is the ultimate value, the choice to live would have to be made without regard for the experiential content of life. These hints from Rand, Branden, Smith, Wright, and Kelley, on the contrary, point toward the view that happiness is what benefits us as agents and makes our lives worth living. How, if at all, can this be reconciled with the view that life is the ultimate value?

One way to reconcile the view that life is the ultimate value with the view that happiness is the ultimate value could be to suggest that Rand means the same thing by life and happiness. If she does, the claims that “life is the ultimate value” and “happiness is the ultimate value” would be equivalent. This, however, seems not to be Rand’s view. Happiness, in her view, is a state of consciousness, specifically, “the state of consciousness that results from the achievement of one’s values.” Life, by contrast, she defines as “a process of self-generated, self-sustaining action.”⁷³ Although life and happiness are closely related, they cannot be identical, since they refer to things with different ontological status—happiness is a state of consciousness, while life is a process.

Another way to reconcile the view that life is the ultimate value with the view that happiness is the ultimate value could be to suggest that the expression “ultimate value” is ambiguous. “Ultimate value” may have two different meanings, so that in one sense, life is the ultimate value, in another sense, happiness is the ultimate value. I think that this is a more promising path, and to see why, we need to look at an often-neglected distinction drawn by Rand between “purpose” (or “ultimate purpose”) and “standard of value.” Rand explains, “The difference between a ‘standard’ and a ‘purpose’ [is that] a ‘standard’ is an abstract principle that serves as a measurement or gauge to guide

⁷³ Rand, “This Is John Galt Speaking,” in Rand, *For the New Intellectual*, 123, 121.

man's choices and actions in the achievement of a concrete, specific purpose." Adding substance to her concepts, Rand writes that "Happiness can properly be the *purpose* of ethics, but *not* the *standard*." The "standard of value," she writes, is "life."⁷⁴

This statement is worth a pause for careful consideration. What Rand introduces is a separation between our ultimate "purpose," which is happiness, and our ultimate "standard of value," which is life. This distinction has an air of paradox to it. On the one hand, Rand claims that the purpose of life—the reason that makes it worth engaging in—is happiness. On the other hand, she claims that what we should use as our yardstick to determine whether or not a certain course of action is proper, is not happiness but *life*. How can it be that if happiness is the thing ultimately worth having for its own sake, then life is what we should ultimately pursue?

If we understand Rand's view on the nature of happiness, though, the view does not seem as paradoxical, since on this view, it could be that even though the benefit that makes life worthwhile is happiness, what we need to do in order to reap this benefit is not to pursue happiness, but to pursue life. As we saw, happiness, according to Rand, is the state of consciousness that proceeds from the pursuit of one's values.⁷⁵ If this is correct, then happiness is causally dependent on values. To the extent that we value something, Rand holds, we will typically experience happiness after having successfully pursued it. Conversely, we will typically experience unhappiness after having failed in pursuing it. To the extent that we value our careers and our friends, therefore, we will tend to be happy when our careers go well and our friendships grow stronger, and tend to be unhappy when our careers decline and our friendships grow weaker. In Rand's formulation, "Emotions are the automatic results of man's value judgments integrated by his subconscious."⁷⁶

An implication of this view is that to the extent that we can choose between different values, we are—within certain measures—plastic with respect to what gives us emotional gratification. This seems intuitively correct. Those who favored Barack Obama in the 2012 U.S. presidential election seemed to be happy when he won. Those who favored Mitt Romney seemed not to be happy. The difference in emotional reaction, moreover, seemed to stem from the difference in their value-judgments about Obama and Romney. Because the Obama

⁷⁴ Rand, "The Objectivist Ethics," in Rand, *The Virtue of Selfishness*, 25, 29, 16.

⁷⁵ Rand, "This Is John Galt Speaking," in Rand, *For the New Intellectual*, 123.

⁷⁶ Rand, "The Objectivist Ethics," in Rand, *The Virtue of Selfishness*, 27.

supporters judged Obama to be the superior candidate, they felt good when he won; because the Romney supporters judged Romney to be the superior candidate, they felt bad when he lost. How we feel about something, it seems, depends on how we judge it.

Explaining Rand's view on emotions, Leonard Peikoff writes, in a piece endorsed by Rand, that happiness is "not a psychological primary; it is a consequence, an *effect*, of one's previously formed value-judgments." This has an important implication for the practice of pursuing happiness. Peikoff writes: "To say, therefore, that men should determine their values by the standard of what gives them pleasure, is to say: 'Men should determine their values by the standard of whatever they already value.'" This, Peikoff observes, would be "circular," "content-less," and, ultimately, "suicidal," since it would lead us into a circle where we do nothing but pander to our own biases. Doing so, moreover, seems not to be the way to achieve happiness.⁷⁷

To illustrate this point, imagine that you had grown up being told that homosexuality is disgraceful, and had come to internalize this view, feeling disgust at the thought of a romantic relationship between two persons of the same sex. Then one day your best friend tells you he is gay. How would you react? If you were an emotionalist, in Rand's sense of the term, you would most likely condemn him. After all, what he said would be emotionally disturbing. The problem with condemning him, however, is that you would be condemning someone whom you have no good reason to believe has done anything wrong or who poses any threat to you. As such, condemning him might well mean throwing away a valuable friendship. It might be that if you had forced yourself to remain calm and had carefully reconsidered your views, you would have come to continue enjoying a highly rewarding friendship, and gradually, your emotions would have adjusted to your new, consciously reasoned value-judgments.

The plasticity of what gives us emotional gratification, therefore, has implications for how happiness is achieved: One does not achieve happiness merely by doing what gives one pleasant emotions. In Rand's words, "Happiness is not to be achieved at the command of emotional whims. Happiness is not the satisfaction of whatever irrational wishes you might blindly attempt to indulge."⁷⁸ If this is right, it seems that happiness can be that which ultimately benefits an agent without happiness itself being the proper evaluative standard

⁷⁷ Leonard Peikoff, "Why Does Objectivism Reject Ethical Hedonism?" *The Objectivist Newsletter*, Vol. 1, No. 2, February 1962, 7.

⁷⁸ Rand, "This Is John Galt Speaking," in Rand, *For the New Intellectual*, 132.

according to which an agent should guide his actions. It might be that in order to achieve happiness, an agent must hold as his standard of value not happiness, but something external to his emotions—for example, his *life*. Perhaps holding life as one's ultimate value and acting accordingly is the best means to achieve happiness. Whether or not this is in fact true is ultimately a psychological issue, but it seems like a plausible suggestion.

In pursuing life as one's ultimate aim, one performs actions that naturally—due to our biological makeup—are both enjoyable and conducive to further enjoyment. One will also, over time, adjust one's emotions to reward what promotes one's life, and as such learn to find enjoyment in that which is conducive to further enjoyment, and one will make one's life a unified project, without contradictory values tearing one apart. This integrates well with Rand's description of happiness as “a state of non-contradictory joy.”⁷⁹ Indeed, by pursuing life, one pursues that which is the very source of one's happiness: one's status as a valuer. If life is a process of self-generated, self-sustaining action,⁸⁰ then life is crucially the activity of valuing, so to value life, in an important sense, is to value valuing. To value valuing in order to achieve happiness, moreover, makes a lot of sense, if Rand is right that happiness is the “state of consciousness that proceeds from the pursuit of one's values.” As such, it is not far-fetched to hold that in order to reach long-term happiness, one should hold life as one's ultimate value.

If we achieve happiness by aiming at life, this is a form of indirect teleology. Indirect teleology refers to cases where, in order to attain something, one must aim at something else. This is a fairly common form of teleology. Think, for example, of an archer who must aim above the bull's eye in order to hit it. Another example might be that of a jogger who jogs up a hillside for the health benefits this brings. Even though good health is the jogger's purpose, the jogger would not aim directly at his purpose when he jogs. When jogging, he would aim at getting up the hill. If he were to try directing his jogging by aiming for health, he would be paralyzed, and would not be able to get the health benefits he would have gotten had he managed to focus on the concrete task ahead. If this generalizes to issues involving happiness, it could be that happiness is gained as a byproduct of taking part in life-promoting activities. If so, it could plausibly be argued that although happiness is that which ultimately benefits an

⁷⁹ Ibid. Thanks to Alexander R. Cohen for reminding me of this formulation.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 121.

agent, life is the proper ultimate standard in practical reasoning. As such, it could be that although happiness is the ultimate benefit, we are—in one sense—justified in stating that life is the ultimate value, if by “ultimate value” we mean ultimate standard in practical reasoning.

This seems to be Rand’s view, moreover, since she writes that “[t]he difference between a ‘standard’ and a ‘purpose’ [is that] a ‘standard’ is an abstract principle that serves as a measurement or gauge to guide man’s choices and actions in the achievement of a concrete, specific purpose,” and while the “standard of value” is “life,” “[h]appiness can properly be the *purpose* of ethics, but *not* the *standard*.”⁸¹ Rand also writes that “[i]t is only by accepting ‘man’s life’ as one’s primary and by pursuing the rational values it requires that one can achieve happiness—not by taking ‘happiness’ as some undefined, irreducible primary and then attempting to live by its guidance.”⁸²

6. Conclusion

It might or might not be correct that Rand uses the phrase “ultimate value” to refer to two different things: that which is ultimately worth pursuing, happiness, and that which is the standard by which we determine how to act, life. Regardless of whether or not this is in fact Rand’s view, it does provide a path out of the problem of subjectivity.

The problem of subjectivity, to recapitulate, is the problem of reconciling two aspects of Rand’s theory. On the one hand, Rand’s theory relies on a pre-rational move, and on the other, it requires mandatoriness and objectivity. So as to clarify how accepting that happiness is the ultimate benefit can help us to solve this problem, and thus provide a justification for valuing life, let me explain how this view can rely on a pre-rational move yet retain its mandatoriness and objectivity.

The view that happiness is the ultimate benefit, and thus the ultimate reason for living, depends on a pre-rational move in the sense that it depends on the recognition of the fact that happiness is better than suffering. This move is pre-rational in the sense that one cannot reason anyone into acknowledging it (other than ostensibly, by pointing). In spite of the fact that this pre-rational move is required for entering the realm of values, however, the view is mandatory for the

⁸¹ Rand, “The Objectivist Ethics,” in Rand, *The Virtue of Selfishness*, 25, 29.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 29.

reason that it depends on an *acknowledgement* or a *recognition* rather than on a choice. Insofar as one is a sentient being for whom happiness is better than suffering, no act of choice can remove an agent from the realm of values. The view is objective, moreover, since in any given situation, what is valuable and what is disvaluable to an agent is an objective fact. Neither the fact that happiness is mind-dependent, nor the fact that emotional-reaction patterns are plastic, threatens the objective and factual nature of what will be conducive to an agent's long-term happiness.

If this argument holds—and if it is true that in order to achieve happiness, one should hold life as one's ultimate aim in practical reasoning—it seems that we have arrived at a way to escape the problem of subjectivity.

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