The Unity and Commensurability of Pleasures and Pains

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Abstract: In this paper I ask, and seek to answer, two interrelated questions about pleasures and pains: (1) Do all pleasures (pains) have something in common that accounts for what these, and only these, are pleasures (pains)? (2) Are all pleasures and all pains measurable on a single quantitative hedonic scale? I defend the view that for both questions, the answer is yes.

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 pleasures? Think, further, of these three painful experiences: The sore burn after having touched a hot stove, the thin sting of a pinprick, and the feel of a pressing headache. Do these experiences share a single quality that accounts for why they are pains? This is the problem of pleasure and pain unity. Moreover: Are all pleasures and all pains measurable 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. I shall defend the view that pleasures and pains are perfectly unified and perfectly commensurable, just like temperatures.

To make the case for this view, I shall first (Section 1) explain what in general it takes for something to be "unified" and "commensurable". Thereafter (Section 2) I examine how unity and commensurability presents a particular problem in the case of pleasures and pains. I frame this problem as the problem of reconciling two opposing pre-theoretical intuitions: On the one hand, an intuition that pleasures and pains are unified and commensurable; on the other hand, an intuition that pleasures and pains are disunified and incommensurable. I argue that neither of these intuitions can be completely abandoned, and in the latter two thirds of this paper I examine three different paths to reconciliation. The first two paths are response theory (Section 3) and split experience theory (Section 4). Both of these, I argue, are unsuccessful. A third path, however—which I label "dimensionalism" (Section 5)—succeeds. Dimensionalism is the theory that pleasure and pain have the ontological status as opposite ends of a hedonic dimension along which experiences vary. This view has earlier been suggested by C. D. Broad (1925), Karl Duncker (1941), Shelly Kagan (1992), and John Searle (1992), but has not been worked out in detail. My aim is to 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.

1. Unity and Commensurability

What does it mean that something is "unified" and "commensurable"?

"Unified" is an adjective that describes groups of a certain kind. As I shall use the concept here, a group is "unified" iff all its members have something in common that accounts for why these, and only these, are members of the group. Depending on what we mean by the phrase "something in common", groups can be unified either

extrinsically or intrinsically. A group is extrinsically unified iff all its members have something *extrinsic* in common that accounts for why these, and only these, are members of the group. A group is intrinsically unified iff all its members have something *intrinsic* in common that accounts for why these, and only these, are members of the group.

Most groups are extrinsically unified in some respect. Think of the group "clothes I wear at the moment". All members of this group have something in common that accounts for why these, and only these, are members of the group: The fact that these clothes, and these clothes only, are currently covering my body. This is an instance of extrinsic unity since what all the members of the group have in common is something extrinsic to the things themselves: a specific relationship to my body.

Fewer groups are intrinsically unified. The group "clothes I wear at the moment" fails to be intrinsically unified, for there is nothing intrinsic to the clothes I wear at the moment that accounts for why these, and these only, are members of the group. An example of a group that does qualify as intrinsically unified, by contrast, is the group "heats". All heats have something in common that accounts for why these, and only these, are heats, namely fast particle vibration. Fast particle vibration, moreover, is a condition of a thing itself, not a relationship to other things. Even if there was only one thing in the universe, this thing could be hot (in the physicist's sense) granted that its particles vibrate. By contrast, if there was only one thing in the universe, this thing could not be "clothes I wear at the moment".

So much for "unified".

"Commensurable" is also an adjective that describes groups of a certain kind. As I shall use the concept here, a group is "commensurable" iff all its members can be

measured on a common scale. Depending on what we mean by the phrase "common scale", groups can be commensurable either extrinsically or intrinsically. A group is extrinsically commensurable iff all its members can be measured on an *extrinsic* scale. A group is intrinsically commensurable iff all its members can be measured on an *intrinsic* scale.[1]

Most groups are extrinsically commensurable in some respect. Think, again, of the group "clothes I wear at the moment". All members of this group can be measured along a variety of common scales, such as their market value, their mass, their production date, the number of times they are worn, their ability to absorb water, etc. All of these instances of measuring, however, are measuring according to a property extrinsic to the clothes themselves, i.e. to their relationship to things such as the people who wear them, money, water, etc.

Fewer groups are intrinsically commensurable. An example of a group that does qualify as intrinsically commensurable is, again, the group "heats". "Heats" are intrinsically commensurable because they can be measured according to their unifying property: Their "hotness" (i.e. their "heat"). They can be measured according to their unifying property because this property exists in terms of more or less, and thus serves as an intrinsic scale.[2]

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[1] Ruth Chang suggests that we use "commensurability" to refer to cardinal rankability and "comparability" to refer to ordinal rankability. I follow Chang's suggestion, so the rankability I defend in this paper is cardinal. I shall not specifically address the issue of cardinality versus ordinality, however, since my reasons for preferring cardinality lie outside the scope of the topic addressed here. See Ruth Chang, *Incommensurability, Incomparability, and Practical Reason* (Cambridge (Mass.): Harvard University Press, 1997), pp. 1-34.

[2] It could be objected that all members of the group "clothes I wear at the moment" can also be measured according to an intrinsic property, such as mass. Mass is an intrinsic property, since even if there were nothing else in the universe, a thing could still have mass. Mass, moreover, is a quantitative property: it exists in terms of more and less. This is insufficient to make "clothes I wear at the moment" an intrinsically commensurable group, however, since it is not in virtue of having mass that certain

In the same way "heats" are intrinsically unified and commensurable, so are "cools". "Cools" are unified by an intrinsic property (slow particle vibration), and this property also exists in terms of more or less. Since "cools" and "heats" mark different areas on the same common scale, moreover, heats and cools (*temperatures*) are intrinsically commensurable with each other. Other paradigm cases of intrinsically unified and commensurable groups are light and darkness (*lumen*), fastness and slowness (*speed*), cheapness and expensiveness (*price*), bigness and smallness (*size*), longness and shortness (*length*), and perhaps, goodness and badness (*value*).

When, in the rest of this paper, I argue that pleasures and pains are unified and commensurable, I argue that pleasures and pains are intrinsically unified and intrinsically commensurable. If I were concerned solely with extrinsic unity and extrinsic commensurability, then the paper would end here, for pleasures and pains—like most things—are clearly extrinsically unified and commensurable in some respects. They are extrinsically unified in virtue of, say, being held by hedonists to be the only things of ultimate value significance. They are extrinsically commensurable in terms of duration.[3]

The view I shall defend, therefore, is that all pleasures (pains) are unified by an intrinsic property that accounts for why these, and only these, are pleasures (pains),

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things belong to the group "clothes I wear at the moment". For the group "clothes I wear at the moment" to be an intrinsically commensurable group in the sense relevant here, it would have to be commensurable according to its "clothes I wear at the moment"-ness.

[3] The reason why most, or perhaps all, groups are extrinsically commensurable in some respect is that their members are often, or perhaps always, measurable according to *some* commensurable property. All the members of the group "book", for example—although they cannot be intrinsically commensurated in terms of "bookness"—do all have the property "size", and since "size" exist in terms of more and less, all books are extrinsically commensurable in terms of this property.

and that this intrinsic property exists in terms of more and less, making every pleasure and every pain commensurable with every other pleasure and pain.[4]

2. Pleasures and Pains

Are pleasures and pains unified and commensurable? I believe our intuitions draw us in opposite directions. On the one hand, pleasures and pains do 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 glow), and it seems to be in virtue of having 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 arbitrary demarcated group of experiences, and children do not need to learn rules for what is a pleasure and what is not. Children sense what is a pleasure, and what is not, because of how pleasures feel.[5] Similarly with 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 glow), and it seems to be in virtue of having this quality that they are pains, and that we are able to reliably pick them out as pains.

We also seem to speak of pleasures and pains as if they were commensurable. Although we do not speak of "pleasure", "pleasurerer" and "pleasurest", and "pain", "painer", and "painest", the same way we speak of "hot", "hotter", "hottest", and

[4] In this paper I'm concerned solely with unity and commensurability *within* persons. I thus leave open the question of whether pleasures and pains are interpersonally unified and interpersonally commensurable.

[5] Of course, we can teach children to take pleasure in new things. This does not, however, change the fact children seem to have direct access to whether a certain experience, when experienced, is pleasurable or painful.

"cold", "colder", "coldest", we do rank pleasures and pains 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 (say, eating bread) that it moves from being pleasurable (the first three slices), to being neutral (the fourth and fifth slices), to becoming positively painful (stuffing in bread past the tenth 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 0 to 5.[6] Saying that something is more or less "pleasurable" or "painful", at least, makes more sense than saying that something is more or less "bready" or more or less "slicey".

As such, there is something intuitively plausible about the view that pleasures and pains are unified (that both have a distinct, intrinsic quality) and commensurable (that they are measurable according to this quality). Murat Aydede summarizes this view as follows:

> Since they [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.[7]

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[6] The *McGill Pain Questionnaire* is a standard questionnaire for measuring pain. See Ronald Melzack, "The McGill Pain Questionnaire: From Description to Measurement," *Anesthesiology*, Vol. 103, No. 1, July 2005, pp. 199-202.

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

Our intuitions do not exclusively draw us towards unity and commensurability, however, and among philosophers in particular, the view that pleasures and pains are unified and commensurable has fallen into considerable disrepute. The standard objection is that though we might speak of pleasures and pains as if they were unified, they aren't unified—and, since they aren't, they can hardly be commensurated according to their non-existent unifying property. This objection is commonly called the heterogeneity objection.

To understand the force of the heterogeneity objection, it is necessary to understand the inclusive usage of the terms "pleasure" and "pain" that is commonly employed in philosophy (and that I take for granted in this paper). John Locke is a proponent of this inclusive usage, and explains in *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* that he uses the terms "pain" and "pleasure" inclusively to refer "not only [to] bodily pain and pleasure, but [to] whatsoever delight or uneasiness is felt by us".[8] Henry Sidgwick similarly explains 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".[9] Leonard Katz, on the same 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

[8] John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), II, XX, §15.

[9] Henry Sidgwick, *The Methods of Ethics*, 7th ed. (Indianapolis (Ind.): Hackett Publishing, 1981), pp. 93, 127.

contrasted with similarly inclusive pain, or suffering, which is similarly thought of as including all our feeling bad".[10]

This wide usage of "pleasure" and "pain" gives the heterogeneity objection momentum. To see why, 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, having self-esteem, eating candy, being given a hug, taking a warm bath, listening to Mozart, scoring a goal in a football match, having an orgasm, reading a short story, falling asleep after a long day's work, being appreciated, and smelling fragrance. These experiences appear to be qualitatively very different. Is it clear that there is a single quality running through all of them? Socrates 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 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.[11]

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[10] 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. Roger Crisp suggests that rather than speaking of "pleasure" and "pain," we should use "enjoyment" and "suffering" to cover the wide usage. Stuart Rachels suggests that we can keep "pleasure", but that we should not treat "pain" as its antonym. "Pain", Rachels suggests, should more narrowly be reserved for the negative experiences brought about by nociception, and 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 Stuart Rachels, "Six Theses about Pleasure", *Philosophical Perspectives*, Vol. 18, Issue 1, 2004, pp. 247-48; Roger Crisp, *Reasons and the Good* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 103-109.

[11] Plato, *Philebus* (translated by Dorothea Frede) in *Plato: Complete Works*, John Cooper (ed.) (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1997), 12 c-d.

Derek Parfit is no 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.[12]

Neither is 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.[13]

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 taste rotten food. 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 there is a single quality that unites them. As writes Rem B. Edwards: "The 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."[14] Pains seem to be radically different from one another, and even simple, sensory pains—pains as recognized by Crisp and Rachels (see footnote 10)—vary in ways that seem to defy strict quantification. Sensory pains do not merely refer to one simple feeling that, when present, varies solely in terms of more and less.

[12] Derek Parfit, *Reasons and Persons*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), p. 493

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

[14] Rem B. Edwards, *Pleasures and Pains: A Theory of Qualitative Hedonism* (Ithaca (NY.): Cornell University Press, 1979), p. 40.

Rather, sensory pains can be pulsing, throbbing, flashing, shooting, pricking, stabbing, wrenching, sore, numb, tearing, etc., and these differences are qualitative, not quantitative.

In light of this, 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 common 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, Edwards claims, is a Wittgensteinian family resemblance relation between various pleasures and various pains.[15]

If the best we can hope for is family resemblance, then unity and commensurability are threatened, since on this view, it is not true that all members of the group have a property in common that accounts for why these, and only these, are members of the group. Moreover, if pleasures and pains are not unified by a common property, they cannot be commensurated in terms of this non-existent property.

If one wants to save the intuition pushing us towards accepting unity and commensurability—as I want—there are logically two ways to proceed. The first way is to claim that the heterogeneity objection is without merit, and that pleasures and pains are in fact homogeneous. I believe this is off the table, since it is undeniable that there is a great diversity among pleasures and pains. The second way is to argue that heterogeneity is compatible with unity and commensurability. I believe this is a more

[15] Edwards, pp. 34-35, 73.

tenable approach, and in the following I shall present and assess three theories that seek such reconciliation: Response theory, split experience theory, and dimensionalism.

3. Response theory

One path to reconciling unity and commensurability with heterogeneity is response theory. Response theory is a cluster of views according to which pleasure and pain experiences are unified and commensurable, not in virtue of their intrinsic feel, but in virtue of how we *respond* to them.[16]

To my knowledge, the earliest formulation of response theory is found in Henry Sidgwick's *The 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.[17]

There are several variations of response theory. William Alston argues that pleasure is a unified experience in virtue of being "an experience which, as of the moment, one would rather have than not have".[18] A similar view is defended by L. W. Sumner,

[16] This view is sometimes referred to as "externalism".

[17] Sidgwick, p. 127.

[18] William P. Alston, "Pleasure" in P. Edwards (ed.), *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (New York: MacMillan, 1967), p. 345.

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".[19] The 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".[20]

Response theory offers a possible way to reconcile heterogeneity with unity and commensurability. First, response theory has no problem accepting heterogeneity. Since response theory 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 many different ways (affect, want, like, desire, etc.). Regardless of our favorite gloss, 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: Attraction and repulsion. This unifying property, moreover, is quantitative, since every desire, 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 acknowledge heterogeneity while accounting for both unity and commensurability.

The problem with response theory is that it appears to be the solution to the wrong problem: It is a solution to the problem of whether or not *desires* (or whatever response one chooses) are unified and commensurable, not to the question of whether *pleasures and pains* are unified and commensurable. The only way in which response

[19] L. W. Sumner, *Welfare, Happiness, and Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 90. Sumner labels this view the "attitude model".

[20] Edwards, p. 35.

theory could be an argument for the unity and commensurability of pleasures and pains, is if pleasures and pains were just responses: if a pleasure were a pleasure *in virtue of* its attractive force and a pain were a pain *in virtue of* its repulsive force. This position, which I 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."[21] Similarly, Richard Hall argues that "The unpleasantness of pain sensations consists in their being disliked,"[22] 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*)."[23] Christine Korsgaard also defends a species of strong response theory, and writes that:

> 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?[24]

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

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[21] Richard Brandt, *A Theory of the Good and the Right* (Oxford: Cleardon Press, 1979), p. 38.

[22] Richard J. Hall, "Are Pains Necessarily Unpleasant?", *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, Vol. XLIX no. 4, June 1989, p. 649.

[23] Chris Heathwood, "The Reduction of Sensory Pleasure to Desire", *Philosophical Studies* 133 (2007), p. 32.

[24] Christine Korsgaard, *The Sources of Normativity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 147-8.

however, also suffer from four serious problems that make the view almost certainly false.

A first problem is that strong response theory gets 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 desiring pan cakes. When you desire pan cakes, do you desire them because they are pleasurable or are they pleasurable because you desire them? Introspection favors the former over the latter: You desire pancakes because of their pleasurable taste. Indeed, accepting the alternative view seems to have a very odd implication: If things are pleasurable in virtue of being desired, then we can never use "because it is pleasurable" as an explanation for why we desire anything, and the statement "I desire pan cakes because they are pleasurable" would be empty, amounting to "I desire pan cakes because I desire them". The only explanation that could intelligibly be given granted strong response theory is an explanation of this form: "I desire pan cakes because of their sweetness". This is an explanation, but it leads to a regress, since 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",[25] and in T. L. S. Sprigge's view, strong response theory ends up with "a strikingly joyless picture of pleasure".[26] The

[25] Andrew Moore, "Hedonism," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Fall 2008 Edition)*, Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2008/entries/hedonism/>.

[26] T. L. S. Sprigge, *The Rational Foundations of Ethics* (London: Routledge, 1988), pp. 131-2.

picture is joyless since, if it is right, the reason why we desire something is never that it gives us a good feeling, but always merely the fact that we are drawn towards it.[27]

A second problem for strong response theory is that it makes pleasant surprises mysterious. I once ate boiled dog. I did not desire eating it, but I reluctantly gave it a try. Having tasted it, I found that it didn't taste so bad after all. In fact, it tasted rather good. So I was pleasantly surprised. To most people, this chain of events is perfectly intelligible. On the view that pleasures are pleasures in virtue of being desired, however, what happened must have been an unlikely incident. If strong response theory is correct, the only thing that could explain the chain of events involved in me finding the dog meat pleasurable is that, independently of the pleasurable taste of the dog meat, I came to form a different desire just after having started eating it.

A third problem is that strong response theory makes it a necessary truth that we desire all pleasures. Though pleasure and desire are intimately related, it seems that we can both fail to desire a pleasure and desire something that is not a pleasure. It also seems that we can experience a (mild) pain without desiring to end or weaken it. If this is so, then pleasure/pain is conceptually independent of desire/repulsion.

A fourth problem is that response theory makes desire-satisfactionism and hedonism identical theories. Though this might not be a fatal implication, it is an odd implication, since having ones desires satisfied seems to be different from experiencing pleasure. I can imagine feeling pleasure without having my desires satisfied and having my desires satisfied without feeling pleasure. In conjunction with

[27] Similar criticisms have been raised by Stuart Rachels, "Is Unpleasantness Intrinsic to Unpleasant Experiences?", *Philosophical Studies*, Volume 99, No. 2, pp. 187-210, 196; 2000, and more recently by Elinor Mason, "The Nature of Pleasure: A Critique of Feldman", *Utilitas*, 19 (2007), pp. 388-97.

the three earlier worries, this mounts a considerable weight against strong response theory. [28]

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, however, I think one will realize that what goes on is that the desiring works causally as a factor raising 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 is often more painful than pleasurable.[29]

The second source of motivation is that strong response theory helps solve the "coffee paradox". The coffee paradox is the curious fact that coffee apparently tastes bad when you're a child and good when you're an adult, even though qualitatively, coffee seems to taste the same at both stages. Coffee, it appears, has the same taste when you're a child and when you're an adult—it's just that when you're an adult, you find its taste pleasurable. This paradox might lend support to the view that the pleasurability of an experience is not intrinsic to our experiences. If pleasurability were intrinsic to our experiences, then presumably the pleasure and pain element in the experience could not change without the content of the experience changing. If

[28] For a more in-depth discussion of these points, too which I owe substantial parts of my own argument, see Aaron Smuts, "The Feels Good Theory of Pleasure", pre-published by *Philosophical Studies* (no pagination yet).

[29] Ibid.

response theory is correct, however, the coffee paradox is not a paradox at all: As adults, we simply 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 solution to the coffee paradox.

Apart from the fact that desire satisfaction tends to be pleasurable and its solution to the coffee paradox, it seems that the only 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, then strong response theory should be rejected in light of its serious oddities. If so, we are left with weak response theory. As we saw, however, weak response theory only has the power (at best) to explain *extrinsic* unity and commensurability. Therefore response theory fails to reconcile heterogeneity with unity and commensurability.

4. Split Experience Theory

Let us now turn to a theory that seeks to reconcile homogeneity 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). To my knowledge, the only 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 a different qualitative feel to them.[30] The crux, however, is that although they all have a *qualitatively* different feel, they differ only *quantitatively* with respect to their pleasurably. The "pleasure" part of an experience, Bentham writes, is something separate from the qualitative experience; it "accompanies", is "derived from", "results from", or is "produced by" our qualitative experiences. If this 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 conjoined with a certain hedonic level attached to our caused by that qualitative feeling.

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, making a certain hedonic experience. The hedonometer can be bombarded with all kinds of heterogeneous information from our 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 irrespectively of the heterogeneity of the input, condense all the information into a certain point on a quantiative 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 or 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

[30] Jeremy Bentham, *Principles of Morals and Legislation*, J. H. Burns and H. L. A. Hart (eds.) (Oxford: Cleardon Press, 1996), pp. 43-46.

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 all pleasures and all pains have in common that accounts of why these and only these are pleasures and pains: 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".[31] Being high or low on the hedonic scale, moreover, is a quantitative property that exists in terms of more and less. For this reason, Bentham can claim that pleasures and pains are unified and commensurable without rejecting heterogeneity.[32]

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 isn't.

Stuart Rachels has presented an introspective argument against Bentham, 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 localized and immediately present in the finger as is the qualitative sensation. Indeed,

[31] Edwards, p. 34.

[32] A superficial reading of Bentham might give the impression that he holds that pleasures and pains, *qua* pleasures and pains, vary qualitatively. Bentham, writing on pleasure, lists seven axes along which pleasure and pain can vary: Intensity, duration, certainty, propinquity, fecundity, purity, and extent. None of these, except but intensity and duration, however, concern matters intrinsic to pleasures and pains. The other axes refer to 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, pp. 38-40.

Rachels argues, you feel just *one* thing: *pain in the finger*.[33] 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.[34] 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, he asks a series of questions. First he asks: Is the wine a cause of the pleasure we get? Ducnker's 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 the wine. The pleasure, Duncker claims, is *in* the very experience. If he is right, then split experience theory introduces one causal step too many.

A third objection has been raised by William Alston.[35] Alston argues that if our experiences were split the way Bentham suggests, then feelings of pleasure would distract us from the things we find pleasurable. Granted that our attention is generally drawn towards 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,

[33] Rachels, "Is Unpleasantness Intrinsic to Unpleasant Experiences?", p. 196.

[34] Karl Duncker, "On Pleasure, Emotion, and Striving", *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, Vol.1, No. 4 (June, 1941), pp. 398-9.

[35] Alston, p. 345.

seems not to be the case. Rather, the opposite seems to be the case: The more pleasure we get from a certain activity, the more our attention tends to be drawn towards that activity.

A fourth problem for split experience theory is explaining 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 will grab one's attention and override 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 pleasure and pain level is determined by a single inner hedonometer. 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, however, would deprive the theory of the explanatory simplicity that makes it appealing in the first place, and opens for complications of its own.

Again, however, we should ask what counts in this view's favor. Although I do not believe split experience theory is as fundamentally mistaken as strong response theory, I see few reasons to positively believe in it—except for the fact that split experience is an intrinsic feel theory that 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 intrinsic feel theory that can explain the coffee

paradox. In lack of further supporting reasons, therefore, the theory should be rejected.[36]

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 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 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 presumably, pain) consist in, but as Smuts himself admits, "This is not an illuminating suggestion".[37] The reason why it is not illuminating is that it is closer to a restatement than to an explanation or an analysis. Smuts does argue, 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

[36] It should be said in Bentham's defense, however, that his theory fares somewhat better when it comes to pleasures than when it comes to pains. Pleasures have more of a holistic feel to them, and are not localized in the same way as pain. While you can have a pain in your index finger, you can't 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.

[37] Smuts (still without pagination).

natural place to stop. Phenomenally, pleasure seems to be a *sui generis* experience—an experience with no constituent parts—and constituent parts is what we would need for it to be possible to give a further explanation of what unifies pleasures. 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".[38] This might be, and if so, Smuts might have given the most thorough explanation that can be given. When facing the heterogeneity problem, however, saying that "all pleasures feel good" is not an answer that will satisfy 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 intrinsically 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 of 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.

5. Dimensionalism

Dimensionalism is the theory that pleasure and pain have the ontological status of opposite ends of a hedonic dimension along which our experiences vary. To my knowledge, the earliest hint towards dimensionalism is found in C. D. Broad's *Five Types of Ethical Theory*. Broad writes:

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

> [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 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 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.[39]

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."[40] Pleasure and pain, on Broad's view, do not ontologically belong together with experiences such as experiential sweetness, greenness, and warmness. Rather, pleasure and pain are tones that all experiences—including sweetness, greenness, and warmness—are imbued with.

A similar view is proposed by Karl Duncker, who argues in "On Pleasure, Emotion, and Striving" 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

[39] C. D. Broad, *Five Types of Ethical Theory*, pp. 229-30.

[40] Ibid.

themselves, pleasure and pain are "essentially incomplete experience[s]" that cannot exist in the absence of any particular experience being pleasurable or painful.[41]

Clarifying the dimensionalist position by means of analogy, Shelly Kagan suggests in "The Limits of Well-Being" that pleasure and pain are related to qualitative experiences the same way auditory volume is related to sounds. Auditory volume, Kagan notes, 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.[42]

Dimensionalism, as I defend it here, states that

(1) Pleasure and pain are opposite sides of a dimension along which experiences can vary.

It is possible to pair (1) with the further claim that

(2) All experiences belong at a certain point on a hedonic dimension.

[41] Duncker, p. 400.

[42] Shelly Kagan, "The Limits of Well-Being", *Social Philosophy and Policy*, Vol. 9, Issue 2 (2009), pp. 70-72. Aaron Smuts might also be interpreted in this direction when writing 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, p. 16.

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 ask, Searle claims, about an experience: "Was is [*sic*] 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.?".[43] On this view, whenever you experience something—spotting a friend, tasting honey, feeling an itch, reading a paper, cuffing, or seeing a blue dot—one of the dimensions along which that experience varies is a hedonic dimension.

In this paper I do not commit 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 sides of the zero point. It is unclear, moreover, what is the difference 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. This does not, however, alter the fact that those experiences which are pleasurable or painful are also unified and commensurable. Though I am open for the possibility that (2) is true, therefore, I shall here solely defend (1).

What reasons do we have to believe in (1) type 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

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

explaining how dimensionalism solves the challenges raised against response theory and split experience theory above.

Dimensionalism faces none of the problems faced by response theory. Since dimensionalism holds that pleasurability 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), and for this reason, it has no problem accounting for hedonic surprises. Dimensionalism also 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 our finger, we feel pain right there in the finger, since according to dimentionalism, it is the very feeling in the finger that is imbued with 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.[44] This becomes clear if we formulate dimensionalism in terms of qualia. Formulated in terms of qualia, dimensionalism holds that rather than pleasure being a quale and pain being a quale, pleasurability and painfulness are dimensions along which qualia vary. To the

[44] 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 (Oct. 1950), pp. 54-55.

extent that we may simultaneously experience several qualia, we may also experience several hedonic tones.

Dimensionalism also offers a solution to the coffee paradox. It can solve the paradox, even though it is an intrinsic feel theory, since it does not hold that hedonic tone is part of the object or the content of the experience. Holding that hedonic tone is a dimension along which our 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* qualitites, but in whom these sensations were *pleasantly* toned?[45]

Broad does not answer the question. Duncker does, however, and writes that "A feeling-tone of pleasantness may reside in any kind of experience".[46] 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 cut 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 being imbued with different hedonic tone at different points in time.

[45] Broad, p. 231.

[46] Duncker, p. 412.

Dimensionalism can also explain why 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…"[47] Dimensionalism can explain why this is so. If pleasures and pains are aspects of experiences, we need neither hedonic objects nor a designated hedonic sense. Rather, we should expect pleasurability and painfulness to be distributed along all different sensory modalities—and this seesm 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 why this is so.

For these reasons, dimensionalism appears introspectively plausible. I also believe it makes evolutionarily sense, however, and here is a speculative explanation of why: Evolution operates by the rule that a trait is selected for iff it promotes survival and reproduction of the individual(s) having the trait. If we take for granted that consciousness evolved, therefore, consciousness would somehow have to promote survival and reproduction in order to be selected for. If consciousness did not promote survival and preproduction, it would not be selected for, and to the extent that it were biologically costly, it would be positively selected against. The only way consciousness could promote survival and reproduction, moreover, seems to be 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

[47] Mill, pp. 1:37, 2:185

experiences with a certain valence or a pro/con attitude. Without a valence or a pro/con attitude, an experience—although it could perhaps be interesting for the organism having it—would not be able to guide the organism's actions. Evolution, moreover, cares for action, not for entertainment. It therefore seems that if consciousness were to ever get going, valence would have to be present from the very start. Alternatively, consciousness would disappear as fast as it occurred. This suggests that hedonic valence phylogentically is as old as consciousness itself, which 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, speculate 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. If this is true, it supports the dimensionalist view on the relationship between consciousness and hedonic valence.

This speculation concludes my arguments in support of dimensionalism. Let me now turn to the question of how dimensionalism can help reconcile heterogeneity with unity and commensurability.[48]

Dimensionalism has no problem allowing for heterogeneity, since it places no restrictions on how heterogeneous our experiences may be. It places no more

[48] 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.

restrictions on how heterogeneous pleasures may be than our common assumptions about loudness places restrictions on how heterogeneous various forms of sound 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…".[49] What unites all pleasures, according to dimensionalism, is 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 intrinsic unity, moreover, since it is in virtue of being on a certain range of the hedonic dimension that an experience is either a pleasure or a pain.[50]

For an intrinsically unified group to be intrinsically commensurable, it is required that the property in virtue of which it is unified is a property that exists in terms of more and less. This was the case with temperatures, since the property in virtue of which temperatures are temperatures is particle vibration, and particle vibration exists in terms of more and less. The same is the case with pleasures and pains, since these mark different points on a hedonic dimension, and dimensions—by their nature—are quantitative: They exist in terms of more and less.

[49] Kagan, p. 172.

[50] Indeed, a dimensionalist could 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 are particular pleasures and particular pains. This need not be a problem, however, since 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 each 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 colds is a threat to the unity and commensurability of heats and cools.

Thus dimensionalism 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 perfectly unified and perfectly commensurable, just like temperatures.

[10,097 words incl. footnotes]