

Unconscious Pleasures and Attitudinal Theories of Pleasure

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This article responds to a new objection, due to Ben Bramble, against attitudinal theories of sensory pleasure and pain: the objection from unconscious pleasures and pains. According to the objection, attitudinal theories are unable to accommodate the fact that sometimes we experience pleasures and pains of which we are, at the time, unaware. In response, I distinguish two kinds of unawareness and argue that the subjects in the examples that support the objection are unaware of their sensations in only a weak sense, and this weak sort of unawareness of a sensation does not preclude its being an object of one's attitudes.

BACKGROUND

On the one hand, there are sensations, such as the feeling of touching velvet, the ring of a 440 Hz tuning fork, and the smell of a blooming lilac bush. On the other hand, there are attitudes or intentional states, which we can have towards states of the world, as when we believe that it is raining or wish that it would stop, as well as towards our own sensations, as when we believe that we are smelling lilac or dislike the feeling we are getting from touching velvet. Similarly, we can distinguish these two kinds of pleasure: sensory pleasure and attitudinal pleasure. Sensory pleasures are what many of us experience when we step into a hot shower on a cold day, bite into a juicy peach, or smell freshly baked bread. They involve pleasant sensations. Attitudinal pleasure is what we get when we are pleased that something is the case, such as that it has stopped raining. These hedonic phenomena have opposites too, of course. There are unpleasant sensations, such as the smell of skunk, and attitudinal displeasures, as when one is displeased that the rain has started up again.

According to *attitudinal theories of sensory pleasure and unpleasantness*, for a subject to be experiencing sensory pleasure at some time is, roughly, for the subject to be experiencing a sensation at that time that the subject has a positive attitude towards at that time. The positive attitude might be desire,¹ attitudinal pleasure,² or

¹ Chris Heathwood, 'The Reduction of Sensory Pleasure to Desire', *Philosophical Studies* 133 (2007), pp. 23–44.

² Fred Feldman, 'Two Questions about Pleasure', *Philosophical Analysis: A Defense by Example*, ed. D. Austin (Dordrecht, 1988), pp. 59–81.

liking.³ Unpleasant sensations are analysed in terms of some negative attitude. What about *painful* sensations? Those are covered by the theory in one way, since all painful sensations are unpleasant, but not in another way, since attitudinal theories of sensory pleasure and unpleasantness may not say what distinguishes painful sensations from those that are unpleasant without being painful. We will ignore that perplexing question here.⁴

In a recent article, Ben Bramble presents a novel and interesting objection to attitudinal theories: the objection from unconscious pleasures. He believes it to be ‘a decisive objection to attitude theories’, and one that he suggests can get us past the current stalemate in the debate between attitudinal theories of sensory pleasure and their non-attitudinal competitors.⁵ My aim in this article is to defend attitudinal theories of sensory pleasure and pain against the objection from unconscious pleasures and pains.

BRAMBLE’S ARGUMENT FROM UNCONSCIOUS PLEASURES AND PAINS

According to Bramble,

one can have unpleasant experiences that one is entirely unaware of at the time of experience. If [this is] right, then of course there can be unpleasant experiences whose subjects have no negative attitudes toward them at the time of experience. This is because one can hardly have the relevant kind of attitude (be it disliking, not wanting, disvaluing, or whatever) toward an experience that one is entirely unaware of.⁶

Bramble cites a number of interesting examples. One involving an unpleasant sensation is due to Daniel Haybron:

Perhaps you have lived with a refrigerator that often whined due to a bad bearing. If so, you might have found that, with time, you entirely ceased to notice the racket. But occasionally, when the compressor stopped, you did notice

³ Richard J. Hall, ‘Are Pains Necessarily Unpleasant?’, *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 49 (1989), pp. 643–59.

⁴ In what follows, to avoid stilted language, sometimes I say ‘pain’ when it might be more accurate to say ‘unpleasantness’. At other times I talk only about pleasure when the point would apply to unpleasantness as well.

⁵ Ben Bramble, ‘The Distinctive Feeling Theory of Pleasure’, *Philosophical Studies* 162 (2013), pp. 201–17, at 203–4. One such competitor is the *distinctive feeling theory*, on which sensations like the smell of freshly baked bread or the taste of a peach cause a further, distinct sensation, the sensation of pleasure itself (G. E. Moore, *Principia Ethica* (Cambridge, 1903), §12; Bramble, ‘Distinctive Feeling Theory’). Another non-attitudinal theory of sensory pleasure is the *hedonic tone theory*, on which pleasurableness is an abstract sensory determinable of which certain determinate sensations, such as the smell of freshly baked bread or the taste of a peach, are instances (C. D. Broad, *Five Types of Ethical Theory* (London, 1930), pp. 229–37).

⁶ Bramble, ‘Distinctive Feeling Theory’, p. 204, italics removed.

the sudden, glorious silence. You might also have noted . . . that you'd had no idea how obnoxious the noise was – or that it was occurring at all – until it ceased. But obnoxious it was, and all the while it had been, unbeknownst to you, fouling your experience as you went about your business. In short, you'd been having an unpleasant experience without knowing it.⁷

A real-life case involving pleasure is discussed in neurologist Oliver Sacks's book *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat*. Sacks's patient, quoted here, lost his sense of smell after a head injury:

Sense of smell? . . . I never gave it a thought. You don't normally give it a thought. But when I lost it – it was like being struck blind. Life lost a good deal of its savour – one doesn't realise how much 'savour' is smell. You *smell* people, you *smell* books, you *smell* the city, you *smell* the spring – maybe not consciously, but as a rich unconscious background to everything else. My whole world was suddenly radically poorer.⁸

Stuart Rachels discusses what he calls 'background pleasure' and cites this example from Sacks.⁹ Rachels points out that Leibniz and Mill were aware of our phenomenon. 'Mill', for example, 'contrasts "the occasional brilliant flash of enjoyment" with "its permanent and steady flame"'.¹⁰ As the Mill quotation suggests, and as Sacks's patient and Rachels's discussion make clear, unconscious pleasures and displeasures aren't just fringe phenomena. They are occurring all the time and all the while affecting the quality of our lives. It is important that theories of pleasure be able to accommodate them.

Bramble's argument requires two main premises. First,

(P1) There is unconscious sensory pleasure and unpleasantness.

This is sensory pleasure or unpleasantness that is genuinely a part of a person's experience, but that the person does not realize they are experiencing. As Haybron puts it, the person was 'having an unpleasant experience without knowing it'. As Sacks's patient puts it, the pleasure is experienced 'not consciously, but as a rich unconscious background to everything else'. The support for (P1) is provided simply by the examples above, and others like them. I have no quarrel with (P1), nor with describing them as 'unconscious' or as sensations of which we are 'unaware' (Bramble tends to use the latter term). I take Haybron's description and the testimony of Sacks's patient at face value. I have

⁷ Daniel M. Haybron, *The Pursuit of Unhappiness: The Elusive Psychology of Well-Being* (Oxford, 2008), p. 205.

⁸ Oliver Sacks, *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat and Other Clinical Tales* (New York, 1987), p. 159.

⁹ Stuart Rachels, 'Six Theses about Pleasure', *Philosophical Perspectives* 18 (2004), pp. 247–67, at 254–6.

¹⁰ Rachels, 'Six Theses', p. 255, quoting from J. S. Mill, *Utilitarianism* (London, 1863), ch. 2, §12.

had similar experiences myself – and of course much more often than I realize.

I'll formulate Bramble's second premise simply as follows:

- (P2) If there is unconscious sensory pleasure and unpleasantness, then attitudinal theories of sensory pleasure and unpleasantness are false.

Bramble's rationale for P2 is key, and is where the action lies. It is a principle we can call

NO AWARENESS, NO ATTITUDE:

If a person is unaware that they are experiencing a certain sensation at a certain time, then it is not possible for them to have an attitude towards that sensation at that time.

It's worth emphasizing that the sort of attitude that features in NO AWARENESS, NO ATTITUDE is a *de re* rather than *de dicto* attitude, or what some philosophers call 'singular thought'. When NO AWARENESS, NO ATTITUDE says that it is not possible for the person to have an attitude towards an unconscious sensation, that is not to deny that the person might have a desire to be experiencing *some sensation or other* of that very kind. Bramble's language – 'one can hardly have the relevant kind of attitude . . . toward an experience that one is entirely unaware of'¹¹ – suggests this interpretation. So does the principle of charity, for NO AWARENESS, NO ATTITUDE would be implausible on its face otherwise. If I am unaware that I am smelling a certain smell, it certainly doesn't follow that I cannot, perhaps just by coincidence, have a desire to be smelling some smell or other of exactly that kind. NO AWARENESS, NO ATTITUDE doesn't disagree. It is just saying that I can't have a desire (or any other attitude) towards smelling *the particular instance of the smell that I am (unconsciously) smelling*.

The *de re* understanding of NO AWARENESS, NO ATTITUDE also enjoys a certain sort of rationale. A *de re* attitude is an attitude about a particular thing. It is widely accepted that in order to have a *de re* attitude towards a particular thing, one has to be acquainted with the thing. And if you have no awareness of a certain something – such as the sensations in the Haybron and Sacks cases – then it seems plausible to say that you are not acquainted with it. Thus, you can't have *de re* attitudes towards them.

And this weaker *de re* interpretation of NO AWARENESS, NO ATTITUDE is still strong enough to make trouble for attitudinal theories of sensory pleasure and unpleasantness, since the best formulation of these

¹¹ Bramble, 'Distinctive Feeling Theory', p. 204, italics mine.

theories will also be *de re*. This is because those who are committed to an attitudinal theory should not want to say that pleasure is occurring in the sorts of coincidence cases just described – such as a case in which one is unaware that one is smelling a certain smell but, by coincidence, has a general or *de dicto* desire to be smelling a smell of exactly the kind that one is, unbeknownst to one, unconsciously smelling.¹²

REPLY TO BRAMBLE'S ARGUMENT

I think we can reply effectively to Bramble's argument if we distinguish between a stronger and a weaker way of being unaware of one's own phenomenal states. It's true that if we are what we can call *strongly unaware* that we are experiencing some sensation, attitudinal theories of sensory pleasure and unpleasantness might imply that that sensation cannot be a pleasant or unpleasant sensation. But this does not conflict with our judgements about the cases above, for the sort of unawareness that features in these cases is different. In these examples, the subject is unaware that they are experiencing the sensation in only a weaker sense. This *weak unawareness*, I will argue, does not preclude being the object of *de re* attitudes.

Haybron claims that when you are experiencing the unpleasant whining of the refrigerator, you don't notice it. Sacks's patient says that many of the pleasant smells that enrich our experiences of the world are unconscious smell sensations. These claims are true, on one reading. But I think that there is another sense in which you *do* notice the whining and in which the smells *are* conscious. That sense is this: if the sensations were to cease, the subject would notice their cessation. Or, rather, that this counterfactual is true of someone indicates that they enjoy a certain sort of awareness of the sensations, which we can call *weak awareness*. And indeed, such conditional claims are built into our examples: 'when the compressor stopped, you did notice the sudden, glorious silence'; 'when I lost it – it was like being struck blind'.

So I submit that if a person is undergoing an experience, and the experience is such that if it were to stop, the person would notice that, then there is a sense in which the person is aware of the experience, or in which the experience is a conscious experience. That one would notice its cessation shows that it is there as a genuine part of one's conscious experience. Why is that? Perhaps the answer is that to notice its cessation is to notice a change in some aspect of one's experience, and one can notice a change in some aspect of one's experience only if one had some kind of awareness of how one's experience was with

¹² My own attitudinal theory explicitly requires the attitude to be *de re* (Heathwood, 'Reduction of Sensory Pleasure', pp. 31–2).

respect to that aspect before the change and also an awareness of how it was with respect to that aspect after the change.

The Haybron and Sacks subjects experience sensations whose cessation they would notice (and in fact do notice, when the sensations do cease). In what sense, then, are they unaware of these sensations? Perhaps it is this: they do not, before the sensation stops, occurrently believe that they are experiencing the sensation, at least not confidently, and nor would they come to believe it even if they were to attend to the question.¹³ Even if they were to attend to the matter, they might be uncertain whether they are hearing the sound. If Haybron asks you whether you hear the refrigerator whining, you might stop, listen, and be unsure. You might even positively deny hearing it, despite the fact that it is indeed whining and that you are indeed hearing it (hearing it in the sense that if the noise were to stop, you would notice that). I myself have had just these sorts of experiences. I have tried to tell if I am hearing some noise going on, and been genuinely unable to tell.

Similarly, if Sacks's patient had been asked, before his injury, during a walk outside, 'Do you smell the city?', he may very well have replied, after some thought, 'No, I don't think I smell anything.' Thus, Haybron's refrigerator owner and Sacks's patient are unaware – though just weakly unaware – of certain sensations that they are in fact experiencing: they fail to confidently, occurrently believe that they are experiencing them, and may not even be poised to do so. But they are not strongly unaware of them: they would (and in fact do) notice their cessation.

That the subject would notice it if the sensation were to stop shows that the sensation is a part of the subject's awareness (in some sense of awareness). But it is evidently not constitutive of this sort of awareness. For there are finkish cases in which, although the subject is *disposed* to notice the sensation's cessation, if the sensation were in fact to cease, they wouldn't notice the cessation, due to some quirk. Suppose, for example, that one's sentience is being artificially supported by a machine. If the machine finks out, one instantly loses consciousness. Such a machine might be making a noise of which one is merely weakly unaware, and so of which one is aware in just the way that the Haybron

¹³ Or at least they would not *easily* come to believe this. Since this notion of ease comes in degrees, weak unawareness lies on a spectrum. Perhaps the relevant dimension is how much attention-paying would be required on one's part to come to believe that one is experiencing the sensation (if it is even possible, in a given case, for one to come to believe this). At one end of the spectrum is the case in which one does not occurrently believe that one is experiencing the sensation but would come to believe it after just a little reflection if one were to consider the question. At the other end of the spectrum is the case in which not only does one not believe that one is experiencing the sensation, but one would continue to fail to believe it no matter how much one attended to the matter and how hard one tried to notice the sensation.

and Sacks subjects are aware of their sensations. Suppose that this machine's noise stops if and only if the machine stops. It would then be false that one would notice the cessation of this sensation even though one is in fact weakly aware of it.¹⁴

There is thus some underlying way of relating to the sensation that is common in this case and the Haybron and Sacks cases, even though the relevant counterfactual is true only in the Haybron and Sacks cases. I don't know the best way to characterize this relation, but I believe that we have successfully identified it, via means of this counterfactual test, which holds in the normal case. This relation is the weak unawareness relation.

Just to be clear, since weak unawareness involves being in a way unaware and in a way aware, it can also be thought of as weak *awareness*. In sum:

Weak unawareness (a.k.a. weak awareness):

- (i) unaware in that one doesn't confidently, occurrently believe that one is experiencing the sensation (and even if one attended to the matter, still might not); but
- (ii) aware in that if the sensation were to cease, one would notice that (finkish cases aside).

But strong unawareness involves unawareness in both senses:

Strong unawareness:

- (i) unaware in that one doesn't confidently, occurrently believe that one is experiencing the sensation (and even if one attended to the matter, still would not); and also
- (ii) unaware in that if the sensation were to cease, one wouldn't even notice that (even in non-finkish cases).

A question somewhat tangential to our purposes is: Is strong unawareness of one's own sensory states even possible? Can it be that a person is genuinely experiencing some sensation – a whining sound, a city smell – and not only do they fail to believe that they are experiencing it (they are at least weakly unaware of it), but if the experience were to cease, they wouldn't even notice that (they are also strongly unaware of it) – and not because the case is finkish or because they are distracted? Finkish and distracted cases aside, I am tempted to

¹⁴ I am grateful to Joshua Watson here. A related kind of case involves distracted subjects. A subject might be weakly aware of a sensation even though, were it to cease, the subject would fail to notice that, due to the fact that, were it to cease, the subject would happen to be distracted at the moment of cessation.

say that if the person wouldn't even notice it if the experience stopped, then the alleged sensation was never in fact a part of their experience in the first place. I find this view tempting even in cases in which there are physiological or behavioural indicators that one's body is registering the stimulus. However, I don't need to take a stand on this here. The most that I might need to take a stand on here is that if strongly unconscious sensations are possible, they cannot be pleasant or unpleasant.¹⁵ But in fact it's not even clear that I need to say that much. I'll explain why below in a footnote.

So, Bramble's argument gets us to see that attitudinal theorists of sensory pleasure and unpleasantness *might* be committed to the impossibility of strongly unconscious sensory pleasure and unpleasantness. But more importantly, it gets us to see that they are pretty clearly committed to a second thing: that we can take up attitudes towards experiences that we are weakly unaware of. I'd now like to defend this claim.

To begin, note that once we draw the distinction between strong and weak unawareness and see that the people in Bramble's key examples are merely weakly unaware of their sensations – that is, once we see that there is a perfectly good sense in which they *are* aware of their sensations – I'm not sure that there is any reason to deny that they can take up attitudes towards these sensations. Consider these two variants of NO AWARENESS, NO ATTITUDE:

WEAK UNAWARENESS, NO ATTITUDE:

If a person is weakly unaware that they are experiencing a certain sensation at a certain time, then it is not possible for them to have an attitude towards that sensation at that time.

STRONG UNAWARENESS, NO ATTITUDE:

If a person is strongly unaware that they are experiencing a certain sensation at a certain time, then it is not possible for them to have an attitude towards that sensation at that time.

Since *de re* or singular thought plausibly requires some kind of awareness of or acquaintance with the object of the thought, STRONG UNAWARENESS, NO ATTITUDE is plausible.¹⁶ But why think it makes WEAK

¹⁵ My opponent may want to insist that there are these strongly unconscious sensations, that some of them are pleasant or unpleasant, and that attitudinal theories cannot accommodate this second fact. I agree that attitudinal theories may not be able to accommodate this (though see the next footnote), but because it is so unclear whether there are any such sensations and also, if there are some, whether any of them are pleasant or unpleasant, an objection founded on them lacks dialectical force.

¹⁶ Though perhaps not undeniable. Perhaps we can be *unconsciously* aware of strongly unconscious sensations, and thus have unconscious attitudes towards them. Attitudinal theories of sensory pleasure and unpleasantness would then imply that there can be

UNAWARENESS, NO ATTITUDE plausible? Why think that being aware of a sensation in the weak sense that one would at least notice its cessation is not sufficient to be in a position to have singular thoughts about that sensation? The sensation is there in your consciousness, in the sense described. Why can't that be enough for one to be able to be averse to it, or to like it? Bramble, at least, has given us no reason to think that it can't.

And there are positive arguments for thinking that one *can* have such attitudes. Consider Haybron's case. The refrigerator is whining loudly. Deep in your work, you don't notice it. Then the compressor stops, and you do notice the sudden, glorious silence. You also realize this: that 'all the while it had been, unbeknownst to you, fouling your experience as you went about your business'.¹⁷ Now consider this question: All the while, had the noise been, unbeknownst to you, *bothering* you? Surely the answer is 'Yes'. Surely if it is true that a sensation was 'fouling your experience', then it follows that the sensation was bothering you. It sounds contradictory to say, 'this smell is fouling my experience, though it's not bothering me at all'. But bother consists in having an attitude. To be bothered by something is to mind it or to be annoyed by it or disturbed by it. If someone is bothered by the fact that it is raining, that person has an attitude towards the fact that it is raining. Likewise, if they are bothered by the refrigerator's whining, they have an attitude towards that. Thus, not only is there no reason to deny that the subject in Haybron's case could have been having a negative attitude towards the whining sound, it seems clear that they were having such an attitude.

But if WEAK UNAWARENESS, NO ATTITUDE is false, then the argument from unconscious pleasures fails. STRONG UNAWARENESS, NO ATTITUDE is plausible, but is of no help, as Haybron's and Sacks's subjects are not strongly unaware of the relevant sensations. WEAK UNAWARENESS, NO ATTITUDE is what is needed to generate the problem for attitudinal theories of sensory pleasure and unpleasantness, but this principle is both unmotivated and open to counterexample. I conclude that the problem of unconscious pleasures for attitudinal theories of pleasure admits of a satisfying solution.¹⁸

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strongly unconscious sensory pleasure and unpleasantness. It would be a further question whether such sensations make our lives better or worse.

¹⁷ Haybron, *Pursuit of Unhappiness*, p. 205.

¹⁸ I am grateful to audiences at the Affective Experience: Pain and Pleasure Workshop at York University in 2015; at the Fifth Annual Tennessee Value and Agency Conference: Pleasure and Pain at the University of Tennessee in 2016; and at the Center for Values and Social Policy at the University of Colorado Boulder in 2016. For extensive feedback, special thanks to Ben Bramble, Anthony Kelley, Eden Lin, and Rob Rupert.