

## The reduction of sensory pleasure to desire

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**Abstract** One of the leading approaches to the nature of sensory pleasure reduces it to desire: roughly, a sensation qualifies as a sensation of pleasure just in case its subject wants to be feeling it. This approach is, in my view, correct, but it has never been formulated quite right; and it needs to be defended against some compelling arguments. Thus the purpose of this paper is to discover the most defensible formulation of this rough idea, and to defend it against the most interesting objections.

**Keywords** Pleasure · Pain · Desire · Motivational theory of pleasure · Hedonism

### 1 Introduction

#### 1.1 Kinds of connection between pleasure and desire

We all agree that there are some interesting connections between pleasure and desire. For instance, many people, on many occasions, desire pleasure. When a person desires something other than pleasure, it is often because he thinks getting it will lead to his getting pleasure. If a person desires something, the idea of the thing will typically be pleasing to her. If a person knows that getting something would bring him pleasure, he often will form a desire for the thing. There are analogous connections between pain and aversion.

There are bolder claims about the linkage between pleasure and desire, but, naturally, they are more controversial. Many of these bolder claims result from removing the qualifiers (like ‘often’, ‘typically’) from their weaker cousins in the preceding paragraph. One claim is that everyone is motivated exclusively by his or

her desire for pleasure (and aversion to pain). Sometimes the doctrine of psychological hedonism is put that way.

The most natural way to interpret these bolder claims is as claims of empirical psychology rather than of conceptual necessity. Few psychological hedonists, I think, want to commit themselves to the idea that psychological hedonism is a necessary truth.<sup>1</sup> They think rather that it is a mere contingent matter of psychological fact about human beings, a claim to be established in the laboratory rather than in the armchair.

This suggests a third class of alleged connections between pleasure and desire: those that do affirm a conceptual, or analytic, or metaphysically necessary connection between the two phenomena. In this paper, my focus will be on claims in this third category. My larger project is to develop and defend a set of theses to the effect that pleasure is reducible to desire. But in this paper, I will limit my focus to one kind of pleasure: sensory pleasure.<sup>2</sup>

The idea that pleasure is explainable in terms of desire is by no means new—sometimes it goes by the name ‘the motivational theory of pleasure’. I hope to make two contributions to the debate. The first has to do with *formulation*: I hope to offer a more precise formulation of the reductive thesis, and one that more accurately captures the basic idea behind the view. The second has to do with *defense*: I hope to offer a more sustained defense of the theory than has yet been carried out, by responding to the best objections to the reduction of sensory pleasure to desire.

#### 1.2 A theory of pleasure, and why

The reduction of pleasure to desire that I favor is a *theory of pleasure*, a thesis (or set of theses) that purport to reveal the nature of pleasure. The theory is reductive in the following sense: if it is true, then facts about pleasure just are facts about desire (we could remove the word ‘pleasure’ and its cognates from English without diminishing its expressive power); but it’s not the case that facts about desire just are facts about pleasure (desire can be present when pleasure is not).

I find the attempt to discover the nature of pleasure a worthwhile project in its own right, no less interesting than attempts by philosophers to discover the nature of other important phenomena, like knowledge, freedom, causation, value. But there are other reasons to be interested.

- (a) The concept of pleasure plays an important role in many areas of normative ethics: axiology, welfare, rationality, moral obligation. We cannot hope fully to understand many important theses in these areas until we understand what pleasure is.
- (b) There are two puzzles about pleasure—the heterogeneity problem and the oppositeness problem (both introduced below)—that a theory of pleasure should solve. So a good theory of pleasure will remove some mystery from the world.
- (c) Below I demarcate three categories of pleasure. At least at first glance, they appear to be three irreducibly distinct kinds of pleasure. Perhaps a theory of pleasure can unify these categories after all. The complete reduction of

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<sup>1</sup> Perhaps Mill (1998, p. 85) is one exception: “to desire anything, except in proportion as the idea of it is pleasant, is a physical and metaphysical impossibility.”

<sup>2</sup> I will be discussing pain as well, and I endorse the view that pain is reducible to desire in similar fashion. To save words, however, many remarks to come mention pleasure only, with the analogous claim about pain left implicit.

pleasure to desire I defend (only part of which, as I said, we will see here) is supposed to do exactly this.

- (d) The theory of pleasure I endorse has another interesting implication: it implies that a form of axiological hedonism is reducible to a version of the desire theory of value. Two of the leading competitors in the theory of value are not such great rivals after all.<sup>3</sup>
- (e) One troubling problem in normative ethics concerns commensurability. Suppose someone thinks we ought to maximize the balance of pleasure over pain in the world. For this to make sense, there needs to be facts like the following: the pleasure I'm feeling now is as pleasurable as the pain I felt yesterday was painful. In other words, pleasure and pain must be commensurable. A desire theory of pleasure and pain can deliver commensurability. This is because, according to it, pleasure is reducible to desire and pain to aversion, or desiring not; and desiring is commensurable with desiring not.

For the purposes of this paper, I take the concept of desire as primitive; nevertheless, let me say a few things about the concept of desire I mean to be employing. As I understand the notion to be used here, desires are the paradigmatic “pro-attitude.” To desire something is simply to favor it, to be for it, to be “into” it. Metaphorically speaking, it is to give the thing a mental “thumbs up.” I assume that we can take this single attitude towards things in the past, present, and future, towards things true and things false, and towards things we believe and things we disbelieve.<sup>4</sup> For we can certainly favor, or be for, or give a thumbs-up to, anything we can conceive, whether past, present, or future, whether true or false, and whether we know it to be true. And this favoring is all I mean by ‘desire’. That is the notion that will play a role in the reduction of sensory pleasure to desire to be discussed here.

## 2 The heterogeneity problem

As has been widely observed, pleasure is a diverse and varied phenomenon. There are bodily pleasures, like those had from relaxing in a Jacuzzi tub, from sunbathing on a warm beach, or from sexual activities. There are gustatory and olfactory pleasures (maybe they, too, qualify as “bodily”). There are what we might call “emotional pleasures,” such as the elation of receiving an ovation or the satisfaction of completing a difficult and worthwhile project. There are more “cognitive” pleasures, such as the pleasure derived from working on a crossword puzzle, from reading an insightful philosophy paper, or from listening to an amusing anecdote. There are aesthetic pleasures, like those derived from listening to beautiful music or from taking in a powerful sculpture. These are all pleasures. Why? What is it about

<sup>3</sup> I defend this in Heathwood (2006). Rachels (2000, p. 187) mentions a related reason to be interested in the nature of pleasure and pain. Pleasure is a paradigm good and pain a paradigm bad. A theory of their nature may shed light on why they are good and bad, and so teach us that other things are good and bad, since the reason may apply to other things.

<sup>4</sup> This assumption/stipulation is the subject of a coming objection (§6.1).

each of these things in virtue of which it is correctly classified as a pleasure? This is “the heterogeneity problem.”<sup>5</sup>

There is a heterogeneity problem for pain as well. There are bodily pains; perhaps there are gustatory and olfactory pains<sup>6</sup>; there are definitely emotional and cognitive pains. What is it about each of these things in virtue of which it is correctly classified as a pain?

A nice, clean answer to the heterogeneity problem, and one that might come first to mind, is that pleasure is some one kind of immediately felt quality, and that various human activities (like eating, reading, listening to music) cause us to feel it. This is the *Felt-Quality Theory*.<sup>7</sup> This answer actually denies that pleasure itself is heterogeneous—just its causes are. There are well-known arguments against Felt-Quality Theories, and, suffice it to say, the phenomenology just doesn't bear it out—there doesn't seem to be any one feeling (or even “hedonic tone”) common to all occasions on which we experience pleasure or enjoyment.<sup>8</sup>

Another popular solution to the heterogeneity problem is that, in each case, the subject *desires* the pleasure. He desires to be tasting the taste of the food, to be reading the paper, to be listening to the music. What makes each of these experiences pleasurable is that the subject wants to be having it. People who entertain this hypothesis are on to a desire theory of pleasure.<sup>9</sup>

## 3 The desire approach to pleasure and “the oppositeness problem”

Among those people are some philosophers. After rejecting a preliminary version, Alston (1967, p. 345) discusses what he sees as the “most promising” formulation of the motivational theory of pleasure:

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

<sup>5</sup> Feldman (1997, p. 84) uses a similar expression, as does Carson (2000, p. 14). Brandt (1979, p. 37) and Korsgaard (1996, p. 148) also find heterogeneity problematic.

<sup>6</sup> Or at least *unpleasant* gustatory and olfactory sensations. More to come (§6.5) on the distinction between painful and merely unpleasant sensations.

<sup>7</sup> Advocates of some form of the Felt-Quality Theory (there are at least two distinct varieties) include James Mill (1869, ii p. 184), Moore (1993, p. 64), Broad (1930, pp. 229–231), Karl Duncker (1941), and Timothy Sprigge (1988). Sumner (1996, p. 89) classifies James Mill this way. Both Sumner (1996, pp. 88–89) and Sobel (2002, p. 240, 2n) seem to regard Bentham as belonging in this category, but it is not clear to me that he belongs. I follow Carson (2000, pp. 13–14) in using the name ‘Felt-Quality Theory’ to cover both the *Distinctive Feeling View* and the *Hedonic Tone Theory* (so-called by Feldman (2001, p. 663)).

<sup>8</sup> Alston (1967), primarily following Ryle, presents a series of arguments against a Felt-Quality View. Many philosophers make the point about phenomenology, e.g., Sidgwick (1907, p. 127), Brandt (1979, pp. 37–38), Feldman (1997, p. 87), Carson (2000, p. 14), and Sobel (2002, p. 241).

<sup>9</sup> A nominally similar solution to the heterogeneity problem, which I cannot discuss here, unifies pleasure not through desire but through *desirability*. This is Sidgwick's view (1907, p. 127): “when I reflect on the notion of pleasure ... the only common quality that I can find in the feelings so designated seems to be that relation to desire and volition expressed by the general term ‘desirable’ ... I propose therefore to define Pleasure ... as a feeling which, when experienced by intelligent beings, is at least implicitly apprehended as desirable ... .” Rachels (2000, p. 198) speaks favorably of other normative analyses of pleasure and pain.

Brandt has endorsed some kind of a motivational theory of pleasure in many places. He describes (1979, p. 38) the “motivational theoretical-construct theory” as follows:

The theory to which we come is, roughly, that for an experience to be pleasant is for it to make the person want its continuation.

This conception isn't quite Alston's. Alston's makes no mention of wanting its continuation (a future-directed desire). Alston speaks of preferring the experience “as of the moment” (a present-directed desire).

An immediate advantage of solving the heterogeneity problem by appeal to desire is that it automatically explains a second fact about pleasure—viz., that pleasure is, in some important sense, the *opposite* of pain. The Felt-Quality Theory of pleasure and pain described above would leave it mysterious why, and in what sense, pleasure and pain are opposites. Many pairs of felt qualities (e.g., a sensation of middle C on a piano and a sensation of F# on a banjo) are in no way opposites. But if the felt quality theory is true, then some such pairs are opposites. How could that be? What could make one sensation the opposite of another sensation?

On a complete motivational theory (one about both pleasure and pain), the oppositeness of pleasure and pain is explained. Pleasure and pain are opposites because pleasure is explained in terms of desire, pain is explained in terms of aversion (or desiring not), and desire and aversion are opposites. And if aversion really is just desiring not, as I assume it is, then the oppositeness of desire and aversion is, in turn, explained in terms of the oppositeness of a proposition and its negation.

Parfit (1984, p. 493), another philosopher who wants to solve the heterogeneity problem by appeal to desire, seems to be on to this further advantage as well in the first sentence of the following passage (the rest of the passage contains his endorsement of a desire theory of pleasure):

What pains and pleasure have in common are their relations to our desires. On the use of ‘pain’ which has rational and moral significance, all pains are when experienced unwanted, and a pain is worse or greater the more it is unwanted. Similarly, all pleasures are when experienced wanted, and they are better or greater the more they are wanted.

Carson (2000, p. 13) states and endorses a reduction of pleasure to desire in the following passage:

The motivational theory of pleasure is the view that the pleasantness or unpleasantness of an experience is a function of one's desires with respect to it qua feeling. A pleasant experience is an experience that one prefers to have rather than not have (abstracting from all considerations about its consequences and preconditions); an unpleasant experience is an experience that one prefers not to have (abstracting from all considerations about its consequences and preconditions). ... The motivational theory provides a plausible account of what all of the many different kinds of experiences we call pleasures have in common.

Other philosophers have considered and/or endorsed other sorts of desire theory of pleasure and pain.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>10</sup> E.g., Spencer (1871, §125), Kagan (1992), Korsgaard (1996, pp. 147, 148).

Some of these passages are clearer than others, but we would do well to settle certain things. Brandt's theory makes use of future-directed desire whereas Alston's and Parfit's make use of present-directed desire. Parfit's theory is about pain whereas Carson's theory is about unpleasantness. Alston's mentions disregarding consequences; Carson's, consequences and preconditions. Brandt's and Parfit's make no such restrictions. Brandt's formulation, but none of the others, requires a causal connection between pleasant experience and desire.

#### 4 Three categories of pleasure

Divide and conquer. If we divide the heterogeneous class of pleasures into subcategories, we can conquer the heterogeneity problem. To begin, it seems clear that there are sensations, or feelings, of pleasure. If you're like me, you continually experience sensations, and some such sensations you would not hesitate to describe as pleasant. If you've ever, say, gotten a massage, you know about pleasant sensations. So *sensory pleasure* is one kind of pleasure.

Expressions containing ‘pleasure’ and its cognates are also used to express a propositional attitude, as when we say that a person is pleased that something is the case, or takes pleasure in some state of affairs. For instance, we can say, “Mary took great pleasure in the fact that her sales presentation was well received,” or “I'm so pleased the Red Sox won the World Series.” So *propositional pleasure* is another kind of pleasure. Propositional pleasure is pretty clearly not reducible to sensory pleasure (as a Felt-Quality Theory might require): I, for one, really am pleased the Red Sox won—I'm pleased right now—but I can testify to the fact that I am feeling no pleasant sensations right now.

Yet another kind of pleasure is picked out by the word ‘enjoys’. A person can be enjoying a state of affairs at a time only if he is in some way perceiving or experiencing the state of affairs at that time. Not so with propositional pleasure. It can be that Stuart is pleased that he will soon be home. But it can't be that Stuart is enjoying that he will soon be home (though he may, I suppose, be enjoying thinking about being home). The enjoyment will come when he finally gets home, and begins enjoying being home. It therefore seems that *enjoyment* constitutes a third category of pleasure.<sup>11</sup>

My focus in this paper is on the first category only: sensory pleasure. Although I want to defend reductions of propositional pleasure and enjoyment to desire as well, and thereby unify the three categories, the reduction of sensory pleasure to desire is a topic big enough to occupy us here.

#### 5 The reduction of sensory pleasure to desire

For there is a heterogeneity problem even just for sensory pleasure. The sensations of pressure felt during a massage, the sensation of warmth had when sunbathing, the taste of a freshly cracked beer, the olfactory sensations experienced when smelling freshly baked bread—each of these is (typically) a sensation of pleasure—that is, each of these is (typically) a sensory pleasure, a sensation that is pleasant or

<sup>11</sup> Davis (1982, p. 244) discusses further differences between enjoyment and propositional pleasure.

enjoyable. But, as before, why? What is it about each of these sensations in virtue of which it is a sensation of pleasure?

The motivational theory of sensory pleasure provides an answer to the heterogeneity problem for sensory pleasure. The basic idea is that a sensation gets to be a sensation of pleasure if the subject of the sensation desires to be feeling it. Notice that whereas a Felt-Quality solution to the heterogeneity problem attempts to unify sensory pleasure by appeal of some intrinsic feature of the pleasure sensation, the desire-based solution appeals to an extrinsic feature of the sensation: that its subject has some attitude towards it.

This is the basic idea, and the idea is pretty simple, but there are kinks to work out. Assuming that sensations are events, we can state our first approximation of a reduction of sensory pleasure to desire:

RSPD1 : a sensation S is a sensory pleasure iff the subject of S desires that S occur.

RSPD1 is an analysis of the property *being a sensory pleasure*, a property had by some sensations. So I mean the connective ‘iff’ to express more than mere necessary equivalence. I mean it to signal conceptual analysis, and hence property identity and composition. If RSPD1 is true, then the property of being a sensory pleasure just is the property of being a sensation such that its subject desires that it occur; moreover, the property of being a sensory pleasure is “built up” out of these “property parts” (just as, perhaps, justification, truth, and belief are some of the parts of knowledge). Although I call it a reduction of sensory pleasure to desire, the thesis does not say that sensory pleasures *are* desires, or any other kind of intentional state. Rather, it says that a sensation gets to be a sensation of pleasure in virtue of its subject having a desire towards the sensation. RSPD1 does not commit us to any reductionist view about sensations themselves—just about the property *being a sensory pleasure*.<sup>12</sup>

But recall the restriction Alston and Carson make. On Alston’s formulation, “To get pleasure is to have an experience which ... one would rather have than not have ... *apart from any further considerations regarding consequences*” (emphasis added). Why has Alston included this restriction?

He includes it because we can desire sensations that are clearly not pleasant—and even painful—if we want them *for some reason*, if they are means to some desired end. Suppose I’ve got a fresh lesion. I don’t want it to become infected, so I clean the wound with rubbing alcohol. We all know how that feels. But I’m actually *wanting* to feel the sting because I know that only then is the alcohol doing its job. So there’s a very painful sensation—the stinging sensation of alcohol on a fresh wound—that I want to be feeling. Eventually I get it. RSDP1 therefore implies, unacceptably, that the sensation is a sensory pleasure.

But I don’t want to feel the stinging sensation for its own sake. I want to feel it for a reason—namely, that it indicates that I won’t get an infection. The theory therefore needs to be restricted in a familiar way: to count only desires for sensations “for their own sake.” This is what Alston was getting at with “apart from any further

<sup>12</sup> RSPD1, while an “externalist” view (on Sumner’s (1996, ch. 4) terminology), is different from another kind of externalist view—the kind that reduces sensory pleasure not to desire but to *liking* or *propositional pleasure* (see, e.g., Hall (1989) and Feldman (1997) for this kind of view). Desiring is different from liking since only the latter entails believing its object.

considerations regarding consequences.” Alston was restricting the view to count only what we can call “intrinsic desires”—desires for things for their own sake.

You have an intrinsic desire for something when you just want it—when there is no reason you can give for wanting it, no further thing you want that you think it will bring you, no end to which it is a means. You just want it—for its own sake. When there *is* a reason you want something—i.e., when what is desired is desired at least partly as a means to some desired end—then you have an extrinsic desire for it. You want the thing because you think your getting it will, in some way or other, make it likely that you will get something else you want.

Here’s a familiar kind of illustration. I want to walk into the pub. Why do I want to walk into the pub? To order a beer. Why do I want to order a beer? So I can drink a beer. Why do I want to drink a beer? So I can taste a beer. Why do I want to taste a beer? Um ... uh ... no reason, I guess. I just do. I want to taste the beer for its own sake, not for anything it will lead to. This last desire is intrinsic, all the others extrinsic.<sup>13</sup>

If the theory is restricted in this way, as

RSPD2 : a sensation S is a sensory pleasure iff the subject of S intrinsically desires that S occur.

it no longer implies that the burning sensation of the rubbing alcohol is pleasant, for my desire for it is merely extrinsic. I want to feel it only because it indicates I will get something else I want.

But RSPD2 is still not right. One problem has to do with time. Suppose that as I child I enjoyed eating Froot Loops, a sugary cereal. Now I want to taste that same taste of Froot Loops again, the taste I used to love. My desire for this taste sensation is intrinsic—I want it for its own sake. Suppose I hunt down some Froot Loops and get exactly the taste sensation I have been wanting. But suppose it tastes awful—way too sweet! I’ve outgrown my sweet tooth. It is not clear what RSPD2 implies in this case of changing desires. It is not unreasonable to interpret RSPD2 in such a way that it implies that my taste of the Froot Loops is a sensation of pleasure, for I did intrinsically desire that it occur, at least before I got it.

If Sidgwick (1907, p. 110) were here, he would say I had gotten a “Dead Sea apple.” He knew that

... what is desired ... may turn out a ‘Dead Sea apple’, mere dust and ashes in the eating.

Cases like these are *disappointments*. There are also *pleasant surprises*. Sidgwick (1907, p. 45) also knew these:

<sup>13</sup> Three further points about the distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic desires. First, the issue is complicated by the fact that we can have both an intrinsic and an extrinsic desire for one and the same thing. Second, ‘extrinsic desire’ is a better term than ‘instrumental desire’. The latter term suggests that the connection between the object of an extrinsic desire and the object of its associated intrinsic desire is always *causal*. But it need not be causal: it can instead be *preventative*, *indicative*, or *exemplifying*. Third, when I say that intrinsic desires are had for no reason, this is not a denial of the claim that there is no good reason, or *normative* reason, for the desire. Rather, there is no *motivating* reason for the desire.

... many pleasures,—especially those of sight, hearing and smell, together with many emotional pleasures,—occur to me without any perceptible relation to previous desires.<sup>14</sup>

We might be tempted to solve this problem simply by requiring desire and sensation to overlap temporally<sup>15</sup>, but a similar problem arises even in cases of overlap. For we should be open to the possibility of *sensory anti-luminosity*: of experiencing some sensation without knowing it. If this is possible (and we should not, in this context, want to take a stand against it), then, possibly, someone is intrinsically desiring to experience some sensation, while he is in fact experiencing it, but without knowing it. He might say, “Alas, would that I were smelling the smell of roses right now,” while he is in fact smelling the smell of roses right now. If this counts as getting pleasure, ascetics beware.

We might be tempted to solve *this* problem by requiring the subject both to desire and to believe that he is experiencing a certain sensation that he is in fact experiencing, but a problem remains.<sup>16</sup> Suppose Descartes desires the taste of a piece of wax taken quite freshly from the hive. Suppose he takes, for example, this piece of wax, puts it to his tongue, and subsequently gets the sensation he wants. Unfortunately, however, his sensation lacks luminosity: he has no idea he’s getting it. So, as above, he regards his desire to be unfulfilled. No pleasure. Finally, suppose an evil genius injects into Descartes’s mind the belief that he is experiencing the sensation in question. The case is admittedly quite exotic, but, nevertheless, it is tempting to say that Descartes gets no pleasure in a case like this. Why not? I want to say: because, in some important sense, Descartes’s desire and belief aren’t really about that very sensation he’s getting.

This diagnosis suggests the solution that one’s desire must be genuinely about the very sensation one is getting—that it must be a *de re* desire about that particular sensation. Indeed, this does seem to capture the metaphor used earlier about giving the sensation a thumbs up, as well as the talk of having a desire *directed towards* the particular sensation. One couldn’t really give a sensation a thumbs up, in the sense intended, or have a desire directed towards the particular sensation, unless one were directly acquainted with the sensation.

One further complication. Having a *de re* intrinsic desire for a sensation still isn’t quite sufficient, for it is at least conceptually possible to have a *de re* intrinsic desire at some time for a merely past sensation; but one can’t be getting sensory pleasure at some time when he’s getting no sensations at that time. We need to relativize to times for a more mundane reason as well: on any desire theory of sensory pleasure, the property *being a sensory pleasure* is going to be a possibly temporary property of

<sup>14</sup> In a similar vein, David Perry (1967, pp. 204–205) writes:

To enjoy a thing it is not logically necessary that one should have desired it or that one would desire its preservation or that one should desire the continuation or repetition of his experience of it. ... I might, on passing a garden by chance, enjoy the scent of flowers without sniffing, lingering, returning, or trying to do these things or having the least inclination to do these things.

Sobel (2002, p. 253) makes a similar objection. Note that if this objection is good—and I think it is—then Brandt’s formulation, which requires a desire for the *continuation* of the experience, is in trouble.

<sup>15</sup> As I was before both Ryan Wasserman and John Hawthorne raised the following objection.

<sup>16</sup> As Cody Gilmore pointed out to me.

the sensations that have it. A sensation can have it at one time and go on to lose it later on.

Putting it all together:

RSPD3 : 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.

Here’s what has to happen, according to RSPD3, for a sensation to count as a sensation of pleasure. The sensation occurs. Its subject becomes acquainted with it. Its subject forms an intrinsic *de re* desire for it while it is still occurring. Then, and only then, I say, does sensory pleasure occur. RSPD3 reveals the essence of sensory pleasure.<sup>17</sup>

RSPD3 properly handles both anti-luminosity cases. For if a person has a *de re* attitude with respect to some sensation, then he is directly acquainted with it; and from this it follows, I take it, that the sensation is luminous. RSPD3 doesn’t deny the possibility of sensory anti-luminosity. It denies (or I deny as an auxiliary thesis) the possibility of direct acquaintance with an anti-luminous sensation. RSPD3 doesn’t deny the possibility of anti-luminous pleasure, either. To be sure, I do deny that a sensation that is a sensory pleasure at a time can be anti-luminous at that time. But RSPD3 is nevertheless compatible with the idea that we can be getting pleasure without knowing it. This would require that our *desire* for the luminous sensation be itself anti-luminous. Nothing in RSPD3 rules out that possibility.

RSPD3 can also handle disappointment. Here’s what goes on in the Froot Loops case. I have a general, *de dicto* desire that I experience some sensation or other of a certain kind—the Froot Loops taste kind. Then I get a sensation of this kind. Only then do I become directly acquainted with a particular sensation of that kind. But once acquainted with this new sensation, I form no *de re* desire for *that* (as I said, way too sweet). Now, perhaps my *de dicto* desire spills over for a few moments and overlaps with the sensation. But that’s irrelevant to whether it’s a pleasure, according to RSPD3.

Pleasant surprises are straightforward. I unexpectedly experience some sensation. I become directly acquainted with it. I give it a thumbs up. What a pleasant surprise.

## 6 Arguments against the reduction of sensory pleasure to desire

### 6.1 Arguments from the concept of desire

RSPD3 does not require that the subject of a sensation of pleasure desire it before it occurs. He just has to desire it (intrinsically and *de re*) while he is feeling it. But some philosophers have claimed that this can never happen, because we cannot want what

<sup>17</sup> Talk of the *subject* of the sensation rather than the *person* experiencing it is intentional, for I hold both (i) that non-persons can experience pleasure and pain, and (ii) that RSPD3 is compatible with this. I see no good reason to deny that the animals we intuitively take to be capable of experiencing pleasure and pain are also the ones that have desires. We have no hesitation in attributing painful sensations to, say, rats, but we likewise have no hesitation in explaining why, say, this rat ran to the trap by appealing to his desire for the cheese.

we already have. Aquinas held this view (*Summa Theologica*, Ia IIae, 30, 2 ad 1), and his endorsement of it is cited approvingly by Kenny (1963, pp. 115–116):

Aquinas pointed out that it is as impossible to want what one already has as to remember what is now happening. ... This obvious condition is something strangely neglected by philosophers.

The idea seems to be that it is a simple conceptual truth about desire that one cannot want what one already has. If someone has something, one would be guilty of conceptual confusion to think that he might also want the thing. Let's call the putative conceptual truth about desire

Falsity : Necessarily, if S desires that p be true, then p is not true.<sup>18</sup>

If Falsity is true, RSPD3 becomes unacceptable, for it follows from the combination of these views that that there is no such thing as sensory pleasure.

Sumner (1996, p. 128–130) advances a similar claim about the concept of desire, and one that, in conjunction with RSPD3, yields the same unacceptable result. Sumner maintains that desire is essentially “prospective”—i.e., that we can have desires only about the future. If a person desires at some time t that some proposition be true, Sumner claims, then the proposition must be about a time later than t. Says Sumner (1996, p. 129):

I can desire now only that something occur later. Desires are always directed on the future, never on the past or present... In being future-directed in this way, wanting once again contrasts with liking or enjoying. I can (occurently) enjoy only what I already have, while I can want only what I have not yet got.

Let's call Sumner's thesis

Prospectivity : Necessarily, if S desires at t that p be true, then p is about a time later than t.

My response to both objections is to deny the principle. I think there are clear cases of desires towards true propositions and desires towards non-future propositions. But before looking at any such cases, let's take notice of the fact that the dispute over Falsity and Prospectivity is more verbal than ontological. For surely there is *some* pro-attitude that we can bear towards things we have (i.e., towards true propositions) as well as towards present and past states of affairs. We can favor, or be into, or give a mental thumbs up to, past and present states of affairs just as well as to possible future ones. And we can give a thumbs up towards things we have. An attitude is there to be named. The question is simply whether it is ever appropriate to use ‘desire’ or ‘want’ to express this attitude. To ensure that my paper deserves its name, all I need is for there to be *some* use of ‘desire’ and ‘want’ according to which these conceptual theses are false.

<sup>18</sup> A more charitable interpretation of the Thomistic idea is

Belief : Necessarily, if S desires at t that p be true, then S does not believe at t that p is true. But it doesn't matter; if the considerations presented below successfully undermine Falsity, they likewise undermine Belief.

I think one simple example suffices to demonstrate that there is such a sense. Suppose Cheapskate's car is parked outside, and it begins to rain. Worrywart notices, and says to Cheapskate,

“I bet you prefer that your car be in the garage right now.”

But Cheapskate's car is dirty. He thinks letting it sit in the rain is a cheap way to get it clean. So he replies,

“No, I want my car to be right where it is.”

Cheapskate is expressing a desire, and I think what he says is literally true. He really does want his car to be right where it is. The object of Cheapskate's want is *that his car be where it is*. But, of course, Cheapskate's car *is* right where it is—the object of his desire is true. So Falsity is false.<sup>19</sup> The state of affairs *that Cheapskate's car be where it is* is also a present state of affairs. Cheapskate wants *now* that his car be where it is *now*. So we have also a case of a non-prospective desire—a desire towards a state of affairs not about the future but about the present. This one case refutes both principles.<sup>20</sup>

## 6.2 An argument from desired non-pleasures: the dizziness case

Feldman (1997) considers and rejects a theory of sensory pleasure similar to RSPD3. Feldman maintains that it's possible to desire intrinsically to be feeling some sensation without the sensation being a sensation of pleasure. In support of this, Feldman presents a case involving the feeling of dizziness. The case is used first—successfully, in my opinion—to undercut a theory that fails to incorporate an intrinsicity restriction. In the case, a research scientist wishes to understand the phenomenon of dizziness and so performs experiments on himself. He gets himself dizzy and attends to the feeling, wanting to understand its nature. When he feels sensations of dizziness, he wants to be feeling those sensations. If you told him you could make the feelings stop by giving him some Dramamine, he would turn down your offer. For he wants to be feeling them. Nevertheless, the sensations might be thoroughly unpleasant.

In this case, the researcher's desire for the dizziness is merely extrinsic: he desires his feelings of dizziness only because he desires to understand dizziness, and he thinks having the feelings will lead to his understanding them. Therefore, the case refutes only a naive motivational theory (like RSPD1). But Feldman extends the dizziness case. He takes a cue from the phenomenon, exemplified classically by misers, of strong and lasting extrinsic desires turning into intrinsic desires<sup>21</sup> (Feldman, 1997, p. 90):

As time goes by, I [the researcher] begin to lose interest in my research, and I become more interested in the dizziness for its own sake. On some occasions I spin around to make myself dizzy even though I've long since given up my research project. Dizziness, which I formerly desired only extrinsically, is now

<sup>19</sup> This point, or a very similar one, is made also by Matthews and Cohen (1967) against Kenny and Aquinas.

<sup>20</sup> Parfit (1984, pp. 170–172) presents further considerations in favor of the legitimacy of this wide notion of desire.

<sup>21</sup> See Mill (1998, ch. 4).

something I desire at least partially intrinsically. Nevertheless, the feeling of dizziness, when I get it, may fail to be a sensory pleasure.

I think the case is inconclusive. It is not so clear that it's possible for the feeling of dizziness in this case to fail to be pleasurable. I think we can cast doubt on Feldman's contention if we attend to the concept of *liking*, and related concepts, and see how they can be exploited by the reductionist to question the possibility of intrinsically desiring some sensation without finding it pleasant.

Imagine the following interrogation:

Interrogator: "Researcher, you say you *intrinsically desired* at t your feeling dizzy at that time."

Researcher: "That's correct."

Interrogator: "This means that at t you *avored*, or gave a mental thumbs up to, your feeling dizzy at that time."

Researcher: "That's right; that's just what it was for me to intrinsically desire the sensation."

Interrogator: "Let me ask you some further questions. Were you *attracted* to the sensation itself?"

Researcher: "I think I should have to say I was. Otherwise, how could it be true that I favored it? If I were to deny an attraction to the sensation, I think I would *ipso facto* be denying an intrinsic desire for the sensation."

Interrogator: "But you can't give a reason you were attracted to the feeling, right? You just were. If you gave some reason for being attracted to it (such as that you found the sensation interesting, or that it would help you with your research), then this would reveal your desire to be extrinsic."

Researcher: "Agreed. I was just attracted to the feeling, and that's that."

Interrogator: "So it seems you would have to say that you *liked* feeling the sensation?"

Researcher: "I think I must say that I liked it. After all, I was in favor of it, I would give it a thumbs up, I was attracted to it. Does it make any sense to accept all of this but then to deny that I liked feeling the sensation (for its own sake)?"

Interrogator: "So you liked that you were feeling the sensation. Did you *enjoy* or *take pleasure* in the dizziness sensation?"

Researcher: "Well I said I liked it, didn't I? Doesn't that just mean the same as that I took pleasure in it."

Interrogator: "Well then I think we have established that you found the sensation pleasant."

In this response to the dizziness case, we go on a conceptual slide from desire to pleasure. The theory says that intrinsically desiring some sensation entails its being a sensory pleasure. We establish this less-than-obvious entailment with more obvious ones. Intrinsically desiring it entails being into it, which entails being attracted to it, which entails liking it, which entails finding it pleasant, which entails its being a sensory pleasure.

I therefore maintain that the researcher's feeling of dizziness is pleasurable. But this admittedly does sound odd. I know what dizziness feels like and it is definitely not pleasant. How could such a feeling ever count as a sensation of pleasure?

Consideration of the diversity of tastes in food can answer this question. It should teach us to be wary of jumping to conclusions about the status of certain sensations

in others. I love spicy food. I feel certain sensations of spiciness and I really enjoy them. My mother, on the other hand, can't take it. She finds spicy food literally painful; she wants no part of it. But surely we would balk and any attempt on my mother's part to conclude that my sensations of spiciness are not pleasant. Surely the following speech by my mother would be off the mark as a refutation of RSPD3:

You've sure got a silly view about desire and pleasure, my boy. Remember when you forced me to try your vindaloo? Well I remember it, and the experience was terrible. Those sensations were sensory pains, not pleasures. But you love vindaloo. You really enjoy having those sensations. You desire them for their own sake whenever you get them. Your RSPD3 therefore implies that they were pleasant. But this is obviously false. I've felt those sensations, and I'm certain about one thing: they are not pleasant!

Obviously, no defender of RSPD3 would or should be moved by such an objection. My mother even admits that I enjoy the sensations. She rejects the idea that they are pleasures simply because she has felt one's just like them and didn't enjoy them.

I think Feldman's case is trading, though in a less crude way, on similar prejudices. If his case has some appeal to you, perhaps it is because you, like me, could never find feelings of dizziness pleasant. You might therefore be tempted to conclude that they mustn't be pleasant in the researcher either. But this is just the kind of prejudice my mother exhibits in her faulty argument. It's easier to notice there, because we already recognize great diversity in food tastes. Since there happens to be much less diversity of our tastes about feelings of dizziness, I think we are less inclined to take notice of the prejudice. It is surely bizarre for someone to find dizziness pleasant. But no more bizarre, I submit, than to have an intrinsic desire to feel dizzy. Present a bizarre case, get a bizarre result.

### 6.3 A second argument from desired non-pleasures: "interesting" sensations

It can happen that we want to be feeling a certain sensation, and that we want to be feeling it in virtue of something about its intrinsic nature, but if asked what it is about its intrinsic nature that attracts us, we will say not that we find it pleasant, but that we find it *interesting*. If we desire the sensation for its intrinsic nature, it seems our desire may qualify as intrinsic. But if what's attractive about the sensation's intrinsic nature is merely that it is interesting, it may be that the sensation is not a sensory pleasure. But if so, then we have a case of an intrinsically desired but non-pleasant sensation, and so a counterexample to RSPD3.<sup>22</sup>

An objection along these lines is actually made against Feldman's own theory of sensory pleasure by Sumner (1998). Sumner (pp. 177–178) asks you to

Think of a feeling (say of "pins and needles" in the legs) which you find intrinsically interesting and of being pleased that you are having it on a particular occasion because of its interesting intrinsic qualities; this does not seem sufficient to make it pleasurable.

<sup>22</sup> Though I didn't do so above, Feldman's dizziness case could actually be interpreted as an instance of this objection.

The objection is slightly different, since it is against a different theory (one, incidentally, that reduces sensory pleasure to propositional pleasure), but the basic idea is the same: we can want to be (and even enjoy) feeling some sensation for its own sake without the sensation's qualifying as a sensory pleasure.

My response to the “interesting sensation objection” depends crucially the intrinsic desire/extrinsic desire distinction. In a word, desires for sensations that are had in virtue of the sensation's interestingness are not intrinsic desires. The reply to (the modification of) Sumner's case, therefore, is that the desire to be feeling the pins and needles sensation, despite its having to do with features intrinsic to the sensation, is an extrinsic desire. RSPD3 therefore does not imply that the sensation is a sensory pleasure.

Recall what we said above about intrinsic desire. When a person has an intrinsic desire, there is no reason he wants the thing—he just wants it.<sup>23</sup> He can't say he wants it because it will bring about this, or prevent that, or indicate this, or be an instance of that. If he could say that, then his desire would be extrinsic.

Now, suppose we look at you in disbelief. We can't believe you want to be feeling the pins and needles sensation, so we ask you to explain. *Why* would you ever want to be feeling that pins and needles sensation? You reply: because the feeling is interesting to me. But this is crucial. You have given a reason for your desire! This is evidence that your desire is extrinsic. You don't want those sensations just for themselves. You want them only because they are interesting. If they ceased being interesting, or if you ceased wanting something interesting, you would lose your desire to be feeling the sensation. This shows that the desire for the sensation is extrinsic. And this despite the fact that the sensation is interesting to you in virtue of its intrinsic features.

Sumner was evidently misled: from the fact that you desired the pins and needles sensation for its intrinsic qualities, Sumner inferred—fallaciously, I say—that your desire for the pins and needles sensation was intrinsic.

That is, the following is a fallacy:

You desire something for its intrinsic qualities.  
 ∴ Your desire is intrinsic.

To see that this is a fallacy, suppose you want to own some copy or other of *The Methods of Ethics*. Suppose the book in your hand is a copy of *The Methods of Ethics*. So you want it. That is, you want that you own the book in your hand. Now, in virtue of what is the book in your hand a copy of *The Methods of Ethics*? It is a copy of *The Methods of Ethics* in virtue of its intrinsic features (we can suppose). So, you want the book in your hand for its intrinsic qualities. Nevertheless, your desire for the book in your hand is extrinsic. You want the book in your hand only because you want to own a copy of *The Methods of Ethics* and the book in your hand is a copy of *The Methods of Ethics*.

<sup>23</sup> This, of course, is not to deny that there is a causal explanation for the existence of the desire—of course the desire has some causal genesis. What is denied is that there is a “reasons explanation” for the desire: the subject can't (truly) give a (non-circular) reason for wanting the thing.

#### 6.4 “I want it because it's pleasant,” or: a Euthyphro problem

In responding to the interesting sensation objection, I have employed a test for determining whether a desire is intrinsic: if the subject cannot give a reason for her desire, or if the reason is in some way circular, then the desire is probably intrinsic; if the subject has no trouble giving a non-circular reason for her desire, then the desire is probably extrinsic. But consider what might happen when a subject is asked to explain her desire for some pleasant sensation. The subject might say she wants to experience the sensation *because it is pleasant*. I appealed to an analogous fact above in the interesting sensation case to establish that the desire for the sensation in that case was extrinsic. Perhaps foes of reduction can appeal to the corresponding fact in the pleasant sensation case to establish that the desire in that case is likewise extrinsic. If so, then the opponent may have given us reason to think that we *never* have intrinsic desires for sensations (or perhaps for anything!, for desires for sensations are the paradigmatic case of intrinsic desires). Perhaps our chains of extrinsic desire always end not in intrinsic desire but in pleasure. This line of thought is incompatible with a reduction of pleasure to desire.

I think we can get at the same objection in a different way, by asking a Socratic question. Do we desire pleasant sensations because they are pleasant, or are pleasant sensations pleasant because we desire them? Although I think our confidence in it is less than is our confidence in the intuitive answer to Socrates's actual question (about piety, or moral rightness), the more intuitive answer to this question is probably that we desire pleasant sensations because they are pleasant. But this conflicts with the reduction of sensory pleasure to desire, according to which pleasant sensations are pleasant because they are desired.<sup>24</sup>

I respond that although the motivational theory does take the less intuitive horn of the Socratic dilemma, the theory is still compatible with an important sense in which we desire pleasant sensations because they are pleasant. In ordinary circumstances, when someone says, “I want to taste that beer because I will find the taste pleasant,” they say something compatible with the motivational theory of sensory pleasure. Or at least there is a natural interpretation of this remark that is compatible with the theory.

When a person says, “I want to taste that beer because I will find the taste pleasant,” he may mean roughly the following, “I want to taste that beer because when I taste that beer I will find the taste I get pleasant.” But this is no problem for the reduction of sensory pleasure to desire. According to the theory, when a person says this, he says, “I want to taste that beer because when I taste that beer I will be intrinsically desiring the taste I get.” Of course, the person might not realize, or even positively deny, that he is saying this, but this is simply because he doesn't accept the motivational theory of sensory pleasure. If Frege is right, then statements about numbers are statements about sets. It is no argument against the reduction of numbers to sets that people who speak about numbers don't realize, or would even positively deny, that they are talking about sets. Likewise, it is no argument against the reduction of pleasure to desire that people who speak about pleasure don't realize they are talking about desire.

<sup>24</sup> Rachels (2000, p. 192) makes more or less this objection: “People want their displeasure to end because it's unpleasant. However, on [a desire theory of pleasure and pain], this amounts to saying that people want their displeasure to end because they want it to end, which is nonsense.”

According to this reply, our Socrates can be interpreted as presenting a false dilemma. He asks, “Do we desire pleasant sensations because they are pleasant, or are pleasant sensations pleasant because we desire them?” The reducer of sensory pleasure to desire responds, “Yes and Yes.” Yes, we desire pleasant sensations because they are pleasant (in other words, we desire them in advance because we know we will be desiring them when we get them). And Yes, pleasant sensation qualify as pleasant in virtue of the fact that they are intrinsically desired.

This reply reveals that the Socratic question is ambiguous. Presumably what our Socrates really meant is the following: “When a person is experiencing and simultaneously desiring to be experiencing some pleasant sensation, does he desire to be experiencing the sensation because it is independently pleasant, or does the sensation qualify as pleasant only in virtue of the fact that the subject is simultaneously desiring it.” To this clunky question, the reducer of pleasure to desire must indeed take the latter, less intuitive horn.

But this should not be terribly surprising, for that is a common price of reduction. To assess how costly the less intuitive horn is, we weigh its counter-intuitiveness against the explanatory and theoretical benefits of reduction. In the moral case, I side with Socrates. I find it too central to our concept of morality that an action cannot be made morally right simply in virtue of its being permitted by some authority—even God. Moreover, there are other explanatory unifications of right action—normative theories of rightness—available.

Things are different in the sensory pleasure case. First of all, the anti-Euthyphronic intuition in the sensory pleasure case is less compelling than the anti-Euthyphronic intuition in the moral case. To see this, consider to what the real Euthyphro commits himself in claiming that right acts are right in virtue of being approved by God. Euthyphro must accept counterfactuals like the following:

CF1 : If God had approved of Ted Bundy’s rape and battery of Joni Lenz, then Ted Bundy’s rape and battery of Joni Lenz would have been morally permissible.<sup>25</sup>

CF1 is hard to swallow. By contrast, reducers of sensory pleasure to desire need only accept counterfactuals like the following:

CF2 : If Jack didn’t want to be feeling the sensations caused by that massage, then those sensations would not have been sensations of pleasure.

CF3 : If Zoe didn’t want to be tasting the taste of that peach, then the taste Zoe experienced would not have been pleasant.

<sup>25</sup> In assessing this counterfactual (or perhaps it’s a counterpossible, but that’s ok), we must take care not to interpret it as a *back tracker* (or something analogous). We cannot justify it, for example, with, “If God had approved of Ted Bundy’s rape and battery of Joni Lenz, then it must be that that act was part of some worthy divine plan that we cannot hope to understand.” The relevant counterfactual requires that we hold everything constant—including the actual fact that the act was not part of some divine plan and has no good consequences—changing only God’s evaluation of the act.

CF2 and CF3 are nothing like CF1. CF1 is incredible; intuition is much less clear about CF2 and CF3.

Secondly, I see no plausible alternative explanatory unifications in the offing. If we hold our anti-Euthyphronic intuition sacrosanct in the sensory pleasure case, we seem to be forced into the unwelcome position of regarding sensory pleasantness to be an inexplicable primitive property (as Felt-Quality Theories have it) or an evaluative property (as Desirability Theories have it).<sup>26</sup> Better to stick with theory on this point, and learn from it that a common idea—that we desire pleasant sensations because they are pleasant—is mistaken.

### 6.5 An argument from undesired non-pains

RSPD3 is a theory about pleasure only. But I have suggested above that I would endorse a reduction of pain to desire as well. Even if a reduction of sensory pleasure to desire is successful, we are still left with a heterogeneity problem for sensory pain, and we still need to explain the way in which sensory pain is the opposite of pleasure. A motivational theory of sensory pain promises to solve both problems.

We formulate the reduction of sensory pain to desire as follows:

RSPD3' : a sensation S, occurring at time t, is a sensory pain at t iff the subject of S desires, intrinsically and *de re* at t, of S, that it not be subject occurring at t.

On this view, a sensation gets to be a sensation of pain just in case its subject wants intrinsically *not* to be feeling it while she is feeling it.

There is a special difficulty for RSPD3', one for which there is apparently no analogue in the pleasure case. It seems there are sensations that are *uncomfortable*, even *unpleasant*, without being *painful*. The trouble this makes for a motivational theory of sensory pain should be obvious. Any uncomfortable or unpleasant sensation we would surely intrinsically desire not to be feeling. RSPD3' implies therefore that such sensations are painful. But not all such sensations are painful. We are more restrictive in our ascriptions of sensory pain. We are reluctant to call many undesirable sensations ‘painful’. We may say that they are uncomfortable, or that we don’t like them, or that they are unpleasant, while steadfastly denying they are *painful*.

Consider a mild itch. We don’t always like the way these feel. They can be uncomfortable and annoying. We want not to be feeling them—that’s why we scratch them. But are these mild itches *painful*? Are mild itches sensations of pain? No—it seems like an abuse of language to call a mild itch ‘painful’. The word is just not used this way. Toothaches are properly called ‘painful’; paper cuts are painful; having my wound cleaned with rubbing alcohol was painful. But not mild itches; they’re merely unpleasant, uncomfortable.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>26</sup> The other main competitor—the theory that reduces sensory pleasure to propositional pleasure or liking (Feldman, 1997; Hall, 1989)—is in the same boat as the desire theory vis-à-vis the present objection: this theory denies that we like pleasant sensations because they are pleasant and says instead that they are pleasant because we like them.

<sup>27</sup> One might suppose that painfulness is just intense enough unpleasantness, but this seems mistaken. There are very mild sensory pains—such as a pin-prick to the forearm—and very intense sensory discomforts—such as intense queasiness—that I would hesitate to describe as sensory pains.

That there are uncomfortable and unpleasant sensations that are not painful is supported by that common question of doctors: “Do you feel any pain or discomfort in your \_\_\_\_?” It doesn’t seem that the phrase ‘pain or discomfort’ is redundant. Sumner (1996, pp. 103) has recognized this phenomenon as well, and provides some nice examples:

Think for a moment of the many physical symptoms which, when persistent, can make our lives miserable: nausea, hiccups, sneezing, dizziness, disorientation, loss of balance, itching, ‘pins and needles’, ‘restless legs’, tics, twitching, fatigue, difficulty in breathing, and so on. While none of these is quite the same as physical pain, we experience each as intrinsically disagreeable. The attitude model [of which the desire theory is one kind] simply obliterates these categorical boundaries by treating all these states indifferently as pain.

Sidgwick also seemed to recognize the possibility of intrinsically desiring not to be experiencing some feeling without the feeling’s being painful. He considers (1907, p. 46) “The question whether all [unsatisfied] desire has in some degree the quality of pain” and has

no hesitation in answering the question in the negative. Consider again the case of hunger; I certainly do not find hunger as an element of my normal life at all a painful feeling: it only becomes painful when I am in ill health, or when the satisfaction of the appetite is abnormally delayed.<sup>28</sup>

I think the argument under consideration successfully refutes RSPD3’. It’s just not the case that being intrinsically averse to some sensation guarantees that the sensation is painful.

My response to refutation: change the subject. Revise the subject matter of the reduction of sensory pain to desire. Change the left-hand side of the analysis rather than the right-hand side. Make it a theory about sensory “unpleasantness” rather than about sensory pain. According to the new theory, a sensation gets to be an *unpleasant sensation* when its subject intrinsically desires not to be feeling it while he is feeling it:

RSUD : a sensation S, occurring at time t, is unpleasant at t iff the subject of S desires, intrinsically and *de re*, at t, of S, that it not be occurring at t.

Even if the present objection does refute the motivational theory of *sensory pain*, it fails against the motivational theory of *sensory unpleasantness*. It does not seem possible for there to be sensations that we intrinsically desire not to be feeling that are nevertheless not unpleasant. If we intrinsically want not to be feeling some sensation, that sensation, I submit, is unpleasant. Sensations of nausea, of itching, of ‘restless leg’, of hunger—these might not be painful, but each is definitely unpleasant.

I can anticipate three complaints about changing the subject in this way. The first complaint is that the new theory is true by mere stipulation and therefore uninteresting. We began with a quest to understand sensory pain. That proved difficult. So

<sup>28</sup> Sprigge (1988, pp. 128–129) and Rachels (2004, p. 248) also recognize non-painful unpleasantness. They prefer ‘unpleasure’ to ‘unpleasantness’. More on this below.

we coined a new term—‘sensory unpleasantness’—that makes the motivational theory automatically true.

I think this first complaint is pretty clearly misguided. The concept of a sensation’s being unpleasant was not cooked up in the philosophy lab. The term ‘unpleasant’ is a term of ordinary language, the corresponding concept is one of ordinary thought, and it applies to sensations in a familiar way. The motivational theory of this ordinary concept of sensory unpleasantness, if it is true, is certainly not true by stipulation. We can even imagine how it could be proven false: it needs to be shown that there are sensations we would clearly classify as unpleasant but to which their sensor is clearly not intrinsically averse.

The second complaint involves the implications for the oppositeness problem.<sup>29</sup> I suggested it is a datum that pleasure is the opposite of pain. By changing our focus, am I not implying that pain is in fact not the opposite of pleasure, and thereby denying a undeniable datum?

I *am* implying that pain is in fact not the opposite of pleasure, but I am not thereby denying a undeniable datum, because the very observation that motivates our change of focus also proves it is just false that pain is the opposite of pleasure. It shows that the opposite of pleasure must be something more inclusive. And notice that changing the subject in this way doesn’t threaten the desire-theoretic solution to the oppositeness problem. For that solution to stand, all that we need is for the opposite of sensory pleasure to be susceptible to a reduction to desire analogous to the reduction of sensory pleasure to desire. I claim this is exactly what we have.<sup>30</sup>

The third complaint about changing the subject is the best one. It is that we are no longer talking about the right concept, the concept that plays the important role in moral philosophy, the concept that has moral, prudential, and rational significance. It is the concept of *pain* that we wanted to understand, and we wanted to understand it, the objection goes, because that’s the concept that figures in hedonistic theories of value and welfare, in utilitarian theories of obligation, in pluralistic theories of value, welfare, and obligation that contain hedonistic or utilitarian components, and in midlevel moral principles making use of the notion of inflicting pain. If I change the subject from pain to unpleasantness, haven’t I failed in my promise to shed light on a central concept of moral philosophy?

No. Ironically, if we admit the possibility of unpleasant non-pains, then consideration of this “conceptual role” argument reveals something unintended. It reveals that painfulness isn’t quite the concept that has moral, prudential, and rational significance after all. It is unpleasantness. Sensory unpleasantness is far better suited to play the role in moral philosophy we thought would be played by sensory pain.

To see why, consider the following simple moral principle:

<sup>29</sup> I owe this objection to Daniel Howard-Snyder.

<sup>30</sup> Rachels (2004, pp. 247–48) claims that *unpleasure*—not unpleasantness—is the opposite of pleasure. One apparent reason to favor Rachels’s view is that perhaps there are painful sensations—and so sensations that belong in the opposite-of-pleasure category—that don’t count as unpleasant, because very intense pains are not properly called ‘unpleasant’. But I’m not convinced this impropriety isn’t merely pragmatic. Calling a sensation ‘unpleasant’ may *implicate* that it is not painful, but it seems to me not to entail it. This is suggested by both the cancellability test—‘Passing a kidney stone is unpleasant; indeed, it is extremely painful’ is no contradiction—and the redundancy test—‘Paper cuts are unpleasant, but not extremely painful’ is not redundant.

Non-Maleficence : It is morally wrong to inflict needless pain on innocent people.

Forget for a moment our present nick-pickings about the concept of sensory pain and get in tune with the spirit of Non-Maleficence. Imagine the sorts of behavior the principle is supposed to prohibit. Now consider the case of Tina the careful torturer. Tina abducts innocent victims and subjects them to her bizarre torture. She makes her victims wear itchy wool sweaters with nothing underneath and won't let them scratch. She feeds her victims rotten food, causing them terrible nausea. She dunks their heads into the tub and won't let them come up for air, causing unbearable feelings of apnea. Now recall the spirit of the simple principle prohibiting needless pain. Is the principle supposed to condemn Tina's behavior? Of course it is.

But recall the puzzle at hand about sensory pain. Recall that itches can be very unpleasant without technically being painful. Likewise for nausea and apnea. Put this to bear on the case of Tina the careful torturer. Tina (perhaps accepting the principle above and knowing about the present debate) is very careful never to cause what would qualify as sensory pain. This is why we call her torture 'careful'. What follows from this, it seems to me, is not that Tina's behavior escapes reproach on a technicality. What we see, rather, is that Non-Maleficence was meant to prohibit Tina's behavior all along. If this doesn't show that the meaning of the word 'pain' is in need of explication, it shows that proponents of Non-Maleficence really have unpleasantness and not pain in mind.<sup>31</sup>

The same line of thought applies to more theoretical positions as well. Obviously, when utilitarians tell us to maximize the balance of pleasure over pain, the intended notion of pain is broad enough to include Tina's torture victims in the hedonic calculus. Obviously, when hedonists say that pain is bad, the intended notion of pain is broad enough for hedonists to recognize that things go badly for Tina's victims.

And this broader notion of pain—one that includes unpleasantness—has this feature, crucial for our larger purpose: the motivational theory about *that* concept is plausible. The concept of pain that features in our common sense moral thought as well as in our more sophisticated moral thought is a concept of pain that bears a conceptual connection to desire. This, I take it, was exactly Parfit's point when he said (1984, p. 493):

On the use of 'pain' which has rational and moral significance, all pains are when experienced unwanted ...

Parfit's view might be that 'pain' has no settled meaning (and so it is unsettled whether there really are unpleasant non-pains), but that one legitimate way to settle its meaning gives the corresponding concept rational and moral significance.

So not only is it permissible to change the subject from sensory pain to sensory unpleasantness, it is required. Sensory unpleasantness, not sensory pain, is what we must understand if we wish to understand the concept that plays the important role in moral philosophy.

I do grant that some mystery remains. We have the class of unpleasant sensations. A subset of the unpleasant sensations qualify as pain sensations. Why? What is it about the pain sensations in virtue of which they are properly described as 'painful'.

<sup>31</sup> Sprigge (1988, pp. 128–29) is aware of this problem with the word 'pain'; he opts to keep the word and stipulate a broader meaning for it.

What distinguishes an unpleasant sensation that is also painful from one that is not? Why has our language and thought delineated this subclass of unpleasant sensation and given it a name, especially given that the distinction has no moral or rational import? I do not know the answer to these questions.<sup>32</sup>

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