



DISCUSSION NOTE

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JOURNAL OF ETHICS & SOCIAL PHILOSOPHY

DISCUSSION NOTE | MAY 2010
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Pleasure, Desire and Oppositeness

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WHY IS PAIN THE OPPOSITE OF PLEASURE? Several theories of pleasure and pain have substantial difficulty explaining this basic feature. Theories according to which pleasure and pain are individual sensations or features of sensations have particular difficulty, since it is difficult to understand how pairs of sensations could be opposites. Heathwood nicely sums up the problem: “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?”¹

Some pairs of sensation-types, such as hot and cold, or black and white, genuinely are opposites. Sensations of pleasure and pain, however, are too heterogeneous for their oppositeness to be analogously simple. Although painful sensations are often caused by processes that are harmful to the body, this is not always the case. For example, hay fever can cause a very painful itching in the eyes without any tissue damage or infection. So it seems that the underlying causes of pleasure and pain are ill-suited to explain their oppositeness.

Heathwood attempts to solve the problem by proposing that pleasure and pain are fundamentally related to intrinsic desires.² “You have an intrinsic desire for something [at a time] 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 for which it is a means.”³ We can introduce some definitions: S’s desire for x is intrinsic at t =df S desires x at t, and S’s desire for x at t does not depend on any further thing that x leads to or produces; S “just wants” x; S’s desire for x has no explanation in terms of further desires, or further things S desires. S’s desire for x is extrinsic at t =df; it is not the case that S’s desire for x is intrinsic at t.⁴ S has an intrinsic aversion to p =df; S has an intrinsic desire for not-p.

The desire theory says that a person, S, takes pleasure in p if and only if S has an intrinsic desire for p and S believes that p; S is pained by p if and only if S has an intrinsic aversion to p and S believes that p.⁵ On a typical version of the theory, a person, S, gets pleasure at t if and only if S has an intrinsic

¹ Heathwood 2007, p. 27.

² Heathwood 2007, p. 27. *See also* Brandt 1979, Carson 2000 and Parfit 1984.

³ Heathwood 2007, p. 30.

⁴ These definitions are meant to leave open the possibility that S might have an intrinsic desire for x while simultaneously having an extrinsic desire for x.

⁵ There is controversy surrounding which augmentations to intrinsic desire result in the taking of pleasure. For our purposes, though, nothing in particular turns on these details, so I have proposed a very simple version of the theory.

sic, *de re* desire that *p* at *t*, and *p* is true at *t*. A person, *S*, undergoes pain at *t* if and only if *S* has an intrinsic, *de re* aversion to *p* at *t* and not-*p* is true at *t*.⁶

The desire theory provides a clear solution to the oppositeness problem. Heathwood writes:

On a complete [desire-based] theory ... 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 ... then the oppositeness of desire and aversion is, in turn, explained in terms of the oppositeness of a proposition and its negation.⁷

Desire and aversion are opposites in a clear and intuitive way – an aversion to *p* is a desire for not-*p* – and so it is our attitudes toward the sensations that are opposites, not the sensations themselves. Furthermore, the desire view is well-suited to explaining the heterogeneity of pleasure and pain in general, as well as the fact that some pleasures do not appear to be sensory in nature at all, such as the pleasure of making a philosophical discovery.⁸

1. Pain and Aversion

This analysis of pleasure and pain in terms of desire and aversion does not do justice to the sense in which pleasure is the opposite of pain. Because sentences satisfying the schema <*S* is averse to *p*> are analyzable in terms of “desire” sentences satisfying the schema <*S* desires that not-*p*>, to be averse to something is to desire its denial. But the relationship between pleasure and pain does not correspond to this relationship between desire and aversion. Sentences of the form <*S* is pained by *p*> do not entail (and cannot be analyzed in terms of) sentences of the form <*S* takes (or would take) pleasure in not-*p*>; someone might be pained by something without thereby being such that she would take pleasure in its denial, and *vice versa*. If *S* is pleased that *p*, then if not-*p* had been true, *S* might be pained or neutral with respect to not-*p*. For example, I take pain in having a cold. Although the desire-based view suggests that if I am pained by my having a cold (because I am averse to it), I will be pleased by a state of affairs that satisfies my aversion. However, I generally take no pleasure in not having a cold – in spite of the fact that I have a satisfied aversion to having a cold.

One might suggest that I take no pleasure in not being sick just because it is impossible to enjoy propositions that are not true, or that the enjoyer does not believe. I cannot enjoy not being sick when I am sick. But this does not help. When I am sick, it is not true that if I were not sick I would enjoy not being sick. If I were not sick, I would be indifferent to the fact that I am

⁶ Heathwood, p. 32; Carson, p. 13.

⁷ Heathwood, p. 27.

⁸ For more detail, see Heathwood, pp. 25-6 and Feldman 1988.

not sick. This is not because I forget about how much I wanted not to be sick once I am well, because desires are transient. It is because the satisfaction of my aversion to sickness does not entail that I take pleasure in being not-sick. Although I have a satisfied intrinsic desire, I might be indifferent or neutral with respect to my not being sick.

We also may fail to be pained by the negation of pleasing states of affairs. I might have a desire to experience the flavors and textures involved in taking a sip of beer, and thereby be averse to not experiencing those flavors and textures. But taking pleasure in those flavors and textures does not entail that I take pain in not experiencing them, or that I *would* take pain in not experiencing them. Although I might take pain in such a state of affairs, perhaps I would be indifferent to it.

There is a disanalogy in structure of opposition between pleasure and pain and desire and aversion. To be averse to p is to desire that not- p , but being pained that p has no such relationship to being pleased that not- p . In general, desire and aversion take the following structure: necessarily, if S is averse to p , then S desires that not- p . But pleasure and pain take a different structure: necessarily, if S is pained by p , then either S is pleased by not- p or is hedonically indifferent to not- p . Of course, pleasure and pain entail belief in a way desire and aversion do not, but this does not explain the difference in structure. Controlling for belief-entailment, if S has a desire that p and believes that p , then (even) if S were to believe that not- p , S would be averse to not- p . But if S takes pleasure that p (and believes that p), it does not follow that if S were to believe that not- p , S would be pained by not- p . S might be neutral with respect to not- p .

2. Value and Oppositeness

So what explains the fact that pleasure and pain are opposites? My proposal is that the oppositeness of pleasure and pain can be explained by appeal to their value. That is, the fact that pleasure and pain are opposites is explained by the fact that pleasure is good and pain is bad, and that goodness and badness are suitable opposites. Pleasure is not good in a merely extrinsic or contingent way; according to an influential and natural interpretation of the nature of intrinsic value, for pleasure to be intrinsically valuable is for it to be good in virtue of what it is in itself, not merely in virtue of what it produces, and for it to have its goodness essentially rather than merely contingently. The same principles apply, *mutatis mutandis*, to the badness of pain – pain has its badness essentially, in virtue of its intrinsic nature. The value of pleasure and pain is fundamental and essential.⁹

⁹ For detailed discussions of intrinsic value, *see* Moore 1903, Moore 1922 and Zimmerman 2002. For detailed discussions of the view that pleasure and pain are bearers of intrinsic value, *see* Carson 2000, Feldman 2002 and Feldman 2004.

Furthermore, the structure of the oppositeness of goodness and badness is isomorphic to that of pleasure and pain. If x is good, then not- x might be bad, or it might be neutral with respect to value. For example, given that it is bad that I am sick, it does not follow that it would be good if I were not sick, because my not being sick might be neutral with respect to value. Similarly, if I am pained by the fact that I am sick, it does not follow that I would be pleased if I were not sick, since I might be indifferent. To take another example, if I take pleasure in the sensations associated with a sip of beer, it does not follow that I would be pained by the absence of those sensations, since it is possible that I would be indifferent to the fact that I am not getting those sensations. Similarly, if it is good that I get those sensations, it does not follow that it would be bad not to get them; again, it might be neutral with respect to value. This suggests that pleasure and pain are opposites because they are opposite in value.

3. Objections and Replies

One objection begins with the observation that it is possible for things other than pleasure and pain to have value. If knowledge is intrinsically good, for example, then this account seems to imply that knowledge is the opposite of pain, because knowledge is good and pain is bad. But knowledge is not the opposite of pain, and this casts doubt on the capacity for value to explain the fact that pleasure and pain are opposites.

One thing to notice about knowledge is that it is difficult to say precisely what its opposite is. Unwarranted true belief is one candidate; disbelief of a warranted true proposition is another; warranted false belief is still another. Perhaps there is no single thing that is *the* opposite of knowledge. However, any successful candidate must be sufficiently similar to knowledge – it must share most of the important features of knowledge (*belief* and *truth* for example), while having the negation of another central feature (*warrant*, for example). So although pain and knowledge are genuinely opposite in value, they do not share many other features in common. Pain is a peculiar, “unpleasant” mode of consciousness.¹⁰ Though it is belief-entailing,¹¹ it is neither fundamentally a matter of belief nor of justification or warrant, and is therefore not similar enough to knowledge in non-value-related ways to serve as a genuine opposite. Similar things could be said of other alleged intrinsic goods, such as virtue, friendship and beauty. Virtues are states of character, and friendship is a relation that holds between persons; neither is a propositional attitude, so neither is similar enough to pain to count as its opposite. Beauty is a sort of value closely related to attitudes of aesthetic judgment, but it is often thought

¹⁰ I do not mean to presume any particular theory of the nature of pleasure and pain here, though I suspect that views according to which they are purely sensory are inconsistent with the data, and I am attempting to show that desire-based views are false, as well.

¹¹ That is, one cannot be pained by a proposition one does not believe to be true, though one can be pained by the (believed) proposition that some other proposition is not true.

that aesthetic judgments essentially have a kind of normativity or universality that judgments of pain lack.¹² When we judge that something is beautiful, we thereby judge that everyone ought to make a similar judgment; we do not make a corresponding demand concerning painfulness. Unlike knowledge, virtue and beauty, pleasure and pain are similar in their non-evaluative properties: they are closely related to motivation and behavior, for example, and they serve a similar evolutionary purpose.

Another objection concerns the implications of the possibility of nihilism on the oppositeness of pleasure and pain. This account of the oppositeness of pleasure and pain has the consequence that if value nihilism were true, then pleasure and pain would not be opposites. But pleasure and pain would be opposites even if nihilism were true – how could a meta-ethical theory have implications about the relationship between pleasure and pain?

I accept this implication but I do not think it should worry us, for three reasons. One, since nihilism is necessarily false, there are no nihilistic worlds, and therefore no worlds in which pleasure and pain are not opposites. Another is that pleasure and pain are so heterogeneous that if nihilism were true, it does not seem that they *would* be opposites. Finally, this implication of nihilism squares with the view that we desire pleasure because it is good and are averse to pain because it is bad, not the other way around. If pleasure were not good, it would not be attractive – its goodness explains why we desire it.¹³

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¹² See, for example, Kant's *Critique of Judgment*, p. 52, and pp. 136-9.

¹³ I am grateful to Julia Driver, Chris Heathwood, Stuart Rachels and Brad Skow for valuable comments and discussion.

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