

THE MORAL VALUES OF PAIN AND PLEASURE:
A CRITIQUE OF THE HEDONIC DEFINITIONS

by

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DEDICATION

For my Mother, Father, and Stepfather, each of whom have their own unique relationship with pleasure and pain. I hope that this document, in some small way, can help each of you to live better lives.

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TABLE OF COTNENTS

	Page
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	v
CHAPTER	
I. PREFACE.....	1
II. THE HEDONIC VIEW REGARDING PAIN AND PLEASURE.....	8
III. NEUROLOGY, PLEASURE, AND PAIN	24
IV. HEDONIC RESPONSES	35
The Reductionist Response.....	36
The Emergence Response.....	39
The Neo-Attitudinal Response.....	41
V. POST-HEDONISM	44
A Different Model of Pain and Pleasure.....	44
Adapting Ethical Considerations	54
Practical Applications	56
VI. CONCLUSION.....	61
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	65

I. PREFACE

This thesis seeks to investigate pain and pleasure, and in particular, to examine the moral value that pain and pleasure seem to have. It is intuitive that pleasure and pain are in some sense morally valuable, but it is unclear why this is the case, how this is the case, or how broadly this statement can be generalized.

For the purposes of this work I identify three main groups, with the word “groups” here interpreted quite broadly, of philosophers who have attempted to investigate this topic in at least some sense. The most recent is a grouping of more phenomenologically-oriented philosophers, two major examples of whom are Elaine Scarry and Susan Sontag, who have investigated the topic, considered matters such as psychology and neurology and pursued the political and moral implications of pain as it is relevant to our moral concerns.¹ The second would be psychologically-and-sociologically-oriented philosophers, major examples of whom are Friedrich Nietzsche, Michel Foucault, and Sigmund Freud who brought forward certain more permissive and curious suppositions about pleasure and pain, and how they function as constitutive aspects of human psychology and ethics.²

¹Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*. (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1985); Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York, NY: Picador Modern Classics 2003).

²Friedrich Nietzsche, “Beyond Good and Evil,” in *Nietzsche: Human, All-Too-Human Parts 1 and 2; Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. Helen Zimmern and Paul V. Cohn, (Ware, Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions Limited, 2008); Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan. 2nd ed. (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1995); Sigmund Freud, “Mourning and Melancholia,” *In On the History of the Psycho-Analytic Movement: Papers on Metapsychology and Other works*, Vol 14, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. James Strachey, (London, The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1916).

The final, and by far largest and longest lasting cohort are the hedonists. It's difficult to tell when their view even emerged as a systematized one, so distant are its roots, and the view, in many new and amended forms, exists to this day.

This work attempts to engage seriously with that final group, despite the fact, which I will admit to here, that I am much more sympathetic with and find myself much more philosophically aligned with the prior two groups. I find that, in particular, Elaine Scarry's views regarding pain, and her comments about their use in torture as a political tool, as well as the similarity between bodily pain and the activities of war, most closely resemble the views I will come to defend by the end of this thesis.

Given this, the question one might rightly ask is why I am choosing to engage with this group at all. Nietzsche is arguably dismissive of the intellectual worth of the utilitarian tradition, and few of the philosophers from either of these two cohorts show much interest in the works either of ancient or contemporary hedonists, and the same seems true the other way around.³ Few if any utilitarians have taken seriously points put forward by Nietzsche or Foucault, at least to the best of my knowledge.

The simple, and somewhat sarcastic, version of my answer to this question is that I am interested in the hedonists precisely because figures like Nietzsche told me not to be. The immediate reaction one has, obviously, to being told that a certain tradition has little to no intellectual merit is a curious and subversive desire to prove it otherwise. How could I not investigate the hedonic tradition myself?

The longer answer is a bit more convoluted, but at the very least I think it can tell the reader a bit about what this work is interested in, and what it is attempting to do. Pain

³ Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, ed. Keith Ansell-Pearson and trans. Carol Diethe, (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 10-11.

and pleasure are incredibly complicated phenomena, and seem to come into play at least slightly in nearly every major area of philosophical investigation. The sensory aspect of pleasure and pain means that they have serious importance to epistemology. Their nature as experientially-charged phenomena means that, even in moral systems that don't subscribe to some form of moral hedonism, pain and pleasure are ethically relevant. Art is often described as making use of the artist's pain, and matters of pain and ecstasy are recurring themes in artistic works. Even in metaphysics, where pleasure and pain might not be as evident at first, we might often be left to wonder "what kinds of entities can feel pain or pleasure?" or "what does it mean to be the type of entity who can feel such things?"

This multi-implicational aspect of pleasure and pain, and the necessity of apprising it from a variety of notably distinct philosophical angles, means that the topic is incredibly difficult to approach and would (and will) require many dense pages of analysis. Early on in my philosophical education I became particularly interested in the overlapping or bleed-over zones between different areas of philosophy; I find most fascinating the border between epistemology and ethics, which is the cleft pleasure and pain seem to most obviously rest between.

Despite the interestingness to this area, at least to my own personal tastes, and perhaps because of the difficulty of such undertakings, most other major philosophers only speak of pleasure and pain in passing. Arguably the only major sustained attempt to engage with the topic, similar in scope to other major philosophical projects such as Neoplatonism or the reemergence of Virtue Ethics, is the hedonic one. In that sense, the hedonists get something of a monopoly on my attention. They are the only game in town

if I'm interested in participating in a prolonged project, even if I might otherwise find them suspect, or disagree with them on core issues.

In addition to this, I think one reason the hedonists have captured my attention is the protracted apparent impossibility of inter-theoretical communication between hedonists and other major moral theories. Utilitarianism is often presented alongside Kantian and Aristotelian Ethics as one of these major theories, yet utilitarianism often comes across as particularly alien when compared against the other major ethical schools, or at least, it has always struck me as so.

Reading Platonic, Aristotelian, or Kantian critiques of hedonism, their objections tend to immediately and obviously strike me as entirely persuasive, yet hedonists persist. When I read hedonist responses, I immediately find that they have relatively simple, if personally counterintuitive, recourse to most of these critiques. Little exchange seems possible, and non-hedonic engagement with hedonists never seems to be prolonged enough to produce any serious progress, nor does understanding seem to result.

I think it is perhaps possible to make two wildly different accusations. The first is that hedonists behave so curiously and operate so autonomously from the core of philosophical discussion that they never really allow their view to be challenged. While I think this is in certain ways true, it strikes me that modern utilitarians are much more aware of the external criticisms of their view than their critics are aware of the utilitarian responses. The alternative is that, like Nietzsche and his intellectual children, most of these adversaries have never bothered to seriously engage with the view after judging it as incorrect.

My goals then are multifaceted. I firstly want to engage with a very ancient and sophisticated school of philosophy that I don't think has been given many good faith critiques from an external source. I also wish to find (perhaps steal or loot are better terms) whatever gems of genuine philosophical insight hedonists might have regarding pleasure and pain, even if I may find some of their core assertions to be suspect. Finally, I do hope to make genuine progress on the topic of pleasure and pain as I think it is deserving of serious philosophical investigation, and I do believe that the hedonists will prove helpful. I hope also that those who hold this view will take my critique seriously, and find the work I attempt here helpful in their pursuits even if they do not find my ultimate arguments against hedonism entirely persuasive.

A few final notes: I have, and will continue to alternate between saying "pleasure and pain" and "pain and pleasure" over the course of this thesis. My goal in doing this is to take seriously the hedonist view of the mirror-like negative and positive relationship between pain and pleasure. The two terms should be regarded as equivalent unless I specify otherwise. I will also often bring out the term 'utilitarian,' and might appear to use it somewhat interchangeably with 'hedonist.' This is because I have, in my research, largely read and engaged with utilitarians, and my awareness of the modern and contemporary traditions of hedonism rests largely on their works. This being said, I do not wish their view to be interpreted as either the only possible, nor even the only currently held type of hedonism. This is merely a certain kind of practical limitation of my thesis as I have approached it. I also feel compelled to mention that there are several assertions made by hedonists in a higher-theoretical manner that I do not agree with, but

that I will grant for the purposes of this thesis, as they are matters long litigated and distant from the topic I am actually interested in investigating.

Finally, a rough summarization of the analysis I will undertake in the following chapters: In Chapter 2, I will outline what I understand to be the hedonic view regarding the value-laden nature and subsequent moral character of pleasure and pain. I understand this to stem from what is admittedly a quite powerful intuition regarding the pressing character and thus plausibly the immediately moral import of these sensations. I examine several common counter-arguments to the hedonic view, and the manner in which hedonic responses to these criticisms shape the implicit definition of pleasure and pain in interesting ways, namely, the accounting-like character necessary to appropriately weight pain and pleasure, and the attempts to give different pleasures and pains varying moral status. I attempt to argue based on these considerations that hedonists lack a coherent notion of what pains and pleasures are such that we could clearly identify them for the purposes of performing the moral calculi which they propose. Based on this, I suggest an investigation into the empirical research regarding pleasure and pain in the hopes that it could begin to clarify this matter.

In Chapter 3, I undertake this empirical investigation, and focus on a neurological notion known as “Gate-Control Theory.” I argue that this theory necessarily implies that the sensations we traditionally refer to as pleasures and pains are subject to moral evaluation prior to their existence as pains or pleasures, and that this fact renders untenable several of the commonly proposed notions of pleasure and pain mentioned in the prior chapter. Further, I argue that they imply a contextual character to pleasures and pains, that this contextual character means things must be valuable prior to the experience

of things in relation to pleasure or pain, and that this makes a strong case for abandoning hedonism as a plausible view.

In Chapter 4, I consider three major responses a hedonist could bring forward to the matters discussed in chapter 3. I label those responses 1) the reductionist response, 2) the emergence response, and 3) the neo-attitudinal response. While I do not find these responses to be entirely implausible, I argue that each of them comes at significant cost. In particular, a reductionist response that relies on giving moral weight to unfelt inputs removes us from the intuition that first grounded our adoption of the hedonist view, an emergence response worsens problems common to many hedonist systems, and a neo-attitudinal view cannot give good justification for its arbitrary insistence on maintaining a hedonist view.

Finally, in Chapter 5, I explore an alternative account that emphasizes the contextual and fluid character of pleasures and pains. I additionally do not try to distinguish between various instances that different theories either exclude or include in their view of pleasure and pain, but rather, generate a broad view that allows multiple different levels of experience and relation to plausibly be considered pains and pleasures. I go on to discuss several implications of this view relating to its integration with preexisting moral systems, matters of practical application, and what the limits of pleasure and pain might be.

II. THE HEDONIC VIEW REGARDING PAIN AND PLEASURE

Pleasure and pain are both deeply intuitive phenomena. Like our other so-called “senses” they appear to us immediately, and imply things about the world, more specifically about ourselves usually, in a manner that can often make sense apart from any deep consideration or interpretation. Unlike most of our other senses, part of this immediate intuition is a value judgment: pains have a kind of immediate negative value, whereas pleasures seem to have an immediate positive one. In a naïve sort of way, the hedonic position is the obvious and logical outcome of this initial intuition in that, given that these sensations have this immediate value, it is inferred that they must be the bedrock of ethics.

Much of the argumentation we receive on this from the hedonists is an attempt to preserve this core naïve assertion, and that preservation’s strongest justification is its initial intuitive obviousness, simplicity, and harmony with perceptions, apart from whatever other benefits the view might provide or difficulties it might engender. Given the immediacy of this intuition, it isn’t surprising then that the view is at least as old as the ancient Greek Cyrenaics, to whom the original formulation of the view is attributed.¹

On the original Cyrenaic view, there was nothing particularly unusual about pain or pleasure as experiences, other than that they were the uniquely and fundamentally ethical experiences.² Much of the unified aspect of these early perspectives, like that

¹Ugo Zilioli, *The Cyrenaics*, (New York, NY: Routledge, 2014), 149-52.

² Which is to say that they are critically different in a manner that is difficult to discuss or emphasize appropriately without turning this project into a series of comments on the Cyrenaic view specifically. Some interesting points from the Cyrenaic perspective being: that all experiences are indicative of changes in the mind rather than representing definite knowledge regarding an external world and that they did not regard happiness, which they considered an aggregate of pleasure, to be the morally compelling item on its own, but rather, happiness is only morally interesting in so far as it represents a multitude of pleasures which are each individually valuable. Zilioli, *The Cyrenaics*, 149-57.

asserted by the Cyrenaics, has been lost in the transition through the various successor theories. Nevertheless, it is interesting that utilitarianism has maintained a certain kind of intuitive appeal in terms of the strength of that initial intuition; it feels as though, if we hold a utilitarian or a more broadly hedonic view, we have dissected ethics down to its simplest and most essential elements, and by doing so we have developed a kind of foundation from which all further truths regarding rights, virtues, or other ethical features we might ever care to be interested in can be derived.

In this thesis I will ultimately come to several conclusions about the nature of pain and pleasure that, firstly, clearly and definitively disagree with this hedonic intuition, and secondly, attempt to construct an ethics from this fundamental disagreement which, though useable and bearing some vague resemblances to the manner in which hedonists regularly conceive of ethics, will disagree definitively with their notion of the grounding of ethics in pain and pleasure themselves. These claims will be as follows: 1) That pleasure and pain receive their value, rather than being innately valuable in and of themselves, and that this receipt of value, otherwise thought of as *the contextualization of pains and pleasures*, is the true basis of ethics, 2) that this perspective is the best description of pleasure and pain as experiences given what we know about neurology and psychology along with other major scientific disciplines, and 3) that ethics requires an understanding and valuation of pleasures and pains in order to be complete and sensible, but, that this process cannot operate on the basis of a calculus, as what most utilitarians and many hedonists would normally insist.

These arguments will stem largely from the manner in which changes in our views regarding biology, psychology, and epistemology, among other fields, demonstrate

that the assumptions which underlie attempted reformed Hedonisms play poorly with advances in these fields and have played poorly with such advances for quite a while. It benefits us to first examine the modern view, and consider its peculiarities on its own merits, before then approaching the matters I intend to discuss, which we will spend the remainder of this chapter accomplishing.

Hedonists will, broadly speaking, take positions contrary to the ones I have elucidated. They hold that 1) there are abstract and uncontextualized units of pleasure and pain that have intrinsic positive and negative value respectively, 2) that this fact is clear, and is the most obvious and appreciable way in which to ground an ethics, and 3) that such an ethics is constituted by a calculus such that we maximize units of pleasure and minimize units of pain.

Connecting this to the perspectives debated more widely by contemporary ethicists, both hedonists and non-hedonists express concern for what I shall refer to as “wellbeing.” All that is implied by this is a vague notion of the accumulation of goods that concern humans and the ethical views they develop. A disputable but common view is that wellbeing is constituted by happiness, which is to say that what constitutes the wellbeing of any human is the ability, in a holistic sense, to be regarded as happy. The hedonic view contends that what constitutes happiness is a preponderance of pleasure over pain, again, within the context of a holistic account of a life.³

Each of these claims is the site of an interesting string of debates, but while a passing familiarity with these debates will form a necessary backbone of the view I will

³ Fred Feldman, *Pleasure and the Good Life: Concerning the Nature, Varieties, and Plausibility of Hedonism*, (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2004) 12-20; Andrew Moore, “Hedonism,” In *the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, winter 2018, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2018/entries/hedonism/>, section 2.

put forward, they are not the essential basis of my criticism. Rather, it is the final pieces, the nature of pleasure and the nature of pain, which will be the main locus of difficulty for the hedonic view.⁴

What firstly becomes necessary to get at the matter at hand is to divide two common but distinct views, *psychological hedonism* and *ethical hedonism*. Bentham argues that pleasure and pain are the guiding parts of human action; we always act so as to seek pleasure and avoid pain, and Bentham takes this to be strong evidence that we should ground our ethical evaluations in pleasure and pain.⁵ Yet, one does not necessarily follow from the other. Humans might ultimately be guided by pleasures and pains in all their actions, and yet there may be other goods beyond pleasure and pain. This could happen in two ways: 1) it could be that such goods are entirely beyond and separate from pleasure and pain, which implies that, though on this view they would be goods, humans would be poor creatures for the purposes of pursuing them, or 2) that pains and pleasures stand in for other more essential goods within the human psyche. On the latter view pleasure and pain are instrumental; they guide us towards goods and interests other than themselves. The literature, thus, makes this distinction: *psychological hedonism* is the view, proposed by Bentham, that as a matter of fact we act to seek pleasure and avoid pain, whereas *ethical hedonism* is the stronger view, promoted by Bentham among

⁴ I mention these peculiarities, not because they interest this conversation in a direct manner but rather because, in my experience, most attempts to dispute hedonism do so by interrupting the chain of assertion which I previously mentioned. Hence, for instance, Aristotle disputing whether a preponderance of pleasure over pain can realistically constitute happiness or Kant disputing whether the value present in life is best understood in terms of a connection between happiness and the wellbeing of a person.

⁵ Moore, "Hedonism," section 1.

others, that our ethics ought to rest entirely upon pleasure and pain as the essential values.⁶

Most philosophers are familiar with the famous Euthyphro dilemma, which asks, to put it shortly, whether God (or the gods, as it were) establishes the good, or if she merely recognizes it. We can articulate the problem I have just described in a similar manner to the Euthyphro: Do pain and pleasure establish what is good and bad, valuable and otherwise, or do they merely indicate it? Do we find pain and pleasure morally concerning because they are directed towards things of value, or are things of value because pain and pleasure have arisen in response to them? Much as with the original Euthyphro problem, the hedonist has little trouble answering this query; pleasure and pain are clearly the value makers, as implying otherwise would be to abandon the hedonic view. The question is whether this is a defensible position.

I recognize that this is a particularly difficult matter to dissect; to pursue this inquiry in a meaningful way, without resorting to pure speculation as to the ethical matter, we can investigate the following from within the realm of the cognitive: in contrast to the hedonist view that pleasure and pain form the bedrock of value, is there something more fundamental underlying pleasure and pain that might more rightly be considered the foundation of the value they seem to convey?

Yet, here might be necessary an early defense: why should such a possibility concern a utilitarian? If all ethics flows through pleasure and pain, at least in the sense of human action and human interest, then why not regard it as the proper bedrock of a moral theory, despite any kind of non-basicness of which it might consist?

⁶ Moore, "Hedonism," sections 1-2.

One immediate reason that comes to mind is a traditional argument that a hedonically minded arguer may bring forward against an alternative view; encountering, say Aristotle's virtue theory of ethics, such an arguer might say that virtues are *ultimately* recommendations for how to maximize pleasure and minimize pain, however Aristotle might dress them up. If the utilitarian is justified in asserting the irrelevance of the non-basicness of pain and pleasure, then there is little stopping the Aristotelian from dismissing the utilitarian charge as mere concern for the virtues' non-basicness when the virtues themselves represent a sufficient basis for our ethics without bother for recourse to their supposed constituent facets. Recognizing this possible contradiction a savvy defender of hedonism might simply not bring forward this argument, yet, the question remains as to why this line of argumentation is illegitimate; why *shouldn't* we say that the virtue theory of ethics is uninteresting if it is reducible to a hedonic account and why *shouldn't* we say if the hedonic view is reducible to some yet deeper account of ethics then it too is an uninteresting area of discussion? We might say that, for instance, virtue ethics still holds a helpful account of ethics at an operational level rather than a theoretical level, much as Mill regards rule utilitarianism as a useful pragmatic shorthand for act utilitarianism due to the practical and epistemic limitations of individuals. What is clear, at least in Mill's account, is that it is the latter theoretical account which grounds the former pragmatic one, and the latter plausibly overrules the former in situations where the two give conflicting recommendations.⁷

⁷ It does not strike me that the utilitarian would necessarily commit a logical contradiction if they privileged the dictates of act utilitarianism over any constituent facets, but it does strike me that such a move inevitably and irrevocably cuts off all possibility of intertheoretical communication. Any theory which makes this move permanently isolates itself from common ground or interest with alternative theories because those alternative theories could never demonstrate a more fundamental or interesting measure of a situation, and all theoretical argumentation would ultimately fall back to an arbitrary

In response to this, however, a utilitarian might well argue that if we do not ultimately ground, in a foundationalist sense, our theoretical constructs, then we quickly become subject to a kind of infinite regress problem. Perhaps there are conversational dangers in asserting that foundation too high up (for instance, that all of my current political beliefs are axiomatically true) but never the less we need to ground our value judgments at some point. Without turning this thesis entirely into a discussion of the merits of foundationalism, I can at least say the following: if we do not want our choice of foundation point to be entirely arbitrary, or indeed, if we want to be sure that foundationalism is a good method of approaching the “grounding” of values at all, the type of inquiry I’m suggesting is precisely what needs to happen. We must establish that pain and pleasure represent properly basic points in our ethical evaluative process.

Here again I feel the need to preempt an attack or at least clarify a direction of this inquiry. It might well be that the cognitive features that bring awareness of pain and pleasure in the human mind are non-basic in the sense that they consist of neurons, chemicals, charges, and organs, much as all our other senses. To say that the eye consists of cells is a poor argument for the notion that “vision” is an epiphenomenon of some underlying sense. For the purposes of this argument, I need to establish that there is a relevant human value, something that we would find interesting and compelling, not merely that our “sense” of pain and pleasure consists of the same biological bits that the rest of our being does.

decision a priori in favor of one or another particular account. John Stuart Mill, “Utilitarianism,” In *the Basic Writings of John Stuart Mill* (New York, NY: Random House, Inc., 2002), 250-9.

The immediate argument, one likely as old as the hedonic view itself, is that people are motivated by a wide variety of interests, desires, preferences, and biases, and that the notion that pain and pleasure are our only concerns is rather ridiculous. This argument has a rather obvious rebuttal as well; that each of these motivations (longing, love, hunger, greed, curiosity, and so on) can be described in terms of pain or pleasure in some way. Each might consist of a pain avoidance, a pleasurable attraction, or some combination thereof to achieve what is essentially a compound motivation. In some sense this is a compelling argument, as it does seem that when I satiate my hunger I avoid pain, when I accumulate wealth I avoid future pain and insure future pleasure, and so on, but a problem develops from this view; if we apply this argument imperialistically enough, we soon include a bewildering array of motivations under but a pair of labels. This view becomes troublesome if we interpret it too aggressively in a couple of key ways: if we interpret this too *reductively* humans begin to appear as automata and if we interpret it too *inclusively* the notion that this bewildering array of different motivations represent a mere two impulses begins to dissolve in favor of a kind of pluralism.

The reductive possibility, while initially consistent with the hedonic view, appears to conflict too heavily with our awareness of human beings. Their motivations are not simple enough and their actions are not obvious enough to be amenable to this type of explanation, at least when we examine sophisticated examples, and especially when we avoid examples of persons who've taken the reductive view seriously and implemented its implications into their lives. For instance, one might suggest that my romantic interests in others is predicated purely in sexual and self-satisfying desires, and that the sacrifices I make in light of my romantic interests are made with a kind of Machiavellian

intention of wooing and acquiring. While I would see it as plausible that this accurately describes some amount of romantic desire and action, I doubt heavily that this well describes most of the conscious thought process behind romantic attraction. This attraction seems simultaneously simpler than this description suggests, because, at least in its more compelling presentations, romantic attraction seems to be a more direct emotional response than this, while simultaneously more complex in that the pleasures and pains to be had by the romantic involve goods that this view doesn't present, such as care and regard for the other person, or a desire for a permanent relationship over mere lustful interest. One could try to preserve this reductive position by holding that, despite our conscious unawareness, the explanative source of these feelings is from a deeper, unconscious source. On this view, we are always calculating hedonically in a pre-conscious manner, and utilitarianism would represent a quasi-Freudian uncovering of these desires and then a subsequent rationalization and systematization of their satisfaction.

The reductionist view has several odd properties. It firstly transforms humans into creatures that are much less morally interesting, as moral discussion and consideration becomes either epiphenomenal or pre-conscious. This might not be true in the particular case I have just mentioned however, as, to clarify, the type of reduction I have just described will i) occur wherever this type of calculative hedonistic reasoning is employed and ii) be limited to those items the hedonist designates as "simpler" than the surface view should hold. The benefit of this reduction is a hemming in of the cacophonous nature of human experience such that it is made more explicable and more easily actionable by the hedonist. An odd issue, however, is the unconscious nature of the

pleasure-seeking behavior within this theoretical account. To remain sensible, this view would need to argue that there are systems of pleasure-seeking and pain-avoiding behavior happening outside of my awareness. Not only this, but if I have no awareness of the satisfaction of these pleasurable desires or painful reliefs, then it becomes curious how they can still be regarded descriptively as pains or pleasures. It in fact implies a certain “turtles all the way down”-ness around the phenomenological origin of pleasures and pains, i.e., that the pleasures I describe feeling consist of simpler pleasures I am unaware of, which (presumably?) would be the result of yet simpler pleasures, or else would represent a bedrock sensation.

In this particular manner, the reductionist approach does not appear to do very much work regarding the matter I am interested here in investigating. The most it can plausibly do is go a certain way to limiting the implausibility of the hedonic thesis by allowing us to attribute pleasure and pain to a reasonably simple pair of concepts. I would mention that there does not seem to be any real reason a hedonist should be married to this view, but rather, a hedonist would have every reason to think that the other goods I mentioned, satisfaction with permanent relationships or care and regard for instance, represent things which could plausibly be accounted for more directly as pleasures and pains. I mention it because its employment will be a very tempting response to other criticisms I will bring forward, and yet its employment results in collateral damage to the hedonist perspective that I suspect of being fatal.

The reductionist approach and the problems I’ve just mentioned hint at a broader issue that becomes apparent in the context of hedonic conversation, namely, if we’re deciding our ethics on the basis of the intrinsic value of instances of pain and pleasure we

will run into instances of pleasure which at least appear to have a negative or immoral character. As a counter to Hedonism, this is sometimes known as “The Argument from Worthless Pleasures” and concerns the nature of pleasures derived from undesirable sources, things such sadistic pleasure in the pain of others, revenge, pleasures from gross sources, and so forth.⁸ In a limited number of cases hedonists have a relatively simple out, namely, that these so called “worthless” pleasures are connected to events of pain or the reduction of pleasures in others, or in our own futures, and we often have reason to think the pleasure acquired is significantly outweighed by the pains induced to achieve them.

Yet, there do seem to be instances of pleasures we would regard as undesirable which are not associated with such pains. The hedonist philosopher Fred Feldman gives an example in which a person engages only in the most obscene sexual acts, has no friends, no particularly impressive knowledge about the world, and whose life broadly has no other benefits for others. This person, who Feldman refers to as “Porky,” has a life filled with base pleasures, with lots of them, and experiences them in a manner that neither causes pain to themselves nor others, and thus appears to be a pure positive case on a hedonist account despite the likelihood that those from other theoretical backgrounds might well condemn individuals who indulge in such lives.⁹

In certain ways this critique seems compelling, but the hedonist has at least two avenues around it. Firstly, they can simply bite the bullet and agree that these instances are actually good lives, despite our moral outrage and intuitions to the contrary. Our

⁸ Feldman, *Pleasure and the Good Life*, 38-40.

⁹ Feldman, *Pleasure and the Good Life*, 40.

incredulity at this can plausibly be overcome by pointing to the differences between individuals as to what gives them pleasure, and this can ultimately be used to justify a kind of liberal social order wherein many people get the ability to pursue different lives with different pleasures; advocates of this approach being the Cyrenaics and Bentham.¹⁰ The alternatives to this would be a *hierarchization of pleasures and pains* such that different kinds of pleasures and different kinds of pains have different moral worth despite their intensity. This approach is favored by thinkers like Mill and Feldman.¹¹

A question which emerges from this latter view is the justification and elaboration of these moral differences; what justifies them on a hedonist view and how does this not conflict with the hedonic thesis that the source of value are the pain and pleasure sensations themselves? Mill attempts to answer this question through the implementation of so-called “competent judges”, people selected for their extensive knowledge about pains and pleasures, and who can thus be in a position to comment with as close to objective awareness as possible on the preferability of certain sensations.¹² Yet, this merely pushes the problem a step back; while these judges might make compelling and useful suggestions, if their judgments are not based in some externally justified set of criteria (even if it is a criteria difficult to formalize and convey as a set of rules) then it cannot be more than the subjective preferences of the judges, likely informed by their society and upbringing.

¹⁰ Zilioli, *The Cyrenaics*, 157-61; Moore, “Hedonism,” sections 1-2.

¹¹ Mill, “Utilitarianism,” 238-49; Feldman, *Pleasure and the Good Life*, 55-71 and 117-23.

¹² Mill, “Utilitarianism,” 241-4.

This particular problem has prompted two different kinds of responses. First is the view put forward by Feldman, who attempts to rationalize the judgments of Mill's judges by imposing multipliers to the value of hedonic units. More morally worthy actions would receive greater multipliers, while less morally worthy actions would receive smaller ones. This at least preserves a situation wherein the moral value of various pleasures and pains still depends on the presence or absence of a pleasurable or painful instance, though, it leaves open the question of what justifies our association of a particular multiplier to a certain category of pleasure or pain.¹³

The pluralist view, which may be complementary to Feldman's perspective, attempts to account for this by regarding multiple different experiences as falling into "kinds" of pains and pleasures. This coheres very nicely with our experiences, as well as the kinds of categorizations of experiences we're likely to generate (such as a distinction between the sensation of physical bodily pain versus that of an emotional or cognitive pain). It also explains the need for judges in so far as it would be the sensible differences between different pain and pleasure events which determine their particular quality and moral worth, because differences between these events would have to do with the sensations themselves and their appearance to the judge.¹⁴

Yet, for all that, it's difficult to see how much work the pluralist perspective can do on this matter either; while this view might explain why we find different pleasures or pains to be distinct sensations, it can't explain why we prefer some sensations of pleasure and pain over others, to say nothing of formalizing this into a system of multipliers

¹³ Feldman, *Pleasure and the Good Life*, 55-71.

¹⁴ Ivar Labukt, "Hedonic Tone and the Heterogeneity of Pleasure," *UTILITAS* 24, (June 2012): 187-93, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0953820812000052>.

allowing for a direct weighing and measuring of the preferability of certain accumulations of base-pleasures over so called higher pleasures. The pluralist account merely informs us that we will find different sensations of pleasure and pain to be different.

None of these positions has truly answered the question in which I am interested. The “crass” views of Bentham and the Cyrenaics at the very least can point to pleasure and pain and say “these are the morally valuable things; all analysis will turn on these two items,” but they cannot explain why these are the base units of value, nor justify their usage beyond the initial intuition of their value. The hierarchization of pleasures and pains suggested by Mill, Feldman, and the pluralists hints at the possibility of *contextual meaning* to pleasure and pain¹⁵; that the sensations can be meaningfully different, but their explanations stop short of giving us a coherent perspective on pleasure and pain. Rather, their approach seems widely to be a simple adoption of the “crass” view and then modifying it while leaving its underlying assumptions unchanged.

The question becomes what moving forward, what moving beyond these prior inquiries which have mostly busied themselves with a rationalization of the hedonist perspective, would look like. The first part of this moving forward would be to discern a key matter regarding the nature of pleasures and pains as cognitive features, namely, that while humans may be complicated entities with complicated interests, on some level of relevant cognitive expression pains and pleasures must operate and consist similarly and

¹⁵ The possibility of this contextual meaning, and the intuitive plausibility of what Mill, Feldman, and the pluralists suggest apart from the contradiction implicit in their view so long as we continue to conceive of it as a hedonic one, will be a critical matter when I look to present my own perspective on pain and pleasure in later chapters.

complementarily; that there is something basally true about pleasures and pains, even if only in a pluralist sense of a comprehensible category, which makes them pleasures and pains as opposed to mere awarenesses, intuitions, or other descriptive cognitions on the part of the brain.¹⁶

Finally, then, to circle back around to my original query, if we need some kind of unifying explanation of what constitutes something as a pleasure or pain in order to make sense of them as ethical categories, we need to identify such a unifying explanation, and we need to examine why that explanatory feature isn't itself the proper base of ethics, or to put it in other words, explain why our ethics should be concerned with pains and pleasures rather than that which makes them what they are.

To search for an explanation of the former, it seems that an investigation into the psychological, neurological, and biomedical research into pain or pleasure is necessary, as we need to verify our best guesses regarding these mechanisms by some empirical

¹⁶ Attempting to reject this premise would do interesting things to our notion of what pains and pleasures are. If I reject it in the sense that there is no essential unifying feature to pains and pleasures, then it strikes me Hedonism might be true, but it is so only trivially, because referring to something as a pain or a pleasure apparently does not tell us anything particularly meaningful about the motivation in question besides the fact that we have linguistically decided to designate it with this term. We would be left to make sense of the linguistic designation, which would amount to an interesting discussion, but would seem to clash with the utilitarian interest in psychological description of our motivations. On the other hand, we could argue that everything cognitive qualifies as a motivation, that I'm never unmotivated in my impressions, awarenesses, thoughts, or other facets of cognition.

This view strikes me as plausible, but it again seems to reduce the hedonic view to a triviality; that we never behave unmotivated means that any possible human interest, anything which could ever arise in a human mind, is a pain or pleasure, or at least becomes a pain or pleasure as soon as it arises in a human mind. If we attempt to unfold this view into an ethics, we find that all cognitions are morally relevant which renders our attempts to narrow in on a particular set of "value laden" features moot, and returns us to the base of moral discussion, to embrace a view like virtue ethics or Kantianism to make sense of the ethically relevant parts of our experiences. It also seems to worryingly erode the difference between pains and pleasures in so far as particular examples, such as my visual or auditory experiences, seem to provoke interest or action despite having a neutral or at least ambiguously positive or negative hedonic value. Thus, adoption of this view would seem to multiply our difficulties and render hedonism morally useless.

source. If it is the case that these research areas have identified anything characteristic of either pleasure or pain, we should be able to work backwards from that to a general explanation of pleasure and pain, or at least how such an explanation would need to look in order to be consistent with the hedonic view.

The latter is at least somewhat dependent on the findings of our empirical research, but what can be said in general is that in order for the hedonic view to hold, the foundations of pleasure and pain need to be pre-ethical, while simultaneously allowing for the relevant ethical judgment to arise when it generates pleasure or pain. If we find that we could make sense of ethics on the basis of the precursors of pleasure and pain, then, as I have argued, the hedonic view isn't defensible.

III. NEUROLOGY, PLEASURE, AND PAIN

One very immediate and major issue with investigating pleasure and pain is that it's very difficult to know precisely what we mean by those terms. This is true for a variety of reasons, not least of which the bewildering array of caveats and qualifications I mentioned in the previous chapter. Yet, even setting those aside, a major issue becomes what we intend to narrow in on and describe, or, what interests we have in defining pain and pleasure. These interests guide our attention; they direct us toward some features or instances and not others. If we are, for instance, medical doctors interested in the physical sensations a person might experience (feelings of touch, and relatedly, the possibility of damage being the most likely targets of our medical interests), we may well develop a definition of pain focused on the relationship between individuals and their bodily experiences.

This definition is clearly not what the hedonists intended by their notions of pain and pleasure, nor is it usually what most individuals exclusively mean by “pains” and “pleasures” when they use them in common language. Here then, we should recognize a certain amount of difficulty with the following definition, put forward by the International Association for the Study of Pain:

“Pain is an unpleasant sensory and emotional experience associated with actual or potential tissue damage, or described in terms of such damage”¹

¹ Murat Aydede, “Pain,” in *the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Spring 2019, Ed. Edward N. Zalta, Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2019/entries/pain/>, section 1.2.

Approaching the matter of pain as I described in the previous chapter would have to involve being interested in many sensations this definition clearly ignores, yet, it does have several benefits.

First, research has gone forward based on this definition, which opens up a possible avenue of empirical investigation less evident within the realm of hedonic description. Second, the definition, while not including all experiences we might be interested in, clearly represents a subset of this category, and as such, things true of this broader category have a good chance of being true of this particular category especially; whatever the explanatory undergirding of pleasure and pain are, they ought to be true of this particular category, or else it functions poorly as the type of explanation which could account for the vast array of items that hedonists generally regard as pains and pleasures, or even more broadly, as an account of pleasures and pains as they are colloquially categorized. Third, and here is the particularly nice thing, physical bodily pains seem to be likely candidates for being the most primitive pains (assuming either a reductionist framework, or even simply an evolutionary psychological description of the development of pain and pleasure as sensations). This implies that, compared to other experiences we might attempt to investigate (like heartbreak, for instance), they should be relatively phenomenally simple, though doubtless, still quite complex in the example of a human. There should be less “fluff” to shave away from the experience of physical bodily pain, as I have been describing it.

What, then, does the biomedical research into pain tell us about it? One of the most curious aspects has been the discovery and gradual unraveling of *Gate Control Theory* (hereafter abbreviated as GCT). The critical aspect of GCT, for our purposes, is

what it implies about how and when pain inputs are experienced. Starting with Descartes, it was largely believed that the types of physical or sensory pain we've been discussing were delivered by special neurons found throughout the body.² Although this was widely confirmed by later research, several curiosities remained as to how this information was processed by the brain. Various theories, including "Pattern Theory" attempted to explain apparent inconsistencies in how pain appears to experiencers. "Pattern Theory" suggests that the actual experience of pain comes about through certain centers within the brain contextualizing inputs in a manner that "mapped" the body, subsequently allowing pain to be localized. It was thought that this could help explain things like pains experienced in phantom limbs, i.e. places that very obviously lacked neurons and thus the ability to convey information as to their current state within the brain. Research into pattern theory eventually revealed a certain inhibiting mechanism, the titular "gates" of GCT. These gates can prevent pain impulses from being processed, or limit the extent to which they are processed and thus experienced.³

The effects of these gates are a bit obvious upon reflection; they explain the kind of inconsistent character of our sensations of pain, how pains can be entirely unfelt in certain life or death situations, and why pains can seem to shift in intensity over time. Endorphins can modulate the extent to which gates are "open" or "closed" and genetic

² Ronald Melzack and Joel Katz, "The Gate Control Theory: Reaching for the Brain," in *Pain: Psychological Perspectives* (New York, NY: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc., 2004), 13-4; Jennifer Corns, "Recent Work on Pain," in *Analysis* 78 (1 October 2018): <https://doi.org/10.1093/analys/any055>, 737-9.

³ Melzack and Katz, "Gate Control Theory," 14-20.

and epigenetic factors can affect the sensitivity of gates to endorphin levels in the body, explaining both situational and individual differences in pain acuity.⁴

What is critical for the purposes of our discussion is that in order for a pain input to pass into the experience of pain, it must pass through a mechanism connected to a system of evaluative criteria against which the relevance of that input is measured. This suggests something slightly different about pain in comparison to our other senses. Visual information is communicated to certain areas of our brain after being received by our eyes; in the process of constructing our visual impressions some of the visual inputs might be ignored or glossed over in an effort to present a coherent interpretation of those visual inputs. However, to my knowledge there is no mechanism which evaluates and systematically excludes visual inputs prior to the process of construction. In other words, pain seems to be unusual in that even before its experiential inputs are constructed into a coherent view of the world, the sensory data that is being used to construct the experience is being assessed for relevancy and importance; pains are being prioritized, and their intensity modulated accordingly. This entire processes is happening prior to any conscious awareness on the part of the subjects in question.⁵

What then is the implication of this regarding our hedonic thesis? Before something can pass into our awareness as a “pain” our bodies need to already consider this experience as valuable, or as a matter worthy of consideration and analysis. This should be worrying to the hedonic thesis; much of the weight in favor of the view seems to depend on the fact that every experience of a pleasure or pain is value laden, but this

⁴ Melzack and Katz, “Gate Control Theory,” 18-25.

⁵ Corns, “Recent Work,” 737-739.

fact suggests an alternative explanation for this value laden-ness; it might simply be a matter of a selection bias in that one's body must have already denoted something as valuable prior to constructing a particular impression in the form we experience as a "pain."

Despite this, there are numerous responses a hedonist might offer as to why this does not discredit the theory. Firstly, many hedonists have suggested that there is a distinction between the sensory experiences of pain and pleasure as described here and the kind of value-laden pleasures and pains that hedonists are interested in.⁶ Secondly, they might suspect that the explanative foundations for these experiences are somehow hedonic in nature; that the operations of the gate might best be understood by reference to other pain and pleasure inputs, and thus not represent a serious challenge to hedonism. Finally, they may think that this case of sensory pain is an unusual one, and that it isn't terribly instructive as to the nature of pleasure and pain generally.

To address the first response, let us return to the conception brought forward by Fred Feldman, and in particular his notion of "sensory pleasure" versus "attitudinal pleasure." It might well be that the gate mechanism and pattern processes described by neurologists are merely what Feldman regards as the "sensory" examples of pain and pleasure, but not their attitudinal element, which Feldman views as the real bedrock of moral value in the hedonic view. For Feldman, this attitudinal alternative involves not an immediate sensory instance, but a kind of value judgment that is the result of an individual's conscious reflection on an object of evaluation. Feldman does acknowledge that sensory instances seem to often generate attitudinal instances of a similar character,

⁶ Feldman, *Pleasure and the Good Life*, 79-83; Labukt, "Hedonic Tone," 174-8.

but it might be that the description I have aimed at fails to capture instances of moral relevance for Feldman.⁷

Feldman can give an account of his view such that attitudinal predilections⁸ are the bedrock of the emergence of value. In his description of the relationship between these attitudinal instances and sensory events we'd normally describe as "pleasurable" or "painful" Feldman puts forward that, while sensations can occur independently, the status of a particular sensation as pleasure or pain is determined by an attitudinal predilection occurring in response to a particular event. He hypothesizes that instances like masochism are explained by a tendency to regard certain sensations we would normally suspect of receiving negative attitudinal responses (pain events) with positive attitudinal responses (pleasure events).⁹ The argument perhaps raises more questions than it manages to answer; it seems clear on Feldman's account that he would give the role of analysis to the attitudinal events, and thus they seem good candidates for whatever inputs affect or inform the gate. Yet even if this is the case, we still lack an explanation of how it is that positive moral value has arisen in the case of pleasure, or negative for pain, in the attitudinal instance, or why it is that attitudinal instances arise and distribute value in the manner that they do.

If Feldman seeks to divide these two instances, we're left to ask for an independent biomedical investigation into the nature of attitudinal pleasures and pains, a topic that neurologists have yet to undertake to the best of my knowledge. Nevertheless

⁷ Feldman, *Pleasure and the Good Life*, 83-90.

⁸ By this I mean the tendency for *attitudinal pleasures and pains* to arise with respect to particular inputs.

⁹ Feldman, *Pleasure and the Good Life*, 85-90.

are there reasons to think such investigation might yield similar results? It seems plausible that the types of events that suppress the experience of sensory pains also suppress attitudinal ones. If I am in eminent danger from a bear, I'm both unlikely to experience pains that are the result of being scratched by a bear, and unlikely to experience pains I might suffer due to the imminent medical debts. My capacity to take attitudinal pleasure, and the extent of its possibility, also seem equally modular with respect to my mood, and my body's accompanying readiness to experience certain inputs as pleasures.

Here I think it is appropriate to address the second possible hedonic consideration, that of an underlying hedonic nature to the gates. If the gates use hedonic value to determine what they accept, and what they reject, then we could still potentially argue that the system operates by a hedonic calculus. For instance, it could well be that prior pain events modulate future ones; my attitudinal pain at being threatened by a bear modulates my experience of pains inflicted by that bear. But here there's a bit of mystery: if prior pain and pleasure events are the only element which affect the gates, we would need to think that my body produces a particular hedonic sensation for the purposes of maximizing pleasure and minimizing pain in future experiences. But if these are the only factors, then the simplest manner to do so would be to simply induce pleasures and never induce pains. Yet, plausibly the hedonist may argue that there is a kind of evolutionary grounding that explains why I experience particular pains and pleasures in response to certain inputs. In particular, that I might be experiencing them in a manner consistent with maximizing my survival chances.

In terms of a complete and tidy explanation put forward by an evolutionary biologist, this explanation might seem sufficient. However, the evolutionary grounding requires us to consider the main value to be survival and reproduction, not hedonic value. In particular, the evolutionary description seems to imply that individual pain sensations play a positive role in facilitating value of a survival kind. In order for the hedonic view to be plausible merely on this evolutionary grounding, there needs to be an external referent that makes sense of why certain experiences are appropriately felt in response to certain inputs, i.e. why it is that I feel an attitudinal pain in response to an imminent bear attack, and why that value system operates in response to external inputs. Without such an explanation, the ultimate grounds of value would be survival, and not pain and pleasure.¹⁰

Here we get a tie-in with the final possible defensive response. It may well be that my attitudinal pain and pleasure events resemble sensory pain and pleasure events in the manner I described, modulated by other events that must have value independent from hedonic evaluation, yet it isn't clear that we should infer from that a fundamental similarity between sensory and attitudinal pleasure and pain. It might be that attitudinal events merely use methods similar to my description of sight, mere coherency and interpretation not prioritization and elimination. In fact, perhaps attitudinal pleasures are distinct from sensory instances entirely, and are the constitutive values that determine their relevance, i.e. they are things like mood, are identical with the state of our bodies' interaction with a certain endorphin releases, etc.

¹⁰ I think the hypothetical view I'm suggesting here would also be an answer to Nozick's experience machine. The problem here seems to be the ease with which pleasure and pain are uncoupled from the purposes evolution seems to have shaped them to.

Such a supposition firstly reverses the order of relationship that seems intuitive between sensory and attitudinal pleasures; an experience's attitudinal-ness would be understood as ontologically prior to its existence as a sensation. That perhaps could be lived with. Worrying, however, is the extent to which mood states seem to alter on the basis of things beyond our cognitions, i.e., mood changes effected by things like the time of the month, changes in diet, and other factors. Still, it strikes me that there remains some plausibility to this perspective, so a more full account of its peculiarities will be addressed in the following chapter.

The possible counter-arguments "hemmed in," at least for the moment, I want to emphasize the ways in which the empirical information I have here presented clashes with a more traditional interpretation of Hedonism.

Firstly, this analysis requires we revisit the empirical account the hedonists have inherited from the Cyrenaics. The Cyrenaics had a peculiar view about epistemology in that they are effectively skeptics with regard to knowing anything definitive about external reality, and in light of this advocated for a kind of solipsism in that our subjective impressions of the world are the only authoritative accounts we have access to.¹¹ With respect to pains and pleasures, hedonists still believe this, at least in the sense that when I feel that I am taking pleasure in something, then I am taking pleasure in it, whereas, most hedonists, I imagine, would say that merely feeling as though I am falling is not identical to falling.¹² This disparity is a peculiarity in that pain and pleasure do not obviously seem as though they should be different to our other senses in this regard, and

¹¹ Zilioli, *The Cyrenaics*, 76-78.

¹² Aydede, "Pain," section 1.2.

the hedonists do not have particularly good grounds to maintain this distinction purely on their own theoretical account.

The scientific account I have given gives us an interesting way of understanding this disparity in that: 1) our sense of pain is constituted by a representation which is merely edited on the basis of external inputs rather than by direct access to sensations which are interpreted, and 2) these sensation are given their constituent component of relevancy (or at least their forcefulness in our perceptions) by a mechanism which attributes value.¹³

This gives us a rational explanation of these post-Cyrenaic curiosities, and further, demonstrates a manner in which the current material I am discussing, while it fits poorly with hedonic orthodoxy in certain key ways, manages to provide better explanations of the views promoted by hedonists than they themselves can give.

Secondly, our empirical accounts seem to carry us outside of the realm of pleasure and pain, at least in the sense that our best explanations of why pains and pleasures are felt with respect to particular things seem to be a function of evaluative mechanisms outside of that realm, and of forces, like selection forces that an evolutionary biologist might describe, which seem to be doing the work of valuing pleasures and pains, rather than pains and pleasures being intrinsically valuable. This strikes me as suggestive of a coherentist web, rather than a foundational bedrock, in that pleasures and pains seem to

¹³ Since this is a discussion regarding value and ethics, I won't dwell on this point, but it does strike me that properly approaching this matter of the "seemingness" and fallibility of our other sensations versus the immediacy and intrinsic subjectivity of our attributions of pain and pleasure is a pressing one, especially given practical ethical problems such as chronic pain, the over-prescription of highly addictive pain relievers and issues in the attribution of pain (or lack thereof) by professionals due to gender and racial biases that has become apparent recently. The epistemology of pain is an issue that, in my view, is deeply connected to these problems.

be caught up with, gaining and loosing value with, and both emerging from and causing things external to them, and our attempts to assign it value singularly keep catching on this fact.

Finally, the model of pain put forward by GCT seems to suggest that either: 1) sensory “pleasures and pains” are meaningfully distinct from pains and pleasures as hedonists would know them or 2) hedonism is wrong. It doesn’t strike me that we can avoid adopting at least one of these views.

To the end of exploring these three implications, Chapter 4 will seriously consider several hedonist responses to the criticisms I have presented here, and the ways they would significantly transform our understanding of the hedonist model if we adopted them, along with any reasons I find to doubt them.

IV. HEDONIC RESPONSES

Despite the numerous disparities between a traditional hedonic account and the specifics mentioned in the previous chapter, I have no doubt there will be numerous rigorous attempts by hedonists to rescue the core elements of their theoretical framework from the implications of these scientific discoveries. While I won't pretend to be able to fully anticipate these responses, I do wish to give them as much of an immediate hearing as possible.

Likely one of the most initially tempting would be a move to a pluralist account of pleasure and pain; however, I hope to demonstrate that such a pluralist account cannot do the theoretical work (by itself) such hedonists would be interested in. Such an account would wish to assert a difference between the kinds of pains I discuss in Chapter 3 and the various pain and pleasure sensations that would constitute the valuable items. In constructing this model, an account would need to be given of these pain sensations I have described, and there are only two ways of approaching them: a) Deny that what I described are really pains, or b) accept that they are pains, and attempt to integrate this fact into this model by some method. No matter the kind of treatment a pluralist account can give the other pains and pleasures on their account, I assert that the core plausibility of their perspective hinges significantly on their ability to meaningfully and effectively explain either "a" or "b".

How might they do this? There are a few methods they could attempt, but nothing about the pluralist account itself, that there are fundamentally different things which have the quality of being pleasure or pain, gives them tools in this particular debate. Rather, the following approaches strike me as the most fruitful possible tracks to take: i) a

reductionist style response that would seek to address GCT by attending to the neurological impulses the gates evaluate, regarding them as the legitimate moral bedrock of pain independent from any assessment on the part of the gates as to the input's "relevancy" or "value", ii) an emergence response that would try to show that while my broad empirical account of how pains and pleasures function is correct, the relevant or interesting moral value only occurs after things become pains and pleasures as I have described them, and finally iii) a neo-attitudinal or mood-based response that would be a reformulation of Feldman's view of attitudinal pleasures and pains such that they are identical to the mood states I previously described. One could perhaps advance more than one of these counter-arguments simultaneously; however, I will consider them piecemeal over the course of this chapter.

The Reductionist Response

To begin, let us consider what I've deemed the *Reductionist Response*. It is clear, from the available empirical evidence, that there are neurons and neural systems within the human body which specifically communicate pain impulses much as other impulses.¹ Perhaps then we could simply regard such impulses as carriers of individual units of hedonic value. Given a sufficiently reductionist account, we could plausibly describe all supposed "higher level" or "alternative" sensations as somehow reducible to one of these neural instances. What this account would then suggest is that many of the sensations excluded by gates are entirely morally valuable instances, and that these sensations persist in their moral value despite our unawareness of them.

¹ Melzack and Katz, "Gate Control Theory," 13-4.

To begin with, I want to emphasize the peculiarity of this view and what it suggests about moral value as we experience it. For instance, it suggests that every drug which prevents the experience of pain by merely inhibiting passage through the gate either has no, or at the very least little hedonic effect. To give an illustration, applying said drug to one patient, and withholding from another might result in a circumstance where patient A feels perfectly fine and patient B is thrashing in pain, but this hedonic account suggests that there is no or at the very least little difference between A and B because the net neural pain events may be identical or nearly identical. That isn't to say on this moral account we would lack reason to administer these drugs, keeping a patient from harming themselves further because of their experience of pain would perhaps be a strong reason, but it nevertheless seems to clash with a pretty deep intuition we have that experience and awareness are morally meaningful.

Further, the reductionist response would have implications for many other matters of significant importance to modern hedonists. As an example, the hedonist Alastair Norcross have been concerned with the wellbeing of animals used for human consumption, and his arguments have rested upon the idea that these animals can have moral value in the same way as humans because they experience pain and pleasure as humans do.² If his arguments are generally persuasive, they should remain so on this view, but worryingly they're also likely to expand to include many entities we might normally exclude. For instance, there's good reason to think that plants experience something close enough to the kinds of neural interactions I've described to warrant serious consideration on Norcross's account. What specifically justified their exclusion

² Alastair Norcross, "Puppies, Pigs, and People: Eating Meat and Marginal Cases," in *Philosophical Perspectives* 18 (Blackwell Publishers, 2004), 229-245.

previously was precisely the idea that pains needed to be cognitively processed before becoming morally meaningful. That distinction would need to be thrown out on this view.³

Nevertheless, I do not wish to dismiss this view merely on the grounds that it coheres poorly with our moral intuitions regarding pain and pleasure, or that it would inconvenience us due to its moral implications. The question is: do we have some reason to think this is a coherent view on the emergence of value? I think a particularly concerning aspect of it is how it cuts off our ability to harmonize the moral value of pain and pleasure with other apparent sources of value. Returning, for instance, to the account suggested by evolutionary biology, we have reason to think that what shapes our neurological tendencies to experience pain and pleasure are the relevance of these experiences to survival and reproduction. There are configurations of pleasure and pain experience that are low in hedonic value on this account, but nevertheless seem to be very effective in actualizing survival. In particular, it would seem the gates themselves suggest that more pain events are possible than those which pass into experience, and this suggests that selection pressures prefer configurations where lots of pain “happens” but where significantly less of it is deemed “relevant.” Similarly, it would seem there are many human lives we would deem valuable on this account which do not maximize the kinds of pleasures nor minimize the kinds of pains in which this view would be morally interested.⁴

³ Norcross, “Puppies, Pigs, and People,” 239-45.

⁴ See Feldman’s example of Stoicism. Feldman, *Pleasure and the Good Life*, 50.

To sum, then, this reductionist account breaks with most of our intuitive notions of pleasures and pains, and fits poorly with other rubrics we might bring forward, thus limiting our ability to have intertheoretical communication regarding value. None of this is to say, however, that it is patently false, nor that it is inconsistent with the available evidence, simply that, beyond wanting “some” way of holding on to Hedonism, the view doesn’t give us any particularly compelling reasons to hold it. If our original reason for being interested in hedonism was its intuitive plausibility, the reductionist response seems to have lost this plausibility and can’t seem to provide us with any alternative reason to find it compelling. Further, any subsequent reductionist view would place these pains as ontologically “after” the gate, and thus can effectively be treated as the non-reductionist accounts I considered in Chapter 3; that is to say, they are no longer relevant to our current discussion.

The Emergence Response

In contrast to the reductionist approach, a defender of hedonism could hold that, while the gates do have a serious effect on what experiences of pain and pleasure come to the fore, these mechanisms don’t have a kind of moral relevancy; the only thing that morally matters would be the pain sensations that are the result of the systems within which the gates operate. The immediate question would be on what grounds the hedonist would reject the moral meaningfulness of the activities the gates undertake.

Perhaps a very obvious one is the experiential and conscious character of pains and pleasures themselves, that is, the fact that they appear in my awareness, whereas the functions of the gates happen external to them. Despite their evaluative tendency, the gates and the various systems associated with them are perhaps better thought of as

unconscious discriminatory systems, and we can restrict our ethical considerations to only those things which are produced by this system.

An immediate way in which this approach becomes somewhat concerning is that many of the factors that are thought to contribute to the operations of the gates seem to be conscious experiences.⁵ Things like mood and focus aren't entirely outside our awareness, so some of the capacities that affect the operations of the gate aren't exactly unconscious. Still, the manner in which these things affect pain and pleasure happens outside of our immediate view, and as such the moral distinction could likely stand.

One issue a view like this might have is an inability to give any moral weight to the items and manners in which the systems which govern the gates designate certain factors as morally relevant. For instance, if we are holding a traditional hedonist view, we have an interest in maximizing pleasure and minimizing pain, but lack of concern with the properties which give rise to this maximization will lead to the kinds of crude ethical views and bullet biting discussed in Chapter 2.

Within artificial intelligence research there is particular concept known as “reward hacking” which involves a system finding a way to effectively hack itself to stimulate its own reward systems.⁶ Reward hacking would seem a particularly concerning probability under this view even compared to a traditional hedonist perspective because there is a necessary distance between the meaningfulness of pleasure and pain experiences (within the context of an external input and the experiential output) as

⁵ Melzack and Katz, “Gate Control Theory,” 24-9.

⁶ Dario Amodei, Chris Olah, Jacob Steinhardt, Paul Christiano, John Schulman, and Dan Mané, “Concrete Problems in AI Safety,” ArXiv, last revised July 25, 2016, <https://arxiv.org/pdf/1606.06565.pdf>, 7-11.

compared to the immediacy hypothesized under older models. In practice, this in particular suggests that Feldman-style interventions, where different experiences of pleasure and pain are apportioned different levels of moral meaningfulness, would no longer be particularly plausible because we are only concerned with the abstract output of a gating system, and not at all concerned with the manners in which that system apportions weight to particular interests or values.

This being said, this response is significantly less impaired by pitfalls, and better resembles traditional hedonic views, than the prior reductionist response. While “reward hacking” isn’t how this problem is traditionally discussed, similar issues have already been raised towards the hedonist view from philosophers like Robert Nozick and his so called “experience machine” thought experiment.⁷ Hedonists, even the cruder hedonists in the style of Bentham or the Cyrenaics, don’t seem particularly concerned about these problems, so it strikes me as a coherent view, despite the pitfalls I have here mentioned.

The Neo-Attitudinal Response

Speaking of Feldman, a revamping of his position seems a strong candidate; the structure of this gate mechanism seems like an internal biological version of a method of apprehension that would need to exist to give Mill’s judges a referent for the purpose of legitimate analysis, and the modifications the gates make to our sensations seem similar in certain ways to the adjusted values Feldman suggests. We should be careful making this comparison, however, as the strength of a pain event isn’t obviously identical to the moral account Mill gives, in so far as things like certain drugs seem capable of eliciting significant reductions of pain in manners that we might find unhelpful (a drug renders me

⁷ Moore, “Hedonism,” section 2.3.1.

unaware of a cut which might lead to my death) or we might find that certain experiences of pain don't quite align with the moral value we would like to place on them (I may place a significant amount of moral weight on working out despite it being particularly difficult and painful in a manner the gates don't properly mitigate).

The factor that seems to be at play both in this instance and in several other criticisms I have levied against Feldman is the disparity between the pains and pleasures we experience versus the moral and experiential weight one would give to those experiences, and how it is that these two things relate to each other. Answering this requires that there be a connection between a certain pain event, a particular attitude, and an instance of value, but which does not circularly ground this set of connections. It is clear that a pain impulse cannot be causing the attitude, because the attitude is a reaction to a particular input such that it should pass into a pain event (or blocking it).⁸ On the other hand, the attitude cannot be referring to an external value to make a determination as to the value of the possible pain event, as this would mean there are things valuable external to pain and pleasure. If the attitude is said to be making a determination regarding a pain in virtue of itself, that is, the attitude is its own grounds, then why does a particular attitude judge pain inputs differently from other attitudes?⁹

The only answer Feldman can give us is that there are pre-existing arbitrary (but mutable) predilections. Attitudinal predilections toward the generation of pains and

⁸ To use Feldman's language, a particular attitudinal propensity would be evaluating whether a certain sensation should elicit an attitudinal pain.

⁹ Or, again, to prefer Feldman's terminology, why do particular propensities towards certain attitudes exist apart from pain and pleasure inputs?

pleasures exist, they are the relevant instances of valuation, they are interested¹⁰ in certain inputs as opposed to others and they prioritize those that interest them. In so far as culture or circumstance can shape our attitudinal responses, Feldman is committed to saying that these arbitrarily distinct instances are each “correct” in that a particular judge whose attitudes have been shaped in this manner would judge similarly, though we might have recourse to criticize certain attitudinal tendencies as less preferable due to either difficulties in satisfying them (these attitudinal formations would be overly picky) or in their tendency towards self-destructiveness.

I find this interpretation of Feldman sensible. If we *insist* that there must be a foundation to values, that there must be a bedrock thing upon which the value of particular inputs should turn, this seems the best formulation of this foundationality. Yet, Feldman’s description seems equally compatible with the critical element of this structure not being the attitudes in particular, but rather, the relationships between a particular sensation, the formation of an attitude, and the pre-existing tendencies of an individual; that is, the value of pleasure and pain does not intrinsically rest in the sensations themselves, but rather, in the latent ability of pleasures and pains to direct our attention towards certain things thus marking them as valuable. Taking this move, however, would require us to abandon Hedonism.

¹⁰ “Interested” might here be an over-anthropomorphization of what is happening here; all I intend to convey is a directedness or a preferential tendency towards certain inputs.

V. POST-HEDONISM

Chapter 4 left open several possible alternative hedonic accounts, but I demonstrated that they either led to strange conclusions, rested on very odd and difficult to verify assertions, or had a certain arbitrariness to them that made them come across as ad hoc rather than genuine attempts to give an account of pleasure and pain. In this chapter I hope to lay out an alternative account. This account will not be a hedonic one but will instead attempt to build from the core peculiarities discovered in Chapters 3 and 4 to produce a way of systematically making sense of the implications of that analysis and the matters hedonic views had difficulty describing.

The key things this account will try to make sense of are i) the contextuality of pleasure and pain, both in terms of their value and the manners and situations in which they arise, ii) their odd epistemic character, and iii) the difficulties in discerning or properly defining what counts as a pain or pleasure. In laying out this account, it is also critical that we test its plausibility against certain known unusual cases of pleasure and pain, asking what this new hypothesis says about them, and how plausible my new model is in light of them.

A Different Model of Pain and Pleasure

An element that needs immediate accounting for is the relationship between pleasures, pains and value. In my non-hedonic account of pleasure and pain, value can play a determining role in designating something as a pleasure or a pain or somehow facilitating their existence, yet the question is how it would do so.

This construction will proceed more clearly if we work with an example case, and a particularly compelling one for the sake of this discussion is a desire for *bodily*

integrity. Many ethics would seem to agree that maintaining the integrity of bodies, of preventing their mutilation or destruction, is a morally worthy effort and something that should be accounted for. It is interesting in a medical context insofar as research about pain is concerned with identifying and healing bodily problems, and is interesting in a stricter discussion of pain and pleasure insofar as pain often seems to be making comment on or pointing to bodily threats or disruptions of the body.

We can interpret “bodily integrity” as an abstract goal that pains and pleasures are aimed towards achieving. The integrity of the body in this case seems to represent a focal point, an area of interest; pains result when integrity is threatened or undermined, and pleasures result from taking actions which positively influence or help reinforce the body. For example, I feel pain when I receive a cut, which both causes me to lose blood and creates the possibility of an influx of external agents into my body, possibly creating further issues. In contrast, I experience pleasures relaxing my body and when I eat, things which help to preserve and maintain it.

There are some curiosities on this account, however, as certain actions which are painful have positive value from a survival standpoint (washing a cut with soap hurts, even though it helps kill dangerous bacteria, for instance). It’s striking that in most cases like this, the distance between our experience of something as painful and our awareness of its helpfulness in terms of survival seems to arise from our evolutionary history. Causal relations which we have discovered and implemented relatively recently tend to be the ones where this distance can be found (soap creation and usage being a relatively recent phenomenon in the grand scheme of things). Further, the unpleasantness can be mitigated through experience. While children dislike the sting of cleaning a cut, as we

become older and more accustomed to the usage of these things, it is easier to ignore the painful sensations created by the usage of these methods. It also seems, based on our discussion of gates in prior chapters, that there can be distance between the impulses our neurology sends and the decisions the gating mechanism makes about what will be experienced.

One dispute that emerged in Chapter 4 was which of these layers of analysis the immediate neural impulses, the gated evaluation, or the conscious-level analysis of a sensation should qualify as the site of pain and pleasure proper. One possibility not considered is that each of these independently qualifies, that is, each of them meets the technical qualifications to be considered pain. This might initially seem odd, but it is a useful way of approaching this matter because each of these levels is typified by a relevant focus, a criterion by which that focus can be analyzed, and a predilection toward a certain form of analysis.

The neural system which handles pain impulses is sensitive to certain kinds of inputs. It is aware of certain pressures and chemical interactions that indicate normal function and when those conditions are not met, either due to an excess of pressure, the presence of unusual chemical compounds, or the absence of appropriate compounds normally present. It thus is aimed at certain factors, is aware of them, and has predilections for certain states of affairs over others.¹ At a higher level, the gating system is governed by a pattern processing system which has parameters regarding what an ideal broad bodily state is, which it generates on the basis of data received from these impulse systems but also on the basis of prior data, preexisting assumptions about bodily

¹ Daniel M. Doleys, *Pain: Dynamics and Complexities* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2014), 27-30.

functions, and more general information about mood and current bodily state as indicated by alternative strains of evidence.² Finally, conscious agency can make decisions on the basis of information from bodily states, but also might choose to override certain impulses, or regard them as less meaningful or of lesser importance when compared to other goals.³

Broadly, each of these systems seems to operate in a similar manner across these various levels of analysis. Given this similarity, we can hypothesize the following anatomy of pain: i) a locus (possibly loci) which is the focal point of a value judgment, ii) a criterion of affect (a manner in which the locus might be affected); linkages between the locus and external possibilities, and iii) an optimal or preferred configuration or instance (or multiple preferred configurations or instances) of the locus.

Let's test out this anatomy in an instance radically different from the kind of bodily instances we've so far discussed, but with an example a hedonist is likely to be interested in. Many individuals have favorite sports teams and they appear to suffer or feel pain when these teams lose, or are in losing situations, and feel pleasure when they succeed, and especially when they succeed amidst adversity. In this example, the locus would be the team being rooted for, linkages would be the games or competitive matches where wins and losses can occur, and preferred configurations would be winning situations with dispreferred conditions being losing situations.⁴

² Melzack and Katz, "Gate Control Theory," 17-21.

³ Doleys, *Pain*, 70-85.

⁴ Perhaps this anatomy is too simple and this is why it seems to work so well in such disparate situations? Are there likely to be situations which meet this description, but which we intuitively wouldn't want to regard as pleasures or pains? It's difficult for me to imagine a situation where this description applies where I wouldn't at least be colloquially justified in referring to an experience as a pain or

The possibility of experiencing pleasure or pain is associated with a locus, but it is critical that this locus be invested with value, and the greater the invested value the stronger the potential pleasure or pain experiences might be in relation to it. If this directedness towards a locus can happen at multiple levels simultaneously, then this gives us one avenue of explaining the peculiarity of painful experiences which have positive characteristics: my neural system is directed towards certain loci and certain outcomes that my conscious actions don't regard as important, or at a minimum, not as important as the neural analysis does in relation to other goals.

This proposed understanding of pain and pleasure has certain benefits. Firstly, it allows a relatively simple way of discussing the relationship between pleasures, pains, and value that privileges value, but still allows pain and pleasure to make meaningful commentary; if pleasures and pains arise in response to valuations, then it both isn't surprising we encounter pains and pleasures regularly in ethical contexts and isn't surprising that pleasures and pains make useful moral commentary. Secondly, it's inclusive in a manner that captures instances we intuitively regard as painful and pleasurable; it relieves us of having to make the stark medical distinction between bodily pains and much less sensory instances without placing our notion of pain and pleasure in conflict with those medical definitions. Finally, this manner of understanding the moral value of pleasure and pain is much more easily compatible with other moral systems; rather than acting as a competing moral view to Kantianism or Virtue Ethics, this notion of pain and pleasure is navigable by these views (or at least, amended versions of these views), and is also amenable to other types of moral analysis.

pleasure. Whether this colloquial definition is a sufficient defense depends on the strength of my model when compared to other more restrictive notions.

To begin exploring these points, fleshing out the relationship between pleasure, pain, and value is a critical aspect of this view. What is the function of pleasure and pain in this model if they do not deliver value? The most restrictive view is that they are merely indicative, that they merely point to objects of value in the world. However if valuations already need to be present then it would seem that an awareness of the presence of a value needs to already be in place, at least in some sense. Therefore, the role of pleasures and pains must be more expansive than this.

In a sensory sense, we can understand the role of pleasure and pain to be that of an awareness of a state of affairs and its relationship to preferred states of affairs. We can see the role of pain and pleasure as representing a kind of measure of distance between a current state and a preferred state. An additional consideration is their role in eliciting action, but pleasures and pains only drive actions in the sense that they bring awareness and then allow for the possibility of response. They do not seem necessarily to be associated with particular actions (or reactions) but rather are instructive pieces of information that are taken into account when action is preferred. A major counter-example to this view, however, would be reflex actions, e.g. removing your hand immediately when touching something hot. The pain impulse appears to illicit an immediate reaction rather than merely reporting information. Again, there's a reasonable evolutionary explanation of this in that shortening reaction times to these types of inputs is generally beneficial, so it's better to shorten the distance between this action and this impulse as much as possible (and in fact this action is elicited by the spinal cord rather than the brain).⁵

⁵ Doleys, *Pain*, 150.

The connection between certain reactions and certain sensations does seem a logical outcome of pleasures and pains in that the ability to attend to pains and pleasures in some manner seems the main reason for their existence. What generates the distance between purely reactive responses to particular inputs? This is a broad topic, likely to elicit many comments from neurologists and evolutionary psychologists, but the manner interesting to our immediate purposes is the layering of multiple systems of pain and pleasure on top of one another. The ability to experience higher order pleasures or pains in response to certain inputs creates the possibility of altering one's reaction, and in this sense the ability of learning, or alterations to predilections. Aggregative systems can come to new conclusions about the meaning of inputs, especially when those inputs have an ambiguous character.

The layering of systems thus has two virtues within this model. 1) It allows us to accept as a legitimate description of some pains the medical notion of pain put forward in Chapter 3 while still allowing a more elaborate notion of pain and pleasure consistent with the more ambiguous examples of attitudinal pleasures and pains or more complex feelings we might call pains or pleasures generally, and 2) It creates the possibility of a much more nuanced account of the relationship between ethics, pains and pleasures.

Yet, "2" asks significantly more of this system than what a mere concept of layering can provide. In particular, we still need to understand how this abstract description appears phenomenally to an experiencer, and we still need an account of what this more nuanced non-hedonic ethics of pain and pleasure would look like.

In my initial description, I've oscillated between using the term "focal point" and "locus" to describe the point at which a particular system is interested in a value, and thus

the area which pains and pleasures can be felt with respect to. What are the implications of these terms, and how do they relate to both the valuations and our awareness? Things are focal points, things upon which we have trained our focus, when they are in our immediate awareness, e.g. when I experience a pain after stubbing my toe, that toe is the subject of my focus or an item to which I am actively attending. Yet, many of these values are not parts of my active awareness; the broader category of items which can become objects of my attention, things which are valued but not necessarily the object of my current consideration, are the loci. These loci have a latent ability to enter in to my awareness when the layers below my active agency designate some matter as important, and in this sense, I cannot consciously choose to focus on something *as* a pain or pleasure (though, I can choose to focus on a value which would illicit pleasure or pain under the appropriate conditions) but must instead become aware of certain pleasures or pains through the locus's capacity to generate a sensation.

Here the relevant question becomes: what are these "values" and "valuations" and how do they relate to my conscious interests? Values have thus far been used by me to indicate anything that can be the object of some system's analysis; they involve a tendency or predilection on the part of that system towards a particular state of affairs. This definition seems somewhat distant from our traditional understanding of values as something which only a conscious agent might have. Certainly it seems as though this applies to something like my bodily integrity (which I would prefer to maintain) or my interest in a particular sports team, but can the concept of "valuing" be attributed to something like a neuron, or an unconscious system of gating? The broader definition of value I have in mind here is the possibility of something becoming a locus. If a system is

capable of being directed towards something, and having an interest in the thing towards which it is directed existing in some preferred state of affairs, then it's capable on my view of valuing it. The more complex instances of valuing, the types of things an agent may express, for instance, would fall under this category, but have a more constraining and particular definition.⁶

We see in the example of my interest in my own bodily integrity that my interests can extend downwards towards sublevels of analysis internal to my own body. In the sports example my interest may extend to external bodies, groupings, and perhaps even to abstract concepts. How far can these experiences extend and what kinds of things can they extend to? A definitive exploration of this question would be an additional thesis of its own, but for our purposes we can limit this question to a human purview, and think about the extension of human interests as a range of things that can at least plausibly be the objects of pleasures and pains. The major determining factor here are the limitations of a particular person's ability to extend valuative interest to some item. Anything which a human can value will be on the table, as it were.

An interesting aspect of the traditional hedonist view is that the manner in which we find value is by finding pains and pleasures. The fact that when I feel pleasure or pain towards something I find it difficult *not* to value it seems plausible despite the extensive manner in which I have criticized this notion over the course of this thesis. While one could simply appeal to the unconscious character of loci, that is, of the fact that my interests can be directed towards things currently outside of my awareness, there is a subtler way of understanding this relationship. While on the view I'm presenting

⁶ Which might give them a particular moral character; a possibility discussed later in this chapter.

pleasures and pains can only arise in relation to things which are of value, what strikes me as a possibility is that pleasures and pains can play a role in shaping the values themselves, for instance, my taking pleasure or pain in an activity can begin to shape my attitude towards it and thus the position and intensity of loci in question. Take an example like writing; I might begin my interest in writing with a desire to, for instance, tell stories in a written format. This initial interest and the various pleasures and pains I experience while attempting this activity can lead me to I become interested in other aspects of writing (such as rhyme or rhythm, word order, imagery, or even methods like typing versus writing).

If pains and pleasures participate in determining what I find of value, but they can only arise with respect to values I already hold, then pains and pleasures have this effect by shifting the loci, rather than generating them. Pleasures and pains might shift loci in a variety of ways, moving its exact position, growing them, shrinking, merging them, splitting them, etc. and I strongly suspect that the different abilities pleasure and pain have in this regard suggests how hedonists' traditional understanding of the relationship between pleasure and pain (as mirror-like opposites) might start to break down. Again this is a topic in need of independent investigation.⁷

The stacked and dynamic character of the loci suggest the manner in which the hedonic calculus is an inaccurate method of understanding the relationship between pleasure, pain and ethical considerations. As I mentioned in Chapter 3, Feldman's account of attitudinal pleasures and pains gives interesting commentary on the nature of

⁷ One aspect of this that interests me enough to write about here is that aggregative layers of analysis (something like agency) is likely to have more flexible loci than lower level ones (something like my sensory neurons). This strikes me as a particularly interesting line of investigation in terms of the power that awareness and agency can bring to a situation.

masochism, arguing that the attitudinal predilection to experience some pains as pleasurable is actually a situation in which an individual experiences some sensation, which normally would qualify as a pain, as attitudinally pleasurable.⁸ On my account it would be correct to say that the sensation is properly a pain at one level, but that it has the capacity to result in a pleasure at a higher level of experience. It would be inappropriate to account for this duality by saying that the sensation should count as much as the pleasurable attitude, but also it seems dismissive to discount the legitimately painful character of the sensation despite the pleasurable attitudinal reaction, at least on the account I'm giving.

There are a variety of other somewhat similar situations, such as *schadenfreude*, where the alignment between pain and pleasure does not align directly with purely pleasurable or purely painful instances, but instead are situations where pleasure can result from pain. Identifying instances of pain resulting from pleasure are more elusive, but seem plausible on this account.

Adapting Ethical Considerations

Regarding a discussion of ethics on my model, the relevant question is: how can we make ethical accounts of pleasure and pain within the model I am suggesting? Although a full accounting of this would require more space than this project allows, a good beginning is to relate my model of pleasure and pain to some traditional moral views.

Aristotle's account in the *Nicomachean Ethics* suggests that sensations like pain and pleasure can be appropriately felt, that is, rather than the traditional hedonist view

⁸ Feldman, *Pleasure and the Good Life*, 85-90.

that pains and pleasures are intrinsic responses to certain inputs, a type of training or habituation can direct pains and pleasure towards appropriate ends.⁹ An ethics constructed in line with the model I'm discussing is compatible with a kind of teleological directedness; if we can identify the proper ends of human consideration, then we can give an ethical account of what pains and pleasures should ideally be experienced. Additionally, given that in the view I've presented pains and pleasures help determine the locations of the loci, a gradual process of habituation (very consistent with Aristotelian notions of the exercise of virtue) makes sense as the practical implication of such an ethics.

Another key ethical concern regards the appropriate entities to which ones interests should extend. Here a Kantian style ethics is relevant. One should extend interest (and thus, place loci within) external experiencers who operate in a self-similar manner (something like: have concern for all entities whose layers of pleasurable and painful aggregation are similar to one's own). Additionally, the extension of ethical concern in the form of the placement of loci would be particularly interested in the operation of autonomous agents, and would likely be suggestive of actions, policy, and thought which helped to extend the capacity with which agents can exercise autonomy with respect to their distribution of loci.

In spite of my critique of hedonism in general, a form of utilitarianism might be compatible with the post-hedonic account I've given. For instance, the agent level experience of pleasure or pain may be used for a kind of calculative analysis to maximize pleasures and minimize pains at that level. The question would be what justifies a

⁹ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. C. D. C. Reeve (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company Incorporated, 2014), section II3, 23.

particular level of analysis as the appropriate point to make such a calculation, but utilitarian ethicists might plausibly generate arguments which could identify some particular level as the appropriate one.

Each of these points seem like interesting starting positions from which to unravel ethical commentary regarding the nature of pleasure and pain within the purview of traditional ethical analysis; at the same time it's worth noting a certain limited character to the traditional conceptions. For instance, the Kantian emphasis on rationality, autonomy, etc., may overlook genuine empathetic concern for other kinds of entities (even non-biological entities). Moral demands on us may arise because of our own experiences of pleasure or pain resultant from an empathetic concern for such creatures and entities in ways the Kantian view might regard as morally irrelevant.

In the context of the model of pain and pleasure I have offered, moral propositions seem easily suggested, but this models will always allow for alternatives. Because of the unstable character of loci due to the way in which pleasure and pain can move or shift them, a continuing problem will be an unavoidable instability. The activity of living, and thus experiencing pains and pleasures, will always be emphasizing or deemphasizing the matters of importance. In particular, without further moral commentary, this view suggests a kind of pluralism, wherein multiple rational configurations will be possible, but aren't necessarily mutually compatible.

Practical Applications

An equally interesting matter would be the application of this model to practical problems. Can my model make serious recommendations about such matters as chronic pain or addiction to painkillers, for instance? Although fully answering these questions

will require considerations external to this model, it can offer at least some helpful commentary about the origin and possible solutions to many of them.

As an example, chronic pain would presumably need to involve a tendency on the part of the gate system to be overwhelmed by too many pain inputs. This could result from two different tendencies, a gate system which does not sufficiently regulate pain inputs, or a system of analysis that takes too seriously limited pain inputs that do arrive to the system. In the context of my model, chronic pain would represent an overemphasis of focal attention on certain values, particularly internally directed valuations. Some method of reorienting attention, and of asserting the relative unimportance of these inputs would be desirable in order to make the system behave more appropriately in response to the inputs it already receives in contrast to methods that reduce inputs by either limiting stimulus or suppressing the activities of sensory neurons, achieving this effect by merely numbing and not correcting the underlying problem.

This being said, does chronic pain represent a genuine oversensitivity on the part of a system, or is the system appropriately calibrated but being forced to work beyond its natural limits? There is a connection here between this issue and addiction to painkillers; one way my model might discuss these addictions is as the product of a systematic error produced due to the initial effects of the painkillers. If there were many pain inputs that the system ignored, and then painkillers were applied which reduced these pain inputs, the system might have habituated to a lower level of pain than prior to the application of painkillers. When painkillers are stopped, the return to standard levels of pain might be interpreted by the system as a ratcheting up of pain from this new established baseline, which then generates a desire (a real need to end painful sensations, to be clear) to seek

out painkillers in order to return the system to preferred levels. To mirror my prior commentary, the initial suggestion might be that pain can be reduced by realigning the system and redirecting interest such that it recognizes these pains not as new and pressing matters, but part of a baseline of sensations that can be safely ignored. Yet, again, if these instances aren't an issue of misregulation on the part of the gating system, but are instead the product of stress and wear on the body, then in actuality the proper response to this situation would be to recognize a destructive pushing of the body beyond its limits.

Again, in a related topic, there's evidence of under-prescription of medications by doctors for cases of pain both for women and people of color in the context of the American medical system.¹⁰ Given that my model suggests part of the phenomenon of pain is appropriately extending your interests externally, the suggestion is that a failure on the part of some doctors to extend their interest to certain individuals represents a serious inability on their part to appropriately feel pain in these situations. An obvious solution would be attempts to encourage empathetic identification with patients. This approach might require decreasing the professional distance doctors impose between themselves and their patients, as this professionalism is likely to limit their ability to conceive of their patients as persons with particular needs and interests who experience pain in the same ways and situations they themselves do.

The reorientation of an individual's perceptions and the creation of a capacity to appropriately feel the pain or pleasure of others can extend significantly beyond the

¹⁰ Natalie Hemsing, Lorraine Greaves, Nancy Poole, and Rose Schmidt, "Misuse of Prescription Opioid Medication among Women: A Scoping Review," in *Pain Research and Management*, April 17 2016, <http://doi.org/10.1155/2016/1754195>; Kelly M. Hoffman, Sophie Trawalter, Jordan R. Axt, and M. Norman Oliver, "Racial bias in pain assessment and treatment recommendations, and false beliefs about biological differences between blacks and whites," in *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America* Vol 113(16), April 4, 2016, <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1516047113>.

domain of the explicitly medical. If my extension of loci external to myself facilitates an ability on my part to be sensitive to external objects, how far does this ability extend? Is this type of analysis applicable to both social moral considerations of relations with others and in discussions about the phenomenology of pain and identification with an avatar or digital extensions of myself? If I have a latent capacity to be concerned about things in a manner analogous to concern for my own bodily wellbeing, then the practical limitation would only seem to be the distance needed to be traversed in order for me to identify with something, or how difficult it is for me to place a locus in a particular external object.

In an effort to consider the limits of this extension, of what is possible given the kind of extensional experiences of pain and pleasure I have suggested, an interesting account would be one centered around experiences of pleasure and pain with respect to nature or the natural world as a whole. Is it possible for human concern, and the accompanying experiences of pain and pleasure, to extend to such abstractions as environments or geological processes? In “The Land Ethic” Aldo Leopold argues that a critical element of an environmentally conscious community is the extension of moral status to environments themselves. He charts this extension in terms of a gradually expanding sphere of consideration, and argues that it is a necessary step in the development of the moral community within western societies. Part of his argument rests on an analogy which allows a particular ecology to be thought of as an additional member of the community much as you would consider your neighbor.¹¹ This particular

¹¹ Aldo Leopold, “The Land Ethic,” in *A Sand County Almanac & Other Writings* (New York, NY: Literary Classics of the United States, Inc., 2013) 171-89.

kind of extension can seem very morally extreme, and to rest on a kind of anthropomorphization of the environment that many might resist. If my conception of pain and pleasure is correct, then it likely makes sense to think of ecological systems as things which both consist of pain and pleasure experiencers (the animals and plausibly other entities which collectively constitute a particular ecology) but more broadly, as a system which tends towards, if not ecological equilibrium then plausibly at least pushes towards certain preferred states. The kind of ecological consideration Leopold suggests might involve, rather than a kind of anthropomorphization, the capacity for humans to be conscious and sensitive to the needs of environmental systems, especially as they relate to human activities.

Some of my more speculative suggestions aside, I hope that this model is at least as plausible as the hedonic ones I considered in Chapter 4, and that the explanatory potential it offers makes it interesting and fruitful, even if inaccuracies remain in my account. My intention is to present a way of accounting for pleasure and pain as moral phenomena given the complexities that surround them as experiences. A further hope is that this model will prompt ethicists to return to the topic of pleasure and pain with attention to generating a description that both synergizes with the phenomenal character of pain and provides an ethical account consistent with the suspicions I have raised towards the hedonic account.

VI. CONCLUSION

I argued in Chapter 2 that, given the foundationalist character of the hedonic view, an explanation of the origin of pleasures and pains is necessary, in particular to verify that these origins are not the morally relevant phenomena as opposed to pain and pleasure themselves. Without such an exploration, the hedonic account rests on infirm foundations and cannot explain its own suppositions in a manner sufficient to allow its proper usage, but is rather left to simply assert the moral worth of “pains” and “pleasures” without a clear vision of what these things are, or how to appropriately apportion value to them.

In Chapter 3, I undertook an examination of the conclusions put forward by the scientific investigation into the mechanical origins of our sensations of pain. I argued that traditional hedonic views regarding pain and pleasure are no longer viable, given these conclusions. The evaluative tendencies of systems which govern the experience of pain, and the fact that these systems, through neurological “gates” described by Gate Control Theory, prevent the movement of pain impulses before they even reach or are interpreted by higher level mechanisms of sensation, demonstrate that pleasures and pains cannot represent a kind of immediate connection between instances of value; rather, they must instead be the end-result of systems which have already been directed towards certain considerations as the proper site of value. Further, I explored implications from this view that were suggestive of alternatives to a hedonic one, especially a necessarily contextual character to the value pains and pleasures seem to convey and the manner this was suggestive of a mutually dependent system resting upon the presence of other values, like survival, upon which the value of pleasure and pain is dependent.

In Chapter 4, several ways of reformulating the hedonic view to retain its viability, given the scientific conclusions, were examined. It was found that these reformulations either undermined key aspects of what was attractive about the hedonist view, worsened certain problems by which hedonist ethics were already plagued, or rested on a kind of arbitrary insistence on a hedonic model despite the benefit to be gained from non-hedonic possibilities. In particular, the “reduction” response, which attempted to salvage Hedonism by focusing on the pain inputs before their analysis by the gate ran in radical contrast to the intuitive justifications for a hedonic notion of value in the first place. The “emergence” response, which attempted to disregard the moral import of the evaluative function of the gating system ended further disconnecting pain and pleasure from their sensory origins such that “Experience Machine” style counter-arguments to Hedonism were significantly strengthened. A reformulation of Feldman’s view proved superficially viable, but was dependent on an arbitrary emphasis on the moral worth of what he calls “attitudinal pains and pleasures” that is ad hoc and overly restrictive.

Finally, in Chapter 5 I attempted to lay out an alternative to the hedonist view and demonstrate the advantages my view would have both theoretically and practically. I identified a relationship between the emergence of pain and pleasure with a tendency for a system to be aimed at a particular set of factors, and described this aiming, or this valuative tendency, as a grouping of “loci,” or locations of particular interest. A system places weight upon and experiences pains and pleasures in response to the various manners in which the system alters and moves towards states of varying preferability. The benefit of this alternative view is its ability to make sense of the relationship between

pain, pleasure, and values external to them, while still maintaining the position of pleasure and pain as items which indicate value and which have a capacity to provide morally meaningful effects. Toward the latter demonstration, I suggested ways that pleasure and pain could be understood both as features which bring attention to the loci, and which help manage them, allowing for their gradual expansion and retraction.

The ultimate aim of the arguments I have made and the model I described in Chapter 5 is to get at the ethical function and value of pleasure and pain. I was interested in this due to my rejection of the hedonist view and thus my desire for an alternative account that could integrate pleasure and pain into other moral systems. My decision to begin this discussion with an analysis of various hedonist views was made in light of both their extensive consideration of this subject, and because I felt a good account of such a relationship would need to be demonstrably superior to their perspectives. I found that certain members of the hedonist tradition, specifically Mill and Feldman, proved to be able contributors to my thought concerning the value and meaning of pleasure and pain beyond mere comparison. Their views take a subtle interpretation of the hedonic thesis, and that subtle interpretation is amendable to non-hedonic use.

This integration of pleasure and pain into other moral systems, and its suggestiveness of certain ethical interpretations, is ultimately something I would like to employ in order to reach practical conclusions regarding what entities are of moral value, how we can properly attend to this moral value, and how we should go about harmonizing the various interests with which morality compels us to concern ourselves.

I find that the model I present in Chapter 5 is suggestive of the possibility of extending moral worth towards things such as the environment and non-human animals,

ways in which value can better be conceived in instances of social relations, especially where those relations have to do with wellbeing of certain communities and minorities, and ways in which we can better conceive our relationships with our own bodies and minds. Even should this view turn out to be flawed, I hope I have demonstrated that pleasures and pains are matters of serious moral import.

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