

Subjectivists Should Say: Pain is Bad Because of How it *Feels*

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Abstract

What is the best way to account for the badness of pain and what sort of theory of welfare is best suited to accommodate this view? I argue that unpleasant sensory experiences are prudentially bad in the absence of contrary attitudes, but good when the object of positive attitudes. Pain is bad *unless* it is liked, enjoyed, valued etc. Interestingly, this view is incompatible with either pure objectivist or pure subjectivist understandings of welfare. However, there is a kind of welfare theory that can incorporate this view of the badness of pain and which is very, very close to being a form of subjectivism. Moreover, this hybrid account of welfare is entirely compatible with the deep motivations of subjectivism. I therefore argue that those who lean towards welfare subjectivism should adopt this account of pain, and that we should revise our understanding of subjectivism to count such theories as subjective.

Keywords:

welfare, well-being, prudential value, pain, badness of pain, attitudes, unpleasantness, negative valence, subjectivism, objectivism

Introduction

Ill-being refers to the negative side of prudential value. Prudential value, in turn, is the kind of value that is “had” or “possessed” by individuals, the kind of value we discuss when we discuss how good or how bad an individual’s life is *for* him or her.¹ Sensory pain is, in many cases at least, an intrinsic prudential bad and one that is, overall, a major contributor to ill-being in our world.² In this essay, I first consider

¹ The *only* kind of value discussed in this paper is intrinsic prudential value.

² Some theorists downplay the badness of pain or even deny that it is ever intrinsically bad. For example, Richard Kraut (1994, 46) denies that attitudes make things good or bad, but also insists that nothing about the feeling of pain could ground the claim that it is intrinsically bad. Having ruled out the two most prominent explanations of pain’s intrinsic badness, he appears to simply deny that pain is ever intrinsically bad. He remarks, “...even though we all want to avoid pain,...[w]e don't notice any

how best to psychologically characterize sensory pain and its badness, ultimately defending a particular account.³ I then consider how best to accommodate sensory pain and its badness in an overall theory of welfare. Although for ease of exposition I talk about “sensory pain” or just “pain,” I take my real topic to be *negative sensory experience generally*. Thus, what I say about pain in what follows is intended to include in its scope unpleasant sensations like nausea or extreme dizziness—despite the fact that these are not typically described as “painful.”

Theories of welfare and, more specifically, theories of the badness of pain are typically labeled either “subjective” or “objective.” Traditionally, subjectivists about pain explain its badness in terms of attitudes. Pain is bad, they say, if and only if and *because* the person feeling pain dislikes it. Objectivists, on the other hand, explain the badness of pain in terms of how pain feels. The characterization of pain defended here—the view I argue is the *best* characterization of pain and its badness—explains the badness of pain, in those cases where it is bad, in terms of how pain *feels*. In this respect, therefore, it resembles objective approaches to pain. Nonetheless, I argue that this view does not fit well with an objective theory of welfare. Perhaps surprisingly, this view of pain and its badness works best with theories of welfare at the subjective end of the subjective-objective spectrum.

characteristic of pain that grounds our aversion to it; we just hate the way it feels.” I cannot speak to the motivations for Kraut’s view, but I confess to finding it hard to see how one could seriously doubt that pain is at least sometimes intrinsically bad. For anyone who seriously doubts that pain is ever bad, this paper will hold little of interest.

³ The focus of this paper is sensory (or “physical” or “bodily”) pain, *not* emotional pain. Unlike me, value theorists often use the word “pain” to refer to the entire category of negative experiences, e.g. Bradford (2020); Hurka (2016).

In almost all respects, the account of pain I defend is the same as the view defended by Bradford (2020). This is no coincidence. I find her account compelling and have adopted it with slight modifications. In addition, I was drawn to her account because of certain similarities between her approach to pain and its badness and my own preferred way of developing a theory of welfare. This similarity *is* a coincidence, but for me a very happy one as it makes bringing pain into my theory very easy. I explain this further towards the end in note 36.

§1 Subjective and Objective

1.1 Theories of Welfare

The terms “subjective” and “objective” are used in a bewildering number of ways, even in the limited realm of philosophical theories of welfare.⁴ However, the dominant approach to categorizing theories of welfare is metaphysical, namely, it highlights an important difference in the way prudential value is grounded.⁵ The primary divide concerns whether or not a subject’s attitudes ground prudential value, and if so, whether they are the only such ground. Taking this as the central

⁴ The literature contains some loose ways of drawing the distinction that are not as helpful *for our current purposes*. For example, Brink (1989) writes that “Subjective theories of value claim that the components of a valuable life consist in or depend importantly on certain of the individual’s psychological states...By contrast...objective theories of value claim that what is intrinsically valuable neither consists in nor depends importantly on such psychological states” (pp. 220-1). On this definition, classical hedonism and desire satisfactionism are both “subjective” despite a significant difference in the way that each grounds prudential value claims. Desire satisfactionists (the most common form of subjectivist) see desire as an attitude that confers value on its object. In contrast, classical hedonists claim that pleasure and pain have value in themselves apart from the attitudes of the subject who experiences them. For a nice overview of the subjective/objective divide that is far more comprehensive than anything I can provide here see Raibley (2013).

⁵ Although metaphysical discussions of grounding can be quite complex, there is no need to reproduce that complexity here. The distinction I want to draw is captured easily enough. As I use the term, theorists who say that, e.g. attitudes ground value, mean that attitudes provide the most fundamental explanation of why some prudential value fact obtains. Why is vanilla ice cream good for me? Because I like it. End of story. I also assume that subjectivist talk of attitudes “conferring value” on their objects or “making it the case that” something is good or bad for someone, are just alternative ways of saying that attitudes ground value.

There are, of course, other non-grounding roles that attitudes can play in a theory. For example, some objective theorists emphasize that many of the items on standard objective lists include attitudes as constituents. Friendship requires *caring for* one’s friend. Knowledge requires *true belief*, and so on. On such theories, attitudes are a necessary part of realized prudential value and prudential value depends (in one sense of “depends”) on the presence of attitudes. But as I understand grounding, attitudes play no grounding role on such theories. For an example of such a view, see Fletcher (2013).

debate, we can define “pure subjectivism” (henceforth, usually just “subjectivism”) as the view that all prudential value is grounded exclusively by attitudes of the subject (or some appropriate sub-set of attitudes). In other words, a particular thing, X, is good (or bad) for a person if and only if and *because* the person has a positive (or negative) attitude (of the right sort) towards it.⁶ “Pure objectivism” (henceforth, usually just “objectivism”) is simply the strongest denial of this view. It is the idea that the subject’s attitudes play no grounding role in an account of prudential value. In between these poles lie various forms of hybrid theory that combine grounds. For example, Sobel & Wall (2020) sketch a theory that allows attitudes to play the exclusive grounding role *for certain limited kinds of goods*, namely, objects of “mere taste.” So, for example, the goodness for me of eating mint chocolate chip ice-cream is explained entirely by the fact that I like this. Other things, however, are good (or bad) for a subject independently of whether or not the subject finds them good or bad.⁷ By allowing that both kinds of grounds are part of the best theory of welfare, the theory constitutes a “hybrid.”

It is important to note, however, that in addition to various ways of carving up metaphysical space in terms of what grounds prudential value, there are also various understandings of what *motivates* theorists to adopt either a subjective or objective theory. In other words, there are distinct understandings of what it is that is most central to subjectivism—what the deepest commitments of a subjectivist really are. Likewise for objectivism. For example, it is often said that the distinctive

⁶ For example, Sobel (2009) writes, “Subjective accounts of well-being maintain that one’s rationally contingent, non-truth assessable pro-attitudes *ground* true claims about what is good for one... Subjective accounts of well-being do not merely claim that an agent’s [attitudes] co-vary with what is good for her or that her having a [positive attitude towards] something is a necessary or sufficient condition of its being good for her. Subjectivists claim that the relevant sort of [attitude] grounds, not merely tracks, the truth of claims about what is good for a person. Something is good for a person, according to subjective accounts of well-being, *because* she has a [positive attitude] of the right sort [towards] it.” (I have replaced “desire” with “attitude” to bring out the intended generality of the definition). Dorsey (2012) offers a similar definition. However, it is worth noting that Dorsey (2021) offers a different account of subjectivism.

⁷ Sobel and Wall (2020).

underlying commitment of subjectivists is a belief in “subject authority.” What exactly that means is not always clear, but for now I shall simply state my own interpretation, according to which the deepest commitment of a subjectivist is to the thought that prudential value facts cannot contradict the subject’s explicit attitudes. Something cannot be good for me if (at the right time and in the right way) I have (the right kind of) negative attitude towards it, and likewise something cannot be bad for me if (at the right time and in the right way) I adopt (the right kind of) positive attitude towards it. Later, I demonstrate that it is possible to depart from pure subjectivism even while *completely preserving* the subjectivist commitment as I have just defined it. That is important. As we shall see at the end, it raises significant questions about whether the current way of carving up this space is adequate and about how a subjectivist should approach the topic of pain’s badness.

1.2 Theories of Pain

Most theorists of welfare want to allow that sensory pain is, at least sometimes, intrinsically bad. Welfare subjectivists, naturally enough, embrace pain subjectivism and welfare objectivists, pain objectivism. Thus, welfare subjectivists maintain that pain is bad for an individual, S, when, only when, and *because* S dislikes it.⁸ On those (relatively unusual) occasions when an individual fails to dislike pain, it is not bad for her. On this view, sensory pain is only *sometimes* intrinsically bad for us, namely when we have the right kind of negative attitude

⁸ A few examples of contemporary subjectivists about pain’s badness are Sumner (1996), Sobel (2005) and Heathwood (2007). For simplicity, I here gloss over certain differences among them. Sumner allows that pain is a distinctive type of experience, and maintains that pain is bad for us when, only when, and because we dislike it. Heathwood and Sobel, on the other hand, deny the phenomenological unity of pain. Because of this Heathwood must give attitudes two roles, namely attitudes must explain *what pain is* (what makes a sensation merit the label “pain”) and explain *why it is bad*.

towards pain.⁹ Subjectivists about the goodness or badness of sensory experiences generally also say (and I shall henceforth assume a form of subjectivism that does say) that (1) the dislike that creates disvalue is contemporaneous with, and directed at, the very sensations that thereby are said to be prudentially bad, and (2) the dislike is an intrinsic dislike of that quality of feeling in itself.¹⁰

Welfare objectivists, on the other hand, deny that attitudes play any role in grounding the badness of pain.¹¹ Of course, they acknowledge that pain is usually accompanied by dislike. But they insist that pain is bad *because of how it feels*, i.e. because there is a particular felt quality of the experience that is, in itself, a bad-making feature. It is this quality we refer to when we say that pain “hurts” or that it is “unpleasant” or that “it feels bad.”¹² Dislike arises (when it does) *in response to unpleasantness*. For the objectivist, whenever this quality is experienced it is bad, so pain is always (at least to some degree) bad for the person who experiences it.

Both views of pain’s badness face deep problems and possess significant virtues. Frustratingly, *these mirror each other*. Subjectivism is unable to capture the intuitive idea that pain is bad *because of how it feels*. However, the subjectivist shoulders this counter-intuitive result to avoid the different but equally

⁹ Again, this assumes a view like Sumner’s. For a theorist like Heathwood (2007) for whom dislike serves both to ground badness and to define the category “pain,” all pains are intrinsically bad for those who experience them.

¹⁰ Heathwood (2007) makes the case for the intuitive plausibility of such a requirement, which he describes as the requirement that attitudes be intrinsic and *de re*.

¹¹ A few examples of contemporary objectivists about the badness of pain are Kahane (2009, 2016), Rachels (2000; 2004), Goldstein (1980, 1989), Mendola (1990), Crisp (2006). Bradford (2020) expresses strong sympathy for objectivism, but her view does not obviously fit in either camp.

¹² Throughout I assume that phrases such as “it is unpleasant,” “it hurts,” “it is painful,” and “it feels bad” all refer to the same quality of negative experiences, the very existence of which is disputed by some. Admittedly, these phrases are not all completely interchangeable. For example, we typically only say of a subset of “unpleasant” sensory experiences that they “hurt” or “feel painful.” I assume this is because, in addition to wanting to be able to refer to unpleasant experiences, we *also* have an interest in being able to distinguish *within* the broad category of unpleasant sensory experiences, those that typically indicate bodily damage, i.e. pain in the narrower sense.

counterintuitive claim that a sensory experience could be bad for someone despite the fact that she is indifferent to it or even enjoys it or values it. Objectivism's strength is its easy embrace of the idea subjectivists could not account for, that pain is bad because of how it feels. But the price of this advantage is high. For the objectivist must likewise be prepared to embrace the very conclusion the subjectivist could not swallow: that an experience you enjoy or value could be bad for you.

As should be clear by now, deciding how best to explain the badness of pain is both complex and difficult. The problems only become worse when we turn to consider other aspects of pain. Over the next four sections I defend four requirements that I think an adequate psychological characterization of pain must meet. Along the way, a view emerges that can meet them and that also avoids the most counterintuitive features of pain subjectivism and pain objectivism. We eventually arrive at a satisfactory account of pain and its badness only to confront puzzles about which sort of *welfare* theory—subjective or objective—can incorporate such a view.

§2 Pains Are Phenomenologically Unified by Unpleasantness

The first requirement is that an acceptable characterization of pain must recognize that pains are phenomenologically unified. In other words, there is a sense in which all pains *feel alike*. Certainly this is the common sense view. Non-philosophers assume that pains form a natural mental category because of how they feel. Moreover, it is typically assumed that this similarity is something all of us easily recognize introspectively.

However, despite its strong intuitive plausibility, this common sense view has not fared well historically among philosophers. For the latter part of the twentieth century, and indeed, until quite recently, the dominant view in philosophy

was that pains *do not* form a phenomenologically unified group.¹³ Philosophers in this tradition insist that introspection does not enable them to locate any common experiential thread running through all experiences of pain. Instead, they argue, if one thinks about what it is like to have a headache, or a stubbed toe, or a severe burn, one will realize that these experiences do not feel *at all alike*.¹⁴ Such observations have historically pushed many who were not already subjectivists about pain towards subjectivism. This is because a certain kind of subjectivist can explain what unifies pain sensations by saying that they are all disliked. Dislike serves simultaneously to make a sensation count as pain and as a bad experience.

Now, admittedly, there is *some* truth to claims about disunity in the sense that there *are* important phenomenological differences among pains. A dull throbbing headache feels very different from a sharp, stabbing pain in one's shoulder, which feels very different again from extreme nausea. What is less clear is whether, in addition to the differences, there is another element internal to the experience that unifies the group.

Though not typically framed in precisely this way, what is really at stake here is the nature of unpleasantness itself. After all, there is nothing problematic *per se* with the idea that a group of sensations might be unified phenomenologically in virtue of how they feel. Consider, for example, the distinctive feel of touching velvet. There is nothing problematic with saying that my various token experiences of touching velvet all “feel alike” in some sense. The problem in the case of pain arises because it seems there is no identifiable sensation or simple feeling—no experience on a par with the distinctive feel of velvet—that could serve as a unifier. When we consider the matter carefully it really does seem that the *only thing* unifying pain

¹³ And some contemporary theorists continue to hold this. Heathwood (2007); Sobel (2002, 2005, 2011).

¹⁴ This objection is known as the heterogeneity objection. Historically, it has been formulated in terms of both pleasure and pain. It seems to begin with Sidgwick (1907, 127) who frames it in terms of pleasure. Others persuaded by it (in relation to either pain, pleasure, or both) include Gosling (1969); Brandt (1979); Parfit (1984, 493); Griffin (1986); Korsgaard (1996); Feldman (1997); Bernstein (1998); Carson (2000); Sobel (2002, 2005); and Heathwood (2007).

experiences is the fact that they are all *unpleasant*, they all *hurt* or *feel bad*. Yet, for a variety of reasons, theorists have found it hard to make sense of the idea that “unpleasantness” could itself be a quality of experience. They tend to assume that accepting this means either (1) that unpleasantness is a basic sensation-like element in its own right, or that (2) it is at least an easily recognizable element of various experiential wholes.¹⁵ If it is not either of these, they can’t imagine what else it could be. Not persuaded by either possibility and unable to imagine an alternative, disunity theorists are driven towards the view that “unpleasantness” is simply another name for our negative reaction to certain sensations. Saying an experience is unpleasant is just reporting in different words the fact that we dislike it.¹⁶

¹⁵ In the text, (1) and (2) refer to the two traditional ways on understanding phenomenological unity. Carson (2000) refers to the whole group as “felt quality theories.” These are then divided into: (1) the distinctive feeling view and (2) the hedonic tone view. The difference consists in the way each view conceptualizes the relationship between unpleasantness (or pleasantness) and the other felt qualities of an experience that is said to be unpleasant (or pleasant). On the distinctive feeling view, unpleasantness is taken to be a distinctive kind of feeling in its own right, a unique kind of “quale.” This suggests that it is possible to isolate unpleasantness in awareness much as one might isolate and focus upon a particular shade of red. The hedonic tone theory, on the other hand, treats unpleasantness as something that permeates an entire experience, but which cannot be isolated in awareness. Here is a very crude metaphor: Consider what it is like to look into a pot of soup and focus on a particular chunk of carrot. Contrast this with trying to look for the salt in the soup. Once the salt is added, you cannot see the salt in the pot (you just see soup) though you can tell that the salt is there when you taste the soup. Even so, you can recognize the salt’s contribution without being able to isolate the taste of salt. The distinctive feeling theory views unpleasantness (pleasantness) as rather like the carrot in the soup, whereas hedonic tone theories view it as rather like the salt. The distinctive feeling view (of pain) is often attributed to G. E. Moore (1903). Labukt (2012) expresses sympathy for this view over hedonic tone (for the case of pleasantness), but does not ultimately take a stand. Bramble (2013) is a contemporary defender of the distinctive feeling theory for both pleasantness and unpleasantness. C. D. Broad (1930) and Dunker (1941) are examples of traditional hedonic tone theorists. Smuts (2011) is a contemporary defender of the hedonic tone view.

¹⁶ Here my focus is on making the case *for* phenomenological unity. However, there are also many problems faced by views that *reject unity*. See in this regard Smuts (2011) and Labukt (2012).

However, in recent years more theorists have begun to challenge skepticism about the phenomenological unity of pain. They have argued that there are more ways to think about unity than merely to think of each aspect of experience as a sensation or simple feeling.¹⁷ If these theorists are right, then there may still be a way to understand unpleasantness as a feature of experience itself. And that is good news since, intuitively, pains do seem to be similar *kinds of experiences*.

Although several different analogies have been offered, I myself find the analogy offered by Crisp most helpful.¹⁸ Crisp focuses on the question of the unity of *pleasure*, but I take it that his remarks are intended to apply to pain in the same way. He first asks us to consider “what it is like” to see a particular shade of blue and to compare this to “what it is like” to see a particular shade of red. The two experiences are obviously quite different, and so one might think nothing unifies them phenomenologically. But Crisp argues that there is a unifier even though the unifier is not itself *another sensation*. We effortlessly grasp (i.e. it is just given as part of the experience) that the experience of blue and the experience of red *are* alike in a more general sense, namely, they are both *experiences of color*. Importantly, this is not a similarity we grasp intellectually or conceptually. Very simple, cognitively unsophisticated minds experience blue and red as having this kind of unity. Crisp emphasizes that these two experiences share something *qua* experiences that neither shares with, for example, the experience of smelling a rose.

In thinking about these matters, I have found one particular criticism of Crisp’s proposal helpful (even though the author of the criticism did not intend to be helpful in this way). In a paper on the phenomenological unity of pleasure, Ben Bramble writes:

¹⁷ Kagan (1992) suggests, but ultimately does not endorse, an analogy with loudness and sounds, pointing out that sounds that are otherwise qualitatively distinct can nonetheless have the same volume. Crisp (2006a;b) advances the analogy with color experience discussed in the text. I place Kagan and Crisp in a third category distinct from either the distinctive feeling theory or the hedonic tone view.

¹⁸ Crisp 2006a;b.

“Crisp’s suggestion is both subtle and interesting. Crisp is surely right that all colored experiences are phenomenologically alike in a way that none of them is like any non-colored experience. This likeness, however, seems to me to be just that they are *all visual experiences*. If an experience is colored then we can be certain it is a visual one. How is an experience of seeing a rainbow phenomenologically like seeing a red phone booth, but unlike one of hearing a jackhammer outside my bedroom window? The answer is just that the first two are visual experiences while the third one is aural. If this is correct then Crisp’s analogy with pleasant experiences is inapt *because pleasant experiences, unlike colored ones, are not all associated with a particular sense* [my italics]. Pleasant experiences can be visual, aural, gustatory, olfactory, tactile, or emotional.”¹⁹

It seems to me that Bramble dismisses the analogy too quickly, in part because he takes it too literally. I see no reason why a defender of the analogy could not simply embrace the idea that what unites “seeing red” and “seeing blue” is that they are both *visual experiences*. The general point that the two are united by their membership in some broader experiential category remains the same. Moreover, contra Bramble, I see no reason to suppose that to make use of the analogy we must assume there is some dedicated sensory mode through which otherwise distinct pleasures (pains) come to us. The more important point, as I see it, is simply that visual experiences form an extremely broad, *natural experiential kind*, as do the experiences that stem from the other sensory modes. Within such a broad category there can be *huge* qualitative variation, yet it remains true that there is something which is “what it is like” to *see* that is very different from “what it is like” to *hear*. Drawing on this, one might suggest that the mind possesses other, similarly basic, similarly broad, experiential kinds. For example, it seems that all experiences either have or lack a feature we can call “valence.” In addition, all valenced experiences are either positive or negative. We thus have three large categories into which all experiences (across all sensory modes) can be sorted. Within any one of these three categories—within, say, the category of negatively valenced experiences—there will be unbelievably huge qualitative variation. Yet it may also be true that “what it is

¹⁹ Bramble 2013, 208.

like” to have a negatively valenced experience is very different from “what it is like” to have a positively valenced one, or an experience that is neutral. It may be that such differences constitute distinct experiential kinds in much the way sensory modes give us distinct experiential kinds.

I find this way of thinking about the phenomenological unity of pain helpful and the claim that sensory pains are phenomenologically unified by their negative valence highly plausible. Importantly, the word “valence” (and the accompanying contrast between positive and negative) has been used in many ways particularly in psychology.²⁰ The use I envision here is more basic, more fundamental than those uses. Valence, as I understand it, is a *sui generis* feature of experiential states that is simply given in experience and which forms the basis for certain familiar, extremely broad mental categories. If asked to describe valence further, I find I am unable to. If you have experience of it, you recognize it. Otherwise not. It is just not close enough to any other mental feature such that one can use that feature to illuminate valence. Most likely, other types of mental valence, including valenced concepts like “good” and “bad” in some sense derive from and/or depend on this most basic form. We refer to the negative valence of experiential states with various words and phrases including “it’s unpleasant,” “it feels bad,” and, in the narrower case of physical pain, phrases such as “it hurts” and “it is painful.”

Accepting that pains are phenomenologically unified does not by itself settle the question of what makes pain bad. Objectivists say that this feature—negative valence—explains the badness of pain. But not all subjectivists have been skeptical about unity, and a subjectivist could say that sensory pains are unified by this feature, negative valence, yet still insist that pains are only bad for someone who dislikes them. Indeed, this is the view adopted by L. W. Sumner (1996).

²⁰ The term “valence” is used in many ways throughout philosophy and psychology, but I intend my own use to be more basic than most. For a good overview of the many uses of the term in contemporary psychology, particularly in relation to emotions, see Colombetti (2005).

2.1 Short Interlude: Picturing Pain

Before continuing, it can be helpful to have a way of picturing different views of pain and its badness. To that end I wish to introduce the following conventions (which will be useful throughout the rest of the paper). I use “S” to stand for a sensation, and give S a subscript, “U!” (where appropriate) to represent the fact that the sensation is a member of a unified phenomenological group, one unified by unpleasantness. “NA” stands for “negative attitude,” “PA” for “positive attitude,” and an arrow signals the relationship of an attitude to its object. Experiences are shown in brackets or parentheses, and complex experiences may contain simpler ones as elements. Finally a letter [G (good) B (bad) or N (neutral, neither good nor bad)] on the outside right of brackets or parentheses indicates the value of the whole to the left within, and in the case below a question mark “?” indicates that the value of the experience in parentheses so far remains open. In complex cases involving embedded experiences, the letter next to something embedded indicates the value that the embedded part *would have* if it occurred by itself.

So far I have defended a view according to which ordinary cases of sensory pain look like this:

[NA → (S_{U!}) ?] B

We agree that sensory pains are unpleasant (S_{U!}), that in most cases people have a negative attitude towards unpleasantness [NA → (S_{U!})], and that in most cases this experience as a whole is bad (hence the outermost B). The question mark next to the unpleasant experience indicates that we are not yet clear what serves to explain the badness of the whole. Is it the *negative attitude* or the *unpleasantness* that makes the whole bad? An objectivist would view the case this way:

[NA → (S_{U!})_B] B

Here, the feeling is bad in itself (S_{U!})_B, and the badness of this feeling explains the badness of the whole experience. The negative attitude, though present, is simply directed at something that is already bad on its own. A subjectivist like Sumner, however, would view it this way:

[NA → (S_{U!})_N] _B

Here the sensation, though unpleasant, is not bad in itself but merely neutral: (S_{U!})_N. The experience only becomes bad when paired with the negative attitude.

§3 Pain Asymbolia is Neither Unpleasant Nor Bad

The second requirement for an adequate characterization of pain is that it must say the right thing about certain *unusual* pain phenomena documented by neurologists. We must account not only for pain as “the folk” experience it, but also make room in our theory for significant phenomena of which the folk know nothing. Pain asymbolia is the example that has proven most puzzling in this respect. Pain asymbolia is a neurological dissociation phenomenon in which people remain capable of experiencing pain sensations but show no signs of being disturbed by their experience.²¹

Unlike someone who has simply lost feeling altogether, these patients definitely *feel something*. They are just completely indifferent to whatever it is they feel. When such patients are burned or repeatedly pricked with a needle they

²¹ See Schilder and Stengel (1931) and Rubens and Friedman (1948) for early clinical descriptions. See Grahek (2007) for further in-depth discussion of the significance of this phenomenon. Pain asymbolia is only one of several distinct examples where people seem to feel pain sensations without minding them. Others are: lobotomy for chronic pain, other psycho surgery for chronic pain, and some cases of morphine use. Whether and to what extent all of these are really alike is hard to tell, but there is no real need to determine that here. Pain asymbolia seems to be the clearest, purest example, so I focus on it. It remains open whether the account developed here should be understood to apply in exactly the same way to all of these cases.

definitely know what is happening on the basis of sensation (not, for example, by seeing what is happening). And they can describe their feelings in remarkably precise ways. They are able to locate precisely where a noxious stimulus is being (or has recently been) applied and they can recognize when, for example, the painful stimulus changes, and they can describe increases or decreases in the intensity of their feeling. Moreover, and perhaps most significantly, they describe their experiences in the familiar terminology of pain, as being “sharp,” “dull,” “stinging,” or “burning.” And they do this in ways that correspond to what one would expect, given the kind of stimulus in question.²²

The bizarre part is that these patients claim to be, and behave as if they are, *completely indifferent* to the feelings they label as pain. They do not *believe* there is anything wrong or any reason to withdraw from a noxious stimulus. They also do not show any signs of *emotional* distress, but remain calm even while being physically harmed. And they do not exhibit the typical *behaviors* of pain (or show signs of trying to repress such behaviors). They do not grimace or become tense. They do not try to withdraw. Their reactions are often the exact opposite of appropriate: They smile and sometimes even laugh while being exposed to stimuli that are ordinarily extremely painful.²³

It is an interesting question how to accurately describe the experience of such patients. But a few points seem clear. Intuitively, we should *not* say that the sensory experiences such patients have in response to noxious stimuli are intrinsically *bad for them*. Bodily damage incurred by exposure to such stimuli may, of course, be instrumentally bad for them. But there seems no basis for saying that an *experience* is intrinsically prudentially bad for a person who is so completely indifferent to it. This leads to a second point. The profound, multi-level indifference these patients have to pain sensations strongly suggests that what they feel *is not unpleasant*. Plausibly, their experience lacks any kind of negative valence for them.

²² Grahek (2007, 41-50).

²³ Grahek (2007, 41-50).

Can we make sense of this? We can if we appeal to an understanding of pain asymbolia according to which the quality of feeling we refer to as “unpleasantness” is something that *can come apart from the other felt qualities of pain experience*.²⁴ However, this is compatible with the idea suggested before, namely that negative valence need not be thought of as a sensation or a quality of sensation, but rather as a much more general feature of experience.²⁵ If that’s right, then we can think of asymbolia as a case in which sensations that are ordinarily experienced as negatively valenced are now experienced in isolation. Lacking their ordinary unpleasantness, these sensations do not evoke any negative attitudes. Our revised picture would look like this (ordinary pain is unchanged, and the value of unpleasant sensations still remains open):

(NA → (S_{U!}) ?] B

And pain asymbolia would simply look like this:

(S) N

There is no negative valence, no negative attitude, and therefore pain asymbolia is neutral in terms of intrinsic prudential value.

²⁴ This idea is suggested by Grahek (2007) and endorsed also by Bain (2013), and Bradford (2020). For a different take see Klein (2015).

²⁵ Allowing that unpleasantness/negative valence can (even if only rarely) come apart from or cease to characterize certain sensations does move us one step further away from Crisp’s *original analogy with color*. Obviously there is no way to experience redness without having this be an experience of color and/or a visual experience. By contrast, this account of asymbolia allows that there is a way (albeit rare) to experience pain sensations without the unpleasantness/negative valence. However, I don’t think this is problematic given that the analogy is meant to suggest a way of thinking about the relationships between specific sensations and more general categories of experience that include a wide range of sensations.

One potential problem with this approach is that it makes it mysterious how subjects with pain asymbolia come to identify their experience as an experience of pain. We embraced the idea that it is the unpleasantness of pain—the negative valence it has—that phenomenologically unifies pains. But if that is correct, how are we to explain the fact that these patients label their experiences as “pain,” given that their experience lacks the lone unifying feature that would relate it to other pains?

However, although initially puzzling, I do not think this objection is particularly damning, for the simple reason that patients with pain asymbolia were once normal experiencers of pain. Thus, they presumably learned in the past to associate certain kinds of sensory experiences, as well as certain observed causes of those experiences, with unpleasantness. They now find to their surprise that they are experiencing such sensations again, often from similar causes, but without the unpleasant aspect. Since there is a reasonable degree of phenomenological overlap between their prior experiences of pain and their current experiences (the bodily sensations are the same), and since there is no other obvious word to use, individuals with pain asymbolia may simply use “pain” to label their feeling.²⁶ The ability to group together various phenomenologically distinct experiences may, in certain unusual cases, depend entirely on a subject’s memory of the fact that experiences rather like these used to have an additional unifying feature no longer present.

§4 When Simple Sentient Minds Experience Pain, It Is Bad for Them

The third requirement on an adequate characterization of pain is that it recognize that a number of sentient but cognitively unsophisticated minds experience pain that is bad for them. By cognitively unsophisticated, I mean to refer to a certain range of animal minds as well as the minds of extremely young or extremely undeveloped humans. As we shall see, satisfying this requirement turns out to be a

²⁶ Bradford (2020) offers the same suggestion.

problem for pure welfare subjectivists who insist that all prudential value is grounded in attitudes, because it is not clear that all of the minds in question have attitudes *of the right sort*.

To help make the point clearer it is useful to rely briefly on what, I admit, is an extremely crude tripartite division of sentient minds: (a) minds with language, (b) minds with some degree of conceptual capacity but no language, and (c) minds with no conceptual capacity at all. Human beings who develop normally acquire language, and in doing so they become complex conceptual thinkers. Language clearly moves conceptual thinking to a whole new level, enabling the acquisition of far more concepts, allowing the mind to develop sensitivities to inferential constraints on thought, and allowing for the formation of a vastly wider range of thoughts. This is the first group.

It is now widely recognized that many sophisticated animal minds engage in simpler forms of conceptual thought despite not possessing language. And pre-linguistic children gradually become concept users and clearly count as having forms of conceptual thought at some point before becoming language users. These minds form our second category. However, even humans are not born with the ability to think conceptually, but gradually acquire this ability in a series of steps that begin at about three months of age.²⁷ And some sentient animal minds show no sign of conceptual thought. Newborn humans (under three months of age) and less sophisticated animal minds therefore form a third category. It is this category I refer to as the category of “simple minds.”

Despite other dramatic differences between simple minds and more sophisticated ones, simple minds are still clearly capable of sensory experience. Newborn humans experience their world through their senses, and their experience includes the experience of pain. But then, if the newborn really has *the kind of*

²⁷ One particularly famous experiment taken to support the claim that conceptual capacities begin to develop at around three to three and a half months is reported in Spelke et. al. (1995). The implications of this and other experiments are extensively discussed in Carey (2009). A defense of simple conceptual capacities in animals is found in Carruthers (2009).

experience we have when we feel pain, intuitively that experience is bad for it. Denying that their pain is bad for them would be bizarre.

This creates problems, however, for the subjectivist interpretation of the badness of pain because it is not clear that simple minds have attitudes. They feel something unpleasant, but it is not at all clear that they form attitudes towards these unpleasant feelings. Objectivists would not have a problem here since they were already committed to the idea that pain is bad because of its *unpleasantness*.

Subjectivists could respond by trying to defend the idea that even the simplest sentient minds have attitudes. This, in turn, would lead to a debate about what exactly attitudes are, a debate that could quickly become complicated without necessarily being helpful. Rather than go down that rabbit hole, I suggest that we instead ask ourselves *why* subjectivists rely on attitudes in the first place, and whether the plausibility of subjectivism is linked to a particular conception of attitudes. If it is, then we need not consider whether simple minds have attitudes in some *other* sense of "attitude." If subjectivist explanations of the badness of pain require a certain kind of relatively sophisticated attitude, and if it is plausible to think that simple minds lack *that kind* of attitude, then in order to capture the fact that such experiences are bad we will have to appeal to negative valence.

So, consider the ordinary subjectivist claim that our attitudes can, and sometimes do, confer value on their objects. Why does this idea have pull to begin with? In other words, what makes it initially plausible, at least for some theorists, that the objects of certain attitudes we have are strong candidates for being prudential goods (or bads) for us? What makes it initially plausible that the attitude might ground this value? I submit that the plausibility of the view, when it seems plausible, stems initially from the fact that most discussions of subjectivism work with examples of relatively sophisticated, conscious attitudes. These are the kinds of attitudes you and I have, as well as the kind that many more sophisticated animals and some pre-linguistic children have. Reliance on such ordinary examples is significant, in turn, because the plausibility of subjectivism derives, I think, from the fact that these relatively sophisticated attitudes *indicate something important about the subject's general orientation towards the object of the attitude*.

In these kinds of cases, when a subject develops a positive (or negative) attitude towards something, X, her mind—no doubt working at some sub-personal level—generates an entirely new mental orientation towards the object such that now (assuming no other influences) she is disposed to think and respond positively to X. Attitudes of this sophisticated sort are part of a process through which we develop quasi-evaluative relationships with particular objects. Of course, not everything we relate to in this way will ultimately count as having value for us, but for many it has seemed that having this kind of generally positive (or negative) orientation towards a thing is a good first requirement on value (disvalue).

Yet it seems unlikely that newborn humans or very simple, sentient animals experience the world in this way. Such quasi-evaluative stances seem linked to at least the beginnings of conceptual thought and the ability to think explicit thoughts about aspects of the world. Taking “attitude” now to refer exclusively to the kind of mental state just described, simple minds arguably *do not have attitudes* despite having sensory experiences that are negatively valenced.

Unfortunately, it is not possible to mount a full defense of this claim here. But it should be enough if I have sketched the issue in a way that makes concern seem justified.²⁸ In other words, even if we cannot (on the basis of what has been said so far) reach a *definitive* conclusion about whether all sentient minds have the right kind of attitudes to ground value, if we have good reasons to suspect they do not, then other things being equal, we should prefer a view that explains the badness of pain for simple minds *without* appeal to attitudes. We should instead appeal to unpleasantness—negative valence—to ground the badness of pain. This resolves our earlier picture of ordinary adult pain in favor of this (the question mark has now been replaced by “B”):

[NA → (SU!) B] B

²⁸ Concerns about whether all minds have attitudes are raised in various places in the literature including Lin (2017), Bradford (2020) and Dorsey (2021). Elsewhere, I defend at greater length both (1) the idea that subjectivist attitudes must be fairly sophisticated mental states in order to play the specific role subjectivists need them to play and (2) the conclusion that some sentient minds *should* plausibly be assumed to lack the capacity to form such attitudes. (Hawkins, n.d.)

Here the negative attitude arises as a response to unpleasantness, but it is the sensory experience itself, in virtue of having negative valence, that is bad and which, in turn, explains the badness of the larger whole. We can then picture the experience of newborns and other simple sentient minds this way:

(SU!) B

If this were the end of our inquiry and if no further requirements remained, this would leave us with a decidedly objectivist picture of pain and its badness. But our fourth and final feature, as we shall see, complicates this.

§5 Unpleasant Experiences Can Sometimes Be Good for People

The fourth and final requirement on an adequate account of pain is that it recognize that not all pain is bad. In particular, it must recognize that sometimes pain that is enjoyed—pain towards which someone adopts a positive attitude—is either neutral in value or perhaps even good.

There are many examples of what seem to be perfectly *ordinary* pain experiences that individuals are either indifferent towards, or have positive reactions to. Intuitively, in these cases, pain is either not bad or good. Sumner gives the plausible example of worrying a loose tooth and enjoying the sharp twinge of pain that results.²⁹ Bradford adds the examples of enjoying (1) eating extremely hot, spicy food, (2) jumping into a freezing cold lake, and (3) getting a deep tissue massage.³⁰ I very much like the acronym she develops for such experiences— HSG— which she tells us stands for the familiar phrase of exercise enthusiasts “hurts so

²⁹ Sumner (1996, 101).

³⁰ Bradford (2020, 240).

good.”³¹ Thus, I shall simply follow her lead and refer to the set of experiences under discussion as “HSG experiences.”

Bradford argues persuasively that at least some HSG experiences have the following two features. First, though there may be cases where pain is enjoyed despite the unpleasantness, there are many instances where the unpleasantness itself is what is enjoyed (or at least a major part of what is enjoyed). In other words, people sometimes enjoy *the very same feature of pain experience that is usually disliked*, namely, the negative valence.³² For example, those who love eating spicy food enjoy the negative aspect of *the burning stinging feel*. And many of those who enjoy deep tissue massage enjoy having their muscles kneaded in a way and to a degree that *makes them ache*. If that’s right, then to properly characterize such cases we must be sure to locate the unpleasantness of pain *within the scope of the positive attitude*.

Second, she argues that we should not view these cases as ones in which the disvalue of the pain is weighed against some amount of positive value derived from the enjoyment. For example, in a case where the overall value of an HSG experience is positive, we should not explain this goodness as positive *net* value—as positive value that exceeds the negative value of the pain. We do not ordinarily think of HSG experiences as even somewhat bad for us. Enjoyed pains appear to have no negative value at all.

To illustrate, Bradford offers the example of a deep tissue massage that hurts but is enjoyed precisely for the way it hurts. Imagine a massage lasting an hour that becomes increasingly painful (i.e. the negative valence of the experience steadily intensifies) over the course of the hour. Nonetheless the degree of enjoyment is steady. A theorist who thinks of the positive value of the massage in net value terms,

³¹ We must also, of course, give a nod to singer/songwriter John Cougar Melloncamp, although his use of the phrase is less innocent. One thing I very much like about Bradford’s discussion is her insistence that precisely because there are so many ordinary, mundane examples of HSG experiences, there is no need to focus our discussion on cases of masochism. Instead, she announces her intention to stick to “PG” examples (2020, 239), and I do the same.

³² Bradford (2020, 239).

will think of this as a case where the value of enjoyment outweighs the disvalue of the pain. However, since pain is steadily increasing over time while enjoyment remains steady, this would mean that the degree to which positive outweighs negative is slowly going down. Thus even if the experience remains good throughout, (the bad never reaches the point where it outweighs the good) the experience slowly becomes *less good for the person who is enjoying it over time*. But that is not the right way to think of the case. Insofar as the person's enjoyment remains steady, we should think of value as remaining steady throughout.³³

I find it plausible that there exist HSG experiences with both of these features. The interesting question is how to square the proper description of such experiences with an account of their prudential value. Interestingly, the very features Bradford highlights suggest a particular explanation that she herself does not embrace. She allows that in the presence of a subject's positive attitude, pain experiences become less bad, and *perhaps* even become good. She therefore accepts a view that can be described in conditional form as the view that pain is bad unless the subject has a positive attitude towards it. But she stops short of saying that a subject's positive attitude fully explains the value of enjoyed pain. She does not ascribe to attitudes the strong power to confer or fully alter the value of their objects. Nonetheless, I suspect that the best explanation of our intuitions about such cases implicitly relies on such an idea. It seems obvious to me that if someone genuinely enjoys eating hot spicy food, this is a good experience for them. And it is good precisely *because* it is enjoyed. Furthermore, it lacks any degree of badness, because enjoyment has the power to simply *cancel* the negative value pain would otherwise have. It seems unacceptable, when we think about it, to say that such enjoyed experiences are bad for the person. But the best explanation of this

³³ No doubt it is possible to imagine a case where increasing negative valence leads to a decrease in the value of the experience *because the higher intensity valence is disliked*. But that is not the point. The point is that we can also just as easily imagine that increases in negative valence are not disliked, and so make no difference to the value of the experience given that the positive attitude remains the same.

intuition (an intuition Bradford shares) is our acceptance of the subjectivist intuition that something simply cannot be bad for you if you like it, enjoy it, etc.

Supposing that's right, we can picture HSG experiences like this:

$[PA \rightarrow (S_{U!})_B] G$

This captures the fact that sensory pain experience is ordinarily both unpleasant (it is accompanied by U!) and bad (note the B outside the interior parentheses). Yet despite this, because a positive attitude (PA) is directed at the pain sensations, the overall experience is good (note the G outside the outermost brackets).

At this point, I believe we have found a way to accommodate all four of our requirements. Not only does it accommodate these four, but it also captures the most intuitive feature of pain subjectivism as well as the most intuitive feature of pain objectivism. The most intuitive feature of pain objectivism is the idea that pain is bad because of how it *feels*. The current view allows that pain experience is bad by default. In the absence of any attitudes it is bad. And in the presence of negative attitudes it remains bad. In both cases, we can say that pain is bad because of how it feels. The most intuitive feature of pain subjectivism is the idea that pain can not be bad for you if you like it, or value it, or otherwise have a positive attitude towards it. The current view preserves this, because it allows that positive attitudes towards pain make pain good. No room is left for conflict between subject attitudes and actual value. We can picture the final account this way:

Final version pain for simple minds: $(S_{U!})_B$

Final version ordinary adult pain: $[NA \rightarrow (S_{U!})_B]_B$

Final version HSG experiences: $[PA \rightarrow (S_{U!})_B] G$

Final version pain asymbolia: $(S)_N$

Having now identified the best psychological characterization of pain and its badness, we can now consider how to incorporate such a view into an overall theory of welfare.

§6 Welfare Objectivism and the Badness of Pain

Recall that in §2 pure welfare objectivism was defined as the view that attitudes never ground value. All facts about welfare goods and bads are explained in some *other* way. The question currently before us is whether something like the account of pain defended in the previous section can be incorporated in an objectivist theory of welfare.

The qualifier “something like” is important, since for obvious reasons the view I defend is excluded in virtue of assigning a grounding role to positive attitudes in HSG cases. However, as I also noted, Bradford, the other and original defender of this general picture of pain, refrains from endorsing the strong conclusions I draw. It *is* part of her account that pain that is enjoyed has a different value for the subject than pain that is not enjoyed. But she is careful not to commit herself to the idea that the positive attitudes present in HSG cases explain or ground this value. She says merely that in the presence of a positive attitude like enjoyment, pain’s badness is *defeated*. She thinks of the conjunction of a positive attitude with an unpleasant experience as a kind of evaluative whole, which like an organic unity has a value that is not the sum of the value of the parts. But she makes no further move to explain the specific value that this whole has. She is also more cautious in her characterization of what the value is, saying merely that such experiences are *not bad*. The question I want to consider now is whether a view like Bradford’s can be incorporated into an objectivist theory of welfare. As will soon become evident, I don’t think it can.

To start, consider the fact that most objective theories of welfare generally acknowledge, and seek to explain, the relationship between the positive (or negative) attitudes of subjects, on the one hand, and welfare goods (or bads), on the other. What’s distinctive is their refusal to assign this relationship a certain

significance. For example, most people, most of the time dislike the experience of pain. The objectivist notes this fact but explains it in terms of pain's independent objective badness. From the objectivist perspective, dislike is a common, intelligible response to unpleasantness, a quality of experience that is bad in itself.

Bradford's appeal to the subject's attitudes in HSG cases is importantly different from these other kinds of cases where objectivists explain a subject's attitudes. This difference, I argue, makes all the difference. The welfare objectivist acknowledges a correlation between *positive* attitudes and welfare *goods*, and between *negative* attitudes and welfare *bads*. With respect to sensory pleasure and pain the correlation is quite strong. In HSG cases, however, positive attitudes are directed at objects that are ordinarily bad—the opposite pattern from usual. This suggests that any attempt to incorporate Bradford's claims about HSG cases would most likely undermine, or come into sharp conflict with, the usual ways objectivists explain the relationships between attitudes and objects.

To see what I mean, consider again the fact that most people, most of the time dislike sensory pain. Call such cases—where negative attitudes are directed at objective bads (as well as cases where positive attitudes are directed at objective goods)—matched cases. Matched cases are typically explained by objectivists in terms of appropriate response to value-grounding features of an object. Likewise, mismatched cases are explained as a failure to respond appropriately. Mismatch cases are cases of attitudes gone wrong or failing in some way.

Now suppose we add that in a small set of cases (HSG cases), where a positive attitude is directed at sensory pain (with its negative valence), sensory pain is not bad after all. Any attempt to explain this small set of *unusual* cases will undermine the ordinary objectivist pattern of explanation for matched and mismatched cases. Ordinarily, a case involving a positive attitude directed at sensory pain would be a mismatch case, and the attitude would be seen as an attitude that has, in some sense, gone wrong. But in HSG cases, we won't want to say that about the attitude. Given that HSG pain is not bad, there is nothing wrong with having a positive attitude towards it. Yet this is puzzling because there are other cases also involving sensory experience with negative valence, but where a negative

attitude is present and the experience is bad. How could positive and negative attitudes both be appropriate to the very same kind of object?

Two additional questions about how to incorporate Bradford's view in an objective theory of welfare serve to further highlight the problems. First, should a welfare objectivist adopting Bradford's account of HSG cases allow that other pairs of positive attitudes and objective bads are evaluatively neutral? Or does this only apply to HSG cases? To illustrate, suppose for the moment that it is objectively prudentially bad for a person to fail at a major project she has devoted many years and much energy to. What then should a welfare objectivist say about a case where someone with a project of this sort fails but, somewhat surprisingly, finds herself pleased about this? If she develops a positive attitude towards the failure does this defeat the badness of the failure? If one introduces too many such cases, the view begins to look suspiciously like a theory better supported in subjectivist terms, given that now so many shifts in attitude accompany shifts in value. On the other hand, limiting the exception to the single case of pain stands out as odd, demanding further justification. Why is this case different?

Second, what should a welfare objectivist say about other kinds of pain cases? Most HSG cases are intuitively not that intense, or if intense, not that long-lasting. It is therefore not hard to concede that the enjoyment of eating extremely hot spicy food is not bad for a person. But what about long-lasting, extremely intense pain? It is hard to imagine any actual human being adopting a positive attitude towards such pain. But if positive attitudes towards pain always defeat badness, then the objectivist is committed to saying about this (merely theoretical but nonetheless important) case that such pain is not bad for the person who experiences it. But objectivists have traditionally wanted to avoid saying precisely that.³⁴ In response, one could try to introduce a distinction between extreme pain, which is always bad, and less intense pain, which is not bad when enjoyed, but still bad when disliked. But it is hard to see how such a distinction could be defended.

³⁴ For example, Kahane (2009, 334), an objectivist about pain, is clear that he finds such a conclusion counter-intuitive, presenting this as an excellent reason for rejecting *subjectivism* about pain.

Moreover, all the usual problems associated with drawing sharp lines would arise (e.g. how can x amount of pain that is enjoyed be good, but $x+1$ amount of pain that is also enjoyed suddenly be bad, etc.?).

Overall, then, this picture of pain, despite its plausibility *as an account of pain*, does not fit well with welfare objectivism. Whether or not that is a problem depends on one's other commitments. Many will not see it as a problem at all, having had no inclination to embrace pure welfare objectivism in the first place. Perhaps this is even a sign that the best theory of welfare will, in the end, turn out to a hybrid of sorts, since many hybrid views easily accommodate this account of pain. Before reaching that conclusion, however, I want to consider the relationship between this approach to pain and subjectivism.

§7 Welfare Subjectivism and the Badness of Pain

In §2 I defined pure subjectivism as the view that attitudes and only attitudes ground prudential value. In between pure subjectivism and pure objectivism are various kinds of theory that combine different accounts of ground, and so count as hybrids. Clearly there are many forms that a hybrid view could take: what makes something a hybrid is just allowing more than one type of ground.

As long as we stick to this framework and these definitions it is crystal clear that any theory of welfare that incorporates the view of pain I defend will count as a hybrid. Indeed, there are presumably many kinds of hybrid theory that could do so. However, there is one particular view in this space that I want to consider in a bit more detail. I call it “almost pure subjectivism.”

It is the view one would get if one combined an otherwise pure subjective view of welfare with the current account of pain and its badness, thereby allowing just *one kind of case*—one kind of welfare bad—where badness is explained without reference to attitudes. A theorist whose commitments are otherwise purely subjective might be drawn to such a view if she is persuaded (as I am) that many sentient minds lack attitudes of the right sort to confer value. This would allow such a theorist to say that the pain of newborn infants, for example, is bad for them. However, in cases where attitudes are present they have the power to fully alter the

default value of sensory pain. So, if someone enjoys eating spicy food so hot that it is painful, then even though her experiential state has negative valence, her positive attitude *makes* the experience good for the subject. Cases where pain is disliked are over-determined. Negative attitudes have the same value-conferring power as positive attitudes, but when directed at something already bad, there is nothing for the attitude to do. Thus, I find it natural to say, even in the case of human adults who dislike pain, that their pain is bad in virtue of how it *feels*. Here, the negative attitude leaves undisturbed a ground that was already there. However, if someone were to dislike intrinsically some other kind of experiential state—one lacking negative valence—the experience would count as bad for the person *in virtue of the dislike*.

Finally, it is important to see that such a theory need not be limited to assigning value to experiential states. Positive and negative attitudes may also explain the goodness or badness of many other non-mental items, such as particular relationships or achievements and so on. I am imagining a subjectivist view—perhaps a form of desire satisfactionism, perhaps a view built on valuing attitudes³⁵—that is extended to make room for the badness of sensory pain in cases where these attitudes are not present (newborns etc.). Almost pure subjectivism differs from pure subjectivism in appealing to more than one ground. However, it only appeals to two, it explains all prudential value either in terms of the valence of an experiential state or in terms of an attitude of the subject, and attitudes have more authority than valenced experiential states.³⁶

³⁵ Such views are defended by Raibley (2010; 2013), Tiberius (2018), and Dorsey (2021).

³⁶ For some time, I have been developing a theory of welfare that allows various different kinds of attitudes to play a role (as opposed to just *desire* or just *valuing* attitudes). From the outset, I have envisioned a structure according to which certain kinds of attitudes have greater authority in the determination of welfare than others. For example, the view holds that the right kind of engagement with something I like is good for me, *unless* I have evaluative beliefs that deem this engagement worthless or bad. In that kind of case, my values make it true that the engagement is *not* actually good for me. In addition to finding Bradford's account of pain attractive in its own right, my interest in her view was further fueled by realizing that she makes a similar move with respect to sensory pain and positive attitudes. Subsequently, I have incorporated my modified version of her account of pain into my theory of welfare, now allowing that attitude type #1 can alter the value of a valenced

As mentioned, it is completely clear where in the current theoretical landscape this view fits. Nonetheless, it seems to me that a good case can be made for revising current definitions such that almost pure subjectivism counts as a form of pure subjectivism. Some philosophers (e.g. Dorsey 2021, 80), emphasize that “subjective” and “objective” are just labels. How we define them is not all that important as long as everyone is clear about what is meant. While I agree that the importance of such labels can be, and often is, exaggerated, I still think how we draw it matters. After all, we are in the business of using such labels because they help us remember and keep track of particularly important theoretical divides—those particularly deep differences that shape in truly significant ways someone’s approach to a given topic. But if that’s correct, then it seems to me worth considering a revision, since otherwise a deep and important divide that comes into view when we consider almost pure subjectivism will be overlooked.

This divide begins to come into view when we notice that almost pure subjectivism has much more in common with pure subjectivism than with either pure objectivism or the typical hybrid views.

First, almost pure subjectivism captures and preserves subject authority more than any other hybrid. What precisely “subject authority” is—what it means to say that subjects have special authority relative to their own welfare—is not entirely agreed upon. Quite different interpretations exist. However, many can accept that it means at least this much, namely, the value something has for a person cannot differ from the value suggested by her attitudes. In other words, something cannot be good (bad) for you if at the right time, in the right way you form the right kind of negative (positive) attitude towards that thing. Moreover, this is not just a fact about how your attitudes happen to align with value. It is true *because* the attitudes have a certain kind of value-conferring power. Other views in the hybrid

experiential state, but that attitude type #2 can alter the value of either attitude type #1 or a valenced experiential state. In other words, various elements of a subject’s psychology factor in determining her welfare, but particular elements have different degrees of “authority” or “strength,” which matter when conflicts arise. What’s ultimately good or bad in a particular case is determined by the most powerful element in play.

zone only partially honor this idea. Earlier we considered the hybrid sketch from Sobel and Wall, according to which a person's attitudes have this strong kind of power only in relation to objects of mere taste. So the fact that I like the feel of cold air on my face is enough to make it true that such feelings are good for me. But in many other cases my attitudes have no such authority at all. Like pure subjectivism, almost pure subjectivism ensures that a person's attitudes have, so to speak, the last word.

A second important difference between this view and other hybrids is that almost pure subjectivism denies that non-mental items can have attitude-independent prudential value. It does allow that unpleasant experiences, which are mental, have attitude-independent value in certain cases, namely when no contrary attitude exists. But almost pure subjectivism limits this kind of possibility to valenced experiential states. It thus leaves no room for the idea that, for example, achievement might be good independently of a person's stance towards achievement or that having a "normal" fully functional body might be good for someone apart from that person's stance towards having such a body. Such non-mental items only count as good (or bad) when deemed so by individual attitudes. This difference seems quite significant to me, and suggests a way of describing the relevant divide. The divide is between theories that see prudential value for a person as determined entirely by the valenced psychological states of subjects (where valence is now being used in a different, broader sense so that it includes both positively/negatively valenced experiences and cognitions involving "good" and "bad") and those that deny this. Allowing almost pure subjectivism to count as a form of pure subjectivism (redefining "pure" in whatever way necessary to do this) better tracks this divide.

Whether or not one has any inclination to accept my proposed reclassification, this much should be clear. The account of the badness of pain defended here is one that cannot easily be accommodated by views at the objective end of the spectrum. However, such a view fits well with welfare theories at the subjective end. Whether or not we classify the particular view I favor with other views that are pure subjective is a question of *some*, but not great, importance. More

important is to notice the striking similarities between almost pure subjectivism and other pure subjective views. The independent strength of the account of pain defended here lends support to the idea that ultimately the best theory of welfare will be somewhere in the neighborhood of subjectivism however defined.

§8 Conclusion

We have covered a great deal of ground here. I will only briefly re-cap. I have defended a view of pain that accords with the following four requirements. First, it treats sensory pains as phenomenologically unified by unpleasantness (what I call negative valence). Second, it acknowledges the existence of pain asymbolia, but views it as a case where ordinary pain sensations lack negative valence. As a result, the experience of pain symbolia is neither unpleasant nor bad for those who have it. Third, it recognizes that not all sentient minds have the capacity to form attitudes in the sense relevant to subjective theorists. It thus posits that pain can be bad in itself simply in virtue of its unpleasantness. And finally, fourth, it acknowledges the existence of HSG experiences—cases where experiential states with negative valence are enjoyed. It maintains that in such cases the power of attitudes is such that the positive attitude of the subject *makes* the experience a good one for the subject. Overall, pain is bad unless it is the object of a positive attitude.

This view of pain and its badness has features of both subjective and objective theories of pain. How then might such a view fit into a larger theory of welfare? As stated it cannot fit into either a pure Subjective or a pure objective theory. Interestingly, even when we soften what we say about the power of attitudes in HSG experiences (ala Bradford) the view is still not compatible with pure objectivism. Various hybrid views can easily incorporate this account. However, when this account of pain is combined with an otherwise thorough-going form of subjectivism (to create what I called almost pure subjectivism) it not only works but preserves many of the distinctive features of pure subjective views in a way other hybrids generally do not. I suggested that we may ultimately need to re-define “subjective” and “objective” in the sphere of welfare, recognizing a slightly different

fault line than the current one. But whether or not that suggestion flies, the view of pain defended here has been shown to fit much better with accounts of welfare at the more subjective end of the spectrum. Ultimately, I intend to defend almost pure subjectivism as a theory of welfare. But that is a project for another day.³⁷

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