A Hedonic Theory of Desire

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Abstract: What is the relationship between pleasure and desire? While some philosophers reduce pleasure to desire, this paper explores the prospects for a hedonic theory of desire, which reduces desire to pleasure instead. I argue that desiring that *p* is best analyzed not as a disposition to feel pleased that *p* when you believe that *p*, but rather as a disposition to feel pleasure in what you imagine when you imagine that *p*. I give three arguments for this hedonic theory of desire, defend it against objections, and consider its broader theoretical implications for current debates in ethics and philosophy of mind.

Keywords: Desire, pleasure, motivation, reasons for action, self-knowledge

What is the relationship between pleasure and desire? Pleasure is something we all desire. Moreover, we usually want pleasure for its own sake and not merely for its consequences. And yet pleasure is not unique in this respect: there are many other things that we want for their own sake. Even when our desires are not about our own pleasure, however, we tend to feel pleasure when we believe or imagine that they are satisfied. Is this just a contingent accident or is there some essential connection between pleasure and desire?

This paper explores the hypothesis that pleasure is essentially connected with desire. As John Stuart Mill writes, 'Desiring a thing and finding it pleasant … are phenomena entirely inseparable or, rather, two parts of the same phenomenon' (1863: 57). But which is more fundamental in the order of analysis? This paper argues that we should reduce pleasure to desire, rather than vice versa.

Here is the plan. §1 argues against the *desire-based theory of pleasure*, which reduces pleasure to desire: it says that being pleased that *p* is simply desiring that *p* while also believing that *p*. §2 examines the *hedonic theory of desire*, which reduces desire to pleasure: it says that desiring something is being disposed to feel pleasure in what you desire. I argue that desiring that *p* is best analyzed not as a disposition to feel pleased that *p* when you believe that *p*, but rather as a disposition to feel pleasure in what you imagine when you imagine that *p*. §3 gives three arguments for this hedonic theory of desire: it explains our introspective knowledge of what we desire, it explains how our desires give us justifying reasons for action, and it avoids familiar counterexamples to motivational theories of desire. §4 defends the hedonic theory against the objections that it generates too many desires, or too few, and that it wrongly excludes animal desires. Finally, §5 examines its broader theoretical implications for current debates in ethics and philosophy of mind.

1. Desire-Based Theories of Pleasure

What is pleasure? Pleasure is a *feeling*. But when you feel pleasure, there is always something—some state of your own body or the external world—that your feeling of pleasure is directed towards. So, pleasure is not just a feeling but also a *propositional attitude* whose content is whatever you feel pleasure towards. We needn't choose between phenomenological and attitudinal theories of pleasure, since there is a propositional attitude of feeling pleased that *p*.[1]

More specifically, pleasure is a *pro-attitude*: it is a positively valenced attitude towards whatever you feel pleased about. Desire is also a pro-attitude. Indeed, desire is often regarded as the most fundamental pro-attitude. That is why many philosophers seek to explain why pleasure is a pro-attitude by analyzing it as a special case of desire. Pleasure cannot simply be identified with desire, however, since you can desire that *p* without believing that *p*, whereas you cannot so obviously be pleased that *p* without believing that *p*.[2]

Instead, philosophers typically analyze pleasure as a conjunction of desire and belief. According to Chris Heathwood (2006), for example, pleasure is *subjective desire-satisfaction*: being pleased that *p* is simply desiring that *p* while also believing that *p*. He writes, 'pleasure can be reduced to desire and belief: to be pleased that something is the case is to want it to be the case while simultaneously believing it to be the case' (2021: 56).

A familiar objection is that you don't always experience the pleasure you anticipate when your desires are subjectively satisfied. You might desire something, and believe that your desire is satisfied, without feeling any pleasure in the subjective satisfaction of your desire. As Sidgwick writes, 'What is desired … may turn out a "Dead Sea apple", mere dust and ashes in the eating' (1907: 110). Heathwood calls this *the dead sea apple objection*, which he illustrates with the following example:

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[1] Lin (2020) argues for the hybrid theory that pleasure is both a feeling and an attitude. Byrne (2001) argues that perceptual experience is a propositional attitude, while Chalmers (2004) defends a more general version of intentionalism, according to which all experiences are propositional attitudes. Block (1996) raises objections to intentionalism.

[2] Feldman (1988: 72) and Heathwood (2006: 557) defend this claim. Phantom limb pain may be a counterexample: you can feel displeasure towards the apparently painful condition of your limb despite knowing that your limb has been amputated. Even so, you cannot feel displeasure towards this bodily condition without perceptually representing it, whereas you can desire something without either believing or perceptually representing that it obtains.

> Suppose a sports lover [Annika] sees a sport [bossaball] playing on the television in a strange bar. It is a weird and wonderful sport. Once the basic rules are explained to her, she really enjoys watching it. After many years of searching in vain to watch it again, she wanders into a bar in a foreign country. Lo and behold, there is a television playing the weird and wonderful sport. It is the same sport as before, but she no longer enjoys watching it. It is a disappointment. But she wants to watch that old sport, and is aware that she is watching it. (2022: 75)

The objection is that Annika wants to watch the game, and believes she is watching it, although she doesn't feel any pleasure in watching it. Heathwood replies that the objection ignores time-indexing. When Annika begins watching the game, she wants to keep watching, but she feels pleased that she is watching at first. After a while, she no longer feels pleased that she is watching the game, but she doesn't want to keep watching either. Hence, she never has a subjectively satisfied desire to watch the game without also feeling pleased that she is watching it.

This reply is fine, as far as it goes, but it only goes so far. We can make trouble by introducing some extraneous factor—depression, repression, or sudden misfortune—that prevents you from feeling any pleasure when your desire is subjectively satisfied. Consider the following twist on Heathwood's example:

> Suppose Barbara is depressed: this is why she is not enjoying the game. She doesn't know this, however, and she wants to continue watching the game in the hope that she begins to enjoy it. When the bartender proposes to change the channel, for example, she asks him to keep the game switched on. Normally, she would feel mildly pleased when the bartender complies with her request or displeased when he ignores it. As things are, however, her depression leaves her feeling completely numb. It masks her disposition to feel any pleasure when her desire is subjectively satisfied or to feel any displeasure when it is subjectively frustrated.

The objection is that Barbara feels no pleasure that she is watching the game, although her desire to keep watching is subjectively satisfied.

Heathwood (2022: 65–8) has recently suggested that happiness—and, presumably, pleasure too—should be analyzed in terms of the subjective satisfaction of *affective* desires, rather than merely *behavioral* desires. And yet Barbara's desire is affective in the sense that it disposes her to feel pleasure

when it is subjectively satisfied, although this disposition is blocked by her depression. If we define affective desires more restrictively as those that make you feel pleasure whenever they are subjectively satisfied, then we risk trivializing Heathwood's proposal.

I conclude that pleasure is not reducible to subjective desire-satisfaction: perhaps feeling pleased that *p* implies believing that *p* and desiring that *p*, but these individually necessary conditions are not jointly sufficient for pleasure. Instead, pleasure is a valenced reaction to what you believe or perceptually represent, which cannot be analyzed as a mere conjunction of belief and desire.

I cannot prove that pleasure is not analyzable in terms of more complex relations between belief and desire. Pending specific proposals, however, it seems reasonable to proceed on the assumption that pleasure is a sui generis pro-attitude that is irreducible to desire. This clears logical space for reversing the direction of analysis. Instead of explaining why pleasure is a pro-attitude by reducing it to desire, perhaps we can explain why desire is a pro-attitude by citing its disposition to make you feel pleasure in what you desire. On this view, pleasure is the most fundamental pro-attitude, whereas desire inherits its positive valence from the pleasure it disposes you to feel.

2. Hedonic Theories of Desire

According to hedonic theories of desire, the essence of desire is feeling pleasure in what you desire. Desire can be occurrent or dispositional: an occurrent desire is a feeling of pleasure, whereas a dispositional desire is a disposition to feel pleasure. I'll consider two versions of the hedonic theory, which disagree about the manifestation conditions for this disposition.

Galen Strawson is one of the few contemporary philosophers who expresses any sympathy for the hedonic theory of desire:

> The primary linkage of the notion of desire to a notion other than itself is not to the notion of action or behavior but rather to the notion of being pleased or happy or contented should something come about … and to the distinct but correlative notion of being unhappy or discontented should it not come about. (1994: 280)

His suggestion is that desiring something is feeling—or being disposed to feel—pleasure when your desire is satisfied. An initial problem is that the satisfaction of your desire needn't induce pleasure when you don't know or even believe that your desire is satisfied. Conversely, believing that your

desire is satisfied can induce pleasure when it is actually frustrated. Nevertheless, we can refine Strawson's proposal to avoid this problem:

> **Strawson's Hedonic Theory:** To desire that *p* is to feel—or to be disposed to feel—pleased that *p* when you believe that *p* or displeased that *p* when you believe that not-*p*.[3]

On this view, your desires dispose you to feel pleased about what you desire in counterfactual scenarios in which your desires are subjectively, rather than objectively, satisfied.

Although Strawson expresses sympathy for this hedonic theory of desire, he doesn't endorse it without qualification. Instead, he suggests that the linkage between desire and pleasure can be broken in some cases:

> The normal case is clear: the experience of positive or negative affect occurs when the desire is fulfilled or frustrated. But many things can go wrong. Pleasure in the fulfillment of a want may be annihilated by a misfortune, and the moment of satisfying a want can be the moment at which one discovers that one was in fact wrong to want what one wanted. (1994: 280)

Strawson is suggesting that the hedonic theory of desire is vulnerable to the dead sea apple objection, but in fact it is more resilient than he acknowledges. Unlike Heathwood, Strawson need not claim that Annika feels pleasure when her desire to watch bossaball is subjectively satisfied. He needs only the weaker claim that she is disposed to feel pleasure when her desire is subjectively satisfied. But Annika satisfies this weaker condition: although the game turns out to be disappointing, she is disposed feel pleased in advance when she believes that she will get to watch it. Similarly, Barbara's depression doesn't remove her disposition to feel pleasure when her desire is subjectively satisfied; instead, it *masks* her disposition by blocking its manifestation when its triggering condition obtains.[4]

We can make trouble, however, by considering desires that are *fragile* in the sense that one is disposed to lose them when one believes that they will be satisfied or frustrated. It's not implausible

[3] Schroeder (2004: 27) critically discusses a similar proposal, although he doesn't consider the revised version below.

[4] As Schroeder (2004: 31–2) notes, it is hard to explain in more basic terms what constitutes the difference between masking a disposition and eliminating it, but this is a general problem for any counterfactual analysis of dispositions, rather than a specific problem for the hedonic theory of desire.

that some human desires are like this, but the mere coherence of this scenario is enough to present a problem. Consider another twist on Heathwood's example:

> Suppose Charlotte wants to watch bossaball again, although what makes this idea appealing to her is that she doesn't know whether she will ever get the opportunity. She loses all interest when she believes that she will have the chance it again and likewise when she believes that she will never get the chance. Even so, her desire persists just as long as she remains uncertain about whether the opportunity will arise.

The objection is that Charlotte wants to watch bossaball again, although she has no disposition to feel pleasure when her desire is subjectively satisfied or displeasure when it is subjectively frustrated.

The problem of fragile desires has an epistemological dimension too. Suppose Charlotte knows that she wants to watch bossaball. She can know this without knowing—or having any evidential basis for knowing—whether she is disposed to feel pleased when her desire is subjectively satisfied. Her evidence may justify agnosticism about whether her desire is fragile enough that she will lose it when she believes it will be satisfied. Here is an initial statement of the objection:

(1) Charlotte knows that she wants to watch bossaball.
(2) But she has no evidential basis for knowing whether she is disposed to feel pleasure when she believes that she will watch bossaball.
(3) Therefore, her desire to watch bossaball doesn't require any disposition to feel pleasure when she believes that she will watch bossaball.

Someone might protest that this argument commits the *masked man fallacy*: I can know that a masked man is approaching without knowing that Jesse James is approaching, but it doesn't follow that the masked man is not Jesse James. If the masked man is Jesse James, however, this is an *a posteriori* truth that I might have no evidential basis for knowing. If Strawson's proposal is true, in contrast, it is knowable *a priori* without any need to acquire new evidence. So, if Charlotte knows that she wants to watch bossaball, then she has an evidential basis for knowing by deduction that she is disposed to feel pleasure when her desire is subjectively satisfied. As we're imagining the case, however, Charlotte has no evidential basis for knowing this.

We can avoid both problems by analyzing desire in terms of how it disposes you to feel when you *imagine* that it is satisfied, rather than when you *believe* that it is satisfied. When you imagine what you desire, you tend to experience a conscious feeling of desire. So, perhaps desire can be analyzed as a disposition to experience conscious feelings of desire when you imagine what you desire. Strawson himself mentions this proposal:

> A capacity to undergo conscious episodes of desiring or wanting is at least necessary if one is to count as desiring anything, and is arguably sufficient … Desire, on this view, can be all there just so long as there is conscious desiring. (1994: 283)

What Strawson doesn't fully acknowledge, however, is that the feeling of desire has a hedonic dimension: it is a *feeling of pleasure* in what you desire.[5]

We must be cautious in identifying feelings of desire with feelings of pleasure. Feeling desire that *p* is not the same as feeling pleased that *p*, since you can feel desire that *p* without believing or perceptually representing that *p*, whereas you cannot feel pleased that *p* without believing or perceptually representing that *p*. Instead, feeling desire that *p* is feeling pleasure in what you imagine when you imagine that *p*. Needless to say, you can imagine that *p*, and feel pleasure in what you're imagining, without believing or perceptually representing that *p*.

Consider Helena's unrequited love for Demetrius in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Although she feels an intense desire for Demetrius to love her in return, she doesn't feel pleased that her love is returned, since she doesn't believe that it is. On the contrary, she feels displeased and emotionally pained that her love is *not* returned. When she imagines Demetrius returning her love, though, she feels pleasure in what she imagines, while also feeling displeased that what she imagines is not true.[6] This hedonic ambivalence explains why the experience of unrequited love is so bittersweet.

Once we recognize that there is a hedonic dimension to the feeling of desire, we can use this to revise the hedonic theory of desire:

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[5] Admittedly, he comes close: 'Nothing could count as genuine conscious desire in a creature utterly incapable of any sort of affective state. And this reinforces the thought that the primary linkage of the notion of desire to a notion other than itself is to the notion of affect—pleasure or displeasure in the widest sense.' (1994: 284).

[6] Smithies and Weiss (2019: 44) overlook this point in denying that feelings of desire are feelings of pleasure.

> **The Revised Hedonic Theory:** To desire that *p* is to feel—or to be disposed to feel—pleasure in what you imagine when you imagine that *p* or displeasure in what you imagine when you imagine that not-*p*.

On this revised hedonic theory, the essence of desire is feeling pleasure in what you desire when you imagine it. Moreover, the strength of your desire corresponds to the degree of pleasure that you're disposed to feel in imagining what you desire. As Mill writes, 'It is a physical and metaphysical impossibility to desire anything except in proportion as the idea of it is pleasant' (1863: 57).

Feeling pleasure *when* you imagine something is not enough for feeling pleasure in *what* you imagine. Suppose you have some neural quirk that causes you to feel pleasant sensations in your toes when you imagine that it will rain. It doesn't follow that you desire what you imagine, since the act of imagining rain causes you to feel pleasure in your toes without causing you to feel any pleasure in the rain that you're imagining.

The revised hedonic theory avoids both problems for the original version. First, we can account for Charlotte's desire to watch bossaball without supposing that she has any disposition to feel pleasure when her desire is subjectively satisfied. Strawson cannot account for her desire without positing some "finkish" disposition (Lewis 1997) that she loses when its manifestation condition obtains. There is no incoherence in the idea of a finkish disposition, but we don't need it to explain Charlotte's desire, since she has another hedonic disposition that Strawson overlooks. When Charlotte imagines watching bossaball, she is disposed to feel pleasure in what she imagines. This hedonic disposition is sufficient for desire even when she has no disposition—finkish or otherwise—to feel pleasure when she believes that her desire is satisfied.

Second, we can explain how Charlotte can know what she desires even when she has no way of knowing whether she is disposed to feel pleasure when she believes that her desire will be satisfied. Since her evidence justifies agnosticism about whether her desire is fragile, she has no evidential basis for knowing how she is disposed to feel about watching bossaball when she believes that her desire will be satisfied. Even so, she can know how she is disposed to feel about watching bossaball given the beliefs and desires that she actually has right now. All she needs to do is imagine watching bossaball and know by introspection that she feels pleasure in what she imagines. As I'll explain in §3.1, we can know what we desire by knowing how we feel when we imagine what we desire.

The problem with Strawson's original hedonic theory is that it analyzes desire in terms of how you're disposed to feel in counterfactual circumstances in which your beliefs and desires may have

changed. After all, you can desire something without believing that your desire will be satisfied. And you can lose your desire when you acquire the belief that it will be satisfied. Moreover, you can know how you feel about things given the beliefs and desires you actually have without knowing how you would feel about them in counterfactual circumstances in which your beliefs and desires were to change. We can avoid these problems by analyzing desire as a disposition that can be manifested in how you feel without any change to your beliefs and desires. More specifically, we can analyze desire as a disposition to feel pleasure in what you desire when you imagine it.

3. Three Arguments for the Hedonic Theory

I've argued that we can improve on Strawson's version of the hedonic theory of desire, but why endorse the hedonic theory in the first place? The mainstream view is the *motivational theory*, according to which the essence of desire is to motivate action:

> **The Motivational Theory of Desire:** To desire that *p* is to be disposed to act in ways that you believe will make it more likely that *p*.

On this view, what explains the positive valence of desire is its motivational role, rather than its hedonic role. Desire is a pro-attitude not because it disposes you to feel pleasure in what you desire, but instead because it motivates you to pursue what you desire.

According to a pure motivational theory, motivation is both necessary and sufficient for desire. There are also impure motivational theories, which hold that motivation is necessary but not sufficient for desire: desires are "multi-track" dispositions whose essential manifestations may include feelings of pleasure as well as motivation.[7] On a pure hedonic theory, by contrast, motivational dispositions are neither necessary nor sufficient for desire. Our desires typically motivate us to act, but this is a contingent feature of their causal role, rather than part of their essence. We are typically motivated to pursue what we take pleasure in imagining, but the essence of desire is feeling pleasure in imagining what we desire, rather than being motivated to pursue what we desire. This section gives three

[7] Stalnaker (1984: 15) defends the pure motivational theory, while Smith (1995: 113–5) endorses an impure theory, although he gives more weight to motivational dispositions in explaining desire's direction of fit. In more recent work, however, Smith (2011) gives a more prominent role to feelings of pleasure; see also Humberstone (1990) and Sinhababu (2017).

arguments for the pure hedonic theory, which are designed to undermine both pure and impure motivational theories of desire.

3.1. Introspective Self-Knowledge

My first argument is that the hedonic theory explains an epistemic asymmetry between first-person and third-person perspectives on our desires, which the motivational theory cannot so easily explain. The datum to be explained is that we can know what we desire in a uniquely first-personal way that is different from our ways of knowing what other people desire. To know whether someone else wants another glass of wine, for example, you need to ask them or make an inference from observation of their behavior. In your own case, by contrast, you can know what you want without any reliance on inference or observation. How is this possible?

The hedonic theory of desire explains how you can know what you want just by knowing how you feel. To know whether you want another glass of wine, for example, you just need to know how you feel when you imagine having one. Suppose you feel pleasure in the thought of having another glass of wine. On any plausible view, this is a fact about your experience that you can know by introspection. Moreover, on the hedonic theory, this fact about your experience constitutes an occurrent desire to have another glass of wine. So, you can know that you want another glass of wine just by knowing that you feel pleasure in the thought of having one.

This is occurrent knowledge about an occurrent desire. Similarly, you can have dispositional knowledge about your dispositional desires. On the hedonic theory, your dispositional desires are constituted by dispositions to feel pleasure in imagining what you desire. When you manifest those dispositions by feeling pleasure in imagining what you desire, you're also disposed to acquire the occurrent knowledge that you desire what you're imagining. So, you have dispositional knowledge about your desire because you're disposed to acquire occurrent knowledge about your desire when it becomes occurrent.

The motivational theory, in contrast, leaves a gulf to be bridged between knowing how you feel and knowing what you desire. Your desires may dispose you to experience certain feelings, but no mere feeling is sufficient to constitute an occurrence of desire. According to the motivational theory, there is more to desire than being disposed to feel a certain way, since your desires must play the right motivational role. And yet the motivational theory struggles to explain how our knowledge of our own motivational dispositions is different in kind from our knowledge of anyone else's. Indeed, it is most

naturally combined with the view that we know about our own desires in much the same way that we know about the desires of other people: namely, by inference to the best explanation.

A familiar rejoinder is that we have a richer evidential base to draw upon in making abductive inferences about what we ourselves desire. The data that we draw upon in the first-person case are different in kind, and not merely in degree, from the third-person case. When making inferences about what other people desire, we must ultimately rely on premises about their behavior known through observation. In our own case, however, we can make use of introspectively known premises about our own experience. According to Krista Lawlor, for example, '*inference from internal promptings* is a routine means by which we know what we want' (2009: 48, her italics).

My main complaint is that we can usually know what we desire without relying on auxiliary premises about how our experiences are correlated with our motivational dispositions. Indeed, we often know what we desire without relying on inference at all. On Lawlor's view, our desires are reduced to the status of theoretical entities, which we never experience directly, but merely postulate by an abductive process of inference to the best explanation. As she expresses the point, 'One's self-knowledge of desire owes to one's ability to *sleuth out* desires as causes of certain characteristic kinds of mental imagings that fill the stream of conscious life' (2009: 72, my italics).

I don't mean to suggest that an inferential theory of self-knowledge is the only option for the motivational theory. Even so, the challenge remains to explain how else we can bridge the gulf between knowing how we feel and knowing what we desire. Perhaps we know what we desire by relying on a 'monitoring mechanism' (Nichols and Stich 2003) that generates reliable beliefs about what we desire without any reliance on inference. The problem is that we need to explain what justifies the beliefs produced by this reliable mechanism when they are not based on how we feel. After all, mere reliability is not sufficient for epistemic justification.[8] According to the hedonic theory, our beliefs about what we desire are justified by hedonic feelings of pleasure in imagining what we desire, whereas the motivational theory cannot give the same answer.

The epistemological problem for the motivational theory arises not from any specific theory of self-knowledge, but instead from the metaphysical assumption that your desires cannot be constituted by your feelings. This is what generates the gulf between knowing what you feel and knowing what you desire, which no plausible theory of self-knowledge can easily bridge. To avoid the

[8] Intuitive counterexamples include clairvoyance (BonJour 1985: ch. 3) and super-blindsight (Smithies 2019: ch. 3). Smithies (2019: 147–8) applies these examples to our introspective knowledge of what we believe.

problem, we need to recognize that our hedonic feelings are not mere symptoms of underlying motivational dispositions that constitute our desires. Instead, our hedonic feelings themselves sometimes constitute occurrences of desire. We needn't infer the existence of our desires, nor detect them blindly through the reliable operation of an internal monitoring mechanism, since we can experience our desires when they become occurrent in the stream of consciousness.

3.2. Reasons for Action

My second argument is that the hedonic theory explains the normative role of desire better than the motivational theory. This argument relies on the normative premise that our desires play not just a causal role in motivating action, but also a normative role in providing justifying reasons for action. Not everyone accepts this premise, but skepticism about the normative significance of desire is often exacerbated by neglecting its hedonic dimension.[9]

Let's start with the distinction between intrinsic and instrumental desires: we desire some things only because we believe they are conducive to other things we desire. These instrumental desires are justified by reasons provided by other desires: as such, they cannot provide justifying reasons of their own, since this results in problematic bootstrapping and double counting. Not all desires can be justified by reasons provided by other desires, however, since this generates an infinite regress. The regress of justifying reasons comes to an end in things we desire intrinsically for their own sake.

My argument relies on the normative premise that our intrinsic desires give us justifying reasons to do whatever we have reason to believe will satisfy them:

The Normative Premise: All intrinsic desires provide justifying reasons for action.

The normative premise explains why you always have some instrumental reason to do what you have reason to believe will satisfy your intrinsic desires. If you prefer gin rather than vodka, for example, then you have some reason to choose it at the bar. Of course, this desire-based reason for action can be rebutted or undercut; say, by evidence that the gin is mixed with gasoline. In such cases, your desire

[9] The normative premise is disputed by Scanlon (1998), Raz (1999) and Parfit (2011), but Chang (2004) and Smith (2011) critique their arguments. It is implied by the Humean theory of reasons, according to which all justifying reasons for action are provided by desires (Schroeder 2007), but not vice versa, since the normative premise is compatible with the thesis that moral considerations provide justifying reasons for action that need not align with your desires.

gives you some reason to drink the gin, which is outweighed by much stronger reasons not to do so.[10] In the absence of such defeating considerations, however, your intrinsic desires can provide reasons that are strong enough to justify action. When your evidence is misleading—perhaps you have no inkling that the gin is mixed with gasoline—your intrinsic desires can even justify acting in ways that turn out badly for you.[11]

How do our intrinsic desires give us justifying reasons for action? The motivational theory struggles to explain this, since the mere fact that you're motivated to act gives you no reason for action. We can illustrate the point using Warren Quinn's example of the radioman:

> Suppose I am in a strange functional state that disposes me to turn on radios that I see to be turned off. Given the perception that a radio in my vicinity is turned off, I try, all other things being equal, to get it turned on. Does this state rationalize my choices? Told nothing more than this, one may certainly doubt that it does. But in the case I am imagining, this is all there is to the state. I do not turn on the radios in order to hear music or get news. It is not that I have an inordinate appetite for entertainment or information. Indeed, I do not turn them on in order to *hear* anything. (1993: 236)

Radioman is motivated to turn on radios: he goes out of his way to press buttons when he believes that this will result in turning on radios. As Quinn notes, however, the mere fact that he is motivated to turn on radios gives him no justifying reason to do so:

> I cannot see how this bizarre functional state in itself gives me even a *prima facie* reason to turn on radios, even those I can see to be available for cost-free on turning. It may help explain, causally, why I turn on a particular radio, but it does not make the act sensible. (1993: 237)

[10] As Schroder (2007: 92–7) argues, it's literally false that you have no reason to drink the gin, although this pragmatically communicates the truth that you have no reason strong enough to justify acting upon.

[11] I'm using the term 'reason' in what Schroder (2007) calls the *subjective* sense, rather than the *objective* sense: reasons count in favor of action by making it justified given your subjective evidence, rather than advisable given all the objective facts.

It is not that radioman has reasons to turn on radios that are undermined by defeating considerations, since we can stipulate that there is no cost in turning them on. Instead, the act of turning on radios seems utterly pointless when considered from his own perspective.

The hedonic theory of desire pinpoints what radioman is missing: he has no justifying reason to turn on radios because he is not disposed to feel any pleasure in the thought of turning them on.[12] Our intrinsic desires are not like this: they give us justifying reasons for action by disposing us to feel intrinsic pleasure in what we desire. My intrinsic desire to taste gin, for example, disposes me to take pleasure in the thought of tasting gin, which gives me some defeasible reason to order it at the bar. Similarly, if radioman feels pleasure in the thought of turning on the radio, then he thereby has some defeasible reason to turn it on.

How can a *mere feeling* give you any justifying reason to do anything? The answer is that pleasure is not merely a feeling: it is a *pro-attitude* that positively evaluates whatever you feel pleased about. When you feel pleasure in imagining something, you evaluate what you're imagining in a positively valenced way. That explains why you have some reason to do what you have reason to believe will bring about what you're imagining. What I'm suggesting, in effect, is that your intrinsic desires give you justifying reasons for action by representing what you desire under *the guise of the good*.

Quinn defends the closely related proposal that our intrinsic desires provide us with justifying reasons for action only if we believe there is some value in acting on them. To have any such reason for action, he says, "I need the *thought* that the direction in which I am psychologically pointed leads to something good" (1993: 242). As many have noted, however, this risks over-intellectualization: children and animals, for example, can act rationally on the justifying reasons provided by their desires without thinking, judging, or believing that there is any value in doing so.[13]

The hedonic theory of desire captures a grain of truth in Quinn's idea that our desires give us reasons for action by representing what we desire under the guise of the good. Desire represents value in a more primitive way than evaluative belief: belief represents value in virtue of its *content*, whereas desire represents value in virtue of its *attitude-type*. We represent what we desire as good by virtue of

[12] Smith (2011: 93) identifies the missing element as a disposition to feel pleasure when your desire is satisfied, whereas I identify it instead with the disposition to feel pleasure in imagining what you desire.

[13] Chang (2004: 67) and Smith (2011: 93) make the same criticism of Scanlon, who claims that desiring involves 'having a tendency to see something as a reason' (1998: 39), although Gregory (2021: ch. 9) attempts to defend the thesis that desires are beliefs about reasons against this objection.

our positively valenced hedonic reactions to what we desire: we feel pleasure in what we desire when we imagine it. This is why our desires give us justifying reasons for action.

3.3. Avoiding Counterexamples

My third argument is that the hedonic theory of desire avoids familiar counterexamples to the motivational theory, including cases of motivation without desire and desire without motivation.

Quinn's radioman is a case of motivation without desire. We can stipulate that radioman has no instrumental desire to turn on radios: if he has any such desire, it must be an intrinsic one. According to the normative premise, all intrinsic desires provide justifying reasons for action. As we've seen, however, radioman has no justifying reason to turn on radios. Therefore, he has no desire—intrinsic or otherwise—to turn on radios. Nevertheless, he is motivated to turn on radios. Hence, motivation is not sufficient for desire.

There are also cases of desire without motivation, including Galen Strawson's example of the Weather Watchers:

> The Weather Watchers are a race of sentient, intelligent creatures. They are distributed about the surface of their planet, rooted to the ground, profoundly interested in the local weather. They have sensations, thoughts, emotions, beliefs, desires. They possess a conception of an objective, spatial world. But they are constitutionally incapable of any kind of behavior, as this is normally understood. They lack the necessary physiology. Their mental lives have no other-observable effects. They are not even disposed to behave in any way. (1994: 251)

The hedonic theory explains how the Weather Watchers can have desires about the weather without being motivated to act on them. It is enough that they are disposed to feel pleasure in what they desire. They might, for instance, feel pleasure in imagining sunshine and displeasure in imagining rain. These hedonic feelings need not be capable of motivating them to act. Indeed, they might be epiphenomena that play no causal role at all.

A motivational theorist might reply that hedonic dispositions are not desires unless they play some causal role in motivating action. This neglects the point that these hedonic dispositions play the normative role of desire in providing justifying reasons for action. If the Weather Watchers are disposed to feel pleasure in imagining sunshine and displeasure in imagining rain, this gives them some reason to do whatever they have reason to believe will bring about sunshine or prevent rain. Of course,

there need be nothing they can do—and nothing they have any reason to believe they can do—to influence these outcomes. Even so, they might acquire reason to believe that they can influence the weather through prayer or incantation. In that case, their hedonic dispositions give them justifying reasons to try to do whatever they believe they can to bring about sunshine or prevent rain, although they are not motivated to act for these reasons.

We can illustrate the point more forcefully using David Lewis's example of mad pain:

> There might be a strange man who sometimes feels pain, just as we do, but whose pain differs greatly from ours in its causes and effects. (1980: 216)

To flesh out the example, suppose the madman experiences the same painful sensation that we do when holding our hand over a flame. This sensation has a hedonic dimension as well as a sensory one: not only does it feel like *pain*, but it also feels *unpleasant*. We feel displeasure at this sensation, and we feel a strong desire for it to stop. This is true of the madman too, since he feels pain just as we do. The only difference is that we're motivated to stop the pain, whereas the madman is motivated to prolong it. Rather than withdrawing his hand, for example, he continues to hold it above the flame. More generally, his psychological wires are crossed in such a way that the motivational roles of pleasure and displeasure are inverted: his feelings of pleasure motivate him to act as we do when we feel displeasure, and vice versa.

What does the madman desire? Intuitively, he desires just what we desire: namely, for the pain to stop. After all, he feels just as we feel when we experience aversion towards our own pain. And yet the motivational theory implies that he doesn't want his pain to stop, since he is not motivated to make it stop; instead, he wants it to continue, since he is motivated to prolong it. All this seems wrong. It is more plausible that he wants his pain to stop, although he is not motivated to act on his desire because his psychological wires are crossed.

We can support this conclusion by appealing to the normative premise that all intrinsic desires provide justifying reasons for action. Intuitively, the madman has no justifying reason to prolong his pain: the mere fact that he is motivated to prolong it gives him no reason to do so. Given the normative premise, however, it follows that he has no intrinsic desire to prolong his pain. Instead, he has every reason to stop his pain, since this is what he intrinsically desires. Because his psychological wires are crossed, however, he is not motivated to act in ways that are instrumentally rational given his desire.

I conclude that motivation is neither necessary nor sufficient for desire. Although our desires tend to motivate action, this is a contingent aspect of their causal role. It is necessary that all intrinsic desires give us justifying reasons for action, but it is contingent whether we are rational enough to be motivated to act upon them. The madman is just an extreme case of irrationality in which someone is not at all motivated to act rationally on the reasons provided by his intrinsic desires. There is no good reason to deny the possibility of such cases.

4. Objections and Replies

I'll now defend the hedonic theory against the objections that it generates too many desires, or too few, and that it wrongly excludes the desires of non-human animals.

4.1. Too Many Desires

Suppose I take pleasure in indulging the fantasy of abandoning my work and family to live alone in the woods. Is it plausible, as the hedonic theory implies, that this is what I want to do with my life? The objection says no: I need have no desire for my fantasy to become reality. If this is right, the hedonic theory generates too many desires.

In reply, we can weaken the force of the objection by noting that we often have conflicting desires that vary in their degrees of strength. It's not implausible that I have some desire to live alone in the woods, which explains why I take pleasure in the fantasy. At the same time, this desire is not strong enough to act upon, since it is outweighed by a much stronger desire not to abandon my work or my family. This explains why it would be misleading to assert without qualification that I want to live alone in the woods. Although literally true, this pragmatically communicates the falsehood that my desire is strong enough to act upon. In fact, it would be more natural for me to deny that I have any desire to live alone in the woods. Although literally false, this pragmatically communicates the truth that I have no desire strong enough to act upon.[14]

The hedonic theory doesn't imply that you desire everything that you enjoy imagining. You might enjoy the experience of imagining the gruesome scenes depicted in a horror film, for example,

[14] In effect, I'm extending Schroeder's (2007: 92–7) pragmatic strategy for explaining away negative existential statements from reasons to desires. Although the pragmatic strategy doesn't extend from language to thought, I maintain that any plausibility in the thought that I have no desire to live in the woods derives from conflating it with the thought that I have no desire strong enough to act upon.

without having any desire to experience them in reality. The hedonic theory needn't imply otherwise so long as you take no pleasure in what you're imagining. Instead, you take pleasure in the displeasure that you feel towards what you're imagining. After all, it can be fun to imagine things that induce some mild degree of fear or disgust. In such cases, you might take pleasure in the *act* of imagining something without taking any pleasure in the *content* of what you're imagining (compare §4.3).

4.2. Too Few Desires

Another objection is that the hedonic theory generates too few desires. Here is an example from Fred Feldman, which involves the distinction between intrinsic and instrumental desires:

> Suppose Bob lives far from the nearest liquor store and his car is broken. He will need to walk a long way in the hot sunshine to get some beer. We might say this: 'he who desires the end, desires the necessary means.' So we may say that Bob wants to take that long walk—he has no other way of getting the beer. But we surely do not want to say this: 'he who finds the idea of the end pleasant, finds the idea of the means pleasant.' Bob does not enjoy lugging a heavy case of beer in the hot sun. (MS: 9)

The objection is that Bob wants to take the long walk in the sun, although he is not disposed to feel any pleasure either in taking the walk or in imagining it.

Feldman considers restricting the hedonic theory to intrinsic desires, but no such restriction is needed. Instead, we can exploit his distinction between intrinsic and instrumental pleasure, which mirrors the distinction between intrinsic and instrumental desire.[15] If you desire something for its own sake, then you're disposed to take pleasure in what you desire just for its own sake. If you desire something merely as a means to an end, in contrast, then you're disposed to take pleasure in what you desire merely as a means to that end.

Bob isn't disposed to feel pleased about walking in the sun for its own sake, since he has no intrinsic desire to walk in the sun. Even so, he may be disposed to feel pleased about doing whatever is needed to buy beer. After all, we often feel pleased about making progress towards our intrinsically desired ends. Bob may feel displeased when his plans are foiled by a parade that blocks his route to the liquor store, and pleased when he discovers an alternative route that circumvents the parade.

[15] See Feldman 1988: 73–4; also Heathwood 2006: 555–9.

Indeed, he may feel pleasure or displeasure when he merely imagines such things. If so, the hedonic theory implies that Bob desires to walk in the sun.

Suppose Bob has no disposition to feel pleasure—whether intrinsic or instrumental—in the thought of walking in the sun. In that case, it is reasonable to deny that he has any desire to do so. Although he is motivated to walk in the sun, it doesn't follow that he desires it, since motivation is not sufficient for desire. Moreover, we can explain why Bob is motivated to walk in the sun without attributing any such desire. He is motivated instead by his desire to drink beer together with his belief that walking in the sun is the only way to get beer.

Once we reject the motivational theory of desire, we're no longer committed to Feldman's assumption that 'he who desires the end, desires the necessary means.' Sometimes we do things not because we want to but because we believe they are necessary for getting other things we want. Indeed, this point is reflected in ordinary language. For instance, Bob might say, 'I don't want to walk in the sun, but I need to do it anyway so I can buy some beer'.

Feldman raises another objection that a 'Kantian agent' might desire to do their moral duty without being disposed to feel pleasure either in doing it or in the thought of doing it:

> Suppose some Kantian wants to do his duty for its own sake. He is not interested in getting to heaven. He is not interested in the pleasures allegedly arising from knowledge of one's own virtue. He just wants to do his duty. Suppose on some occasion he takes himself to be in the midst of doing his duty. Still he might not take pleasure in doing it. He might be the sort of person who often (and honestly) says: 'I get no pleasure from doing this.' (MS: 13)

Feldman's Kantian is not motivated to do his duty because it gives him pleasure. Instead, he does it just because it's the right thing to do. This doesn't entail that he takes no pleasure in doing the right thing. After all, you can take pleasure in doing something while also doing it just because it's the right thing to do. Parents can take pleasure in caring for their children, for example, without doing so for the selfish reason that it brings them pleasure.[16]

[16] This undermines Smith's (1998: 453–4) objection that hedonic theories of desire are committed to psychological hedonism, the thesis that pleasure is the sole motivation for action. As Feinberg (2004) explains, we're not always selfishly motivated by our own pleasure when we act on our intrinsic desires, since our intrinsic desires are not always concerned with our own pleasure.

But suppose Feldman's Kantian is not like this: he takes no pleasure in the thought of doing his duty or displeasure in the thought of violating his duty. Again, it's not unreasonable to deny that he has any desire to do his duty. Once we reject the motivational theory of desire, we can explain why he is motivated to do his duty without attributing any such desire to him. He does his duty because he believes that it is right. Sometimes we do things not because we want to but only because we believe we should. The Kantian might say, 'I have no desire to do my duty, but I must do it anyway because it's the right thing to do'.

This is to reject the Humean theory of motivation, which says that every action is motivated by some desire together with some belief that performing the action will satisfy the desire. And yet the Humean theory of motivation tends to go hand-in-hand with the motivational theory of desire. For instance, Michael Smith (1995: 115) supports the Humean theory of motivation by appealing to a functionalist theory of mind that explains the difference between belief and desire in terms of their motivational roles. This argument loses its grip once we abandon the motivational theory of desire.

4.3. Animal Desires

One version of the 'two few desires' objection is that the hedonic theory cannot account for desires in non-human animals. In reply, non-human animals can have desires so long as they can imagine what they desire and feel pleasure in what they are imagining. Moreover, they can do this without any cognitive capacity to think abstractly about what they desire or any meta-cognitive capacity to feel pleased that they are imagining what they desire.

According to the hedonic theory, pleasure is psychologically—as well as definitionally—more fundamental than desire. Some primitive creatures may feel pleasure or displeasure in how they represent things without any capacity to imagine that things could be otherwise. These creatures have likes and dislikes, but they have no desires. Desire is psychologically more demanding than pleasure, since it requires some capacity to imagine alternative possibilities and to feel pleasure in what you imagine. Not all non-human animals satisfy this psychological condition, but many of them do.[17]

Imagination can be sensory as well cognitive: you can imagine things by visualizing them, for example, rather than by thinking about them more abstractly. Human desires are more abstract in content than animal desires because we can think about the world using abstract concepts and we can feel pleasure in what we are thinking about. The desires of non-human animals, in contrast, are more

[17] Mitchell (2016) reviews the empirical evidence for imagination in non-human animals.

plausibly constrained by their sensory capacities. They can imagine what they desire in a sensory format without having the cognitive capacities required to think abstractly about what they desire.

Non-human animals can also have desires without any capacity for meta-cognition. There is a difference between feeling pleasure in the *content* of what you're imagining and feeling pleasure in the mental act of *imagining* it. A recovering alcoholic might feel pleasure in the imagined prospect of drinking gin, for example, without feeling pleased about the fact that they are imagining it. Conversely, non-human animals can feel pleasure in what they imagine without having the meta-cognitive capacity to feel pleased about the fact that they are imagining it.

The neuroscientist, Kent Berridge, has found dissociations between pleasure and motivation by manipulating dopamine levels in rats.[18] Elevating dopamine by injecting amphetamine increases their motivation to obtain food but without affecting behavioral indications of pleasure: rats speed more quickly towards sugary food but lick their lips no more often when eating it. They can even be motivated to eat foods they appear to find disgusting, which they react to by wiping their mouths and shaking their heads. Conversely, depleting dopamine saps motivation without diminishing pleasure: rats show little interest in food, and may even starve to death unless actively fed, although they display the usual signs of pleasure when fed sugary foods.

The hedonic theory of desire is entirely consistent with these experimental results. It may conflict with Berridge's informal summary, according to which 'wanting' comes apart from 'liking', although he uses scare quotes to indicate that his use of these terms may depart from their ordinary meaning. If the hedonic theory is true, then Berridge's informal summary is accurate only if rats with elevated dopamine feel pleasure when they imagine eating food that they subsequently find disgusting. It seems more likely, however, that they are motivated to eat the food without being prone to feel pleasure in the prospect of eating it. If so, these are not aptly described as cases of wanting without liking, since motivation is not sufficient for desire. Instead, Berridge's rats are in the same predicament as Quinn's radioman, since being motived to eat the food gives them no reason to do so. Either way, Berridge's experimental findings pose no threat to the hedonic theory of desire.

[18] Kringelbach and Berridge (2012) provide an accessible overview.

5. Theoretical Applications

Having argued for the hedonic theory of desire, and defended it against objections, I'll conclude by considering its broader theoretical significance. What are its implications for current debates in ethics and the philosophy of mind?

The hedonic theory of desire has important consequence for theories of welfare. Desire-satisfaction theories of welfare are often supported by appealing to the Resonance Constraint, which says that your welfare is constrained by what you desire:

> **The Resonance Constraint:** Something is a welfare good for you only if it resonates with your desires.[19]

The Resonance Constraint implies that all welfare subjects are creatures with desires. As I explained in §4.3, however, some non-human animals may feel pleasure or displeasure without having any capacity to imagine alternative possibilities of the kind that is required for desire. Such creatures are surely welfare subjects, since their feelings of pleasure or displeasure can impact their welfare without resonating with any desires. We should therefore revise the Resonance Constraint by including pleasure along with desire in a more general category of hedonically valenced pro-attitudes:

> **The Revised Resonance Constraint:** Something is a welfare good for you only if it resonates with your hedonically valenced attitudes, including pleasure as well as desire.

More generally, we should abandon desire-satisfaction theories of welfare, since they focus too narrowly on the hedonically valenced attitude of desire. Instead, we should prefer attitudinal theories of welfare that include all hedonically valenced attitudes, including pleasure as well as desire, within the class of attitudes that determines welfare.

The hedonic theory of desire also has important consequences for the relationship between consciousness and welfare. Many philosophers claim that only conscious beings are welfare subjects. The hedonic theory of desire explains why this is so. Without the capacity to experience feelings of pleasure, you cannot have desires or any other hedonically valenced attitudes of the kind that are required for being a welfare subject. However, this criterion excludes not only all unconscious

[19] Proponents include Railton (1986), Rosati (1996), and Heathwood (2021).

creatures, including *zombies*, but also some conscious creatures, including *Vulcans*, which David Chalmers defines as 'a conscious creature who experiences no happiness, suffering, pleasure, pain, or any other positive or negative affective states' (2022: 343). Neither zombies nor Vulcans have the capacity to feel pleasure required to satisfy the amended version of the Resonance Constraint. On this view, consciousness is necessary but not sufficient for welfare.[20]

One final consequence concerns the prospects for a functionalist theory of mind, which aims to analyze mental states in terms of their causal role. There is a broad consensus that functionalism cannot succeed as an analysis of phenomenal consciousness, since we can coherently imagine scenarios in which our phenomenal feelings are dissociated from their normal causal role. We can coherently imagine *zombies* who function as if they feel pain without feeling pain and *madmen* who feel pain without functioning as if they feel pain. Even if there is no functional analysis of phenomenal consciousness, however, a popular fallback position is that we can give a functional analysis of propositional attitudes, including belief and desire.

If the hedonic theory of desire is true, this fallback position is unstable: there can be no functional analysis of desire without some functional analysis of feeling pleasure. If there is no functional analysis of phenomenal consciousness, including pleasure, there is no functional analysis of propositional attitudes. A more promising approach is what Uriah Kriegel (2013) calls 'the phenomenal intentionality program', which seeks to analyze propositional attitudes in terms of their relations to phenomenal consciousness. The hedonic theory of desire, which analyzes desire in terms of feelings of pleasure, is just one application of this more general program.

I conclude that the hedonic theory of desire has broad theoretical significance for a wide range of current debates in ethics and the philosophy of mind. Moreover, it has many theoretical advantages over its main rival—the motivational theory of desire—and shows resilience in the face of objections. Although it is rarely taken seriously, the hedonic theory of desire deserves reconsideration.

Acknowledgements

I'm grateful to Cameron Green, Inchul Yum, Eliška Wichterlová, and multiple anonymous referees for helpful feedback on previous drafts of this paper.

[20] Smithies (forthcoming) gives a more detailed argument for this claim.

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