


ARTICLE

The badness of pain

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Abstract

Why is pain bad? The most straightforward theory of pain's badness, *dolorism*, appeals to the phenomenal quality of displeasure. In spite of its explanatory appeal, the view is too straightforward to capture two central puzzles, namely pain that is enjoyed and pain that is not painful (e.g. pain asymbolia). These cases can be captured by *conditionalism*, which makes the badness of displeasure conditional on an agent's attitude. But conditionalism fails where *dolorism* succeeds with explanatory appeal. A new approach is proposed, *reverse conditionalism*, which maintains the explanatory appeal of *dolorism*, but gives attitudes a value-defeating role. It is argued that this view does best in fulfilling the desiderata and capturing the cases.

Why is pain bad? There is plenty of literature about the nature of pain, but less about its badness; plenty of literature about well-being, but surprisingly little about ill-being. This is particularly surprising because much of normative ethics takes for granted the badness of pain in order to ground the wrongness of causing it. If anything is intrinsically bad, it's pain.¹ Yet there are instances where we do not treat pain as intrinsically bad, but only instrumentally, and still other cases where it is not treated as bad at all but even good. Pain's badness, while obvious, isn't straightforward.

One might think comprehensive theories of well-being also account for ill-being, including pain, but it turns out that it is not obvious that standard accounts of well-being can do this, as Shelly Kagan argues (2014). Consider desire satisfaction theory. One might think that desire satisfaction theory naturally yields an account of ill-being according to which ill-being is a matter of having *frustrated desires*. But a frustrated desire is simply a privation of good, i.e., not getting what you desired, hence a failure to gain an improvement in well-being, not a robust bad. One might reconstrue: for some putative bad X, we might say that what you want is X *not* to obtain, but X does obtain. But again, this is still simply an absence of getting what's desired, namely X not obtaining. It's hard to see how the view can introduce bads that won't simply reduce to privation of well-being, at least not without further argumentation. Similar questions arise for other accounts.

Ill-being may encompass more than pain, but since pain is at least part of our ill-being, if anything is, and since it's not clear how its badness can be explained by

¹I follow the literature and use 'intrinsic value' to convey 'final' or 'non-instrumental' value. This is not to be confused with value solely in virtue of intrinsic properties.

many standard theories of well-being, we might as well look at it on its own, which is what I do in this article. What is of interest isn't just the sensation of physical pain, but pain construed broadly. This includes other unpleasant physical experiences, such as nausea, extreme hunger, cold, and dizziness, as well as non-physical, psychological unpleasant experiences. In philosophical discussions of well-being, the tradition since at least Plato has been to treat psychological displeasure in the same broad category of ill-being as physical displeasure and so I will too.² To be clear, then, I will use 'the unpleasant' or 'displeasure' from now on to refer to the broadest category, which includes typical physical pain sensations, physical displeasure such as nausea, and psychological displeasure; and I will use 'physical pain' or 'pain sensation' for the sensation of physical pain. This article is about the badness of broadest category: the unpleasant.

The commonsense view is that the unpleasant has a recognizable phenomenological character of negative valence – to be unpleasant is to be an experience that feels a certain way, to wit, bad. That's not to say that there must be one distinctive feeling common to all unpleasant experiences. That might be true, and some philosophers hold this view (Moore 1962 [1903], Bramble 2013); others reject displeasure as a distinctive feel, rather it is an aspect of experience (Kagan 1992, Crisp 2006). What's common among these views is the commonsense claim that there is phenomenologically recognizable negative valence to unpleasant experience.

Although seemingly obvious, the *heterogeneity objection* complains that there is no common phenomenological character (Sidgwick 1981 [1907], Heathwood 2007). A response is to pivot to an account that reduces displeasure to experiences that are the object of an attitude such as desire. I discuss *desire-reductive accounts* (DRA) below.

The view I will ultimately defend retains the commonsense thought that the badness of the unpleasant is explained by the way it feels. That entails that unpleasant experience has a phenomenologically recognizable character. That's not to say, however, that what it is for something to *be* unpleasant just is for it to feel a certain way. For the most part, the article aims to remain neutral regarding an analysis of the unpleasant. The central exception, however, is DRA, since it denies that unpleasant experience has a recognizably negative valence phenomenological character.

Much of the current philosophical literature on pain occurs in philosophy of mind and is devoted exclusively to the nature of physical pain – what it is, whether it is necessarily unpleasant, and what its unpleasantness amounts to.³ Beyond DRA, which concerns unpleasantness broadly, philosophers of mind offer other reductive accounts of the unpleasantness of physical pain such as representationalism, the view that physical pain's unpleasantness is reducible to representational content, such as damage to the body (Tye 1995). Some representationalists argue that physical pain is reducible to evaluative content (Helm 2002, Bain 2013), whereas others argue it is reducible to imperative content, i.e., a command (Klein 2007, Martínez 2015). Functionalism accounts reject representationalism and reduce the unpleasantness of physical pain to a functional role in our mental economy (Aydede 2014, Aydede and Fulkerson 2019). Importantly, where these discussions of physical pain diverge is at a point subsequent to the acknowledgement of typical physical pain's unpleasant phenomenological character.

²Moreover, empirical evidence suggests that there is a common element (Singer et al. 2004). See Kahane (2016) for philosophical discussion.

³For example, the Stanford Encyclopedia entry 'Pain' opens with the following: '[p]ain is the most prominent member of a class of sensations known as bodily sensations' <<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/pain/>>.

Recently some proponents of reductive accounts of physical pain have drawn attention to physical pain's badness. Some suggest that it is a desideratum of a reductive account of physical pain that it is able to answer the normative question (Bain 2017) and it can be argued that it is a strike against an account if it gives the wrong answer (Jacobson 2013). The assumption appears to be that a reductive account must source physical pain's badness at the bottom of the reduction (Aydede and Fulkerson 2019: 28). But even if analyzed reductively, it does not follow that the source of badness is reductive. What physical pain reduces to might not be what explains why it's bad; badness might emerge higher up. Importantly, there is methodological advantage in locating the explanation of pain's badness higher up. Many reductive accounts rely on empirical science and leave open the possibility that future data may reveal the correct account of physical pain and, looking at the deepest level of reduction, may preclude an explanation of badness, not to mention the challenge of grounding the normative in the descriptive. Further, to locate the badness of physical pain at a deeper level of the reduction is to risk counterintuitive or worse implications about its value – in particular that it might be good, rather than bad. Consider, for instance, the representationalist account according to which physical pain's representational content is 'damage to the body' (Tye 1995, 2006). Arguably what is represented, to wit, damage to the body, is bad, but would it then follow that the representation of this thing is also bad (cf. Jacobson 2013)? Quite the contrary, one could argue: its being so represented is *good*, since now the subject of the pain has been alerted to some bodily damage.

Importantly, it strongly seems that what is bad about the unpleasantness of physical pain is the same thing that is bad about *any* unpleasant experience. But a univocal account cannot be achieved if the badness of physical pain is explanatorily exhausted by a reductive analysis. Consequently, on the very plausible assumption that the best explanation of the unpleasant is univocal, the best starting point is at the level of unpleasantness. This article therefore takes this approach, with the further advantage of being compatible with empirical evidence and accordingly with most if not all reductive accounts of physical pain and unpleasantness. Again, this is not to say that physical pain is best analyzed in terms of unpleasantness, or that unpleasantness cannot be further reduced. Rather, this is to clarify that the target of the account is the *unpleasant*, which is a feature of typical physical pain.

A good account, then, will univocally explain the badness of typical physical pain, as well as other unpleasant physical and psychological experiences. Further, since babies and non-human animals also have unpleasant experiences that are intuitively bad for them, it would be peculiar if the explanation of the badness of unpleasant experiences for these welfare subjects were different; hence a second desideratum for an account of the badness of the unpleasant is that it be univocal across welfare subjects. A further desideratum is that the account capture only that bad pains are bad. As we will see, there are certain categories of the unpleasant that we should be able to say are not bad.

Dolorism

One theory appeals directly to phenomenal quality to explain badness. On this view, feeling tone equals value valence. If a physical or psychological experience has a negative feeling tone, it has a negative value. If it feels bad, it is bad. To be precise:

S's experience E (at t) is intrinsically bad for S (at t) if and because E has negative feeling tone.

Given the parallels to hedonism, call this straightforward account *dolorism*.⁴

The appeal of the account is its straightforward and intuitively compelling explanation of the badness of the unpleasant. In the way that Mill says of the goodness of happiness that 'ultimate ends are not amenable to direct proof' (Mill 2001 [1861]: 4), we have the same direct grounding of badness in dolorism. There is no further explanation to be given. This explanation resonates with the commonsense explanation that pain is bad *because it hurts*. Further, dolorism easily captures the badness of physical and psychological unpleasant experiences across all welfare subjects including non-human animals and infants. As appealing as it may be, dolorism does not give the right verdict when it comes to unpleasant experiences of a certain kind, which I turn to now.

'Hurts so good' experiences

There are some unpleasant experiences that we do not treat as bad and may even treat as good. These are experiences in which we enjoy physical pain, such as the pain of exertion in intense athletic activity that is relished by many people. Inspired by a gym-goers' slogan, I call these experiences HSG experiences – experiences that 'hurt so good.' There are many instances of these, such as eating very spicy food, getting a deep tissue massage, jumping in a freezing lake, sitting in a very hot sauna, or eating something with a strong bitter or sour flavour. There are further relevant examples that may transpire in the bedroom, but I am going to do my best to make my point while keeping this discussion PG, as it were. In any case, we don't need to entertain what some people think of as lurid masochistic examples to see that there is a great deal of complexity to the value and disvalue of unpleasant experiences. Such examples are more plentiful and less controversial than has been previously acknowledged. As Wayne Sumner remarks,

there are quite commonplace instances of our not being averse to, or even relishing, pain. I can deliberately probe a loose tooth with my tongue and find the sharp pang which results quite delicious. In this case I have no difficulty identifying the feeling as painful; indeed, that seems to be part of its appeal. (Sumner 1996: 101)

There are also psychological HSG experiences. Thrill-seekers are familiar with these – many people enjoy unpleasant psychological experiences such as fear. Similarly, many people relish feelings of deep sorrow or other unpleasant psychological experiences when listening to very stirring music or reading a tragic novel (cf. Smuts 2009).

One might be inclined to say that HSG experiences do not feel unpleasant; they are *enjoyed*, and that just is what it is to be pleasant. But this is inaccurate. In an HSG experience it is precisely the *unpleasantness* that is enjoyed. We find this quality of the experience enjoyable, and relish and welcome it.

To be sure, in some cases an unpleasant experience is welcomed not because of the way it feels, but because of its instrumental or signatory significance. Some people think that when other people claim to enjoy the pain of exertion in exercise, it is because they see this discomfort as a sign of the good work that they are doing in pushing themselves

⁴Dolorism under a different name is represented in Goldstein (1989) and Rachels (2000).

to develop their athletic ability or to become healthier, but they do not genuinely enjoy the pain of exertion for how it feels.

While this is surely true in some cases, nevertheless it is not true in all cases. Some people enjoy the pain of exertion in athletic activity intrinsically for the way it feels. Enjoying this feeling may have started out as a matter of associating it with health or achievement, but in these cases the feeling itself is now enjoyed, even in the absence of future good, simply for the way it feels. Moreover, there are other cases where an unpleasant experience has no relation to further good, such as eating spicy food, jumping in a cold lake, or Sumner's relishing the pang of a sore tooth. These experiences feel unpleasant, and are enjoyed for the way they feel.

Yet one might think that it is not the unpleasantness of experience that is enjoyed, but the other elements of the experience. Consider spicy food. We wouldn't seek out the burning sensation on its own, without any other flavors. One might suppose, then, that in all apparent cases of HSG experiences, the unpleasant experience is not sought for the way it feels, but is a part of a larger whole, the other parts of which are enjoyable.

It is undoubtedly true that in some HSG experiences, displeasure is one element that is part of an experience with many different aspects. What matters is whether the part of the experience with the displeasure also is enjoyed for the way it feels, or whether in every case, it is tolerated because it makes possible or comes along with some other enjoyable experiences. I don't doubt that there are cases where the latter is true. These are not HSG experiences. But not all cases are like this. For many people who enjoy spicy food, the burning tingle is not *merely tolerated* because it is a concomitant of other, enjoyable experiences. Rather, it is itself enjoyed. In fact, the whole experience is pursued at least in part to experience this burning tingle, and one would be disappointed if the food weren't sufficiently spicy so as to produce it. People who enjoy horror movies feel similarly: they are disappointed if they do not feel genuine horror.

To be clear, I am not claiming that everyone enjoys HSG experiences.⁵ All we need to see is that in at least some instances, an experience that feels unpleasant is itself enjoyed for the way it feels, and that intuitively, HSG experiences are not bad for the people who enjoy them – not even *pro tanto*.

Because dolorism is committed to saying that the value of experiences is a matter of feeling tone, dolorism is committed to saying that HSG experiences are intrinsically bad. But there is nothing objectionable about welcoming and seeking these experiences just for the sake of feeling them, whereas it is objectionable to seek something that is intrinsically bad for its own sake. This gives us a reason to reject dolorism.

A dolorist might reply that the pleasure one takes in HSG experiences is valuable, even if the displeasure is bad, and according to the hedono-doloric calculus, you are well off when hedons of pleasure outweigh the dolors. But this approach has counter-intuitive implications. If the hedons and dolors are equal, one would be in a *zero value* state of well-being, and an intense deep tissue massage or an invigorating swim in an icy lake hardly has the same well-being value as feeling nothing.⁶ Of course, there may be

⁵Indeed, some people may never have HSG experiences. But this is not evidence against it being the case that some people do. Having given this article as a talk on many occasions, I ask those in attendance who have enjoyed an HSG experience to put up their hands so skeptics in the audience may see that at least some people enjoy them. The results are just about the same every time: roughly 80% of people raise their hand. Of course, this is hardly scientific, but helpful, I hope, to illustrate plausibility.

⁶Feldman (2004: 88) makes a similar argument.

cases in which these experiences make someone just as badly off as well off and the whole thing is a stalemate, but in other cases it is exactly this experience that is sought and considered worthwhile. Call this the *zero-value* objection.

The dolorist could insist that if it is stipulated that the experience is one that has positive well-being value, then it *must* be the case that the experience has on balance more hedons than dolors. Only experiences that are truly neutral in well-being value would have exactly equal amounts of each. So it's false to claim that there can be just as many (or more) dolors than hedons in these HSG experiences.

But when we think about what these experiences are like to the people who are experiencing them, the pleasure gained need not be proportionate to or even greater than the pain. Suppose that someone enjoys intensely painful deep-tissue massages. Suppose that the pain of the massage increases, such that dolors increase, yet her enjoyment level stays the same. The dolorist is committed to saying that her well-being is *decreasing* as the displeasure is increasing. Yet the case does not seem that way. She enjoys the whole experience, even though more dolors, outweighing the hedons, are accruing. Of course, there are cases where pain is too intense to be enjoyable and a thin line may separate enjoyable from unenjoyable pain. But this is not the sort of case that we are considering here.

The point is all the more vivid when we consider the *reasons*. Someone who enjoys a very intense deep tissue massage has reason to get one. But according to the hedonodoloric calculus, if that massage is exactly equal in hedons and dolors, then she has no more reason to get one than not. But she has a reason to get one. Indeed, she has such a reason precisely because of the painful experience she enjoys. Dolorism does not capture this.

Now, some hedonists deny that the phenomenal quality of pleasure and displeasure are relevant for value, instead holding that, as Feldman does, well-being is a matter of *attitudinal* pleasures and pains. Attitudinal pleasures and displeasures are propositional attitudes, wherein 'a person takes attitudinal pleasure in some state of affairs if he enjoys it, is pleased about it, is glad it is happening' (Feldman 2004: 56). Attitudinal displeasure is a matter of being displeased about some state of affairs. Let's call this *attitudinal dolorism* (AD). Its sophistication affords more resources, which initially appear to give a better analysis of HSG experiences. Feldman addresses directly the puzzle of masochism (2004: 85ff.): HSG experiences involve sensory pains in which one takes attitudinal pleasure. There is a sensation, F, in which S takes attitudinal pain, and hence is a sensory pain. S takes attitudinal pleasure in the fact that S takes attitudinal pain in F, hence S enjoys the unpleasant experience. Hence HSG experiences are accounted for.

Yet this explication does not yet account for desert-adjustment. Feldman further holds that the intrinsic value of attitudinal pleasure or pain is adjusted according to enhancers and attenuators, such as the appropriateness (desert) of the object. According to desert-adjustment, certain objects of attitudinal pleasure or pain are more or less deserving of these attitudes. The suffering of innocent children, for example, is not a deserving object of pleasure (Feldman 2004: 119). AD can hold that the intrinsic value of pains and pleasures is adjusted by the desert of the objects. The value of a pleasure is attenuated when the object is an undeserving object of pleasure. On certain desert-adjustment schedules, sensory pains are not deserving objects of attitudinal pleasure, therefore pleasures taken in these pains have little or no value. Hence HSG experiences have no positive intrinsic welfare value. Given that the pains have negative value, HSG experiences have negative value overall. But these experiences are not pro tanto bad for the people who have them.

But this is only if one adopts a desert-adjustment schedule according to which sensory pain is an undeserving object of attitudinal pleasure. Supposing instead desert-adjustment is rejected, AD is nevertheless subject to the zero-value objection. AD does not capture the nuance of HSG experiences as well as one might like. Moreover, it leaves behind the greatest appeal of straightforward dolorism – denying that there is a recognizable phenomenological quality to displeasure elides the resources to explain its badness. Why should *being displeased* be intrinsically bad? Being displeased about, for example, injustice seems more naturally intrinsically good rather than bad.

Now, dolorism might avoid its problems with a better, more sophisticated aggregation method. The view that I will ultimately propose is, in a way, precisely this.

Pain asymbolia

Another intriguing challenge for dolorism, or any account, comes from pain asymbolia. People with pain asymbolia report to experience the physical sensation of pain, but they do not find it bothersome.⁷ This is not to be confused with congenital analgesia, which is complete insensitivity to pain sensation.⁸ Rather, people with pain asymbolia recognize what they are feeling as pain, but aren't displeased by it. As one asymbolic patient reported in response to a stimulus, 'I feel it indeed; it hurts a bit, but it doesn't bother me.'⁹ Consequently, it is apparently possible to experience a pain sensation and yet *not be pained by it*, as it were. The puzzle is that the pain sensations allegedly include all the trappings of typical pain sensations and yet are not bothersome. The intuition, I take it, is that the pain in these cases is not bad for the people who experience it. The dolorist would wrongly assess this pain as bad. Asymbolia presents a counterexample for this view.

To be sure, there are other ways to analyze asymbolia that may defray the objection, and I will consider some other possibilities later. There is, of course, a limit to what we can know about the nature of asymbolia due to the private nature of experience and the relative scarcity of studies, so we shouldn't take conclusions about asymbolia without a grain of salt. But if there are better theories available, we should turn to them.

The desire-reductive analysis

Perhaps unpleasant experiences are only bad when they are *undesired*. One way to make use of this insight is to reduce the unpleasant to experiences that are undesired. Heathwood does this. His view is this:

S's experience E at t is unpleasant at t if and only if S desires intrinsically and *de re* at t of E that it not be occurring at t.¹⁰

⁷The initial scientific discussions of pain asymbolia appear in Schilder and Stengel (1928) and Schilder and Stengel (1931); see also Pözl and Stengel (1937), Berthier et al. (1988). There is lucid and fascinating philosophical analysis in Grahek (2007).

⁸Possibly, some people who underwent lobotomies also had a similar condition, but it is unclear whether the experiences of lobotomy patients and people with pain asymbolia are the same (Bain 2014: 311; Aydede 2000: 547).

⁹Pözl and Stengel (1937: 180) as quoted in Grahek (2007: 45).

¹⁰In Heathwood's own words: 'A sensation, S, occurring at time t, is unpleasant at t iff the subject of S desires, intrinsically and *de re*, at t, of S, that it not be occurring at t' (Heathwood 2007: 41). In contrast to dolorism, this view is stated as a biconditional. On Heathwood's view, all undesired experiences are bad. Undesired experiences *just are* unpleasant, so unlike dolorism, this view does not leave open the possibility

This is a desire-reductive analysis (DRA). An experience that one desires not to occur just is what it is for it to be unpleasant. Regarding badness, according to the desire satisfaction theory of well-being, of which this account is a proposed corollary, an experience or state *E* is good for *S* at *t* if and only if and because one desires intrinsically and de re at *t* that *E* be occurring. What is bad is the reverse, namely, *S* desires *E* not to occur. Hence the putative explanation for the badness of unpleasant experiences:

S's experience *E* is bad for *S* if and only if and because *S* desires intrinsically and de re at *t* of *E* that it not be occurring at *t*.

Once we move to attitudes, any view needs to include some extra machinery to specify the relation between the attitude and object to avoid counterexamples. The desire must be directed at the experience intrinsically, i.e., for itself in virtue of its feel, since there are many experiences that one might desire extrinsically that they not occur (you might desire not to experience the smell of cookies baking because you don't wish to be tempted, but the smell itself is not unpleasant). Additionally, the desire must be de re for the experience, viz., its phenomenal character. You might say, 'I desire to not taste sardines' yet you are eating a mystery food that you find delicious, and the mystery food is sardines. Your desire was not directed toward the phenomenal character of tasting sardines. The *res* of the de re is the phenomenal character of the experience.

This account does well by pain asymbolia: an experience is only unpleasant when it is undesired, and people with pain asymbolia have no such desires. Therefore, whatever it is that the asymbolic is experiencing is not unpleasant and therefore not bad for them.

The analysis also appears to do well by HSG experiences. Heathwood takes up an example: suppose someone comes to desire the typically unpleasant sensation of dizziness for the way it feels. Heathwood argues that the person actually does not find dizziness unpleasant on the grounds that he *enjoys* it, and from this Heathwood concludes that it is pleasant after all. But HSG experiences are unpleasant yet desired intrinsically, that is, for the way they feel. The desire-reductive analysis renders desiring an unpleasant experience conceptually impossible. Yet HSG experiences intuitively do seem to be possible, and indeed actual for many people.

A proponent of DRA might analyze HSG experiences in the following way. HSG experiences involve a particular experience, *H*, that *S* desires not to experience intrinsically and de re and is therefore unpleasant, yet *S* also desires, intrinsically and de re, to experience *H*. Now, this sounds peculiar. *S* both desires and desires not to experience *H*, at the same time, and in the same way, namely in virtue of the way *H* feels. One might think this is impossible or a contradiction. If so, this analysis of HSG experiences fails. But whether it is possible is a matter of empirical psychological fact – perhaps it is possible both to desire to have an experience and to desire not to have an experience at the same time in the same way. It might be irrational, but it's not obviously a priori impossible. Nevertheless, contradiction arises at the next step: the view holds that an experience is intrinsically good when it is desired and intrinsically bad when it is undesired, consequently *H* is both intrinsically bad and intrinsically good in the same way at the same time. Presumably each of these entails the negation of the other. So this analysis of HSG experiences is untenable.

that there may be bad experiences that are not unpleasant. Other versions of DRA appear in Sidgwick (1981 [1907]) and Brandt (1979: 38).

A better attempt is this. S desires intrinsically and de re at t that H not occur, and S also desires intrinsically and de re at t to experience G. G is the experience of desiring not to experience H at t while experiencing H at t. H is undesired and therefore intrinsically bad, and G is desired and therefore intrinsically good. DRA can consistently analyze HSG experiences in this way. However, this renders DRA subject to the zero-value objection. Moreover, like the dolorist, the proponent of DRA must also insist that insofar as HSG experiences are unpleasant, they are pro tanto bad. But HSG experiences intuitively are not pro tanto bad for those who enjoy them. So DRA does not provide any advantage over dolorism in this regard.

Finally, it is not obviously settled that the view generates an account of intrinsic bad. This view is taken as a corollary of the desire satisfaction theory of well-being, which holds that an experience or state is intrinsically good when desired. But the corollary for bads can just as well be construed as a desire that is positively satisfied, namely as the desire for some experience to not occur. At all times when the experience does not occur, S's desire is positively satisfied, and this therefore constitutes a robust good. This is implausible. One can easily conjure up a host of experiences one desires not to occur, all of which are presently satisfied (being tortured by aliens, burned at the stake, etc.). Now, on Heathwood's analysis as stated only experiences are robust goods and bads. His view is unusual in this respect. Traditional desire satisfaction theories are not so restricted. While one might think Heathwood's view avoids this objection, it is not obvious that it does. Arguably, in at least some cases, *not experiencing H* can itself be an experience, G. Hence the experience G, namely of *not experiencing H* is desired intrinsically and de re – for the way it feels, namely, as an experience that is the *absence of H*. Of course, that is contentious and contingent on having the desire for G. Nevertheless, all told, DRA does not provide a more appealing alternative than dolorism.

Conditionalism

A different account avoids these problems by appealing to desire or some other attitude as a condition of badness rather than constitutive of it. The badness of an experience is conditional on it being the object of a con-attitude such as undesire or dislike. Sumner, for example, holds this view: 'if we retain the view that pain is just a certain kind of sensation ... then we will have to give up thinking that it is necessarily an intrinsic evil for us.... Instead, we must look to our attitude or reaction to the pain – the extent to which we mind or dislike it' (1996: 105–6). Parfit has a similar view: 'If we didn't dislike this [pain] sensation, our conscious state would not be bad' (2011: 54). Call this view *conditionalism*:

S's experience E is intrinsically bad for S at t if and only if and because S *dislikes* intrinsically and de re at t S's experience E.¹¹

Conditionalism captures HSG experiences: they are unpleasant yet not disliked and therefore not bad. As Korsgaard says, '[p]ain wouldn't hurt you if you could just relax and enjoy it' (1996: 147). Insofar as the icy lake plunge, deep tissue massage,

¹¹I have here put the view in terms of 'dislike' and talk throughout of con-attitudes including undesire and dislike, yet there are meaningful differences. For instance, putting conditionalism in terms of desire may cause problems for theories of reasons that attach reasons to desires, as discussed in Parfit's 'agony argument' (2011: 73ff.). The arguments in this article, however, do not turn on these distinctions so the family of views is collected together under the heading of conditionalism.

and pain of exertion are *not* disliked, they are not instances of pain that is intrinsically bad. Similarly, conditionalism gives the correct verdict in pain asymbolia.

But there are three concerns with conditionalism: it captures too much; it doesn't capture enough; and it makes the worst part of displeasure irrelevant for its badness.

To begin, there are experiences that conditionalism assesses as bad which we do not intuitively think are bad. If, in a cranky mood, a toddler dislikes his mother's kiss, this experience is bad for him. The problem, it appears, is that the qualities of the experience play no role in whether it counts as bad – nothing about the analysis requires that it have a negative tone.

But we might think that dislike indeed is sufficient for the badness of an experience. Bennett Helm has a very compelling example of a victim reacting to the caress of a rapist – indeed, this does seem to be bad for the victim, even if the same physical sensations under different circumstances would not be so abhorrent and even pleasant (Helm 2002: 23). A conditionalist might be moved by Helm's example and come around to thinking that the disliked mother's kiss is indeed intrinsically bad, just as the unwanted caress is. So one might deny that conditionalism captures too much. Alternatively, we might be inclined to take Helm's example as support for a refinement of conditionalism: positive feeling experiences are good only on condition they are desired, and negative feeling experiences are bad only on condition of being undesired. I discuss a similar approach in the next section.

Perhaps instead the mother's kiss falls into another category of experiences, which leads to the second concern. Perhaps a toddler is simply not capable of forming the relevant higher-order attitudes for establishing the goodness or badness of an experience. The pain of non-human animals is bad for them, but it is unclear that all non-human animals have higher-order attitudes. Further examples include extremely intense physical pain or extremely intense unpleasant psychological experience that limit one's cognitive abilities to the point of eclipsing any ability to form attitudes. Such mind-blowing pain leaves no mental space to take an attitude toward it, one might think.

A conditionalist could now claim that such cases involve something like a built-in dislike. But HSG experiences show that negative feeling tone experiences do not involve built-in dislike. An alternative response claims that infants and non-human animals obviously dislike painful experiences, so whatever attitudinal machinery is needed for dislike is present, even if in a primitive form. This is perhaps the most plausible answer that the view can give, but it is committed to attributing capacities that may not be there. It is hard to imagine a toad or shrimp, for example, having cognitive apparatus that is sufficiently sophisticated, and yet pain is bad for toads and shrimps.¹² Now, it may be that infants and non-human animals do have the relevant attitudinal machinery. This is, after all, an empirical question. Since the answer to it is not obvious, it is preferable not to rest crucial details of the account here.

In any case, even if infants and non-human animals do have the relevant capacities, there is still the most important problem for conditionalism. It misses something important: the quality of the feeling of unpleasantness has no role in the explanation of its badness. The way that unpleasantness feels is importantly relevant for why it is bad. Conditionalism does not capture this. Quite the contrary, dislike makes it bad. This point is illustrated by the commonsense reaction to the question of pain's badness – it hurts!

¹²A similar argument is leveled by Lin (2017).

Guy Kahane proposes an intermediary conditionalism, which he calls the *felt aversion* theory (FA).¹³ According to FA, pain involves two components: a distinctive sensation, which isn't by itself bad for the person who feels it; and second, an affective aversion to that sensation, to which the distinctive sensation typically gives rise. The distinctive feel of the pain sensation explains why it typically gives rise to aversion, and pain is only bad when the aversive state arises, and is not when it doesn't.

FA initially appears to be a sophisticated conditionalism: only certain sensations, namely pain sensations, are bad on condition of being the object of aversion. Rather, to be precise, on FA it's the combination of the two states – the sensation and the aversive reaction – that is bad. The view is this:

S's feeling of aversion and pain sensation P are bad for S at t if and only if and because S feels averse to P, intrinsically and de re at t.

This avoids the problem of including too much: only pain sensations are bad in virtue of the aversion toward them. Hence the mother's kiss objection is avoided.

Asymbolia is the central inspiration for Kahane, and accordingly FA captures it successfully. Asymbolia patients have pain sensations that do not give rise to feelings of aversion, hence they are not bad for them. By extension, FA also appears to do well by HSG cases.¹⁴ Best of all, Kahane explains that the aversion *typically* arises from the pain sensation *because of how the pain sensation feels*.

However, it is unclear how FA is going to account for psychological displeasure. Kahane gives a brief sketch in which the state that is analogous to the pain sensation is a perceived state of affairs in the world. The affective aversion that makes the overall state bad is directed toward this perceived state of affairs. The state of affairs by itself isn't bad for the person perceiving it, but the overall state of perceiving it and feeling averse to it is bad.

But examining this approach more closely, the perceived state of affairs is not analogous to the physical sensation of pain, and there is no theoretical pressure to think that we should incorporate it in an explanation of the badness of the psychological displeasure. In physical displeasure, the physical pain sensation has a specific feel that generates theoretical pressure to be incorporated in an account of pain's badness. In psychological displeasure, there is no physical sensation; it is the aversion itself that feels bad. The theoretical pressure regarding psychological unpleasantness is to explain why the bad feeling of the affective state is bad for the person experiencing it. So a better approach for FA is to claim that what's bad is the *aversive state* in virtue of its feel.¹⁵ What we have now, then, is the view that this kind of aversive feeling is bad, independently from the source from which it arose.

What this means is that rather than being a sophisticated form of conditionalism, FA collapses to dolorism – what's bad is a certain kind of experience, namely aversion. But now, while FA does well by physical HSG experiences, it doesn't do well by psychological HSG experiences: it gives the same account as dolorism. What's bad according to FA is the feeling of aversion, but in psychological HSG experiences, such as watching horror movies, we have aversion that is not intuitively bad. Moreover, while at first FA

¹³Kahane calls it the 'experiential dislike' theory in (2009), and in (2016) gives it the name 'felt aversion.'

¹⁴I say 'appears' to do well, since it's not entirely clear that FA would capture HSG experiences true to form if the pain sensations do not involve an unpleasant feeling in the absence of the felt aversion.

¹⁵As Kahane clarified in correspondence.

avoided the mother's kiss objection, it now may not since there is no reason to restrict the view to aversion arising only from pain sensations, since it is the aversive state that feels bad and is bad.

Reverse conditionalism

The central appeal of dolorism is precisely what's missing from conditionalist accounts, namely, that the badness of unpleasantness is explained by the way it feels. But dolorism's main drawback is that it is too inflexible to account for the wide array of cases that conditionalism and FA capture. The strength of these views comes from the role given to attitudes. Not only does this feature allow these views to capture more cases, but also it is independently plausible that the attitude is relevant for the welfare value of the experience.

I propose that both of these components operate in the best account of the badness of displeasure. Both felt quality *and* attitudes play a role. Where conditionalism goes wrong is in sourcing badness in the dislike. This gets the order of explanation wrong. Dolorism is correct in that the feel of unpleasantness explains its badness. With Kahane, I agree that the bad feel of pain explains why we are typically averse to it. But beyond this, I propose endorsing dolorism insofar as the unpleasant feel explains its badness. Attitudes, however, also play a significant role: attitudes toward unpleasant experience are relevant in cases where it is *not* bad.

The proposed view, then, is this. The badness of unpleasantness is explained by its negative feeling tone. To this extent, dolorism is correct. But certain attitudes can *defeat* its badness. Unpleasantness in which one takes an attitude of the relevant sort, typically a pro-attitude such as being welcomed or relished, is not intrinsically bad. An attitude of welcoming or liking toward a feeling with a negative tone defeats its intrinsic badness. Call this view *reverse conditionalism*:

S's experience E (at t) is intrinsically bad for S (at t) if and because E has negative feeling tone, *unless* S has a relevant attitude towards E, intrinsically, de re, and at t.

Reverse conditionalism retains the dolorist thesis that feeling tone explains value valence, but adds an 'unless' defeating clause: the badness of unpleasant experience can be defeated by certain relevant attitudes. Unpleasant experience that is the object of certain attitudes (by the person whose experience it is) is not intrinsically bad. Attitudes have this value-defeating role only when directed toward the experience intrinsically and de re for the same reasons and in the same way as discussed above.

Reverse conditionalism allows that attitudes may defeat the badness fully or partially (cf. Chisholm 1968). Plausibly in some cases an unpleasant experience in the presence of a value-defeating attitude is still bad to some extent, where the attitude attenuates the badness. This will be a matter of the intensity of the unpleasant experience and intensity of attitude. To be specific, a weak pro-attitude toward a very intense unpleasant experience may defeat its badness only partially, whereas a strong pro-attitude toward an unpleasant experience of moderate or low intensity may defeat it totally. To clarify, reverse conditionalism concerns the value of an unpleasant experience, as opposed to the degree to which an experience feels unpleasant. Undoubtedly attitudes can mitigate the degree to which an experience is felt as unpleasant – an unexpected pinprick feels more unpleasant and alarming than a pinprick that is expected and contextualized. The degree to which an experience is unpleasant is one aspect of its badness, as

acknowledged by the first clause of reverse conditionalism. The ‘unless’ clause concerns attitudes toward an experience, given its degree of unpleasantness where such mitigation by context and expectation have already been taken into account. The unpleasant experience would have some negative value but for the attitude, which defeats this badness fully or partially.

Reverse conditionalism thus captures HSG experiences perfectly: these are unpleasant experiences toward which we have certain attitudes, and hence are not bad. Moreover, a symmetrical extension of reverse conditionalism to the goodness of pleasure holds that the goodness of pleasure can be defeated by a relevant con-attitude. This enables flexibility to account for examples such as Helm’s case of the rapist’s caress.

Why should we be inclined to think that attitudes play a defeating role in value? Of course, there is nothing too controversial about the claim that attitudes can be value-theoretically relevant, and there are other instances where it is plausible that the badness (or goodness) of something can be defeated by the presence of something else. Aristotle’s account of virtuous indignation is a classic example. Pain at unmerited good fortune (*Rhetoric* II.9 1386b10) is good – because the object of the pain is injustice, its badness is defeated. Another classic example is desert: ‘[i]f A is a wicked deed and if B is the suffering involved in the sinner’s remorse or in his retribution, then the two evils, A and B, may be preferable to A without B’ (Chisholm 1986: 72). The pain is part of a larger whole in which the presence of the other part defeats its badness. That’s not to say that in these cases, especially the latter, the pain is not bad (or as bad) for the person whose pain it is, which is what is under discussion in this article; rather, the point is that there are plausible cases in which this pattern of value appears: the badness of one thing is defeated – either entirely or partially – in virtue of a relation to something else.¹⁶ Reverse conditionalism falls in the tradition of accounts in which the value of a part is shaped by another part.

One might wonder, however, whether reverse conditionalism is in tension with earlier complaints against conditionalism. Reverse conditionalism accepts that attitudes defeat badness, but the argument against conditionalism rejects that displeasure’s badness is adequately explained by attitudes. But the complaint against conditionalism is not that attitudes have no business playing an axiological role. It is that they do an inadequate job as shown by the objections to conditionalism: primarily, conditionalism cannot capture displeasure for psychologically unsophisticated welfare subjects, and omits the worst part of displeasure from the explanation of its badness. The aim of reverse conditionalism is to capture what conditionalism gets right, namely that attitudes are indeed relevant for badness, but correct what it omits, namely that quality of feel is relevant too.

¹⁶These, of course, are familiar examples of the principle of organic unity, according to which the value of a whole may differ from the sum of the value of the parts, as discussed by G. E. Moore, Franz Brentano, and throughout the contemporary literature in value theory (Moore 1962 [1903]; Chisholm, 1968, 1986). There is plenty of discussion about how, exactly, we are to construe the value of the parts of an organic unity in relation to the whole. Do the parts retain their intrinsic value while the whole has a value that differs from the sum of the values of the parts, or do the values of the parts change when combined in a whole, resulting in a total value that differs from the sum of the values of the parts (Hurka 1998, Bradley 2002)? If we think of reverse conditionalism as an instance of organic unity, it is best understood along the construal according to which the parts change value in virtue of their relation to one another: the badness of one part is defeated, which is to say changed, in virtue of the presence of another part, namely the attitude.

Interestingly, while it is plausible that pleasure and displeasure are amenable to defeat by attitudes, it is far less obvious that other putative welfare goods and bads are so amenable, such as knowledge and false beliefs, or virtue and vice. One might think such variation is an objection. However, it turns out that assorted putative goods and bads behave in a variety of different ways. A pro-attitude toward one's false beliefs or vices seems to make the situation worse, not better. Achievement and failure, on the other hand, behave more like pleasure and displeasure as candidates for defeat: plausibly, an achievement contributes less to one's well-being if one rejects it (consider scientists reluctantly working on nuclear technology), and the badness of failure may be mitigated if met with a pro-attitude. Interestingly, then, some welfare goods and bads may be amenable to defeat while others are not.¹⁷

However, it appears that asymbolia presents an objection: because there is no attitude toward the sensations, they are in the same category as baby pain or animal pain, where feeling tone equals value valence. But the challenge is that the pain does *not* appear to be intrinsically bad in these cases.

There are several responses available for reverse conditionalism. As suggested above, asymbolia can be understood in different ways. First, a case can be made that pain asymbolia patients have defeating attitudes: the attitude toward their pain is one of *unbotheredness*. There doesn't seem to be a precisely apt English word to characterize this attitude, but it's a natural thought that there is indeed a robust attitude. Perhaps 'equanimity' is the best approximation. This is illustrated by the telling quote from a patient in Schilder and Stengel's original study: 'it hurts a bit, but it doesn't bother me.'¹⁸ Instances of this attitude arise all the time in ordinary life, to minor pains, chronic low-level pains to which we have become accustomed, or athletic endurance such as running. These are unpleasant experiences, but they are not felt as bothersome even though their displeasure is recognized. They are met with an attitude of acceptance, unbotheredness, or equanimity. Right now, in fact, as I write this, my hands ache from typing. I can note the negative feeling tone of the sensation, but am unbothered by it. I accept it among the various sensations that I'm experiencing, but I don't mind it in spite of its unpleasantness. However, one might think even if I am unbothered by this pain, surely I would be *better off* in at least that respect if it went away, which would suggest that it is intrinsically bad. But considering the aches in my hands as I type, if this sensation went away, would I be better off, just strictly in virtue of this feeling? I would be better off because I could type more quickly, but this is instrumental and not a matter of the experience intrinsically. I am simply unbothered about whether or not I experience this mild displeasure, considered in itself. It is simply among the various things that I feel, some of which are pleasant, some neutral, and some unpleasant.

However, one might be unconvinced that there is such attitude. Isn't 'unbotheredness' after all a matter of having *no* attitude, a matter of being precisely *indifferent* about how one feels about something? To be sure, there is a way of being indifferent which is a matter of having no particular attitude, but I'm suggesting that beyond this there is at least in some cases the positive presence of a distinctive attitude of

¹⁷There's more to be said, and the plausibility of asymmetries is rich. Consider again knowledge: while it seems implausible that a pro-attitude to one's false beliefs mitigates their badness, it's not so implausible that con-attitudes to one's knowledge defeat its goodness, at least partially. Virtue and vice may be asymmetrical in this way as well.

¹⁸Grahek 2007.

equanimity. Consider someone receiving very bad news with equanimity – they fully assess and acknowledge the badness of the news, but greet it with an attitude of acceptance and equanimity (a journal rejection, for example). This is quite different from being indifferent or neutral to the news, i.e., having no attitude toward it. Similarly, mindfulness meditation, which works to cultivate a certain mindset of observation of one's bodily states and other phenomena, has been studied with respect to pain, and, through practice, meditators have been shown to reduce the badness of their pain experience.¹⁹ With this expanded repertoire of attitudes, reverse conditionalism can hold that pain experiences that are the object of this kind of attitude are not bad, and consequently it has resources to explain why pain sensations are not bad in pain asymbolia, as well as a wide range of other examples.

Yet even while including equanimity is a value-defeating attitude, asymbolia patients may not have it. The literature reporting their experiences is scant, and it is possible that asymbolia patients are genuinely indifferent to pain sensations.

However, a more nuanced and compelling analysis of asymbolia defrays the concern. According to perhaps the most widely accepted analysis of asymbolia, asymbolics' pain sensations do not in fact have negative feeling tone (Grahek 2007; Bain 2013). While recognizable as pain sensations, they have all the characteristics of a pain sensation as we would ordinarily recognize it, but without the 'feels bad' or 'hurts' element. In other words, asymbolia patients experience a sensation that is recognizably a pain sensation, but it is not unpleasant. This is difficult to imagine as an experience that one might have oneself, but perhaps it is the best way of understanding this condition. If this is true, asymbolia patients do not have any unpleasant experience and therefore there is nothing bad, according to reverse conditionalism. What are we to make, then, of their remarks that their pain 'hurts a bit'? Perhaps it's simply that given the strangeness of their experience describing it accurately is difficult and they reach for the usual pain vocabulary rather than give entirely accurate descriptions of their experience.²⁰

If the latter construal of asymbolia is accurate, this is good news for both dolorism and conditionalism. However, dolorism still cannot capture HSG experiences, and conditionalism is still subject to its various shortcomings including the direction of explanation, leaving reverse conditionalism with the upper hand overall.

Overall, then, reverse conditionalism is able to hold that some displeasure is not bad, while still maintaining that the feeling of displeasure explains its badness. Moreover, it does well capturing psychological displeasure much more straightforwardly than the

¹⁹E.g. Kabat-Zinn (1982), Kabat-Zinn et al. (1985), Grant et al. (2011). It's unclear whether the best way to understand mindfulness meditation is as involving a cultivated robust attitude of equanimity or a cultivated genuine indifference.

²⁰On yet another construal of asymbolia, pain sensations do indeed have negative feeling tone, but the reactions to pain sensations are unusual: asymbolics do not have the *motivational* responses that typically arise in response to pain (Klein 2015). Evidence supports this view insofar as patients with pain asymbolia have the autonomic reactions for a normal experience of pain sensations (e.g. elevated heart rate, hypertension, and sweating), but without the expected affective responses, flinching, or blinking (Berthier et al. 1988: 43). On this construal, reverse conditionalism maintains that asymbolics' pain is in fact bad for them, and their abnormal condition explains why they don't respond to unpleasantness as one usually does. Interestingly, this analysis requires that, whereas typically pain has a motivational component, it is not necessary. Some analyses of pain in the literature maintain that unpleasant pain is necessarily motivating, and so this is at odds with these analyses (e.g., Bain 2014). Yet this seems to be a plausible understanding of the asymbolic's experience; moreover, HGS experiences present a challenge to these views.

other views. All that we need to say about psychological displeasure is that it has negative feeling tone, and in the absence of any higher-order attitude, it is bad for you. When we relish our misery, as when we enjoy reading a sad novel or listening to stirring music, this is not bad for us, because these experiences are welcome. Finally, its explanation is univocal across welfare subjects, and so satisfies the desiderata set out at the beginning of the article. No doubt there is more to be said, but I will have to leave the discussion here.²¹

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