Philosophies of Happiness

Appendix 1: Pleasure: Attitude or Object?

What is pleasure? What does it mean to say we are experiencing pleasure or are enjoying something? We all have commonsense intuitions about what pleasure is; we seem to know it when we experience it. Philosophers often take it as their role to challenge commonsense beliefs and to analyze phenomena most of us take for granted. In contemporary times they have taken into account the evidence of experimental psychology and neuroscience as well, in an effort to understand what it is that is occurring in us when we experience pleasure.

In what follows, I will argue that pleasure lies in the psychological response, orientation, or stance of the person—what philosophers have termed the attitude—to a physical sensation or a mode of engagement in an activity. I will suggest that this response or mode of engagement has an affective quality that is not reducible to a pure bodily sensation. It is what Murat Aydede and William Robinson have termed a non-sensory conscious experience, similar to those that Bruce Mangan describes as on the fringe of consciousness. I will suggest that this framework is useful as a way of understanding both Epicurus’ and Aristotle’s accounts of pleasure.

Philosophers of mind in the contemporary period begin their discussion with the work of Gilbert Ryle, who in 1954 challenged the prevailing conception of pleasure as a bodily sensation akin to pain, that pleasure is simply a sensation that feels good. Leonard Katz describes this as the simple picture of pleasure—“a simple and undescirbable feeling in momentary consciousness.” Most of us would through introspection say “I am feeling pleasure” just as we would say “I am feeling pain.” Ryle challenged this view. Drawing inspiration from Aristotle, Ryle described pleasure as what David Wolfsdorf has aptly termed a mode of engagement in activity. To take pleasure or to enjoy something is a way of engaging in our everyday pursuits in the world; Ryle does not focus on bodily sensations. In the 1960’s, Terence Penelhum and David Perry developed the idea that there are in fact two fundamental kinds of pleasure: enjoyment and “being pleased that.” Enjoyment draws upon Ryle’s description of engaging in activity;
being pleased that is known as ‘propositional pleasure;” it is taking pleasure in a state of affairs that can be expressed in the form of linguistic propositions.

I would like to focus on one dimension of this contemporary discussion. This revolves around what philosophers have called intentionality. Is pleasure fundamentally a feeling, an episode we can isolate, or is it an attitude toward a sensation or activity? Does pleasure lie in the sensation or experience itself, or in our attitude towards the experience?

To orient ourselves in this debate, it will be useful to briefly ground ourselves in the contemporary discussion, beginning with Ryle.

Ryle’s view is that there are two uses of the term “pleasure;” one denotes a mood, and another a mode of engagement in activity. Ryle gives three reasons for rejecting the notion that pleasure is a certain kind of feeling or bodily sensation. One reason is that we can ask whether we like or dislike a bodily sensation, but not whether we like or dislike a certain pleasure. Second, he suggests that sensations can be described in ways that pleasures cannot. One can ask how a tingle feels—like an electric shock or like waves—but one cannot ask these sorts of questions of pleasure. Third, he maintains that whereas we can focus our attention on sensations without their ceasing, we cannot do so with pleasure. In Ryle’s view, if we focus our attention on enjoyment, this interferes with our ability to enjoy. iii

Ryle argues that pleasure is also not a feeling in a second sense of feeling as emotion or passion, such as amusement, anger, and disappointment. He gives three reasons for this. First, one can be overcome by emotions or passions, but not by enjoyment. Second, he argues that emotions or passions but not enjoyment can distract one from thinking straight. Third, emotions or passions but not enjoyment can be resisted. iv

He also argues that pleasure is not a feeling in a third sense of feeling as mood. He gives three reasons for believing this as well. First, moods have duration independent of activities, whereas pleasure cannot be timed independently of the activity one enjoys. Moods lack objects, whereas one enjoys or takes pleasure in something. Third, enjoyment is what one in a certain mood is disposed to. v
Ryle offers his own constructive understanding of pleasure. Pleasure entails a kind of absorption and spontaneous interest. In his two 1954 articles on Pleasure as well as his 1964 work *The Concept of Mind*, Ryle discusses pleasure under the rubric of “heed” terms such as attending, being conscious of, noticing, and recognizing. These terms, he maintains, do not refer to inner mental states but to dispositions. For example, if we pay attention to a lecture, we might be disposed to say something about it. If we enjoy gardening, we would express annoyance at being interrupted from the activity.\(^vi\)

In a 1957 article, “The Logic of Pleasure,” Terence Penelhum criticizes Ryle’s dispositional account of heed concepts, but nevertheless agrees that enjoyment is a kind of heeding, although not attending. He argues that while we can attend, concentrate, or apply our mind at will, we cannot be attracted to, absorbed by, or interested in something at will. Like Ryle, he argues that enjoyment is closely related to absorption and being interested in, but maintains that in contrast to these modes of heed, enjoyment is effortless. He also maintains that enjoyment is episodic, occurrent, or operative rather than dispositional; it is an event rather than a disposition to respond in a certain way, and it is a private rather than a public episode. It is self-evident to a person whether he or she is enjoying something; we cannot be mistaken whether we are enjoying. Finally, he argues that we can enjoy other people’s activities, for example, by enjoying our own watching children playing. Thus Penelhum agrees with Ryle that pleasure as enjoyment is not a sensation, but a private episode, a kind of effortless heeding that admits degrees. It is a passive condition, one that cannot be willed; our awareness is drawn by something rather than directed to it. It is a reaction or a response to a stimulus.\(^vii\) This accords with the findings of neuro-psychology, which we will discuss in the next section.

3. Object or Attitude? Intentionality and Representation

In the recent contemporary period, three technical terms for discussing issues about pleasure have become entrenched in the field of philosophy of mind: intentionality, attitude, and representation. Unfortunately, the technical senses of these terms conflict with our commonsense ways of using them, and different theorists use the terms in differing ways. I will aim to orient the general reader in use of
these terms, and show how they can be useful for our own attempts to understand pleasure. These concepts and technical terms will be useful for our analysis of the theories of Epicurus and Aristotle.

Intentionality has been defined as the mind’s directedness or orientation toward something. The mind can think about things that don’t exist in the external world; for example, the mind can entertain the concept of a unicorn. The unicorn is called the mind’s intentional object. In this case it is a concept that exists purely in the mind.

According to philosophers of mind who accept intentionality, bodily sensations are intentional objects of the mind. They are facts that the mind directs itself towards. Thus pain is regarded as a mental or psychic event, an event or occurrence in consciousness. A corpse does not feel pain. There must be a mind or consciousness to experience pain. Our commonsense view—which tends to regard pleasure and pain alike as simple feelings or sensations—is that it is the knee or the toe that experiences the pain. Philosopher of mind Tim Crane disagrees. The mind directs itself to the part of the body that is experiencing the pain; the pain is experienced by the mind, albeit as located in a part of the body.

In fact, in a highly influential 1977 article, Murat Aydede draws upon recent neuro-psychological research to argue that pleasure and pain function differently. Pain is a blended experience, whose processing involves the cooperation of two systems in the brain: the sensory system and the motivational-affective system located in the limbic system of the brain. The sensory system located in the cortex is responsible for gathering sensory information. This use of the term sensation does not refer simply to any bodily sensation but specifically to that function that gathers information, whether internally or externally. Internal sensory processing is referred to as proprioception; external gathering is known as exteroception. In the experience of pain, the body gathers information in the sensory part of the brain. However, there is an additional source of the pain experience, which is in the affective motivation system, located in the limbic system of the brain. This supplies the affective response, which gives the qualitative feel of attraction or aversion. One part of the brain senses the pain; another part dislikes it.

In the case of pleasure, argues Aydede, only one system of the brain is involved, the motivational-affective system. Thus pleasure is an affective response to a sensation, but the sensation
Itself is not part of the pleasure response. In practice, the two seem to be so closely fused that we experience them as one, as part of the same sensational experience.

What does this mean in practical terms for our analysis of pleasure? All agree that pleasure requires consciousness. This notion goes back to Plato, who in the dialogue *Philebus* shows that pleasure without consciousness is not pleasure; no one would choose a life of pleasure if we could have no awareness of it. Pleasure always has an appearance aspect; pleasure appears to an experiencing subject. Thus, one might argue, as Michael Pakaluk does, that whereas the good can be independent of any experiencing subject, pleasure always has a relational aspect. Nothing is simply pleasant; it is always pleasant to someone. Pleasure is always an intentional experience in the first sense of intentional: it is something experienced by a conscious mind, something a conscious mind is directed toward. Even if pleasure is a “pure sensation,” it is a sensation experienced by a conscious mind, and thus an intentional state with an intentional object.

Now animals can experience pain; do we say that animals have consciousness that is directed toward objects? Absolutely. Animals gather information through sensation, and thus their consciousness directs itself toward “objects” of consciousness.

Where does the language of attitude come in? At the first level of consciousness the mind is simply aware of a sensation of pain, just as it is aware of the sense object of light or sound. This is the first level or order of intentionality, one experienced by the observing mind. There is another function of mind that not only observes or witnesses but also evaluates. This is where attitude comes in: the mind can like or dislike the sensation; it can respond with attraction or aversion. This response adds an affective color or hue to the sensation. In experience, the sensation and the affective response are so close that we are unsure whether the affective color comes from our own attitude or from the object. When we enjoy a delightful massage, it is not clear whether the pleasure is in the feelings experienced by the body or our “liking” of those feelings.

Now plants also have primitive responses: plants grow toward the sun; amoeba react to their environment. But at least from Aristotle on, it was held that only animals and humans are sentient beings,
beings who have conscious minds that can be aware of sensations. The observing consciousness can be aware of sense objects of light, heat, color, flavor, warmth, touch, smell. Primitive awareness is awareness without evaluation or judgment; this is the function of the sensory gathering network. Another function of mind evaluates experience. The mind “likes” or “enjoys” a sensation or dislikes it. The mind is attracted or aversive to the sensation. Animals flinch from painful sensations. Babies cry when they are hungry, thirsty, or tired, or when touched with a cold object.

This attraction or aversion is one thing philosophers of mind refer to when they talk about an attitude toward an object. The technical term “attitude” may be confusing, because it suggests a deliberate stance. However in this philosophical sense, attitude can be automatic and primitive. The child’s knee flinches when bumped. Philosophers of mind would say that the baby is responding to the sensation with an attitude of aversion. An attitude is any psychological orientation to an object of awareness.

Aydede argues that in pain the mere awareness of the sensation and the attractive or aversive response are fused; two different parts of the brain work together to produce the experience of pain. In pleasure it is otherwise. The bodily sensation is one thing; for example when a person receives a massage, the body is massaged and feels simple touch. The response of pleasure, the affective tone, is separate, added by the motivational-affective center of the brain. In the experience of a massage, the two are so closely fused that we are sure that the bodily sensation of the massage “feels” pleasant. But notice that it would not feel pleasant if our muscles were extremely tight, or if we had a condition that makes us aversive to touch. Pleasure requires a part of the brain that assents to and “enjoys” the sensation.

That is why pleasure is always of something. Pleasure cannot stand alone; it is a reflection upon a sensation. The only time it stands alone is in artificial laboratory conditions, in which the limbic system of the brain is artificially stimulated, or in the case of drugs, which artificially stimulate this center of the brain. But in ordinary conditions, the motivational affective system reflects upon something, some sensation or activity.

Both pleasure and pain are intentional states; the difference between the two is at what stage we find the affective response, how it is created together with sensation. In pain, the affective response is by
nature fused with the sensorial information gathering; attitude and object are by nature fused. In pleasure, affective response reflects upon a pure sensation.

This is thus an attitudinal account of pleasure. Now the question arises: where does the affective quality of pleasure lie—in the attitude or the object? We know that pleasure “feels good.” Where does the good feeling lie? In Aydede’s account, when we drink lemonade on a hot day, the sense proceptors feel the coldness and taste the flavor. That is the pure sensation. The “good feeling,” the pleasure, is an affective response added by the motivational-affective part of the brain, the limbic system. This part of the brain “likes” or “enjoys” the lemonade; it finds it refreshing.

To support this, let us note that some people don’t “like” lemonade. If too much sugar is added, it can taste too sweet. So here we will have pure sensation of touch, taste of sweet lemonade, and primitive “dislike” on the part of the brain. The taste of lemonade on its own is neither pleasant nor unpleasant. Pleasure and displeasure are an affective response added to the pure sensation. These have been termed “pro-attitude” and “con-attitude” by philosophers of mind. But note that these need not be deliberate, articulated stances. Our brains like and dislike semi-automatically, and we add that affective response to the sensation. The adding is so automatic that the experience seems to us as if they are fused. The fusion takes place earlier in the brain for pain than for pleasure, in the view of Aydede.

So does pleasure lie in the attitude or the object? For Aydede, there is no pure sensation of pleasure. The pleasure lies in the attitude. Nevertheless, Aydede does affirm that pleasure “feels like” something. He describes pleasure as a non-sensory conscious “feel.” Liking “feels” like something; enjoyment has a non-sensory conscious feel that is added to the pure sensation of hearing jazz music, sipping lemonade, or swimming in a cool pool on a hot day. We can distinguish between the pure sensation of touch and the “pleasantness” of the sensation; the “pleasantness” is the “liking” or attraction that our mind or consciousness adds.

How do other contemporary philosophers respond to the view put forth by Aydede? William Robinson, in an article “What is it Like to Like?” accepts the view of Aydede with one caveat. He too describes pleasure as a non-sensory conscious occurrent, drawing on the fascinating work of Bruce
Mangan suggests that there are feels to mental phenomena on the fringe of consciousness such as the feeling of certainty, or knowing, or familiarity. The feeling of familiarity is dependent on other sensations. We have to have familiarity of something, e.g. of a face. Just so, argues Robinson, pleasure is always directed toward a sensation or experience. He disregards “being pleased that”; he asserts that thoughts don’t feel like anything. Pleasure is not directed toward thoughts but towards the feelings that thoughts engender. When a scientist has the thought that the universe is a self-governing system of natural law, she takes pleasure in the feeling that the thought causes.

Countering Aydede, however, Robinson argues that the attitude itself does not have a distinctive feel. Aydede argues that there are certain sensory processes that process incoming information from peripheral detector cells for informational content. Pleasure does not arise from these specialized information mechanisms and thus is not properly a sensation. Nevertheless, “to experience physical pleasure is to experience, among other things, some qualitative feel that is never the content of a proper sensory (informational) state.” Robinson suggests that “some” could suggest that there are several kinds of qualitative feel, each of which contributes pleasure. If so, however, what would make them all “pleasant”?

Robinson has articulated a phenomenon called the Appearance of Necessity (AN) that states that when we find a sensation pleasant, it seems to us that it has to be so, that we could not have a sensation of the very same kind and not like it. Robinson then goes further, and argues that it is difficult to locate what is the “pleasure sensation” component of a pleasant experience. It is difficult to separate out the pleasurable component from the other parts of the sensation. We can imagine a dish as more or less salty, but it is difficult to imagine a sensation we enjoy without the enjoyable component or the liking.

Robinson’s acceptance of the Appearance of Necessity causes him to reject Aydede’s thesis that there is a qualitative pleasure feel that we could imagine subtracted from our sensory experience, that we could imagine the sensation without its being pleasant.

Robinson does mention a variant of sensationalism that appeals to the phenomenon that the color purple can strike us as a blend of red and blue, and orange can strike us as a blend of red and yellow. Thus
a pleasant feel could be the blend of the pure sensation of jazz music or a cool swimming pool plus the pleasurable component. Robinson, however, rejects this analogy, because red remains a distinct component. Red does not seem like an aspect of yellow in orange, whereas, the pleasantness does seem to be a component. Pleasantness is always pleasantness of something. “It is the taste that is pleasant, but it is not the yellow that is red.”

Another example Robinson offers from the realm of color is the unsaturatedness of hues. Pink, lime, and sky blue are recognized as pastel shades of red, green and blue; they are unsaturated hues. One cannot have unsaturatedness without a hue; it is the unsaturatedness of a hue. Thus, the cover of a book remains what it is when ripped from the book, but pleasure cannot be separated off as a self-standing sensation. And an experience of color in one’s visual field is located in a specific place, whereas pleasantness of the color is not located in this way. The pleasantness of an experience is not even located where the experience is. Bodily sensations and resonant sounds are experienced as located somewhere, but the pleasure we take in them is not located where they are.

Thus Robinson claims that liking a sensation is having a certain non-sensory, evaluative experience that accompanies the sensation and is directed upon it. Whenever we find sensations pleasant this element is present. This element is intentional, i.e. it is directed upon an experience. It is thus not a sensational element in itself; it cannot occur without being directed upon a sensation. Nor is it a self-standing mere accompaniment of sensations. It is dependent on and embedded in something else.

Another issue is whether pleasure is representational. The qualities of sensory experience are thought to be representational because we believe they refer to things “out there” in the objects themselves. But we do not ascribe pleasure to external objects in the same way. In pleasure, there is no quality that we are representing that is the quality of an external thing. The qualities that sensory experiences represent are not about anything: green is just green. However, the non-sensory experience of pleasure is directed upon the aspect of a sensation that is found to be pleasant. The qualitative contents are never directed upon anything, red is just red, green is green, but the evaluative character of pleasure is always directed upon something. It is a quality of consciousness, in a way that red is not.
Aaron Smuts offers a “feels good” theory of pleasure. He argues that what is common to all pleasant experiences is that they feel good. Describing the phenomenology of sensory experiences, he argues that "to 'feel good' is about as close to an experiential primitive as we get." Consequently, he must make use of metaphors: "we might say that the locus of the pleasurable sensation glows; we feel a warm feeling; the good feeling hums like the vibration of a tuning fork."

Smuts takes feeling good to be qualitatively identical across pleasant experiences, but he denies that so-called propositional pleasures and intellectual pleasures are necessarily pleasant. Being-pleased-that something is the case, for Smut, does not entail pleasure. Pleasure is an experientially basic feeling, not an attitude. Smuts likewise maintains that "flow" or "being in the zone" are not the same thing as getting pleasure.

Smuts distinguishes his feels good theory as belonging to one of two types of theory that pleasure is a conscious quality—namely, a hedonic tone theory as opposed to a distinctive feeling theory. The distinction between hedonic tone and distinctive feeling versions of the conscious-quality theory was first drawn in Fred Feldman's 2001 article "Hedonism."

According to the distinctive feeling theory, pleasure is a distinctive feeling "analogous to such feelings as the sensations of hot and cold." In other words, hedonic feeling is a distinctive quality of consciousness. Thus, a cold lemonade may be experienced as a phenomenal complex consisting of a gustatory character (the flavor), a tactile quality (the coldness), and pleasantness. In contrast, the hedonic tone theory holds that a range of experiences or qualities of different kinds may all share a "certain phenomenally given dimension," called a hedonic or positive tone. For example, the taste of lemonade, the smell of sandalwood, and the sound of rain falling might all share a hedonic tone. Thus, the hedonic tone theory overcomes the central difficulty of the distinctive feeling view, which is that there does not appear to be any phenomenally distinct quality that one can isolate among various pleasant experiences. Nonetheless, if the hedonic tone theory is not to become a pro-attitude theory, it must maintain that various qualitatively distinct experiences can share some quality in virtue of which they are pleasures. Again, this quality is not distinct from the various qualities. For example, compare intensity, which may be a property belonging to qualities across a range of sense-
perceptual experiences. For the hedonic tone theory, pleasure or pleasantness is a feature of experience like intensity that can be shared by various senses; “pleasantness,” like intensity, can be shared by hearing, touch, smell, sight, and taste.

Thus we have three distinct kinds of theories of pleasure. On the attitudinal theory, pleasure is a psychological stance or orientation toward an object of consciousness. It can be positive and express itself as attraction, liking, or enjoyment, or negative, and express itself as aversion and dislike, and it may itself have a qualitative feel to it; liking or enjoying might feel like something. On the distinctive feeling theory, pleasure is a distinct feeling like other qualities of consciousness: cold, hot, savory, sharp, pleasant. According to the hedonic tone theory, pleasure is a quality of consciousness that is shared across sense modalities, like intensity.


iv Symposium: Pleasure, 137.


vi Gilbert Ryle, *The Concept of Mind*, 107-110. See also “Pleasure,” 141 and following.

vii Terence Penelhum, “The Logic of Pleasure,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 17: 488-503; David Wolfsdorf, *Pleasure in Ancient Greek Philosophy*, 223-5. Both William Alston (1967) and Warren Quinn (1968) defend dispositional theories. In his influential 1967 book the *Concept of Pleasure*, David Perry distinguishes enjoyment and being pleased that as two kinds of pro attitude. In the 1980’s, we see the Wayne Davis-Richard Warner debate. Warner argues that the subject desires the occurrence of the experience or the activity for its own sake—not instrumentally, for example, as we might want to take bitter medicine for the sake of health. This is intrinsic desire. Recent contemporary discussions have not focused on enjoying or being pleased that, but rather sensory pleasure, that is, pleasure taken in sensations. In the recent contemporary period, there has been much discussion of pleasure and intentionality and pleasure and representation. In the case of pleasure and representation, we can distinguish between two possibilities. One is that pleasure’s intentional object is representational, for example in the case of being pleased that p. The other is that pleasure’s intentional mode is representational; in other words, that the pleasure itself, in contrast to what it is taken in, is representational. For example, in Plato’s view of the appearance aspect of pleasure in Republic 9, pleasure represents the refilling of bodily deficiencies. *Pleasure*, 225-46.

viii The intentional object also has an aspectual shape. Two people can think of the same woman, but the same intentional object can have a different aspectual shape for each: for one the woman can be one’s mother, for another, one’s friend. See Tim Crane, “The Intentional Structure of Consciousness,” in *Consciousness: New Philosophical Perspectives*, 38, following John Searle, *The Rediscovery of the Mind*, 155.
Crane, 42-48.


Michael Pakaluk, “Pleasure” in *Aristotle’s Nicomachean Ethics*, 293.

For Aristotle, pleasure is a second order psychic experience, reflected upon a first order psychic experience, an activation (energeia)

William Robinson, “What is it Like to Like,” *Philosophical Psychology* 19: 743-65


Aydede, 553; quoted by Robinson, 748.

Robinson, 746

Robinson, 749

Robinson, 749

Timothy Schroeder, for example, has held that an experience of pleasure is a perceptual representation of a certain quantity of positive change in one’s net state of intrinsic desire satisfaction. But this would mean that our knowledge of what we like is an inference. We would need to ask ourselves whether our desires are being satisfied in order to know whether we like something. Schroeder, “Pleasure, Displeasure, and Representation”, *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 31: 507-30


Smuts, 255 (2010).


Feldman 662.

For a recent defense of the distinctive feeling theory, see Ben Bramble, "The Distinctive Feeling Theory of Pleasure," *Philosophical Studies* 138.