

How Pleasures Make Life Better

ANDREW H. ALWOOD



Abstract

In this paper, I argue that Phenomenalists about pleasure can concede a key claim, Heterogeneity, commonly used to object to their theory. They also can then vindicate the aspirations of J. S. Mill's doctrine of higher pleasures, while grounding their value claims in a naturalistic metaethics. But once Phenomenalists concede Heterogeneity they can no longer consistently endorse Hedonism as the correct theory of wellbeing, since they implicitly commit to recognizing distinct kinds of pleasure that are independently good-making. I also explore further issues that arise for a Pluralist theory of pleasure: How could there be distinct kinds of pleasure? How can pleasures be measured? Is it possible for some pleasures to be superior in kind to others? What unifies the category of pleasant experiences? Is the value of pleasant experiences natural or non-natural?

Keywords: *well-being, pleasure, hedonism, phenomenalism, J. S. Mill*

1 Introduction

The following claims are jointly inconsistent:

Phenomenalism: An experience is made pleasant by its affective phenomenal features.

Heterogeneity: There is no one phenomenal feature present in every pleasant experience that makes it pleasant.

Distinct pleasures are good: There are phenomenally distinct pleasant experiences that each is good for the experiencing subject on account of its phenomenal features.

Hedonism: Pleasantness is the only basic good-maker.

Phenomenalists claim that pleasure is a matter of how an experience ‘feels’; it is determined by phenomenal features of experience. If they concede Heterogeneity, they then have to concede that there are distinct pleasures which share no phenomenal features. Yet if two phenomenally distinct kinds of pleasure are each good for a subject, on account of their phenomenal features, then there are at least two kinds of pleasure that are basically good-making¹. This result conflicts with Hedonism’s claim that only one thing, pleasantness, is a basic good-maker.

First, in section 2, I respond to traditional versions of the Heterogeneity objection against Phenomenalism and introduce the Pluralist Phenomenalist theory of pleasure that recognizes distinct kinds of pleasantness. This clarifies a central limitation of the Heterogeneity objection. Then, in section 3, I argue that Pluralist Phenomenalism is inconsistent with Hedonism, which clarifies that the Heterogeneity objection still has some bite.

We are left to consider the merits of the claim that distinct kinds of pleasure are independently beneficial. In section 4, I argue that this can help make sense of J. S. Mill’s famous claim that there are “higher” pleasures that are intrinsically superior to other kinds of pleasure.

Then, in section 5, I examine how pleasantness can be measured and what unifies the category of pleasant experiences. I also argue against the most developed version of a Pluralist Phenomenalist theory of pleasure in support of an alternative naturalistic theory of how distinct pleasures make life better.

My overarching aim is to clarify and develop the spirit behind the idea that pleasure improves wellbeing because of how it feels to experience it, on the assumption of Heterogeneity. This is obviously important for Hedonistic utilitarians, but is also relevant for any theorist who includes pleasure as at least one of the basic good-making features.

2 *The Heterogeneity objection against Phenomenalism*

The word ‘pleasure’ has to be understood quite broadly in debates about wellbeing, in order to be charitable to Hedonists.² Some Hedonists prefer to characterize their views in terms of ‘enjoyment’ and ‘suffering’ rather than ‘pleasure’ and ‘pain’. We should give the Hedonist all the resources she needs, especially if we’re trying to refute her essential claim.³ But I will continue to use the word ‘pleasure’, intending it to apply quite broadly.

The broad construal of ‘pleasure’ has the drawback that it doesn’t obviously stand for a unified class or kind; hence, the objection that pleasure is heterogeneous. Here is Derek Parfit’s brief and influential presentation of the objection:

“*Narrow Hedonists* assume, falsely, that pleasure and pain are two distinctive kinds of experience. Compare the pleasures of satisfying an intense thirst or lust, listening to music, solving an intellectual problem, reading a tragedy, and knowing that one’s child is happy. These various experiences do not contain any distinctive common quality.”⁴

Parfit’s real target here seems to be Phenomenalism, which is variously articulated as the thesis that what makes an experience pleasant is its felt character, tone or phenomenology.⁵ Most writers advocating the Heterogeneity objection similarly review the variety of pleasant experience and then reject Phenomenalism for reasons Parfit mentions. Chris Heathwood says:

“pleasure is a diverse and varied phenomenon . . . (ranging from) *bodily* pleasures, like those had from relaxing in a Jacuzzi tub, from sunbathing on a warm beach, or from sexual activities. . . (to) *gustatory* and *olfactory* pleasures. . . (to) ‘*emotional* pleasures’, such as the elation of receiving an ovation. . . (to) ‘more *cognitive*’ pleasures, such as the pleasure derived from working on a crossword puzzle, from reading an insightful philosophy paper, or from listening to an amusing anecdote. . . (to) *aesthetic* pleasures, like those derived from listening to beautiful music or from taking in a powerful sculpture. . . This is ‘the heterogeneity problem.’”⁶

Heathwood names his target “the Felt-Quality Theory” according to which “pleasure is some one kind of immediately felt quality”. He summarizes the complaint: “the phenomenology just doesn’t bear it out – there doesn’t seem to be any one feeling (or even ‘hedonic tone’) common to all occasions on which we experience pleasure or enjoyment.”⁷

I think Heathwood’s presentation of the Heterogeneity objection is better than Parfit’s since it more clearly targets a monistic Phenomenalist theory of pleasure, that pleasure is some *one* way of feeling. But his version of the objection mistakenly dismisses all Phenomenalist theories after raising a problem only for monistic versions on which pleasure is

immediately felt.⁸ He overlooks more sophisticated versions that can agree with the key claims in his objection.

A Pluralist Phenomenalist theory of pleasure claims that there are distinct phenomenal features that each can make an experience pleasant: there are *distinct kinds of pleasantness*. Such accounts aim to combine Heterogeneity and Phenomenalism. Roger Crisp claims “there is a plurality of feeling tones” in the class of pleasures or enjoyments, while Ivar Labukt advocates for Phenomenalists to deny the monistic claim that there is just one pleasant phenomenal quality.⁹

But not just any pluralism about pleasure can consistently concede Heterogeneity. For example, Crisp insists “there is a common quality – feeling good” that unifies the class of pleasant experiences.¹⁰ But we should wonder whether this common quality of ‘feeling good’ is itself a phenomenal feature of experience. If it is, then Crisp’s view collapses into a monistic version of Phenomenalism, one which obviously cannot concede Heterogeneity.

Labukt, on the other hand, advocates a pluralism that does not claim any phenomenal unity to the class of pleasant experiences. He suggests “there are positive hedonic tones that have no shared phenomenal properties at all; they simply feel completely different.”¹¹ The coherence of such a theory refutes the arguments from philosophers like Parfit and Heathwood who raise the Heterogeneity objection against Phenomenalism.

Phenomenalists are usually expected to say that pleasure is phenomenally unified, in the sense that there is a phenomenal feature in common to all pleasant experiences. But this involves a commitment to monism about pleasure, and hence is incompatible with Heterogeneity. If a Phenomenalist endorses Heterogeneity, she must relinquish the phenomenal unity of pleasure.

Notice, though, that pluralists about pleasure could recognize within the class of pleasant experiences distinct sub-groupings that each is unified by a common phenomenal feature. It is not necessary (though it remains possible) to say that every pleasant experience is phenomenally unique. For example, perhaps all bodily pleasures feel a similar way, or all olfactory pleasures, or perhaps there are a few basic taste-sensations that each unifies a sub-grouping of gustatory pleasures. There are many other possibilities. Although I won’t argue for a specific version of pluralism about pleasure, I return to consider distinct kinds of pleasure in section 4.

A central question for pluralism about pleasure is whether anything can unify the class of pleasant experiences, consistent with the assumptions of Phenomenalism and Heterogeneity.

Labukt addresses this question by developing the suggestion from Stuart Rachels that what makes an experience pleasant is that *those experiences are beneficial due to how they feel*.¹² This ‘evaluative unity’ account of pleasure proposes to unify pleasure as a genuine kind, by positing the value of pleasure as explanatorily more basic than pleasantness itself. I will return to criticize this account of pleasure in section 5.

Pluralist Phenomenalists about pleasure must concede that pleasure is not a basic descriptive kind. In recognizing more than one particular kind of pleasantness – distinct phenomenal features that each can make an experience pleasant – they implicitly recognize pleasantness as a derivative or disjunctive kind. I will argue in the next section that pluralism about pleasure leads to pluralism about wellbeing.

3 From a plurality of pleasures to a plurality of good-makers

Hedonism is a form of monism about wellbeing since it claims that there is only one basic good-maker: pleasantness. Yet Hedonism also requires monism about pleasure, since pleasantness must be just one thing, if it is the one and only basic good-maker. Hedonism is incompatible with the Pluralist Phenomenalist theory of pleasure which I introduced in section 2.

It might be helpful to illustrate the argument here with examples, and to draw out all the assumptions. Consider the following two pleasant experiences that seem to have nothing phenomenal in common:

Experience 1: Ron enjoys running and especially likes the “high” he experiences after crossing the finish line of a challenging race. When asked to describe what he likes about this way of feeling, he describes the physical sensations as “exciting” and also claims there is a mental levity associated with increased energy and attention.

Experience 2: Sue finds her job stressful and she relishes the chance to steal a private moment on her lunchbreak. She likes to close her eyes and imagine herself under a tree just like the one at her Grandmother’s house. She claims this meditative exercise makes her feel “settled” and “grounded”.

When pressed, she finds it difficult to describe any physical sensations involved and instead speaks of the “stillness” of her mind.

Let’s assume that these experiences indeed share no phenomenal feature that makes each pleasant: they simply feel pleasant in different ways. This assumption is supported by combining Heterogeneity and Phenomenalism. Let’s also assume that each experience is beneficial simply because of how it feels, i.e., the basic explanation of why these experiences benefit their subjects is in terms of their phenomenal features.¹³

These claims entail that there are distinct phenomenal features that are basic good-makers. Ron and Sue have experiences that are beneficial because of how they feel, yet they feel completely different from each other. Let’s say that Ron’s experience *E1* is pleasant because of the ‘exciting’ phenomenal feature *p1*, and Sue’s experience *E2* is pleasant because of the ‘tranquil’ phenomenal feature *p2*.

How should we explain what makes these experiences beneficial? There are two candidate explanations to choose from. Either *E1* benefits Ron on account of *p1*, or else it benefits him on account of either *p1* or *p2* or . . . , where this disjunction includes a disjunct for each phenomenal feature that can make an experience pleasant. But this choice does not seem difficult. Ron’s experience benefits him because it involved an exciting pleasantness, not because it either involved exciting pleasantness or tranquil pleasantness or . . . , etc., for every kind of pleasantness. The disjunctive feature doesn’t do explanatory work here. The same kind of reasoning can apply to Sue’s experience to conclude that *p2* itself explains why *E2* is beneficial: the tranquil pleasantness of her experience explains why she benefits from it. Pleasantness per se is not the basic reason why these experiences are beneficial, if pleasantness is indeed a disjunction of more particular kinds of pleasantness.

My argument targets theorists who want to say that the pleasant phenomenal features of experiences are what makes them beneficial. This includes Hedonists and other proponents of the Objective List theory of wellbeing who include pleasantness on their list of basic good-makers. My argument forces them to distinguish the following claims:

Phenomenal-Explanation: any experience that intrinsically benefits a subject does so on account of its phenomenal features.

Hedonistic-Explanation: any experience that intrinsically benefits a subject does so on account of its pleasantness.

These two claims seem to nicely cohere when we think of pleasantness as a single phenomenal feature that is present in every pleasant experience, for then there would be a class of experiences all of which are beneficial on account of that one feature, pleasantness. But this picture is disrupted by Heterogeneity and the Pluralist theory of pleasure.

Once we have recognized distinct kinds of pleasantness – distinct phenomenal features that each can make an experience pleasant – we can conceive of pleasantness as a disjunction of these phenomenal features.¹⁴ But then pleasantness is no longer a basic good-maker.

Anyone attracted to both Phenomenal Explanation and Heterogeneity ought to reject Hedonistic Explanation and instead embrace a pluralist version of the Objective List approach on which there are distinct kinds of pleasantness on the list of basic good-makers. I call such a theory *Phenomenal Pluralism about wellbeing* when these phenomenal features are the only items on the list.

Phenomenal Pluralism preserves the main theoretical attractions of Hedonism. Both theories can maintain that only pleasures are intrinsically beneficial, and that the complete, basic explanation of what benefits a subject is in terms of the phenomenal features of the subject's experiences. This preserves the parsimonious attractions of Hedonism, and locates the value of wellbeing in the natural world. Both theories can also maintain that the value of pleasure is objective (independent of attitudes) although also subject-dependent (dependent on a subject's experiences).

Additionally, the epistemological attractions of Hedonism can be preserved. Empiricists have long advocated Hedonism on the grounds that the experience of pleasure provides direct or basic empirical evidence for its value.¹⁵ A Phenomenal Pluralist about wellbeing can likewise claim that there is basic empirical epistemic justification for thinking that pleasures are beneficial. However obvious or uncontroversial it seems that pleasure is good for the one pleased, this is preserved in the more perspicuous claim that a particular pleasant experience is good for the one pleased on account of the particular kind of pleasure it involves.

Therefore, theorists attracted to Phenomenalist Hedonism ought to consider switching their allegiance to Phenomenalist Pluralism about wellbeing.

4 *Higher and lower pleasures*

Suppose that there are distinct kinds of pleasure, with each kind unified by a single phenomenal feature. For example, all bodily pleasures have a certain feeling in common, and all intellectual pleasures have a different feeling in common. This opens the question whether some kinds of pleasure are more beneficial than others, simply on account of how they feel. If the feeling of intellectual pleasure is intrinsically superior to that of bodily pleasure, for example, then this would vindicate Mill's famous claim that they are "higher" pleasures.

Mill claims that some pleasures have a superior "quality" that makes them better as pleasures.¹⁶ He purports to amend Bentham's Quantitative Hedonism so that the quality of a pleasure is another factor that can affect its value, in addition to the quantity of pleasure as measured by intensity and duration. Mill's Qualitative Hedonism has been thought riddled with problems and so now is not taken as seriously as Quantitative Hedonism.¹⁷

Critics allege that Mill faces a dilemma: either his notion of quality reduces to quantity, and thus he has not departed from the simpler Hedonism of Bentham, or else the explanation of a pleasure's superior quality depends on the value of something other than its pleasantness, and thus he would be forced to relinquish Hedonism.

Here, I wish to explore what exactly Mill would be forced to give up if he took the latter horn of the alleged dilemma. My comments on what Mill "could" say are obviously speculative and are not meant as interpretations of what he actually did say. My point is that there is a coherent theory that gets results he clearly wanted to establish, while retaining key virtues of Hedonism.

Mill could develop his theory of higher pleasures by embracing a Pluralist Phenomenalist theory of pleasure on which there are distinct kinds of pleasure, e.g. intellectual and bodily pleasures. These kinds are unified phenomenally: whatever else differentiates particular intellectually pleasant experiences, there is a phenomenal feature $p1$ making them intellectual pleasures, and likewise there is a phenomenal feature $p2$ that makes an experience a bodily pleasure. These phenomenal features, $p1$ and $p2$, are intrinsic features that can serve to ground the intrinsic superiority of intellectual over bodily pleasures.

Mill could clarify that his theory of value is Phenomenalist Pluralist if he recognized that the phenomenal differences between higher and lower pleasures are independent sources of value. That is, he could opt for a prioritized objective list of basic good-makers, with each item on the list

being a kind of pleasure, and with some kinds of pleasures superior in kind to others. Mill could say that both of the phenomenal features $p1$ and $p2$ are basic good-makers, and add that the value of $p1$ is superior to the value of $p2$. In fact, Mill could posit a lexical priority on his objective list of values, so that no amount of $p2$ could be so beneficial that it surpasses the value of $p1$, if indeed he wants to establish that intellectual pleasures are discontinuously superior to bodily pleasures.¹⁸ In this way, $p1$ is better than $p2$, but there is no numeric scale by which to rate how much better it is.

What grounds the difference in value between higher and lower pleasures? The superior quality of intellectual pleasure, with respect to bodily pleasure, is simply its peculiar way of feeling, $p1$. The inferior quality of bodily pleasure, with respect to intellectual pleasure, is its peculiar way of feeling, $p2$. Nothing further explains why these features are as valuable as they are, since they are basically good-making. The different kinds of feeling make for different kinds of value.

To some, this might sound like cheating, as if Mill could illegitimately help himself to the claim that $p1$ is superior to $p2$. But anyone who wants to explain value in terms of natural features must make similar assumptions. Bentham himself claims that the intensity of pleasant feeling is basically good-making. Nothing further explains this. Mill makes more assumptions of basic value than Bentham, but they are the same sort of assumption. My reconstruction of Mill's theory of higher pleasure posits multiple basic good-makers, and so overtly endorses value pluralism within the category of pleasant experience. Mill also seems to want to establish discontinuity in value, and so further distinguish his theory from Bentham's.¹⁹ But if the extra assumptions needed to establish the discontinuity help his Qualitative Hedonism cohere better with our reflective judgments and intuitions about wellbeing, then they serve a good purpose.

My reconstruction of Mill's theory of higher pleasures would give the desired verdict on Crisp's example of Haydn and the oyster.²⁰ Crisp imagines that the oyster could live as long as it needed so that the duration of its bodily pleasures overcomes the value of Haydn's briefer yet more dignified pleasure. But if Haydn enjoys intellectual pleasure with phenomenal feature $p1$, and the oyster only enjoys bodily pleasure with phenomenal feature $p2$, where $p1$ is discontinuously better than $p2$, then there is no duration long enough for the oyster to enjoy greater wellbeing than Haydn.²¹ Nor could a bodily pleasure occur intensely enough to rival the value of the intellectual pleasure.

Another advantage of my reconstruction of Mill's ideas is that it avoids confusions pointed out by critics who allege that Mill confused pleasure as a mental state with pleasurable activities, and that Mill confused a higher kind of pleasure with pleasures caused by exercising higher psychological faculties.²² According to my reconstruction, Mill would clarify that it is pleasant phenomenal features of conscious experience that are classified as intrinsically superior or inferior, and so avoid such confusions.²³

Mill's division between intellectual and bodily or other kinds of pleasures may seem hard to defend on phenomenal grounds alone. It suspiciously looks as if the classification is based on the activities or faculties involved in producing such feelings. Yet I submit that this suspicion fails to distinguish between the features we first use to recognize an experience as, say, bodily pleasing, from the basic features that make the experience beneficial. Perhaps we first focus attention on certain feelings by describing the situations in which they are felt, e.g. situations involving one's body, and then focus exclusively on how such experiences feel as we demarcate distinct kinds of pleasantness. Perhaps it would be less misleading to dispense with labels like 'intellectual', 'bodily', etc., and instead use the rich experiential vocabulary we possess (e.g. the descriptors mentioned in endnote 2) to isolate different kinds of phenomenal pleasure, such as tranquility, elation, and relief.

Importantly, even though Mill would indeed relinquish Hedonism on my reconstruction of this theory of higher pleasures, he could still preserve many of its desirable features. While he would have to give up the claim that pleasantness alone is good-making, he need not posit non-pleasures as basic good-making features. He can retain the Hedonistic claims that only pleasures benefit, and that all possible improvements in a subject's wellbeing are to be explained by the phenomenal features of the subject's experiences. He can retain an empiricist epistemology and a conservative ontology of value. This is no ordinary pluralism about wellbeing.

Still, the Phenomenal Pluralist theory of well-being sketched here does encounter problematic issues regarding the measurement of pleasure and its value. Any pluralist must address the question of how independent values relate to one another, and the specter of incommensurability looms. If Mill's doctrine of higher pleasures indeed commits to a discontinuity between the higher and lower pleasures, then it commits to incommensurable values.²⁴

Whether or not my speculative reconstruction here is the true theory of wellbeing, it demonstrates a convergence of Mill's ideas about higher pleasures with the Pluralist Phenomenalist theory of pleasure that reconciles Heterogeneity and Phenomenalism. In the next section, I return to examine Pluralist Phenomenalism more closely.

5 *Measurement and metaethics of a plurality of pleasures*

Pluralist Phenomenalism about pleasure posits distinct phenomenal features that each can make an experience pleasant. What other commitments does this require? How can it be filled out into a complete theory of pleasure and its value?

In this section, I argue against the most developed version of Pluralist Phenomenalism about pleasure found in Labukt [12]. Labukt claims that pleasure must be unified by non-natural value, but his argument relies on a mistake. First, I clarify what his account of pleasure is committed to. Then, as I diagnose the mistake, I sketch an alternative naturalistic development of Pluralist Phenomenalism about pleasure.

Recall my conclusions from section 3 that, in positing distinct kinds of pleasantness that are independently good-making, a Pluralist Phenomenalist about pleasure commits to endorsing both value pluralism and the claim that pleasantness is explanatorily idle. I now add a third commitment: it is impossible to measure pleasantness itself.

On a simple Benthamite view, the amount of pleasure a subject feels at a time is identical to how intensely his or her pleasure feels. Pleasantness is measured by measuring the intensity of pleasant feeling. But once we posit distinct kinds of pleasantness, there is no single dimension on which the various pleasures can be measured as more or less intense. Heterogeneity implies multiple dimensions of how pleasures can feel: there is one scale for, say, how *tranquil* an experience feels, another for how *joyful* it feels, and so on for every phenomenal feature that can make an experience more or less pleasant or unpleasant. Adding more tranquility to an experience makes it more pleasant, and adding more joyfulness to an experience also makes it more pleasant. But there cannot be a scale that measures the intensity of pleasure itself, as if making an experience much more tranquil but slightly less joyful determined a precise change in overall pleasantness.

This commitment is confirmed by those who wish to argue the defensibility of Pluralist Phenomenalism. Labukt briefly considers and dismisses a worry about measurement and aggregation, claiming that

“we are led to accept this view... whether it is elegant or not.”²⁵ Stuart Rachels proclaims ‘the hedonic calculus is a joke’.²⁶ While this may seem pessimistic, each of these authors optimistically proposes to unify the phenomenally heterogeneous class of pleasant experiences by means of their evaluative or normative features. This class is unified, they claim, in that *these experiences are all good for an experiencer due to how they feel*.

Rachels suggests that unpleasantness, as a unifying feature of all unpleasant experiences or “unpleasures”, might amount to this: “Unpleasures are just those experiences that are bad for the people who have them due to how they feel.”²⁷ Labukt takes up this suggestion and adapts it to his purposes, saying that “pleasures are those experiences that by themselves and due to how they feel make the person experiencing them better off.”²⁸

One might worry that such an *evaluative unity* account fits badly with Phenomenalism. But they are not contradictory. As I understand it, the evaluative unity account implies that an experience’s phenomenal features make it pleasant, by first making it good for the experiencer. The value of the experience is thus posited with an important intermediate role to play in the order of explanation. The pleasantness of an experience is determined by its value, and the value of the experience is determined by its phenomenal features.

The evaluative unity account thus reverses the Hedonist’s order of explanation. Whereas the Hedonist says that what makes an experience beneficial is its pleasantness, the evaluative unity account says that what makes an experience pleasant is its beneficial feature.

The evaluative unity account also contradicts the monism of Hedonism, since it posits a plurality of phenomenal features that are independently good-making. Labukt notes in passing that this account commits to value pluralism.²⁹ He should also agree that pleasantness itself is explanatorily idle, since the more basic phenomenal features that determine pleasantness do all the explanatory work. This confirms the points I argued for in more detail in section 3.

To be clear, I am not confirming these claims in order to hold them against Pluralist Phenomenalism about pleasure, but rather to clarify what it involves. These commitments may not trouble Rachels or Labukt, if they are only concerned to defend Phenomenalism against the Heterogeneity objection.

Now I will argue against the evaluative unity account and how Labukt develops it. Labukt claims that the evaluative unity account is “the

only plausible answer” to the question of why we refer to a class of heterogeneous phenomenal features as one thing ‘pleasure’.³⁰ He also claims that the value of pleasure, which serves the unifying purpose, must be non-natural and irreducibly normative.³¹ But these claims appear to imply an incoherent metaphysics and epistemology of pleasure and its value.

Labukt is explicit that “what makes an experience pleasant – according to the present (evaluative unity) view – is that it is good simply in virtue of how it feels” [12, p. 189]. Yet pleasantness is a paradigmatic natural property, and has been recognized as such in a long history of metaethical debates including G. E. Moore’s famous claim of a naturalistic fallacy. So, Labukt appears to be claiming that a natural property is determined by non-natural value. But whatever else non-natural values do, they do *not* play a role in determining the natural features of the empirical world. The phrase ‘non-natural’ was coined to talk about a part of reality separate from the natural. Moreover, the phenomenology of pleasure is overtly empirical as it is something we immediately experience. Yet non-natural value is traditionally thought to be unobservable.³²

Is there a way to save the evaluative unity account from incoherence? Perhaps one could try to defend the surprising claim that pleasantness is itself a non-natural feature, and an irreducibly normative feature, too. That would avoid the incoherence of claiming that a natural feature is determined by a non-natural feature. But I do not see how it helps with the epistemic point that pleasant phenomenology is immediately experienced. Perhaps it could be denied that pleasantness itself is immediately experienced, yet surely the particular phenomenal features that determine pleasantness are immediately experienced. It seems absurd to claim that pleasantness itself is non-natural while conceding that every possible way by which we experience pleasantness is natural. Yet it seems equally absurd to insist that the immediately experienced phenomenal features are themselves non-natural.

Thus, it seems reasonable for a proponent of the evaluative unity account to consider that the value of pleasure is natural. Some naturalists think that a given value can be both natural and irreducibly normative.³³ Or perhaps the value of pleasure reduces to its descriptive grounds. Before I can diagnose the mistake that leads Labukt to conclude that the value of pleasure must be non-natural, I have to first begin to sketch an alternative naturalistic account and explain why the evaluative unity account is not a commitment of Pluralist Phenomenalism about pleasure.

Recall the point I began with in section 2, that the word ‘pleasure’ has to be interpreted broadly in moral philosophy. There are also restrictive senses of ‘pleasure’ on which, e.g., all pleasures are sensory. Perhaps all pleasures in this restrictive sense are unified around a common phenomenal feature. But there are examples of affective states, such as euphoria, that are non-sensory yet seem beneficial on Hedonist or Phenomenalist grounds. It seems appropriate to call such states pleasures, at least in philosophical contexts. We are concerned with the broad construal of ‘pleasure’ on which it involves all positive affective conscious states, and an equally broad construal of ‘unpleasantness’ on which it involves all negative affective conscious states.

Pleasures are all kinds of positive affect. So, that would appear to unify them, if indeed they are unified. But what does it mean to call an affect ‘positive’ or ‘negative’? In classifying a form of affect as positive rather than negative, we are not evaluating it as a good thing to have, nor are we attributing it normative properties such as being worth pursuing. Empirical researchers group particular kinds of affect into positive and negative (and other) categories as they attempt to measure subjective states of mind. For example, a psychologist might ask a subject how much joy they felt today, how much tranquility, and so on, and then tabulate the sum of such positive affects. Note that, properly speaking, this example should not be thought to aggregate such positive affects into a single measure of *how much pleasure* the subject felt. Instead, it is an aggregation of particular affects whose relative pleasantness might be incomparable. Yet it makes sense from the empirical researcher’s perspective to group them together.³⁴ The important point is that calling a particular form of affect ‘positive’ is a classificatory task that does not involve evaluative judgments. The researcher should not be interpreted as implying that there is any reason or benefit in having such states, although of course in practice a psychologist might go on to make such claims, e.g. in the course of a therapy session.

Thus, it may be possible to unify the class of pleasant experiences without recourse to the idea that they are all good for a subject to experience, and without recourse to positing non-natural or irreducibly normative properties. There is a non-evaluative feature shared by all pleasures: they are all kinds of positive affect. So, Labukt is incorrect to claim that his evaluative unity account is the only way to do this. I believe the reason why he overlooks this alternative is that he conflates the positivity of positive affect with its value.

When Labukt introduces his evaluative unity account he says,

“What do the positive hedonic tones have in common? The only plausible answer I can think of is that they are all positive. Somewhat more precisely, *positive hedonic tones are those phenomenal qualities that are intrinsically good due to how they feel*. Negative hedonic tones would be those phenomenal qualities that are, in the same sense, bad.”³⁵

In this quotation, Labukt appears to say that what makes a particular affective feeling (or hedonic tone) a form of positive affect is that it has value. He seems to conflate the descriptive feature of having positive affect, with the evaluative feature of improving well-being. It is clear that he wants the evaluative feature to be pleasant-making and to do the work of unifying the class of pleasant experiences. But his discussion becomes hard to interpret as he uses phrases like ‘positive hedonic tone’ as if calling a form of affect ‘positive’ is equivalent to evaluating it positively. He inter-changes ‘positive hedonic tone’ with ‘experiential goodness’ and ‘phenomenal value’ as if they were synonymous phrases.³⁶

This conflation of the positivity of positive affect, which is a non-evaluative feature, with the value of pleasure mistakenly leads Labukt to conclude that the value of pleasure must be non-natural. In the previous quotation, he claims that the evaluative unity account is the “only plausible answer”. Yet, he has overlooked the idea that the positivity of positive affect could be a non-evaluative feature that unified the plurality of feelings that make for pleasantness. Then, as he explains why he thinks a naturalist cannot adopt the evaluative unity account of pleasure, he says:

“if we want to appeal to experiential goodness in order to solve the hedonic unity problem, then experiential goodness could not merely be the disjunctive property of being one of the positive hedonic tones. It is not particularly helpful to be told that positive hedonic tones are those phenomenal qualities that are good due to how they feel, and that being phenomenally good amounts to being one of the positive hedonic tones.”³⁷

Labukt seems to be pointing out a circularity that should be avoided, one in which the disjunctive feature of being one of the particular phenomenal features that makes for pleasantness both determines and is determined by the value of pleasant experiences. Of course, this circularity should be avoided. But a phenomenal feature (or hedonic tone) is not made a form of positive affect by its value. This non-evaluative

feature, the positivity of certain affects, might unify the phenomenally heterogeneous features that can make an experience pleasant.

Further questions arise for a naturalistic version of Pluralist Phenomenalism about pleasure and its value. The most pressing is *whether positive affect itself is a natural, unified class*, assuming that it groups together phenomenally heterogeneous features.

A naturalist might answer this question negatively if she were happy to concede that the notion of positive affect is shaped by human interests. This would be to disagree with Labukt and others that there is advantage in defending a unification of pleasures, and instead press for accepting that reality provides a plurality where our practices of using one word ‘pleasure’ or ‘positive affect’ leads us to want a unity. There’s no need to conclude that pleasures make up a non-natural kind, or that pleasantness does not exist. Compare how English speakers used one word ‘jade’ to refer to what we now know are two substances with distinct microphysical structures. We can still sensibly use ‘jade’ if we adjust our expectations to accommodate its reference as a disjunctive feature. Similarly, we can still pick out a plurality of experiences with ‘pleasure’ even if we conclude that pleasantness is disjunctive.³⁸

Yet some naturalists will want to vindicate the expectation that pleasure is unified. An optimistic naturalist will claim that positive affect is a natural property that unifies the heterogeneous kinds of pleasantness into a natural class.³⁹ Recall that Crisp seems to opt for a Pluralist Phenomenalist theory of pleasure on which there is a commonality in the heterogeneous class of pleasant experiences, since they all ‘feel good’. In section 2, I cautioned that this would not truly be a pluralist theory of pleasure if ‘feeling good’ is itself a phenomenal feature of experience. But perhaps instead we should say this ‘feel good’-feature is what makes a phenomenal feature a form of positive affect. One could claim that the class of pleasant experiences is unified by the fact that they all ‘feel good’ and thus are kinds of positive affect, while consistently endorsing Heterogeneity, as long as there is no particular way of feeling identified with feeling good. That is, there are many ways to feel good, but there is no way of feeling that is *simply* feeling good, without also feeling good in one of those particular ways. The ‘feel good’-feature is not itself a phenomenal feature of experience. The particular phenomenal features make an experience feel good and thus also a form of positive affect, and so pleasant.

To be clear, ‘feeling good’ is not an evaluative feature, although it is playing the same intermediate unifying role that value plays in the

evaluative unity account. To say that an experience feels good is not yet to say it is beneficial or to evaluate it as worth pursuing. It is to classify an experience based on how it feels, relative to a standard that ranks feelings. Such standard-relative judgments are non-evaluative in the relevant sense, even though a high ranking on the standard qualifies as feeling ‘good’. Compare how J. L. Mackie, an anti-realist about objective values, happily admits that there are facts about goodness relative to standards, such as what counts as a good sheepdog: “Given any sufficiently determinate standards, it will be an objective issue, a matter of truth and falsehood, how well any particular specimen measures up to those standards. . . . it will be a factual question whether this sheepdog has performed better than that one” [13, p. 26]. Similarly, it is a non-evaluative fact that one experience feels better than another.

The optimistic proposal on the table, then, is that ‘feeling good’ is a natural, non-evaluative feature of reality that unifies pleasures and explains why we refer to heterogeneous phenomenal features as ‘pleasant’. This account seems to match the alleged advantages of the evaluative unity account and yet avoid its troubles.

Finally, I would like to emphasize that a naturalistic account of pleasure and its value is needed to preserve the advantages of Hedonism that I noted earlier. A Pluralist Phenomenalist about pleasure can enjoy the Hedonist’s theoretical virtues of metaphysical parsimony and empirical epistemology, but only if pleasure is an empirically accessible part of the natural world.

6 Conclusion

As I stated at the beginning, my overarching aim has been to clarify and develop the idea that pleasure improves wellbeing because of how it feels to experience it, on the assumption that pleasant experiences are heterogeneous. I first argued (in section 2) against attempts to refute Phenomenalism. One can embrace Heterogeneity while opting for a Pluralist Phenomenalism about pleasure that recognizes distinct phenomenal features that make experiences pleasant. But then I argued this pluralism about pleasure commits to pluralism about wellbeing as well (section 3), and thus is inconsistent with Hedonism. In recognizing a plurality of heterogeneous pleasures, one is led to the claim that it is not pleasantness per se that determines wellbeing but rather the more particular kinds of pleasure.

I also argued that a Phenomenal Pluralist theory of wellbeing, on

which only distinct kinds of pleasure are basically good-making, could be used to defend Mill’s claim that some pleasures are intrinsically superior to others (section 4). Finally, I argued against Labukt’s non-natural evaluative unity account of pleasure and sketched how a metaethical naturalist can improve upon it (section 5).

Throughout, I have explained how rejecting Hedonism is compatible with preserving its theoretical virtues in metaphysics and epistemology, on a naturalistic Phenomenal Pluralist theory of wellbeing. Phenomenal Pluralism about wellbeing ought to be taken just as seriously as Hedonism, since they can agree on everything except which feature of a pleasant experience is the one that makes it good for the experienter.

Nevertheless, one might agree with the key arguments in this paper and yet believe that non-pleasures are also basically valuable. Standard pluralist theories of wellbeing can concede that pleasantness itself is not on the objective list of basic good-makers, replacing it with particular kinds of pleasure.

Notes

- 1 A basic good-maker is such that there is no further explanation of what makes the relevant thing good. I hereby set aside the notion of instrumental value, or other forms of derivative value, and focus exclusively on non-instrumental or intrinsic value.
- 2 See Moore [15] who includes as ‘pleasures’ “contentment, delight, ecstasy, elation, enjoyment, euphoria, exhilaration, exultation, gladness, gratification, gratitude, joy, liking, love, relief, satisfaction, Schadenfreude, tranquility.” Moore claims that ‘displeasure’ must be understood just as broadly, with perhaps even greater variety, including “ache, agitation, agony, angst, anguish, annoyance, anxiety, apprehensiveness, boredom, chagrin, dejection, depression, desolation, despair, desperation, despondency, discomfort, discombobulation, discontentment, disgruntlement, disgust, dislike, dismay, disorientation, dissatisfaction, distress, dread, enmity, ennui, fear, gloominess, grief, guilt, hatred, horror, hurting, irritation, loathing, melancholia, nausea, queasiness, remorse, resentment, sadness, shame, sorrow, suffering, sullenness, throb, terror, unease, vexation, and so on”.
- 3 See [6] for an introduction to the debate about wellbeing that I am engaging with.
- 4 See [16, p. 493], italics in the original. Many philosophers have made this kind of argument since Sidgwick’s early presentation. See [15, sec. 2.1] for discussion of “the disunity objection”.

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- 5 Phenomenalism has been conceived under different guises: felt quality theories, distinctive feeling theories, hedonic tone theories, and theories on which pleasantness is internal or intrinsic to pleasant experiences. For discussion, see [21], [17], [5], [22].
- 6 See [11, p. 26], italics added.
- 7 [11, p. 26]
- 8 Advocates of a monistic theory of pleasure have defended themselves from the Heterogeneity objection by undermining the power and accuracy of introspection, pointing out ways in which introspection can be misleading and inconclusive. [1], [12], [19] suggest that pleasure might be a single way of feeling, although we do not or cannot notice this via introspection. However, such a defense against the Heterogeneity objection appears to undermine the main support for Phenomenalism, which seems to require introspection.
- 9 See [5, p. 108] and [12, p. 187]. Also relevant is [8], which discusses earlier suggestions of pluralism about pleasure.
- 10 [5, p. 109]. See also [19].
- 11 [12, p. 189]. See also [17], [18]. Although I mostly agree with Labukt's response to the Heterogeneity problem, as it targets Phenomenalism, I return to criticize Labukt's development of Pluralist Phenomenalism about pleasure in section 5.
- 12 See [12, p. 190], and [17, p.198].
- 13 Notice that this assumption would be denied by hedonists who reject Phenomenalism, such as Feldman [7] or Heathwood [11], and also by those who reject Objective List theories in favor of a subjective theory of wellbeing, such as desire-satisfaction theories.
- 14 I return to consider the unity of pleasure in section 5.
- 15 The Ancient Greek Hedonist Epicurus posited feeling (*pathos*) as the criterion by which to judge good and bad in his Letter to Menoeceus.
- 16 See [14, chp 2]. Mill is responding to the worry that it is "a doctrine worthy only of swine" to "suppose that life has... no higher end than pleasure." He suggests that aesthetic and intellectual pleasures are superior in quality to bodily pleasures.
- 17 In addition to the dilemma I proceed to mention in the text, another problem for Mill is the role of his competent judges, who he claims offer the only way of understanding what 'quality of pleasure' means. Their preferences appear to *confer* greater value on the higher pleasures. This would appear to opt for an attitudinalist or desire-satisfaction explanation of wellbeing, which might be confirmed by Mill's claim that the degree of desire is always in exact proportion to the degree of pleasantness. However, there is also reason to instead interpret the role of the competent judges' preferences as evidential; they *discover* or reveal the greater value that is there in the pleasure. I assume this latter, evidential or discovery, interpretation in this paper. For discussion, see [2, sec 2.2 – 2.4].
- 18 Mill seems to posit such discontinuities between higher and lower pleasures in his description of the preferences of competent judges: "... what makes one pleasure more valuable than another, merely as a pleasure, except its being greater in amount... (is) a decided preference (of competent judges who)...would not resign it for any quantity of the other pleasure..." . See [14, chp 2]. For discussion, see [4, chp 2].

- 19 I wish to remain neutral about whether it is desirable to posit discontinuities in value. A Phenomenal Pluralist about wellbeing can posit such things, as I explain in this section, but also could refrain from doing so.
- 20 See [4, chp 2] and [5, chp 4].
- 21 Crisp [4], [5] attempts a different solution in which higher pleasures are supposed to be more pleasant, even discontinuously more pleasant, than lower ones. However, the only interpretation I can give to ‘more pleasant’ and ‘more pleasurable’ is one of quantity, rather than quality. So, Crisp seems to save Mill from incoherence only to saddle him with the implausible view that lower pleasures can never contain more pleasure than higher ones.
- 22 These criticisms are discussed in [2], [5], and [22] amongst many other places.
- 23 Tannsjo [22, p. 92] questions the rationale for thinking aesthetic pleasures are more beneficial simply on account of how they feel, as opposed to on account of the activities or faculties that produce them, by asking what if aesthetic pleasure could be produced by sexual intercourse. Yet I see no problem admitting that such phenomenal features would retain their superior significance no matter how they are produced.
- 24 Incommensurable values can still be comparable since one can be incommensurably better than the other. What makes for incommensurability is that there is no cardinal scale by which to say how much better the one is than the other. See [3] for discussion, and also for the definitions that I adopt here. Crisp [4] uses different vocabulary to mark a similar distinction in saying that, for Mill, higher pleasures are ‘discontinuously’ better than lower pleasures.
- 25 [12, p. 193]
- 26 [18]
- 27 [17, p. 198]
- 28 [12, p. 190]
- 29 See [12, p. 193]: “... there are irreducibly different forms of value”.
- 30 See [12, p. 189]. An anonymous referee cautions that Labukt might not actually endorse the evaluative unity account, if he is merely working through the implications of a pluralist theory of pleasure that he might not endorse.
- 31 See [12, p. 191].
- 32 See [10, chp 1] for Harman’s famous argument about observation of values.
- 33 See [20], especially sec. 5 ‘Nonreductive Naturalism’.
- 34 Some examples of psychological measures of affect that group particular forms of affect together as ‘positive affects’ and ‘negative affects’ are the Multiple Affect Adjective Check List (MAACL) and the Positive and Negative Affective Schedule Expanded Form (PANAS-X). See [24].
- 35 [12, p. 189], his italics
- 36 Such phrases are used in [12, p. 189-98].
- 37 [12, p. 191]
- 38 The example of jade is discussed in philosophical literature on natural kinds. See [9] for commentary and references, as well as historical details that are much more complicated than the simplistic facts I mention in the text.
- 39 See [23, sec 3] for discussion of theories with similar aims.

Andrew H. Alwood
Virginia Commonwealth University
College of Humanities and Sciences
Department of Philosophy
915 West Franklin Street
Richmond, VA 23284-2025
<aalwood@vcu.edu>
<<https://vcu.academia.edu/AndrewAlwood>>

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