# Pain, Dislike and Experience

GUY KAHANE
*Oxford Uehiro Centre for Practical Ethics, Oxford University*

It is widely held that it is only contingent that the sensation of pain is disliked, and that when pain is not disliked, it is not intrinsically bad. This conjunction of claims has often been taken to support a subjectivist view of pain's badness on which pain is bad simply because it is the object of a negative attitude and not because of what it feels like. In this article, I argue that accepting this conjunction of claims does not commit us to this subjectivist view. They are compatible with an objectivist view of pain's badness, and with thinking that this badness is due to its phenomenal quality. Indeed, I argue that once the full range of options is in view, the most plausible account of pain is incompatible with subjectivism about value.

There is a grand old question: do things have value, or give reasons for action, because we desire them, or do we desire them because they have value or give reasons?[1] Call the first grand view subjectivism, the second objectivism. There is another old question: is pain bad because we dislike it or do we dislike it because it is bad? Many philosophers answer that pain is bad because we dislike it. Does that commit them to an answer to the grander question? It is clearer how the commitments go in the other direction. If we are already subjectivists, then we *should* say that pain is bad only because we desire it to stop. But if we say that pain is bad because disliked, should we endorse subjectivism, at least with respect to pain?

In this article I shall consider what follows from accepting what I shall call the Dislike Theory – the view that pain is bad only *when* disliked. I shall question the widespread assumption that this view supports a subjectivist view of pain's badness – the view that pain is bad only *because* it is the object of desire. It is not just that the Dislike Theory is compatible with objectivism about value and reasons. This may not be enough, since there may still be a sense in which the Dislike Theory favours the subjectivist view. What I shall argue is that once the true range of available options is made clear, the Dislike Theory in its most plausible form is compatible *only* with objectivism.

## I

Philosophers who hold a subjectivist view of pain typically hold a conjunction of claims. The first is

[1] I'll assume throughout that whenever something is intrinsically bad it also gives reasons to avoid it.

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*The Dislike Theory*. Whenever pain is intrinsically bad, it is also necessarily a state we dislike.

The other is

*Contingency.* The sensation of pain is only contingently disliked.

There are strong reasons to endorse both claims. It is often pointed out that there is no introspectible sensation common to all painful or unpleasant experiences. This suggests that it is not a specific sensation, but some further common state that is required to make all of these experiences bad. And the nature of that further state is suggested by the example of frontal lobotomy patients. These patients seem to feel the sensation of pain without disliking it at all. Most agree that whatever it is that such patients feel, it is not bad. So it seems that it is our dislike of pain that makes all the normative difference.[2]

These considerations rely on our intuitions about particular cases. They do not directly draw on any grand metaethical view. It is easy, however, to see how this conjunction of claims would seem to support a subjectivist view of pain, the view that pain is bad, not just when but *because* it is disliked, where dislike is understood as a generic conattitude:

(S) Pain is only bad because it is the object of a desire for it to stop

To resist this conclusion, we could reject either one of the two conjuncts:

(i) Most obviously, we could reject the Dislike Theory: we could try to argue both that pain is only contingently disliked and that it is still bad when not disliked. This is a natural way of arguing for what I shall call the *Sensation Theory*.[3]

On this view it is the sensation of pain that is intrinsically bad and whether it is disliked is both contingent and irrelevant. Since subjectivism is committed to the Dislike Theory, then this would be a straightforward way of resisting subjectivism.

[2] For a detailed review of the effect of frontal lobotomy on pain, see W. Freeman and J. W. Watts, *Psychosurgery in the Treatment of Mental Disorders and Intractable Pain* (Springfield, IL, 1950). Philosophers tend to misreport these effects. Although lobotomy patients are not generally motivated to avoid or end their pain, it is not clear that they are completely indifferent to it. But there are other forms of brain disorder – such as pain asymbolia – where pain sensation does seem to be experienced without any trace of dislike.

[3] For valiant recent attempts to defend the Sensation Theory, see Irwin Goldstein, 'Pleasure and Pain: Unconditional, Intrinsic Values', *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 50 (1989), pp. 255–76, and Stuart Rachels, 'Is Unpleasantness Intrinsic to Unpleasant Experiences?', *Philosophical Studies* 99 (2000), pp. 187–210.

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(ii) Another and generally overlooked way of arguing against a subjectivist account is to deny Contingency and claim both that pain is necessarily disliked and that, nevertheless, it is necessarily disliked only *because* it is bad in itself. Call this the *Necessary Dislike Theory*.

It is understandable why this view has not been much discussed: it cannot rely on the most basic device for demonstrating intrinsic value, imagining something without a certain property it typically has (here, our dislike of pain) and asking whether it would still be intrinsically bad. But there is at least something to be said for the view. The necessary connection it assumes between pain *qua* bad and present-tense, first-person motivation is parallel to the necessary connection that is often assumed to hold between pain *qua* sensation and present-tense, first-person belief.[4]

Notice that the denial of Contingency – and thus this second alternative – is compatible with the Dislike Theory, at least as stated above. So we may think of this alternative as one objectivist version of the Dislike Theory. On this view pain is disliked *because* it is bad.[5]

In any case, each of the two alternatives depends on the denial of at least one of the two claims. But these are, to repeat, supported by persuasive considerations. What I want to ask in what follows is whether there is available a plausible objectivist view of pain's badness if we *do* accept these two claims about pain.

## II

Let us assume then not only the Dislike Theory, but also the contingency of dislike. This does not leave room for the sensation of pain to be intrinsically bad. But we can still distinguish two ways of stating the resulting view of pain's badness, one subjectivist, one objectivist:

(S) The sensation of pain is only bad because it is the object of a desire for it to stop

[4] The denial of Contingency is compatible with subjectivism. One can hold the view that the sensation of pain is necessarily disliked, but that nevertheless it is not disliked because it is bad but bad because disliked. On this view, rather implausibly, it would be just a brute metaphysical fact that it is the sensation of pain – and not, say, that of a green afterimage – that is necessary disliked.

[5] Notice that although the Necessary Dislike Theory is different from the Sensation Theory *as it is usually defended*, it is still the view that what makes pain bad is a particular sensation. So it is perhaps best to think of the Necessary Dislike Theory as the conjunction of the Dislike Theory and the Sensation Theory (see III below).

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(O) The state that is intrinsically bad is not that of having a sensation of pain, but of having it and disliking it[6]

To bring out the sense in which the second version is objectivist, it may be better to state these two views in terms of reasons. On the subjectivist reading, we have reasons to take the means to end our pain because we want it to stop. On the objectivist reading, the reasons we have are not to satisfy a desire, but rather to want to end the *state* we are in: the state of disliking our present pain. To be sure, on both readings someone in pain has reasons to try to end it. But they give distinct results as we move further. For one thing, the objectivist reading can explain why it is irrational to have a further desire to want one's pain to continue. On the subjectivist view, this would be a desire that would compete on equal terms with our initial dislike of pain. The objectivist reading also automatically explains why we have reasons to avoid *future* pain, or care about past pain. On the subjectivist view, such rational concerns would be contingent on our having the appropriate motivation. The Dislike Theory ensures that we would dislike our *present* pain. It is entirely compatible with complete indifference to pain at all other times.[7]

The distinction between (S) and (O) is not, of course, all that distinguishes objectivism and subjectivism, understood as grand metaethical views. Strong objectivists deny further that having positive or negative attitudes towards *other* kinds of objects, properties and states is sufficient for value accruing to (or reasons given by) the state of having such attitudes. While for subjectivists the fact that the object of our dislike is our present sensation of pain must be treated as of no special importance – the only thing that matters is the existence of a generic con-attitude – for the objectivist present sensations must be special.[8]

If objectivists think of dislike as a generic con-attitude, then they are left in an uneasy position. They deny that either the sensation of pain or the having of a negative attitude towards something have any value on their own. It is only when these two indifferent things are combined that value and reasons are produced. How and why remains an unexplained mystery. Certainly there is nothing in the objectivist

[6] This version of the Dislike Theory is all too often missed, but this is not to say it has not been defended. Derek Parfit hints at it in *Reasons and Persons* (Oxford, 1984) and develops it explicitly in an unpublished manuscript. Fred Feldman, 'On the Intrinsic Value of Pleasures', *Ethics* 107 (1997), pp. 448–66, argues for it at length, but does not draw its metaethical implications. The objectivist version of the Dislike Theory that I shall develop below, however, is different in an important respect from the version endorsed by these philosophers.

[7] I owe this way of drawing the distinction to Derek Parfit.

[8] Notice also that on the objectivist view, the *sensation* of pain could be said to be bad only in a derivative sense.

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position that predicts that one of the clearest cases of intrinsic value would turn out to involve a conative attitude that is itself not held for any reason. This surely counts against the objectivist reading of the Dislike Theory.[9] Thus, even if the Dislike Theory is *compatible* with objectivism, it still seems that subjectivism can better *explain* it.

## III

There is one aspect of our ordinary conception of pain's badness that the subjectivist reading of the Dislike Theory does not explain, indeed does not leave room for. It is extremely natural to think that pain's badness is due to *what it feels like*, that pain is bad because it *feels* bad. We already saw one straightforward way of grounding pain's badness in this way. That was the Sensation Theory, the view that the sensation of pain is bad whether or not we dislike it. The dispute between the Sensation Theory and Dislike Theory is an old one. But I believe that a common way of understanding what is at stake in it is mistaken. The two opposing views are

*The Sensation Theory*: the sensation of pain is intrinsically bad – its badness has nothing to do with whether or we dislike it or not

*The Dislike Theory*: whenever pain is intrinsically bad, it is also necessarily a state we dislike

Notice that these two claims may still be consistent if we held the overlooked view I called the Necessary Dislike Theory on which pain is necessarily disliked because it is bad. To exclude *this* objectivist reading of the Dislike Theory, we need to add to our statement of the Dislike Theory a further claim about *evaluative priority* – the claim that pain is bad *because* it is disliked. It is only *this* version of the Dislike Theory that is incompatible with the Sensation Theory.

In any case, the sensation and dislike theories are almost invariably given a further gloss:

*The Sensation Theory**: pain is bad *only* because of what it is like, because of how the sensation of pain intrinsically feels.

*The Dislike Theory**: pain is bad *only* because we want it to stop: its badness has nothing to do with how it intrinsically feels.

Although this gloss ensures that the two theories are incompatible, this way of setting out the dispute hides from view an important alternative.

[9] For a similar complaint, see Ruth Chang, 'Can Desires Provide Reasons for Action?', *Reason and Value: Themes from the Moral Philosophy of Joseph Raz*, ed. J. R. Wallace, (Oxford: 2004) and David Sobel, 'Pain For Objectivists: The Case of Matters of Mere Taste', *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 8 (2005), 437–57.

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There is no problem with this statement of the Sensation Theory. Indeed, if the sensation of pain is intrinsically bad, then pain would be bad because of how the sensation of pain feels like. There is no other property that the sensation of pain has that could explain its badness. But it does not follow, from the claim that pain is bad because it is disliked, that the badness of the *state* of disliking the sensation of pain has nothing to do with how *this* state intrinsically feels. And we saw that on the objectivist reading of the Dislike Theory, it is this state that is intrinsically bad, not the sensation of pain itself.

At this point we must be careful to note two ways in which the term 'pain' can be used: to refer to a certain neutral sensation, or to the state of disliking such a sensation.[10] In order to clearly mark this distinction, I shall henceforth use 'sensation of pain' to refer exclusively to a particular type of sensation that, I shall assume, is in itself neither good or bad, while I shall speak of *suffering* when I want to refer to the larger state of disliking a sensation.

I shall refer to the version of the Dislike Theory that denies that the badness of suffering has anything to with the character of our experience the *Pure Dislike Theory*. The alternative view I shall call the *Experiential Dislike Theory*. It is the conjunction of the following claims:

(i) *The Dislike Theory:* when the sensation of pain is bad it is necessarily disliked.
(ii) *Evaluative priority of dislike*: the sensation of pain is bad because it is disliked.
(iii) *Objectivism:* the state that is intrinsically bad is not that of having a sensation of pain, but that of suffering – of having this sensation and disliking it.
(iv) *Experience:* the state of disliking pain is intrinsically bad because of how it intrinsically feels.[11]

This variant of the Dislike Theory may seem to attribute suffering's badness to two incompatible sources: to the presence of dislike (ii), and to its intrinsic feel (iv). But to think so is precisely to commit a common mistake about the relation between the Dislike Theory and what it is like to suffer. The mistake is to assume that to have an experience of a certain feel, and to have a sensation, are necessarily one and the same. But this is plainly false. To be sure, all sensations are

[10] This ambiguity is noted in R. M. Hare, 'Pain and Evil', *Essays on the Moral Concepts* (London, 1972).

[11] I have not seen this possibility discussed in the extensive literature on the question. A possible exception is Scanlon who talks of 'complex experiential wholes' combining sensation and dislike (Thomas Scanlon, 'Replies', *Social Theory and Practice* 28 (2002), pp. 337–40).

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also experiences. But many experiences are not sensations. Conscious thoughts are experiences. And very often, so are emotions and desires. States of emotion and desire, of course, need not always be felt. When they do make their mark in consciousness, what is experienced is a manifestation of an underlying dispositional state. This, however, is not a problem. On the Experiential Dislike Theory, what we refer to as dislike is *necessarily* felt. So there are no two sources of badness but only one.[12]

## IV

What supports the Experiential Dislike Theory? It has one very significant advantage over the pure version. It is compatible with the natural view that pain is bad because of how it feels. *This* is how suffering is experienced. When philosophers argue that we must give up this natural view, they do so because they find the considerations that support the Dislike Theory persuasive, and because they assume that the natural view must be identical to the Sensation Theory. But we just saw that this natural view of pain's badness *is* compatible with the Dislike Theory. And the intuition that supports the tie between pain's badness and the *way* it feels to suffer is stronger and clearer than the considerations that support the Dislike Theory.

We can argue for the experiential view by first considering a weaker claim:

*Supervenience*: Suffering's badness supervenes on the character of the agent's total experiential state.

On this view, there cannot be a change in whether an agent suffers or stops suffering without some change in his total experiential state. As I noted, this claim is weaker than the Experiential Dislike Theory. That facts about A supervene on facts about B doesn't yet explain the metaphysical relation between the two. But the step from Supervenience to the Experiential Dislike Theory is very small indeed. If suffering necessarily supervened on the character of our experiential state, and given the strength of our intuition that suffering is bad

[12] I am assuming that, if it were possible to *unconsciously* dislike one's present pain, this wouldn't count as an instance of suffering (for a defence of unconscious dislike, see K. C. Berridge and P. Winkielman, 'What is an Unconscious Emotion? (The Case for Unconscious "Liking")', *Cognition and Emotion* 17 (2003), pp. 181–211). Could it really be awful to experience a sensation that I was behaviourally disposed to want to end, even if at the time I was completely unaware of being thus motivated? For further evidence that our dislike of present pain isn't just a generic con-attitude, consider the fact that *conscious* dislike directed at a *future* sensation of pain also needn't be unpleasant or bad (see Scanlon, 'Replies').

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because of how it feels like, then what else could explain suffering's badness?

To deny Supervenience is to hold that *hedonic inversion* is conceivable: that I could be in the same *total* experiential state I am in when suffering from excruciating pain, yet that this state may not be bad at all, or may even be intensely enjoyable and thus good. This, I believe, is not a suggestion we can make sense of. Perhaps there will be those who will deny this. But it is not by accident that, although subjectivism about pain's badness is widespread, we are never told that this is one of its implications. Subjectivists must explicitly endorse this consequence. It will not do for them to hide behind the exotic reports of frontal lobotomy patients who only assert *indifference* to sensations of pain. And we have been given no reason to believe that, when lobotomy patients feel pain, their total experiential state is *identical* to ours when we suffer.

It may be suggested that our impression that the badness of suffering is due to its phenomenal quality rather than to our bare desire to get rid of a sensation is the result of a kind of feedback effect. On this suggestion, our strong dislike of the sensation affects it in some way, but this change in its qualitative feel is entirely epiphenomenal and has nothing to do with its badness.[13] The suggestion raises two questions. The first is simply: what does it mean? Talk of feedback is metaphorical. What we want to know is how the presence of desire can affect the quality of an experience, and why this happens in some cases and not others. Perhaps it will be replied that our understanding of conscious experience is so poor that answers to such questions are simply not forthcoming. This will not do for a simple reason. We do not need any theory to recognize that *felt* emotions and desires are common denizens of ordinary conscious life – but these states do not make their presence in consciousness felt because of any feedback effect due to some *further* attitude. If so, why insist on the obscurities of experiential feedback? A second question is this. Talk of feedback suggests a merely causal, and thus contingent, relation between dislike and quality of experience. But if so, then we must again be committed to the unlikely possibility of hedonic inversion. Yet if (mysteriously) the feedback effect is a necessary one, then it is no longer clear what could motivate the suggestion. Why should we hold that experience, of all things, is not as it appears to us?

There is another difficulty with the Pure Dislike Theory. On both competing views, dislike is some kind of affective state with a conceptual tie to motivation. On the pure theory, however, dislike need

[13] I owe this suggestion to Derek Parfit.

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not be any kind of experiential state (even if it sometimes may be felt). But this is inconsistent with the epistemology of suffering. As many proponents of the Dislike Theory recognize, that I suffer implies that I believe I am suffering, and that I believe I am suffering implies that I am indeed suffering, except perhaps in exceptional circumstances.[14] Now on the experiential version, dislike has the epistemology of a conscious state. So it is clearly compatible with these two truisms. But on the pure version, dislike has the epistemology of an intentional state. And while we have first-person authority about our intentional states, it is widely recognized that this authority is fallible. We can be mistaken about our intentional states in a way we cannot be mistaken about our conscious states. So on the pure version we could suffer without knowing it, as well as mistakenly think we are suffering. But neither, I believe, is a genuine possibility. This is a further reason to reject the Pure Dislike Theory.

Let me mention a final piece of evidence in support of the experiential view. Much of the case for the Dislike Theory rests on the example of lobotomy patients. But to put this much weight on an empirical result is to unwittingly become hostage to the vicissitudes of further research. Findings about the functional dissociation of two psychological phenomena are often followed by findings about a *double* dissociation between the two phenomena. This indeed may be the case with the sensation of pain and the affective state of dislike. Patients who underwent lobotomy report pain without dislike. Patients with another kind of brain lesion report dislike without pain. One such patient reported a 'clearly unpleasant' feeling located 'somewhere between fingertips and shoulder' that he wanted to avoid, but was completely unable to further describe its quality, localization or intensity.[15] Here we can either say that the sensation of pain is missing, or that the patient's experience has no definite sensory qualities. But the unpleasantness is still experientially manifest, and known immediately. What this patient immediately feels is exactly what we've been calling dislike. And what he badly wants to end is *this* experiential state, not an indefinite sensation. It is hard to see how either the pure Dislike Theory or the feedback view can make sense of such reports.[16]

[14] See Hare, 'Pain and Evil', and William Alston, 'Pleasure', *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. P. Edwards (New York, 1964), vol. 6, pp. 341–7.

[15] See M. Ploner, H.-J. Freund, and A. Schnitzler, 'Pain Affect Without Pain Sensation in a Patient with a Postcentral Lesion', *Pain* 81 (1999), pp. 211–14. The interpretation of such reports obviously requires further discussion. But it is subjectivists who repeatedly appeal to the example of lobotomy.

[16] Talk of dislike suggests an attitude with an intentional object. I've tried to show that the state of dislike is not a generic con-attitude. But it is not even obvious that dislike

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## V

Suffering, then, is essentially a phenomenal state, a state of consciousness. To ask us to define what that means would be asking too much. But it suffices to point out that the Experiential Dislike Theory doesn't commit us to holding that there is a specific introspectible feel, akin to redness, that all unpleasant experiences share. A better analogy would be, not the phenomenal quality of redness, but that of being coloured. Particular shades of colour can be utterly different from one another, but this doesn't prevent them from being instances of the same phenomenal type.[17]

Although it is open to objectivists to deny that the experiential dimension of suffering plays any intrinsic normative role, this is not an attractive position to take. The Pure Dislike Theory may favour subjectivism; the Experiential Dislike Theory is incompatible with it. But I am not suggesting that objectivists should reject the Pure Dislike Theory just for this reason. It is the default view that what makes suffering bad is the way it feels. It is supported by a range of considerations and intuitions. If it is common to adopt the Pure Dislike Theory, this is not because this is an independently plausible position, but because the more plausible experiential version of the theory has been overlooked.[18]

guy.kahane@philosophy.ox.ac.uk

must take an intentional object. Perhaps objectless anxiety is an example of objectless dislike. The experiential Dislike Theory can be revised to allow for such a possibility. The pure theory can't.

[17] Of course, typical experiences of suffering will also include a neutral sensory component.

[18] I have greatly benefited from discussing these issues with Derek Parfit. I am grateful to Timothy Chan and Nicholas Shackel for extremely useful comments.

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