


# Is pleasure all that is good about experience?

Willem van der Deijl<sup>1,2</sup> 

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**Abstract** Experientialist accounts of wellbeing are those accounts of wellbeing that subscribe to the experience requirement. Typically, these accounts are hedonistic. In this article I present the claim that hedonism is not the most plausible experientialist account of wellbeing. The value of experience should not be understood as being limited to pleasure, and as such, the most plausible experientialist account of wellbeing is pluralistic, not hedonistic. In support of this claim, I argue first that pleasure should not be understood as a broad term to describe valuable experiences generally. I then analyze responses to the main argument against a monistic view on the value of experience: the philosophy of swine objection. I argue that such responses deviate from the central hedonistic view that only pleasure and pain matter for wellbeing. I then argue that the argument can be avoided on a pluralistic account, and formulate a plausible candidate for an account of pluralistic experientialism, in which, besides pleasure, non-hedonic aspects of experience like novelty, compassion, and aesthetic value also contribute to wellbeing.

**Keywords** Wellbeing · Pleasure · Hedonism · Philosophy of swine · Pluralism

## 1 Introduction

There is a large variety of theories on the nature of wellbeing, but one important distinction that divides them is the experience requirement. Some theories of wellbeing maintain that only what affects our experience can alter someone's wellbeing, while other theories deny this. Theories that maintain the experience

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✉ Willem van der Deijl  
willem.van.der.deijl@umontreal.ca; wjavanderdeijl@gmail.com

<sup>1</sup> Faculty of Philosophy, Erasmus University Rotterdam, Rotterdam, The Netherlands

<sup>2</sup> Centre de Recherche en Ethique, Université de Montreal, Montreal, Canada

requirement are experiential theories of wellbeing. Historically, after having gone from the status quo to a nearly extinct view in the past century, such theories now appear to be undergoing a revival (e.g. Crisp 2006a; Tännsjö 2007; Bradley 2009; Moen 2016; Bramble 2016a). Generally, experiential theories of wellbeing are hedonistic. That is, in these theories, the degree of wellbeing is considered to be determined fully by pleasure<sup>1</sup> (positively) and pain (negatively). While the category of experiential theories is broader than hedonism, in philosophical practice it is not. In a rare defense of this stylized fact, Ben Bramble argues:

“If the experience requirement is true, then hedonism seems likely to be true as well. This is because:

1. If things must affect someone’s experiences in order to benefit or harm her, this is likely because benefiting and harming just consist in affecting people’s experiences in various ways.
2. If benefiting and harming just consist in affecting people’s experiences in various ways, this is likely because they just consist in affecting people’s pleasures and pains specifically.” (2016a, 88)

Bramble continues: “I will take (2) for granted” (88). Similarly, Chris Heathwood argues more carefully:

[T]he “experience requirement” on welfare arguably implies that only certain experiences or mental states can be intrinsically good for a person (cf. Sidgwick 1907, iii; xiv). Once we have that claim, together with the observation that pleasures form quite a broad category of mental state, we have some reasonable evidence that only pleasures are intrinsically good for us. (2013, 6)

In this article, I question this connection between experiential theories of wellbeing and hedonism. Is pleasure the only intrinsic good<sup>2</sup> that experiences provide? I argue that it is not. In particular, I argue that hedonism is unable to satisfactorily answer one of its most persistent problems: the philosophy of swine objection. Given the nature of pleasure, attempts to formulate versions of hedonism that avoid the problem either deviate from hedonism, or are unsuccessful. However, a broader experientialist account of wellbeing is able to address it.

More precisely, broader experientialism is the view that only what affects our experience can alter our wellbeing, but that the degree of someone’s wellbeing is not merely determined by the pleasure and pain they experience. I formulate a particular broader experientialist account in Sect. 4 on which pleasure and pain are central to the value of our experience, but extra-hedonistic features of experience—such as novelty of experience, the experience of human compassion, and a sense of

<sup>1</sup> A note on terminology: some philosophers have proposed to use the term pleasure and enjoyment interchangeably (Crisp 2006a). For the purpose of clarity, I will mostly stick to the term pleasure, whenever precision is required. However, where I use the term enjoyment, I do so without intended change in meaning. Also, throughout the text I will mostly use the positive terms (pleasure and enjoyment), and leave out their negative counterparts for brevity.

<sup>2</sup> When I refer to good here and throughout the text (except if otherwise specified) I mean good in a prudential sense (i.e. pertaining to wellbeing).

self-understanding—may all contribute to wellbeing, as long as a person enjoys these experiences, and especially if a person is not suffering from a low balance of pleasure over pain. In other words, while pleasure may play an important role in determining how good lives are, and particularly to what makes them bad, extra-hedonic features of experience contribute to making our lives truly great.

A broader experientialist view, I believe, is attractive for various reasons. While experientialism and hedonism are generally not treated separately, the intuitive appeal of the experience requirement need not at all be tied to a commitment to the much more controversial view that only pleasure and pain matter to wellbeing. As I argue below, the scope of the concept of pleasure is limited. As hedonists correctly argue, it seems plausible to limit wellbeing to experience, however, it also seems plausible to conceive of the value of experience as a rather rich concept, much richer than the concept of pleasure allows. Knowing how pleasurable an experience is may tell us a lot about how valuable this experience is for the person having it, but does it really tell us all? Broader experientialism denies this. This alternative way to develop experientialism has, surprisingly, been neglected in the literature. The idea that the value of experience for us is richer than the concept of pleasure allows has been taken up by some hedonists by broadening the term pleasure to be a much richer concept than what it stands for in common language. This solution, I argue below, is not a promising route to defend hedonism.

Another motivation for the development of the account is the status of experiential theories of wellbeing in the literature. Typically, such theories are challenged by two counter-arguments, which are jointly taken to provide a strong case against the position: the experience machine objection and the philosophy of swine objection (Heathwood 2013). The experience machine objection (Nozick 1974) maintains that a life lived in an artificial *experience machine* lacks something valuable, even though it may be perfectly good *in terms of experiences*. However, in recent years the argument has been criticized on grounds that the intuition it pumps is driven by moral rather than prudential reasons (Silverstein 2000; Crisp 2008); that it is too strongly based on what we would want in such a case, rather than on how prudentially good the life of the person in the machine is (Silverstein 2000); or that the intuition it pumps is allegedly driven by a status quo bias which affects people's responses to it (De Brigard 2010; Weijers 2014; see Weijers and Schouten 2013; and Bramble 2016b for reviews of the arguments). While Lin (2016) recently argued that some of the force of the experience machine argument withstands these recent rebuttals, the force of the objection in light of these criticisms appears much less strong than it has long been seen.

A second objection to experientialist theories is the philosophy of swine objection (e.g. Crisp 1997; Feldman 2002; Bramble 2016a). This objection is older than the experience machine objection (see for example Mill 1871). At the same time, however, it is specific to hedonism, and need not apply to other experientialist theories of wellbeing. This objection is based on the superficial nature that pleasure can have. While hedonistic accounts can explain the value of non-superficial pleasure—such as enjoying poetry—by citing the variety of experiences that are pleasurable, it follows from the monistic nature of hedonism that any richly filled life must be considered worse than a highly simple life that is more pleasurable. It is easy to think of counterintuitive examples using this derivation, some of which I

rehearse below. A significant share of the argumentative structure of this article is dedicated to showing that, while a number of solutions to it have been proposed, none of them have been able to successfully save hedonism from the philosophy of swine objection. Some versions of broader experientialism, including the version I formulate below, can avoid this objection. On these accounts, pleasure is valuable, but lacking other valuable features of experience may severely limit a person's wellbeing, thus accommodating the intuition the philosophy of swine objection is based on. Given that the two most serious objections to experientialist accounts of wellbeing fail to provide a sufficient reason for rejecting broader experientialism, while one of them counts strongly against hedonism, these accounts deserve attention. Hedonism has given experientialism a bad name, and for no good reason.

It is important to note the concept of wellbeing this article is concerned with is a whole-life concept: how good a whole life is for the person who is living it. While it is common to assume for experiential theories, and in particular for hedonistic theories, that the value of a whole life for the person who is living it is the sum of the value of its (temporal) parts, I consider it an open question whether this is necessary (cf. Bramble 2014, 2016a).<sup>3</sup>

I first discuss the nature of pleasure and argue against one possible conception of pleasure, namely the view that pleasure simply is *valuable experience* (Sect. 2). I then present hedonism as a view on wellbeing, discuss the philosophy of swine objection, and review existing responses, arguing that they are unsuccessful (Sect. 3). Finally, I formulate an alternative, pluralistic experientialist account, and discuss possible objections (Sect. 4). Section 5 concludes.

## 2 What is pleasure?

There is a possible view on the nature of pleasure on which the claim that I defend is trivially false, namely, the view that pleasure simply consists in *valuable experience*. We can call this the valuable experience view of pleasure (VEP). This view contrasts with a view that states that pleasure is (a type of) *valuable feelings*. If VEP would be correct, it would by definition be inconceivable that there is something besides pleasure that is good in experiences. However, VEP is an implausible account. Not only is it deeply revisionist, but it turns pleasure into a vacuous concept. The way we think about pleasure is as a feature of feelings, not as a feature of experiences as a whole.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> While it is a consequence of the argument I present below that hedonism has no motivational space to deviate from the view that whole life wellbeing is the sum of its temporal parts, experientialism in general does leave room for this motivational space. I would like to thank an anonymous referee for bringing the relevance of the whole-life/momentary wellbeing distinction to the substance of this article to my attention.

<sup>4</sup> It is important to note that what is at stake here is a semantic problem: the meaning of the term pleasure. It may substantively be the case that, because hedonism is correct, anything that is good about experience is pleasure. However, as I argue, if this is so, this is because anything that is good about experience is a quality of how it feels.

While there is a flourishing debate about the nature of pleasure in contemporary philosophical literature, most of this discussion revolves around one controversy, namely the heterogeneity of pleasures: the kind of feelings that we consider to be pleasurable—sex, the taste of good food, learning that you have passed a course, etc.—feel so differently, that it seems dubious that pleasure itself has any distinctive phenomenology (Feldman 1997; Aydede 2014). A first view—internalism (also sometimes referred to as phenomenological theories; Bramble 2013)—maintains that it is a shared phenomenological quality of the way pleasurable experiences feel that make them pleasurable (Crisp 2006a; Smuts 2011; Bramble 2013; Labukt 2012),<sup>5</sup> while a second view—externalism (or, attitude theories)—sees our attitude towards feelings, or experiences, as essential for pleasure—through, for example, us desiring it (Heathwood 2006).<sup>6</sup> Externalists believe that whether a feeling, or experience, is pleasurable or not depends on our attitude towards it. Little attention has been paid to the object of pleasure: the thing that is pleasurable. For internalists, it is clear that it is feelings that are pleasurable, as pleasures either constitute a “feeling tone” (e.g. Smuts 2011; Crisp 2006a) or a “distinctive feeling” (e.g. Bramble 2013). For externalists, this is less straightforward. Externalism can be defined in the following two distinct ways:

- (1) An experience is pleasurable iff the subject has an intrinsic, *de re* pro-attitude towards the way the experience *feels* at the moment they the subject is experiencing it (i.e. desires it intrinsically and *de re*).
- (2) An experience is pleasurable iff the subject has an intrinsic, *de re* pro-attitude towards the *experience* at the moment the subject is experiencing it (i.e. desires it intrinsically and *de re*).

The difference between these two formulations is significant, as (2) is a (potential)<sup>7</sup> version of VEP, while (1) is not.<sup>8</sup> The difference, however, has not received much

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<sup>5</sup> Internalism can be further divided into a distinctive feeling view—maintaining that pleasure is a distinct, specific sensation (e.g. Bramble 2013)—and the hedonic tone view—maintaining that all pleasures share a feeling quality (but no specific feeling), such as that they “feel good” (e.g. Smuts 2011).

<sup>6</sup> A view that is very difficult to relate to these positions is Fred Feldman’s attitudinal view on pleasure, in which pleasure is a propositional attitude, meaning that it requires the person who is having them to “take pleasure in” something (2002, 607). He denies pleasure is merely a feeling (at least such feeling is not sufficient, it must be accompanied by an attitude), and even suggests “Attitudinal pleasures need not have any ‘feel’” (2004, 56). This has attracted much controversy for being over-intellectualized (see Crisp 2006b; and particularly Mason 2007; see also Feldman 2010). However, I believe part of this controversy is due to Feldman’s minimal usage of the term “feel” (in scare quotes) to refer to sensory feelings (feelings that have “location”, 2002, 606). As Feldman also uses the term “attitudinal feeling” (606), it remains quite unclear to me how his view of pleasure relates to the notions of experience and feeling that I am using to classify theories of pleasures.

<sup>7</sup> It is not necessary that a person who endorses (2) also believes that pleasure is necessarily the only valuable thing in experience. It is after all possible to be a subjectivist about pleasure (in the sense of (2)), but take there to be other values in experience that are objectively good even if they are not desired. But it would be an odd position.

<sup>8</sup> An alternative way to phrase this is to say that experiences according to internalists and externalists of type (1) experiences are pleasurable *in virtue of* the goodness of the feelings they contain, while an externalist of type (2) would claim that experiences are pleasurable *in virtue of* the goodness of the experiences themselves. This would then avoid the phrase that the former group maintains that pleasures

attention (but, see Lin 2014, 131, ft.8 for a similar take on pleasure). Crisp and Shaver discuss the difference between these views in the context of Sidgwick's formulation of pleasure as "desirable consciousness" (Crisp 2011 argues against the interpretation of Sidgwick as defending (2); Shaver 2016, however, supports it).<sup>9</sup> Most externalist accounts of pleasure are not outspoken on the scope of the object (see Smuts 2011, ft.15), or are ambiguous.<sup>10</sup>

Both externalism in formulation (1) and internalism identify pleasure and pain as features of feelings (or, sensations). Feelings are features of experiences, but descriptions of feelings are not complete descriptions of experiences. Beside pleasure, we can distinguish other features of phenomenological states, such as its aesthetic features, the sense of understanding it entails, how new it feels. As I stare outside the window on a sunny autumn day, I may feel a sense of pleasure. The fact that the I notice, for the first time this year, that the trees are turning auburn is a something that provides pleasure. But, this sense of pleasure does not fully describe the experience.

An externalist of variety (2) may argue that as soon as something is a feature of an experience that is desired, it is pleasure. This, however, leads to counterintuitive conclusions. As an argument against externalism, Aaron Smuts puts forward the example of an episode from Ingmar Bergman's *Scenes from a Marriage* in which a husband has just told his wife, who was under the impression they had a good marriage, that he has fallen in love with another woman and will leave on a six-month trip with his new lover. The wife begs to see a picture, and eventually the husband concedes and shows a picture of his beautiful mistress. Smuts argues that: "I desire the overall experience while it is occurring" (247), and continuous: "I would not describe my experience of this episode as in any way pleasurable, but I find it to be one of the most effective affair fictions ever created." (247).

Smuts' example presents a strong case against externalism, but only as formulated in (2). An externalist can reply that while Smuts liked the experience as a whole as it was occurring, he surely did not like the feelings for their own sake. The feelings of devastation and excruciation are only desired in relation to the artistic experience. In isolation, or in combination with many other experiences with

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Footnote 8 continued

are *constituted* by feelings, which may make some uncomfortable. I take these formulations to be equivalent for the purpose of the argument.

<sup>9</sup> The disagreement heavily rests on the Sidgwick's usage of the term "feeling" which he does not distinguish from general consciousness (Shaver 2016, ft.88).

<sup>10</sup> Version of externalist definitions of variety (2) include Heathwood's definition: "what makes each of these experiences enjoyable has nothing to do with any further feelings they cause, but instead with the attitude we take up toward the experiences themselves." (2007b, his more precise definition of sensational pleasure does limit itself to sensations, 2007a). Bramble's definition of externalism also follows (2): "for an experience to be pleasant is just for its subject, at the time of experience, to *intrinsically want it to be occurring* (i.e. to want it to be occurring *for its own sake*)" (Bramble 2013, 202). However, Alston's definition is in line with (1): "to get pleasure is to have an experience which, as of the moment, one would rather have than not have, on the basis of *its felt quality*...." (Alston 1967 [my emphasis]). Carson's definition is more ambiguous: "pleasantness or unpleasantness of an experience is a function of one's desires with respect to it qua feeling." While this seems in line with (1), he then continues: "A pleasant experience is an experience that one prefers to have rather than to not have" (Carson 2000, 13).

which they are typically accompanied they would surely not be desired. An externalist of variety (1) would not have to concede that the experience is pleasurable, making the account much more plausible. Only if someone has a pro-attitude towards the way it feels, as perhaps a sadist would, would the externalist of variety (1) have to conclude that it is a pleasure.

While I do not want to take a stance on the externalist/internalist debate, in the following I do suppose that pleasure is a feature of how good a feeling is. So, either internalism is correct, or externalism is correct in version (1).

So far, the argument against VEP has suggested that it does not comply with the meaning we commonly ascribe to the term. This may not be a decisive argument against it. Robert Shaver (2016), for example acknowledges that a broad notion of pleasure does not comply with the way the notion is commonly used, but argues that Sidgwick rightly developed a revisionist account of pleasure to fit its normative purpose better. And Parfit, while expressing sympathy for a version of externalism (2) also notes that “[t]his theory need not follow the ordinary uses of the words ‘pain’ and ‘pleasure’.” (1984, 614). However, VEP becomes even more dubious if we would like to fit experiential values into it that may even come at the cost of what we generally call pleasure. Surely, we could call the value of having aesthetic experiences pleasure even if it is not necessarily correct to call it pleasurable in our everyday language if it helps us understand wellbeing. Nevertheless, such a broad notion of pleasure does not only go against our usage of language, it also limits us in the way we may describe tradeoffs between different experiences. Consider the stereotype of the tortured artists who prefers to suffer for aesthetic achievement. While it may be objected that this suffering is instrumental to the aesthetic experience,<sup>11</sup> we can plausibly postulate that this artist would prefer to be in an experiential state of aesthetic appreciation at the cost of some suffering rather than be in a comfortable experiential state void of aesthetics. On VEP, however, such a character cannot be described well. If the aesthetic experience that comes with his artistic work is considered valuable experience, the artist is merely exchanging one kind of pleasure for another, and can thus not be described to be suffering at all. We may want to say that spending an evening watching *Scenes from a Marriage* instead of watching a feel-good flick we forego some pleasure in order to see something beautiful and moving. However, according to VEP, we are merely trading of one type of pleasure for another.

The VEP is thus too simple. It should be rejected. There are many views on what makes an experience pleasurable—be it a distinctive feeling, feeling tone, or an appreciated feeling—but we can agree that it is feelings that make an experience pleasurable, not value of experiences as a whole.

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<sup>11</sup> I would like to thank an anonymous referee for pointing this out.

### 3 Hedonism and the philosophy of swine objection

Hedonism can be defined in various ways, but I submit that in the most minimal sense, hedonism is the view that wellbeing merely consists in pleasure and the absence of pain. An essential feature of hedonism is that it is monistic. So, in a minimal sense, we can define hedonism as follows:

*Minimal hedonism* The degree of someone's wellbeing is determined fully by pleasure (positively) and pain (negatively).

Definitions of hedonism often frame the monistic character of hedonism by submitting that pleasure and pain are the only basic values or goods (e.g. Lin 2014). The minimal definition of hedonism implies that if there is a difference between two possible lives in terms of welfare, this difference must be due to a difference in pleasure (or pain). Putting more meat on the bones of hedonism will inevitably be more controversial. One strand of philosophers takes hedonism to be essentially quantitative. After all, as hedonism takes wellbeing to consist of pleasure and pain, it must also assume that these can be compared in a determinate fashion. If that is so, some quantitative scale is assumed merely comprising pleasure and pain.<sup>12</sup> Such a quantitative account can be expressed as follows:

*Quantitative hedonism* The degree of someone's wellbeing is determined by the quantitative balance of pleasure over pain.

If this formulation is correct, to know the amount of pleasure (and pain) in one's life is to know someone's degree of wellbeing. The philosophy of swine objection exploits exactly this feature of quantitative hedonism in its critique of hedonism. The objection is roughly based on the idea that if only pleasure contributes to wellbeing, we would have to conclude that some lives containing much simple pleasures are higher on wellbeing than lives that contain a smaller amount of sophisticated pleasures, while our intuition suggests otherwise. Two examples of such cases have gained much attention in the literature.

A classic formulation of the objection compares the life of Haydn with that of an oyster (Crisp 1997, 2006a, but, the example dates back to the Socratic dialogue *Philebus*):

Imagine you are a soul, waiting to be allocated a life. You are offered either the life of the composer, Joseph Haydn, or that of an oyster. Haydn's life is quite long, involving great success and enjoyment. The life of the oyster

<sup>12</sup> One early formulation of this idea can be found in Sidgwick: "(...) we must assume the pleasures sought and the pains shunned to have determinate quantitative relationship to each other; for otherwise they cannot be conceived as possible elements of a total which we are to seek to make as great as possible" (1907, 123).



consists only in the most simple and primitive pleasurable experience possible. Of course, you ask for the life of Haydn; but you are then told that the life of the oyster can be as long as you like – millions of years, if you so desire (Crisp 1997, 10–11).

The oyster is able to experience some form of low pleasures that, at face value, cannot compare to the pleasure enjoyed by Haydn. However, the oyster can live for a very long time. As the length of the life of the oyster increases, its wellbeing must, at least according to quantitative hedonism, at some point exceed that of Haydn.

Another formulation of the objection is due to Feldman, based on Moore's objection against hedonism:

Imagine a person-we can call him 'Porky'-who spends all his time in the pigsty, engaging in the most obscene sexual activities imaginable. (2002, 618).

Porky finds this highly pleasurable, but it would seem, the example is purported to show, that he is not leading a life that is very good for him. Clearly Porky has a lot of pleasure in his life, and a quantitative hedonist seems committed to say Porky's life is as good, if not better, than our own.

The philosophy of swine argument can be represented as follows:

1. Wellbeing consists in the quantitative balance of pleasure over pain (quantitative hedonism).
2. There are possible lives that contain a high balance of pleasure over pain, but that do not contain a proportional degree of wellbeing (such as Porky's life).
3. Consequently, quantitative hedonism is false.

### 3.1 Abstract and qualitative hedonism

As a result of the Philosophy of Swine objection, most contemporary formulations of hedonism have followed Mill in deviating from quantitative hedonism. If, besides the quantity of pleasure, certain features of pleasure are also valuable, we can divert the conclusion that Porky's life is better than that of most, and (perhaps) that Haydn's life is better than that of the oyster. Such a view would require an abstracted value function, one that is not directly proportional to quantity of pleasure. We can call such an account abstract hedonism. A general formulation of this is as follows:

*Abstract hedonism* The degree of someone's wellbeing is determined by the quantitative balance of the value of pleasure over the disvalue of pain.

The most well-known abstract hedonistic view is qualitative hedonism (Mill 1871).<sup>13</sup> As has been a topic of contention in debates surrounding Mill's view, it

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<sup>13</sup> There is a large variety of interpretations of Mill's conception of wellbeing, some of which do not clash with quantitative hedonism. On one such view (Schmidt-Petri 2003, 2006; but see also Ebenstein 1985) denies that Mill is not a quantitative hedonist. On this view, Mill did not intend anything else with his discussion than pointing out two pleasurable experiences that last equally long and are equally intense

is controversial whether abstract hedonism is compatible with a minimal monistic definition of hedonism (Moore 1903; see Martin 1972; Scarre 1997; Riley 1999; but also Rawls 1981). As Moore famously has argued: "... if you say, as Mill does, that quality of pleasure is to be taken into account, then you are no longer holding that pleasure *alone* is good as an end, since you imply that something else, something which is *not* present in all pleasures, is *also* good as an end." (Moore 1903, 80). Moore is sometimes understood to argue that qualitative hedonism is internally inconsistent. Or, as begging the question, by assuming that hedonism must simply be quantitative. Both such criticisms would miss their mark. There is nothing inconsistent in claiming that only pleasure and pain constitute wellbeing, and quality of pleasure contributes to wellbeing (Fletcher 2008). Nevertheless, such accounts do not do justice to Moore's criticism. Even if abstract hedonism is not inconsistent, it does suffer from a motivational problem (cf. Fletcher 2008). The reason is that the notion of quality of pleasure is not at all self-evidently clear, in the sense that quantity of pleasure is, or at least, may be. Quality of pleasure is a thick concept. In any particular substantive formulation of abstract hedonism, the notion of quality of pleasure will gain substantive content. What kind of content will be is determined through values beyond merely pleasure itself. Versions of abstract hedonism thus fail to comply with the monistic nature of hedonism, as formulated by Minimal Hedonism.

Consider the Porky example. In order to avoid the conclusion that Porky's life is as high on wellbeing as that of those who enjoy less pleasure overall that is not derived from sexual engagement with pigs, we would have to say that the pleasure Porky is experiencing is of a lower quality. But in light of Minimal Hedonism, the only support for such qualitative difference must be derived from pleasure itself. What this implies is that in order to stay faithful to Minimal Hedonism we must say that Porky's life is worse than mine *in terms of pleasure*. But it is difficult to see why this would be a satisfactory explanation without reference to extra-hedonic features of experience. For example, what seems to drive the Porky example is that he is missing out on human compassion and respect. But in order to stay faithful to Minimal Hedonism, the reason Porky's pleasure is of a lower quality cannot be that it lacks such features of experience. Purely in terms of the feeling Porky is experiencing, there is no justificatory space within Minimal Hedonism to explain why Porky's behavior is somehow worse than reading poetry.

This problem gets worse when we consider the oyster example. Two defenders of qualitative hedonism, Fletcher (2008) and Donner (1991), both assume that both quantity and quality of pleasure add continuously to the value of pleasure. So, it

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Footnote 13 continued

need not result in the same *amount* of pleasure. On this account, Mill's view is still vulnerable to the philosophy of swine objection. On an alternative conception, Mill's qualitative hedonism is a version of quantitative hedonism in which differences in quality are differences on the same scale in the magnitude infinity (Riley 1999, 2003). While this solution clearly avoids the philosophy of swine problem, it relies on an implausible phenomenological consequence, namely that the pleasure of poetry feels infinitely more pleasurable than lower-quality pleasures, such as having sex (Scarre 1997).

explains how a human life and an oyster's life of equal length and equal amounts of pleasure may not result in equally good lives. However, it does not explain how the conclusion can be avoided that as the oyster life gets extended at *some* point the value of the pleasure it involves must exceed the human life. In order to avoid this, the value of pleasure in a human life could never be balanced out by *any* amount of lower-quality pleasure. This could only be the case if the value of oyster pleasure would marginally decrease in quantity and converge up to a finite amount that the value of pleasure in a human life exceeds. This would surely account for our intuitions about the oyster case. However, the rationale for such a value function is difficult to find within the axiological realm of Minimal Hedonism. If only pleasure adds to wellbeing, why would the exact same quality and quantity of pleasure have different value depending on how much of it is already experienced? No satisfactory reply to this question can be given without appeal to extra-hedonic features of experience, such as the value of novel experience.

### 3.2 Crisp's radical qualitative hedonism

An alternative solution to the philosophy of swine problem to hedonism is presented by Roger Crisp, who, while sympathetic to Mill's solution, argues that it ultimately fails, because, "(...) it is not clear why, if nobility can increase enjoyableness and hence value, it cannot be a good-making property in its own right, nor why an experience could not be noble without being in the slightest enjoyable." (2006a, 632). And hence, following Moore, Crisp acknowledges qualitative hedonism as Crisp interprets Mill has no proper non-arbitrary ground to restrict itself to its monism. Crisp proposes instead to reject the distinction between quantity and quality altogether: "If one experience is more enjoyable than another, it must be because the qualities of the two experiences differ in some way. But those qualities may well be intensity or duration." (633). And, in relation to the oyster case, he argues: "Yes, the oyster's life becomes increasingly more enjoyable and valuable as it is extended; but it never, perhaps, becomes as enjoyable as the life of Haydn" (634).

While I believe that the value of a pleasure in experience may not be constant, the suggestion that pleasure *itself* may decrease if a feeling of pleasure is extended is, I believe, deeply confusing. Feelings are localized in time. If, as I argued above, pleasure is a feature of feeling, two moments that feel the same should result in the same pleasure.<sup>14</sup> In case of the oyster, it is postulated that the feeling of the oyster is the same over time. So, consequently, the pleasure in time should remain constant. If that is the case, a continuously extended life with a constant stream of pleasure must at some point extend any finite amount of pleasure. But this is exactly what Crisp denies.

A way out of this problem is to let non-hedonistic values add to the value of pleasure in Haydn's life. Crisp indeed proposes that "[a]t this point a hedonist about wellbeing may wish to admit the existence of certain non-hedonistic aesthetic

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<sup>14</sup> For externalism, we should add: provided that the attitude towards the feeling remains the same. But, Crisp rejects externalism, and for the oyster, we can postulate, the attitude may remain the same.

values, the appreciation of which can be enjoyed to such an extent that such enjoyments become discontinuously more valuable than certain bodily pleasures” (634). But, we should now wonder how this is consistent with the monistic position of hedonism that only pleasure matters. Crisp argues that because pleasure is still a necessary feature of goodness in experience, which justifies us to maintain that only pleasure matters. However, this is a non-sequitur. If pleasure is a necessary feature of good experience to which other features of experience may add value, pleasure is not all that matters. It may show that pleasure has a prioritized position in the axiology of experience, but it does not establish that pleasure is the only value—in fact, it is inconsistent with this view. Crisp thus also deviates from Minimal Hedonism, and embraces extra-hedonic experientialism without acknowledging it.

### 3.3 Ben Bramble and novelty

A different recent defense of hedonism, due to Bramble (2016a), does not rely on the quality/quantity distinction, but does introduce a valuation of pleasure that is non-proportional to the quantity of pleasure itself. Bramble argues that the wellbeing value of pleasure is not limited to its degree (how pleasurable an experience is), but that the novelty of pleasures is a necessary condition for an experience to contribute to wellbeing: “pleasures that introduce nothing qualitatively new in terms of pleasurable into a person’s life—add nothing in and of themselves to her lifetime wellbeing” (2016a, 98). Bramble argues that Porky’s life is not very high on wellbeing, because he only experiences one particular type of pleasurable experience, and misses out on all the rest. I am sympathetic to Bramble’s suggestion as a way experientialism can avoid the philosophy of swine problem, but it is incompatible with Minimal Hedonism.

Bramble formulates his claim negatively: purely repeated pleasures add nothing in and of themselves. This may be a plausible way to account for the philosophy of swine objection. But, it cannot be defended within a monistic hedonistic framework. On Bramble’s account, two identical experiences of pleasure, experienced at different times, do not count equally: the one counts, and the other not at all. His view is thus a version of abstract hedonism: it is the balance of the value of pleasure and pain that matters to wellbeing, not the balance of pleasure over pain itself. As such, it suffers from the same issues as abstract hedonism. While Bramble’s suggested wellbeing function maintains, consistent with Minimal Hedonism, that only pleasure (and pain) can affect wellbeing, Bramble’s suggestion to exclude non-novel pleasures lacks motivational support within Minimal Hedonism. If Minimal Hedonism were true, the only factor that can make a difference to wellbeing is pleasure (and pain). As there is nothing about pleasure (or pain) itself that could motivate why only new pleasures contribute to wellbeing, it is not clear why a hedonist should accept this. So, within Minimal Hedonism, novelty could not make a difference to wellbeing.<sup>15</sup> If novelty does not make a difference to wellbeing,

<sup>15</sup> The instrumental value of novelty, of course, is easily accommodated under the heading of avoiding boredom.

repeated pleasures should count equally. If only pleasure and pain matter intrinsically, why would then only some pleasure and pain matter?

In response, Bramble could say (as in Bramble 2014) that he would deny the claim that there is nothing within the concept of pleasure itself that warrants dismissing the value of some pleasure in virtue of adding nothing new in themselves. To argue for this, he draws an analogy with the notion of colorfulness:

when we ask how colorful a given thing is – say a painting – most of us are wanting to know *how many different colors it contains, and how bright these are*. A very small painting consisting of many different bright colors (say, a miniature of Jackson Pollock’s *Blue Poles*) may be far more colorful than a very large painting consisting of only one or two drab colors (say, Rothko’s *Black on Maroon*) (2014, 71 [original emphasis]).

I fully agree with Bramble that for the case of colorfulness, it certainly is not the case that more quantity color (if variety of color remains the same) necessarily results in more colorfulness. However, the analogy with pleasures is not very strong. If pleasure were like colorfulness in this respect, it would be more pleasurable to have a large variety of small dishes that taste merely fine, than it would be to have the one thing that you most enjoy. However, while it may be plausible to say that it would be better to taste a variety of dishes, it would be better *despite* not being quite as pleasurable. This again points us to the conclusion that while Bramble’s solution may be axiologically plausible—variety of pleasure may matter to wellbeing—incorporating this within the notion of pleasure itself stretches the concept of pleasure in highly counterintuitive ways.

### 3.4 Feldman’s desert-adjusted hedonism

A final response to consider is due to Fred Feldman, from whom the formulation of the philosophy of swine problem in the form of Porky came. Feldman’s own response is that hedonism (in his case attitudinal hedonism) can easily be amended to deal with such examples by counting the pleasure taken in worthy objects as being more valuable than the pleasure taken in inappropriate objects<sup>16</sup>: “More exactly, the value of a pleasure is enhanced when it is pleasure taken in a worthy object, such as something good, or beautiful. The value of a pleasure is mitigated when it is pleasure taken in an unworthy object, such as something evil, or ugly.” (2002, 619). Feldman supports this view by explaining that he believes “it’s reasonable to describe certain objects by saying that they ‘deserve to be objects of pleasure’”. This avoids the problem of Porky, because his life is filled with a “worthless sort” of pleasure, namely pleasure that is “disgusting” (2002, 620). So, Feldman also broadens the scope from quantitative hedonism to abstract hedonism.

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<sup>16</sup> I focus here on the view defended in the article “The Good Life: A Defense of Attitudinal Hedonism” (2002). In his well-known book “Pleasure and the Good Life” (2004), Feldman, besides reformulating the same solution, also proposes an alternative solution to the philosophy of swine problem. This solution is based on a view he calls: “altitude-adjusted intrinsic attitudinal hedonism”, which mirrors a form of qualitative hedonism. However, he expresses a dislike to this solution himself.

The value of pleasure not only depends on its quantity, but also on the extent to which the object taken pleasure in deserves to be taken pleasure in. Clearly, the axiology of this view is not limited merely to pleasure. The level of “desert of pleasure” of objects of pleasure has value in itself in conjunction with pleasure, and thus is inconsistent with Minimal Hedonism.<sup>17</sup>

### 3.5 Bullet-biting

Before drawing the conclusion that hedonism has no satisfactory response to the philosophy of swine problem, we should consider one last response: biting the bullet. Maybe simple pleasures are of comparable value to complex pleasures, Porky’s life perfectly good for him, and the oyster’s life better than Haydn’s if sufficiently long. Perhaps our intuitions misfire. Arguably, our views on hedonism should not be based on one type of counter-example, which may be misleading. However, the philosophy of swine problem gets at something important: pleasure itself cannot account for the value of rich experiences. A person who has led a life in which he has loved many people and felt the warmth of human connections, has had many different kinds of pleasurable experiences, and experienced many beautiful things is not the same in terms of wellbeing as someone who has led a pleasurable life void of any of these goods. The philosophy of swine problem gets at this difference. However, the support for these experiential values is not limited to the intuitions pumped by the philosophy of swine examples, but their value becomes apparent when looking at them individually as well.

A life of little variety may be very pleasurable, and certainly be good. Nevertheless, we tend to think of pleasurable lives that are rich in variety as being particularly good. In obituaries and end-of-life writings, authors often stress the significance of richness in lives, not just their pleasure, in describing the value of life for them (see for example Sacks 2015 beautiful description of his own life).<sup>18</sup> Overall, I think Bramble is right to assert that there is a hard-to-deny plausibility to the view that novelty is a valuable feature of experiences.

<sup>17</sup> Not only is such a version of attitudinal hedonism not compatible with Minimal Hedonism, it is arguably not an experiential theory at all. Feldman does not say much what makes an object worthy as an object of pleasure, but in order for it to avoid the Porky problem (as Feldman argues it does) it must not be a subjective notion of worthiness. Porky may very well think that his sexual desire is a worthy object of pleasure. He may be unaware that others would think it disgusting—or, that it *is* disgusting, if disgust is indeed objective. The reason that he is not leading a good life, on Feldman’s defended view, is not because he experiences unworthiness in his life, but rather that he experiences pleasure that Feldman takes to be unworthy. As this unworthiness is not itself experienced, Feldman’s view does not adhere to the experience requirement.

<sup>18</sup> In particular, Sacks writes:

I cannot pretend I am without fear. But my predominant feeling is one of gratitude. I have loved and been loved; I have been given much and I have given something in return; I have read and traveled and thought and written. I have had an intercourse with the world, the special intercourse of writers and readers.

Above all, I have been a sentient being, a thinking animal, on this beautiful planet, and that in itself has been an enormous privilege and adventure.

Relatedly, it is not all uncommon for those with Alzheimer's disease to be "stuck" on joyful emotions. Insofar as they suffer, they do not appear to be suffering in terms of lacking pleasure in their life. They may very well feel much more of it at times that many other people do. Hedonism is not an adequate view on what they are missing out on in life (Schermer 2003). Rather, it points to the value of the connection between our experiences, to which memory plays a crucial role. Memory loss does not rob us of pleasure in our lives, but of our ability to understand our experiences and connect them (see also Moore 1903, para. 52).

Lastly, something that seems to grant our concern in case of Porky is a lack of human warmth, empathy, human connection—or in brief, human compassion—that he seems to be missing in his life. We do not need to think of such extreme examples to appreciate the value of human compassion beyond its instrumental value to pleasure. Lonely people need not be miserable. But, someone who is lacking the experience of human compassion in their life is missing out on a piece of the human experience that adds value to our lives, even if this comes at the cost of some amount of pleasure.

In conclusion, the appeal to broaden the value of experience beyond pleasure is not only driven by the philosophy of swine objection, but also by the appeal of extra-hedonic values themselves. While I have mentioned just a few of such values—novelty, self-understanding, and compassion—this is by no means an exhaustive list of valuable features of experience.

#### 4 Experientialist pluralism: the appropriate response

The arguments so far have aimed to establish that hedonism—in its monism—is not a satisfactory view on the value of experience. This provides a *prima facie* argument for pluralistic accounts. However, significant concerns may be raised against pluralism about the value of experience as well. An extra-hedonistic account of the value of experience, should be able to address at least the following two potential objections.

Firstly, pleasure is an important feature of experience. It is no coincidence that hedonistic theories have been so popular throughout history. A pluralistic experientialist account of wellbeing runs the risk of trivializing the importance of pleasure in our experiences.

Secondly, in a recent article, Kauppinen (2015) has argued against pluralism about experiential value on grounds that for possible candidates of such values, it is not invariably good to have them (see also Crisp 2006a, cited above). For example, someone who is experiencing novelty without enjoying it at all does not clearly benefit from this experience at all. The same may apply to other values that experiences may have, such as experiencing beautiful tragedies.<sup>19</sup>

A pluralistic account of the value of experience need not be committed to the view that different values that matter for the value of our experience contribute

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<sup>19</sup> Kauppinen makes a related point about veridicality. He argues that veridicality cannot be something that gives value to experience, because it is not actually something that is experienced. I agree with this point fully.



equally to wellbeing. The vulnerability of such an account to the possible objections, depends highly on the structure such an account takes. Firstly, we may suppose, following Crisp, that pleasure is necessary for an experience to contribute to wellbeing. This would address Kauppinen's concern that extra-hedonic values may not invariably contribute to our wellbeing, while at the same time would avoid the conclusion that pleasure is the sole contributor to wellbeing. Secondly, the value of extra-hedonic features of experience may appear to have a rather perfectionistic character. To someone who is suffering deeply, the lack of novelty and aesthetic value of her experiences may be the least of her concerns. Avoiding suffering is a particularly significant aspect of our wellbeing, and alleviating pain seems to have a gravity that extra-hedonic values do not have. A plausible pluralistic account can address this by assuming that such non-hedonic values add increasingly to wellbeing as lives are getting more pleasant (and less painful). I thus propose the following sketch as an experiential theory of wellbeing:

*Extra-hedonistic experientialism* The degree of someone's wellbeing is determined by the value of experience, which depends on

1. the quantitative balance of pleasure over pain, and
2. extra-hedonic values, such as novelty, self-understanding, aesthetic value and compassion,

whereby the balance of pleasure over pain determines how well someone is up to a certain level, after which the extra-hedonic goods increasingly add value to experiences only if they contain at least some pleasure as well. The better one's life is, the more extra-hedonic values matter to wellbeing.

This formulation gives pleasure a central role, and does not claim that extra-hedonic values contribute to wellbeing without containing at least some pleasure. It, however, only describes the general structure of a wellbeing account. While the proposed account is quite specific about the functional form of the relation between experiential goods and wellbeing, it is deliberately imprecise in at least the following senses: (1) it leaves the list of extra-hedonic goods that contribute to wellbeing incomplete and underspecified, and (2) leaves the grounds on which they are considered good open as well.<sup>20</sup>

Nevertheless, this account does not fall prey to the philosophy of swine objection. While Porky has much pleasure in his life, this is the sole experiential good in his life. He misses out on experiencing new pleasurable things, and seems to be limited in his sense of understanding, but most importantly, he misses out on the experience of human compassion. So, while his life achieves a *certain level* of wellbeing,<sup>21</sup> he obtains no wellbeing above this level. So, Porky's life is worse than that of many

<sup>20</sup> Whether the value of experience is irreducibly objective, or depends in some way on the nature of individuals and their (volitional) makeup is beyond the scope of this article. Nevertheless, it is good to note that pluralism about the value of experience is distinct from a claim about the comparability of the different goods that make it up. They may be, but need not be, incommensurable, and may as such be reducible to a single quantitative index (or not).

<sup>21</sup> How good this certain level is exactly is also left vague, but we can assume that this level makes a life worth living, but not great.



others who are experiencing at least a certain degree of pleasure over pain, but who are experiencing human compassion and other extra-hedonic experiential goods.

A fortiori, the oyster experiences no extra-hedonic goods at all. So, like Porky, the oyster's wellbeing is limited to a certain level. Haydn's life is rich in experiential goods—*aesthetic value, novelty, and the human compassion of friendships and family*—that the oyster misses out on. Hence, on the proposed account, Haydn's life plausibly has a higher degree of wellbeing than the oyster. The long mildly pleasurable life of the oyster may be good, but the fact that the oyster has a higher quantitative balance of pleasure over pain in his life is insufficient to show that the oyster's life is better than Haydn's. On the proposed account, it may be better to the oyster, or to be Porky, than to be someone who lives in agony. However, most people who do achieve a decent amount of pleasure over pain have lives that are better than theirs, because of the extra-hedonic valuable features of their experience.

Two further objections may still apply. First, taking Ockham's razor seriously, simplicity is a virtue of theories. My formulation of extra-hedonic experientialism is only able to incorporate more intuitions about wellbeing at the cost of parsimony. Second, hedonists often argue extra-hedonic values only seemingly contribute intrinsically to wellbeing because they contribute reliably to pleasure instrumentally (Kauppinen 2015; Moen 2016). Both these arguments should be resisted. In so far as parsimony is a virtue of theories in both the descriptive as well as axiological domains, it should not come at the cost of misdescribing, in our case, wellbeing. Or, as the famous slogan goes: "Everything should be made as simple as possible, but not simpler." If the observations in the preceding section are correct, experiential accounts of wellbeing that do not ascribe *intrinsic* value to extra-hedonic values run into the philosophy of swine problem. Any rich valuable experience—that is compassionate, aesthetically interesting, and novel—can then be traded off, in terms of wellbeing, by some sufficiently pleasurable experience that lacks all those features. As we have seen, this results in highly counterintuitive conclusions. This problem occurs when extra-hedonic value and pleasure do not align. Without flat-out denying the possibility of such dilemmas, or biting the bullet on the counterintuitive consequences hedonism has for those cases, pluralism about the value of experience to wellbeing cannot be denied.

## 5 Conclusion

The article set out to answer whether pleasure is all that is good about experience. I have argued that if experientialist accounts of wellbeing are correct, hedonism does not straightforwardly follow. To the contrary, hedonism seems deeply problematic as an experientialist account of wellbeing. Hedonism's narrow focus on just one valuable feature of experience has made its position vulnerable to a significant problem: pleasure itself cannot account for the goodness of rich experiences. Pluralism is more plausible as an account of experientialist prudential value, even if pleasure may have an especially important role in the value of experience.

Where does this leave experientialist theories of wellbeing? In the introduction, I have set up the case against experientialism about wellbeing as consisting out of two

major arguments: (1) the experience machine objection, and (2) the philosophy of swine problem. I have argued that the second problem is a significant problem for hedonistic accounts that cannot easily be avoided, but need not apply to a broader account of experientialism. The experience machine objection still applies to this family of theories. However, recent critical discussions of this objection have cast, at the very least, a significant amount of doubt on its efficacy. We thus have to conclude that pluralistic experientialism about wellbeing is serious contender in the debate on the nature of wellbeing, and, as such, deserves consideration.

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