A problem that emerges when analysing the arguments for and against hedonism is that each side has its own conception of the nature of pleasure and pain and paradigmatic examples which support their own argument. In this paper, I examine a disagreement that can be observed back in the arguments of the philosophers of classical Greek period, as to whether pleasures and/or pains are essentially feelings or more like propositional attitudes. I suggest Plato’s arguments in the *Philebus* are in accord with current thinking in this area, and push away from subjectivist conceptions of the good towards those that are objectivist.

In Athens, in what we call the classical period, Socrates, Plato, Aristotle and many of their contemporaries discussed and argued about the nature of time and space, identity and change, good and evil, the sorts of things which are familiar as philosophical topics. But they also explored the notion of the “Good Life”, arguing about the (necessary and sufficient) conditions for a life being good in itself, for the one who lives it. The topic in many respects defines the philosophical focus of Hellenistic period in the work of Epicurus, and of the Stoics. Investigations into the good life are important for deliberations in moral philosophy, and the concept of individual welfare is central to theories of rationality, and arguments about the ideal society.

There are a number of proposed answers to the question, of what makes a life a good life, that have been argued by philosophers resulting in a plethora of positions such as hedonism, eudaimonism (happiness/fulfilment), desire-satisfaction, and perfectionism, to name a few which have ancient pedigrees and have proved resilient and flexible enough to still be argued today. Hedonism, an ancient species of which I shall shortly look at, despite attracting deserved criticism both then and today, is resilient because despite its problems, it has at its core, some good arguments about the ultimate value of pleasure in a good life. While hedonism as a subjectivist account of the good in its strong (default) form can be criticised for claiming that nothing matters prudentially to an individual except the quality of experience, the weaker
form that claims only that an individual’s welfare is *in part* dependent upon a mental state, cannot be so easily dismissed.

For philosophers who recognise the value of pleasure but none the less argue that it cannot be the ultimate measure of the good life, such as Plato, one of the responses to hedonism has been to posit an objectivist conception of the good and to challenge the underlying conceptions of the nature of pleasure and pain that the subjectivists employ. And so a problem that emerges when analysing the arguments of both sides in that each side has its own conception of the nature of pleasure and pain, and definitive examples which support their own argument. Of the many deep disagreements about the nature of pleasure and pain, whether pleasures and/or pains are “brute” feelings (the conception favoured by subjectivists) or, conative states like attitudes towards sensations and propositions (a conception favoured by objectivists), is a significant issue that has generated a lot of work.

**Preliminaries**

Due to the complexity in this area, we are often forced to talk and argue about pleasant, unpleasant, and painful experiences loosely, as though despite their very diverse causes and objects, they are all the same, in that they share something essential. And yet, on deeper analysis we talk and argue as though there are marked differences between them, and to try to distinguish bodily pleasures from mental (emotional) pleasures, as well as bodily pains from non-bodily pains, and both, from unpleasures. Sometimes, and henceforth, the term “bodily” is replaced by “sensory”, and so we have sensory pleasures and pains, and non-sensory pleasures and pains, sensory unpleasures, and non-sensory unpleasures.

Sensory pleasure is the kind we feel when we undergo sensory experiences such as taste, smell, touch, etc., examples may include pleasures such as receiving a massage, a warm bath, the taste of chocolate, and perhaps quintessentially, the orgasm. Examples of sensory unpleasures may include vomiting, nausea, and itching. Sensory pain is just paradigmatic pain, it’s the pain from burns, cuts bruises and other assaults upon the body. It is typically argued that sensory pleasure and sensory pain are opposites, but some argue that pleasure’s opposite is unpleasure, and find examples that support this contention such as the relation between the pleasure of eating and the nausea of eating too much, and point to the fact that we have a specialised sensory system for pain, but no such equivalent for pleasure (Massin, 2014; Hardcastle, 2014).

Mental or emotional pleasures and pains are taken to be non-sensory, in that they seem essentially to involve beliefs, judgments, and attitudes like hopes and fears, and any sensory component that may be present is deemed trivial. Examples may include the pleasure of owning a prestige car, hearing about the saving of an endangered species, or of the rise in value of financial investments. And *mutatis mutandis* some have argued for treating grief, shame, anxiety and guilt, etc., as non-sensory pains (emotional or mental pain), or at least as cases of non-sensory unpleasures.
It can appear that we use different words for sensory and non-sensory pleasures and pains; I “enjoy” the taste of X, means the taste of X is pleasant whereas if I say I am “pleased” with the taste of the X, it suggests the taste of X may be enjoyed for reasons other than its taste. Once we start considering the intentional objects of pleasures and pains, it gets obscure, and it is not clear whether those terms capture any real distinctions between pleasures and pleasures and pains and pains. Also there is what gets called by neurophysiologists, “top-down modulation” in which the psychological appreciation of the significance of the feeling, smell, or taste might affect the sensory experience itself rendering it pleasant or unpleasant in a sensory sense (Bain & Brady, 2014:3.1).

In this paper, if I say pleasure is a sensory pleasure if its subject experiences the pleasure primarily due to undergoing some sensory qualities in a sensory experience, and mutatis mutandis of pain, it will be good enough for present purposes. Although as I have intimated this distinction is roughshod and glosses over some potentially significant problems, it is up to the task, and may, in turn, settle some of other issues glossed over or left unresolved. When thinking about pain at least, the distinction between sensory and non-sensory appears much less of a problematic, as it’s taken as granted that pains, like cuts, burns, bruises, and breaks, all of which have rich sensory dimensions, are the clearest examples of sensory experiences. Even if you want to argue, as many have and do, that extreme emotional experiences and nausea and other unpleasures are essentially pains, there is nonetheless a much starker difference between the sensory ones and the latter, in that only the former pains have the brutal pain sensations that include other locatable qualitative sensory characteristics, such as piercing, burning, and aching (Usher, 2012).

So with regards to sensory pleasure and (especially) sensory pain, in contemporary arguments on this topic, it is argued by some that both are essentially feelings often called sensations, that are internal to the pleasant or painful experiences. By internal it is meant that the pleasantness or painfulness is an essential part of the phenomenology of the respective experience (Aydede, 2014:21). In the literature, these theories are called felt-quality theories because they take both pleasure and pain to be, in essence, a distinctive feeling or a hedonic tone in the sensations. Regardless of which, feeling or tone, both argue that the pleasantness/painfulness has a phenomenological reality that has a detectable occurrence in our sensory experiences. Sensory pleasures of the

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1 An excellent examination of this problem can be found in Williams, 1966.
2 Aydede, 2014:121, cites Summer, 1996, and Crisp, 2006, for using “externalist” and “internalist”, and Carson, 2000, and Heathwood, 2007, as using “attitudinal” and “felt-quality”. Fred Feldman, is cited as making the distinction between “hedonic-tone” and “distinctive feeling” (Feldman, 1997). G. E. Moore is cited as being one of the few to hold a distinctive feeling line (Moore, G. E., 1903/1983:12). The hedonic-tone account can be found in Crisp, 2006, see also Shelly Kagan, “Recognition of the qualitative differences between the experiences of hiking, listening to music, and reading philosophy need not call into question our ability to identify a single dimension-pleasure-along which they vary only in magnitude” (Kagan, 1992:72).
kinds I have mentioned and especially sensory pain (paradigmatic pain) are their best and strongest examples.

But there has long been an opposing tradition, which has argued that sensory pleasure and even pain, are in fact composites of sensory and cognitive components, and it is the cognitive (conative) component that is taken to be essential. Again, following the literature, I will call these positions attitudinal, because they take the essence of pleasure to be external to the sensation, and instead constituted by a conative or evaluative pro-attitude (Aydede, 2014:121). The nature of the attitude has broadly been reduced to desiring (preferring, or liking) a sensation or sensory experience, and the same, mutatis mutandis, applies to pain and other unpleasures, which are also reduced to a conative or evaluative attitude (desiring not, avoiding, disliking, etc.).

Both the felt-quality and the attitudinal accounts have ancient pedigrees. I shall look first at Aristippus and the Cyrenaics, who I take as holders of the felt-quality view, and then at Plato, who clearly articulates an example of the attitudinal conception in his dialogue Philebus.3

Aristippus and the Cyrenaics

A contemporary of Socrates and Plato was Aristippus (born c. 435 BCE–died c. 356 BCE), the first of the Cyrenaic school, and the famous proponent of the sort of unabashed hedonism of the “wine, women, and song” variety that scandalised their contemporaries and others ever since. Since we don't have a body of work from him as we do for Plato and Aristotle, and some of the scandalous stories attributed to him are possibly unfair and untrue, it might be thought he is an unsuitable candidate to be a representative of this position. Instead, it could be argued we should look at the argument of Eudoxus, a respected philosopher in Plato's Academy, who had argued that pleasure is the chief good on premises including; all things, rational and irrational, aim at pleasure; animals aim at what they believe to be good; and that pleasure isn't sought as a means to something else, but as an end in its own right.4 However, on the question at hand, we do not know what Eudoxus thought or argued with regard to the nature of pleasure and pain, but it would (for reasons that I hope shall shortly become clear) naturally align with the Cyrenaic view. Hence, I place them all in the philosophical and folk tradition that conceives of pleasures and pains as being essentially brute-feelings (without any content) and therefore as taking a felt-quality conception.5

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3 I have followed the normal convention of referring to passages in Plato, which is to refer to the page numbers and column letter of the standards edition of Plato, edited by Stephanus.

4 A fuller rendering of Eudoxus' argument and a description of his character can be found in book 10 of the Nicomachean Ethics (1172b10–1173a15).

5 We don't have much primary material on Aristippus and the Cyrenaics to analyse, and the distinctions (if there are any) between his arguments and those of the school he inspired so I can only take a rough and ready picture and appeal to a number of important points/themes found in Diogenes Laertius' (henceforth DL and cited according to convention), Lives of Eminent Philosophers Book II Part 8 65–93.
It is claimed by Diogenes Laertius that when the Cyrenaics argued that pleasure is the end or the goal of life they did not mean pleasure in general, or pleasure over the long term, but immediate, particular pleasures. This is because they held that pleasures do not differ from one another, one pleasure is not more pleasant than another, and pleasure is good even if it comes from unseemly things. So when, in an apparent contradiction they say that bodily pleasures are better than other pleasures (the pleasures of the mind), we should interpret that as a preference for the immediately and easily obtainable pleasures of bodily gratification over, for example, more sophisticated, complex, and time and effort consuming pleasures of the mind. The arguments were apparently premised upon a sceptical epistemology; it being impossible to know anything beyond one’s immediate sensations amongst which pleasure and pain were the most prominent (DL II 8 86–90).

Like Eudoxus, the Cyrenaics are reported to have argued that the proof that pleasure is the chief good is that we are from our childhood attracted to it without any deliberate choice of our own; and that when we have obtained it, we do not seek anything further. And again like Eudoxus they made a point of how there is nothing which we avoid so much as we do its opposite, which is pain. But perhaps in disagreement with the “sober and respectable” Eudoxus, they also asserted that pleasure is good, even if it arises from the unbecoming, the absurd and even immoral causes (DL II 8 88–89).

I think the pleasures of bodily gratification, Diogenes says the Cyrenaics lauded, epitomise the felt-quality conception of pleasure and pain I defined earlier. And I think it is implicit in other hedonists’ arguments like that of Eudoxus’. This conception seems to recognise no difference between the pleasure received from very diverse causes of pleasure, no appreciation of the truth, value and ethics of what is enjoyed. Put simply, on the feeling conception, to have a pleasure is to have a conscious experience which has a unique phenomenal character qua pleasure, and which we desire and is therefore valuable for itself; and the same mutatis mutandis is true of pain, it is an experience with a unique phenomenal character we abhor and seek to avoid.

This feeling conception of pleasures and pains is central to subjectivist accounts of the good and what can be called default hedonism (Feldman, 2004:109–123). On the felt-quality conception, when we experience pleasure we experience it as a detectable event or episode with a duration and an intensity that may vary over time and we can’t be wrong about it or its value. These episodes of pleasure thus have (in principle) an amount of pleasure that is measurable. And the same can be said of pain; when we experience paradigmatic pain, we experience it as an event or episode with a duration, and a certain intensity at each moment in time. And as with pleasure, episodes of pain would have an amount of pain that is in principle measurable.

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6 If Eudoxus had an argument against this Cyrenaic argument, or that ruled out the conception of pleasure and pain as feelings, it is not recorded by Aristotle.
The combination of the felt-quality conception of pleasure and pain, and hedonism has the great advantage of simplicity when it comes to practical reasoning and prudence. For the default hedonist, a person’s good depends solely on whether they are pleased and not in pain. Hence, if we create units of measurement such as *hedons* and *lupons* (units of pleasure and pain respectively) and calculate net pleasure and pain taking into account duration and intensity of particular courses of actions or behaviours, those actions and behaviours that result in a higher net amount of pleasure and a lower net amount of pain are rational. There are philosophers who have proposed that this position can be bolstered against some of the objectivists criticisms, by respecting other values and supporting demands for truth, ethics and sophistication in the kinds of pleasures that make up a good life, but these adjustments come at the cost of simplicity, and whether they succeed in strengthening the felt-quality conception is beyond the scope of this paper (but see Feldman, 2004:109–23).

**Plato**

There are a number of discussions in Plato’s dialogues about pleasure and pain, as a number of arguments are explored. But in a latter dialogue *Philebus*, Plato has Socrates arguing for a position that would place him squarely in the camp of those who think that even in the case of sensory pleasures and pains the pleasantness or painfulness is *external* (it is not a detectable object in the sensory experience) to the sensation or sensory input. Ultimately, Plato is an objectivist about the good in that claims about what is good can be correct or incorrect, and that the correctness of a claim about a person’s good is determined independently of that person’s attitudes and opinions (Arneson, 1999:115). And so he argues that pleasures and pains are in essence, perceptions: states of the ψυχή (psyche/soul/mind) with a structure like beliefs, desires, fears, expectations and other propositional attitudes.

In brief, Plato developed an elaborate conception of pleasure and pain based upon proto-physiological ideas that associated pains and pleasures with the disruption and restoration of the organism’s psycho-physical constitution. Furthermore, he has Socrates argue that the psyche is responsible for guiding the body towards its good condition so that the human animal is a homeostatic being that has the ability to monitor and nurture itself. The foundation for this argument is given in the following statement on the nature of pleasure and pain in the *Philebus*:

When the natural constitution (κατὰ φύσιν) of determinate and indeterminate (πέρας and ἄπειρον) that forms a living organism is destroyed (φθωρά), this destruction is

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7 The *Protagoras* in which Socrates tries out the Hedonic Calculus, the *Gorgias* which introduces physiological themes to the discussion, and the *Republic* which introduces the concept of true and false pleasures and argues that the philosophical life is the most pleasant.


pleasure and pain, while the return towards its own nature, this general restoration from destruction is pleasure. (Phil 31c–31b, see also 35e)

A robust appreciation of what Socrates is saying here requires some knowledge of Plato’s metaphysical ideas, and of the cosmo-physiology of the Timaeus. For the purposes of this paper, the metaphysics can be put aside and we can just look at the physiological ideas. Even before Socrates’ day there were those who were interested in what we would call physiology and medicine (Irwin, 1992). In two later dialogues, Philebus and Timaeus, Plato incorporates into his own arguments the basic idea that living beings are composed of elements and forces in some kind of proportionate mix, which is dynamic and subject to fluctuation from its optimal condition. As sickness and health occurred when these optimal states are disrupted and restored so too (as suggested by Empedocles) pain and pleasure occur.

After giving the statement above (Phil 31c–31d), Plato has Socrates give a few examples of pleasures and pains; Hunger is a dissolution and hence is painful, while eating is the restorative filling and is therefore pleasant; thirst is a drying out, but drinking the filling up with moisture of that which was dried up and so is pleasant; excessive cold is a disruption and so is painful while the warming to the right degree, a restoration, hence it is pleasant (Phil 31c–32b, see 47d–50d for the disruptions and restorations of the psyche alone, 51a–d for a description of true pleasures in which the disruption is not perceived but the restoration is).

However, the context of these claims and the arguments that follow point to pleasures and pains actually being consequent upon the processes by which an animal is disturbed and restored (Evans, 2007:73). The context is that Socrates has already said that one of the psyche’s functions is to guide the body towards health, including healing and repair, from damage and disruption that occurs from living (Phil 29e–30b). The argument is that a psyche that perceives in its body damage or disruption is a disturbed psyche, which is motivated to restore or replenish that which has been destroyed, depleted and disrupted (this idea is also found in the Timaeus 86d–90d) (Evans, 2007:86). As the body’s optimal condition is restored from the disruption, the psyche perceives the restoration in the body and is itself restored from the imbalance created by the perception of the disturbance in the first place. It is added that both perceptions only occur if the disruption or restoration is significant enough that it causes a σεισμός (an oscillation) in the psyche (Phil 33d–34a, 43b–43c).

The initial disruption and restoration account given at 31c–31d in Philebus, is thus modified by an important qualification, in that both pleasure and pain are perceptions (αἴσθησις), they are thus psychological states; those that represent bodily damage and disruptions are pains, and those psychological states that represent bodily restoration are bodily pleasures. As essentially psychological states then they are separate and

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10 See Tracy, 1969, see also Hampton, 1990 and Burgess, 2000.
external to the states/sensations of the body and they are cognitively robust, because we are told that appetitive states like thirst and hunger are also non-bodily psychological states, involving memory and desire (Phil 35d–e, 34b–35d).

In the discussion on desire, Plato has Socrates say that the desiring organism is able to recognise the object of its desires. We can readily agree that at least from childhood onwards that when we feel thirsty we desire “drink”, for example. And hence we can see how one might claim that (in adult or mature animals at least) desire is not just the appreciation of lack or disruption but also includes a reference for the object of replenishment and restoration (Phil 35b–d). And Plato is arguing that an organism can be motivated to pursue the object of restoration only when/if it has had contact with that thing to give content, and thereby direction to the organisms intentions (Evans, 2007:88).

How does Plato think organisms come to make the connection between the disturbance and the object of restoration? In the passage 34c–35d of Philebus, he has Socrates explain that it cannot be the body, instead Socrates thinks that the desiring organism connects with the object, by representing it as the aim for action, which it can only do by the use of memory (Phil 35c–d). It is thus made clear that memories, which are also states of the psyche, are bearers of representational content, the content being an object to be pursued given the circumstances the animal currently finds itself in (Phil 38b–39c) (Evans, 2007:89).

The upshot of all these moves is that for Plato even sensory pleasures and pains, become like beliefs, desires, hopes and fears, in the sense that they are mental states of the sort we call propositional attitudes (more recently expressed by some as representational states) (Phil 37a–37c). In the case of pain for example, the psyche doesn’t just perceive the disturbance in the body, but it makes a connection between the relevant bodily disturbance (sensory input), and the relevant object of repair, replenishment or restoration, and in this way brings with it a motivation to pursue the means to restoration for that particular disturbance. And this means that bodily pains are in essence content bearing psychological disruptions, which inform the animal in what way its body has been damaged, and motivate the animal to fix itself (Evans, 2007:83). And mutatis mutandis for pleasure, it is also a contentful mental state, its functional role is to inform the organism that its disruption is being restored, so that next time it is similarly disturbed it is motivated and remembers the circumstances and objects of that restoration.

Contemporary arguments and desiderata

How does the felt-quality conception like that of the Cyrenaics’, and the attitudinal account involving propositional attitudes of Plato, stand in contemporary philosophical debates? Plato’s conception is among friends, as there has been a popular strand

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12 Matt Evans provides an examination of limitations of other perceptual theories, which may have led Plato to take a representationalist position (Evans, 2007: 81–83). See also Usher, 2012: Chapters 10, 13.
of the philosophy of mind that has embraced perceptual models about pain and which invoke representational content. Furthermore, externalist conceptions like Plato’s are doing better at answering contemporary desiderata about pleasure and pain, with regard to non-phenomenality, motivation and opposite valances (Bain & Brady, 2014:3.1).

For contemporary perceptualists who embrace representationalism, to be in pain is to be having an experience which represents a part of your body as damaged or undergoing some kind of disturbance, in the same way that you might visually have an experience that represents a red tomato before you. The claim is not that pain is a sign from which damage might be inferred, but that pain notifies the organism of damage in a way like that in which visual experiences notify the organism of shapes and colours. Consequently, even if one balks at the suggestion that pain experiences are beliefs, it is possible to argue that they do have truth-conditions, being true (or veridical) if the represented bodily location really is damaged, and false if it is not, as in cases of referred pain, and the aptly named phantom-limb pains (Bain & Brady, 2014:3.2).

And perceptualism of this kind fits with contemporary representationalist accounts of phenomenal consciousness in which an experience’s phenomenal character is or supervenes on its content (Tye, 1995; Byrne, 2001). So for example, to have a “red feeling” is to experience a representation of something red in the environment. This aspect of representationalism is perhaps more controversial, and brings us to the consideration of some contemporary desiderata with regards to pleasure and pain, and non-phenomenality.

I described before, one of the oldest and most persuasive ideas about pleasure and pains: that sensory pleasure and sensory pain are “feelings” that are an integral part of the very phenomenology of a pleasant sensation or painful sensation. In the previous century, deep philosophical problems with the nature of phenomenal objects emerged, as they don’t fit our contemporary naturalism. Furthermore, some influential arguments were made that there isn’t an introspectively discoverable quality that unites all pleasures (or all pains too, potentially, though I’ll leave pain aside for the moment) (Sidgwick, 1907; Feldman, 1997). So even leaving aside the ontological problems with phenomenal qualities, there was what is called the heterogeneity problem; how could all those very different things called pleasant (reading, swimming, listening, etc.), cause the same thing (pleasure) in every case? And it was argued that when you introspect on pleasant experiences (of which there are a seemingly infinite variety), you can find no phenomenal quality, in virtue of which they are all pleasant.15


14 Although I haven’t discussed it here, in earlier papers I have explored Plato’s arguments that pleasures and pains can be false in a number of different senses, see Couvalis and Usher, 2003 and Frede, 1985.

15 This does not mean that these experiences are not pleasant, but that they don’t share a phenomenal feature that is their pleasantness (Bain & Brady, 2014:3.1).
Externalist theories are better placed to answer these concerns. Firstly, the nature of the phenomenal qualities is a moot point if one takes the position that the essence of pleasures and pains is not in each's own particular phenomenal qualities. And explaining how the diversity of things found pleasant all cause the same phenomenal quality (the heterogeneity of pleasures problem), is less of a problem for attitudinal theories. On versions of externalism, such as Plato's attitudinal account, what unifies the diversity of particular pleasures and particular pains, is the attitude implicit in the perception of negative and positive conditions.

Now I suggested that the externalist position is supposed, *mutatis mutandis* to apply to sensory pain. But with regards to sensory pain (paradigmatic pain) the internalists might have thought they were on unassailable ground. Who could deny that to experience pain from an injury to the body from say a clumsy knife stroke, is to experience a particularly awful sensation with an attention-grabbing phenomenal quality. And yet, repeated physiological studies on pain, have shown that pain sensations and painfulness can come apart, or in other words that it is possible to experience sensory pain that is not itself unpleasant or painful. People with congenital conditions or brain injuries can experience what is called pain asymbolia, where they clearly identify noxious stimuli as pain, but they insist it doesn't bother them (Grahek, 2001). This phenomenon has been taken as good evidence against the felt-quality conception; if even in the case of paradigmatic pain (sensory pain from cuts burns and bruises that have pain sensations), it can be shown that the painfulness (the phenomenal quality of hurting) is not a component of pain sensations, then the internalists' hitherto strongest example appears on shaky grounds (Usher, 2012).

So in this important regard, Plato's argument fits well with contemporary perceptualism. In response to the internalist and felt-quality views which can be found in the Cyrenaic's arguments and in the mouths of protagonists like Callicles and Protarchus in his dialogues, Plato never seems too concerned about the nature of qualitative or phenomenal properties. This suggests that when it comes to understanding pleasure and pain, he thinks that what is important is its attitudinal nature, not its qualitative or phenomenal characters. For Plato such a conception not only fits within his greater metaphysical and physiological framework, but also it gives pains and pleasures the properties they must have if they are to play a robust role in practical reasoning under an objectivist conception of the good. If pain and pleasure are to act as an explanation of a rational action within an objectivist account, then their *meaning* something, i.e., their having content that can be correct or incorrect, makes them much more suitable candidates for rational analysis, than brute feelings we just like or dislike (Evans, 2007:90).

To be clear Plato's conception and those like it do not entail that pains, or any other psychological states (pleasures), do not have non-representational qualitative

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16 “Since he holds that bodily pains just are attitudes of a certain kind, one can defend his account without ever abandoning or minimising one's commitment to the existence of qualitative states. One need only insist that pains have no determinate qualitative character essential to them *qua* pains” (Evans, 2007: 92).
properties, only that, whatever qualitative properties a pain (or pleasure) might have, they are not essential to it (Evans, 2007:72–93). Hence, the conception is clearly opposed to the sort of subjectivist and internalist view I argued was held by Aristippus and the Cyrenaics, which took the essence of pleasantness and painfulness to be non-representational qualitative properties present in every and all cases of pleasure, or pain, that we cannot be wrong about.

A second desiderata in this area concerns the motivating power of pleasures and pains. Consider the pain or unpleasantness of jumping into a very cold lake. It defensibly motivates you to get out of the water quickly, defensibly because the motivation might be overridden by a stronger motivation to prove how tough you are, for example. The point is that the pain has a motivational character inherent in its unpleasantness and that it is independent of further desires (Bain & Brady, 2014:3.1). Hence, unpleasant pains, belong to a special category of motivations, motivations that figure in rationalising explanations of action (Bain & Brady, 2014:3.1). The idea is that when we explain the behaviour of scrambling out of the freezing water in terms of the unpleasantness of pain, we are not just giving a reason that the person’s body moved (as the dropping of a coin into one side of the scales was the reason that it descended), but we are also giving a reason or reasons for which a person moved it, to wit: a mental episode in which the action seems rational to the person, and accordingly motivating them to perform it (Bain & Brady, 2014:3.3).

Plato is among those who extend the claim mutatis mutandis, to pleasures, and unpleasures. In investing pleasures and pains with content/meaning he can now argue that pleasures and pains are intrinsically motivating in that they, of themselves, provide motivating (albeit defeasible) reasons for their subjects to act (Aydede, 2014:123). In contrast on Cyrenaic type felt-quality conceptions, there is at best a reliable but contingent connection between pleasantness and painfulness and motivation as it is just a brute fact that the perception of a phenomenal quality motivates (Aydede, 2014:123).

Finally a brief word on the issue of opposing (positive/negative) valences. Here again, we find attitudinal conceptions like Plato’s are better placed to answer these questions about the nature of pleasure and pain. On the assumption that unpleasantness is the opposite of pleasantness, if not pain itself, attitudinal theories can account for this by positing opposite attitudes (e.g. liking versus disliking, or attraction versus aversion), or same attitudes but opposite content (desiring versus desiring not) (Aydede, 2014:124). Again, in contrast, if pleasantness is just a contentless phenomenal sensory quality, in what sense could it have an opposite?

The externalist, attitudinal conceptions of pleasure and pain like Plato’s are better placed to answer these desiderata. Of course, there are some significant problems for perceptual views like the ones I have outlined and some challenging retorts by felt-quality adherents. In particular, there is a problem with the claim that beliefs (content) can, by themselves, motivate. Humean arguments along the lines that the possession of indicative content of an experience, whether visual experience or a pain, cannot account for it to be pleasant, unpleasant, or motivational remain problematic for those
taking the attitudinal line (Bain & Brady, 2014:3.2). I cannot go into the attempted defences against these problems in this paper, suffice to say there remain some challenging problems in this field.

In conclusion to this exploration I return to my original question which was what kinds of things pleasures and pains are, with a view to understanding the place of pleasure in the good life. If the Cyrenaic conception of the nature of pleasure and pain I outlined earlier is rejected, then that would pose significant problems for subjectivist accounts of the good and the hedonic calculus. If in essence, pleasures and pains are what they are because of their respective content, because of their meaning, then we can evaluate that content for its prudential value, and weigh it against other values we might hold, in a much more robust way than we can if they are representationally blank, content-less, subjective feelings of homogenised value.

In the literature the argument is often made against the hedonist that were it possible, via “experience machines” or lobotomy-like surgical procedures to have a life of permanent bliss, at the price that you would be unconscious of the world, most of us would reject such an option as a good life, for ourselves and others. The attitudinal conception of pleasures and pains is able to account for that rejection while still respecting the value of pleasure and pain. The pleasures and pains that “fit” with our other values and goals are welcome components of the good life, and others, no matter how intense they may be, will be trivial at best. Such distinctions are difficult to make if you take the feeling conception of pleasures and pains.

Thus, if you accept that there is content or meaning at the core of pleasures and pains, and that that content can be false, mistaken, irrational, etc., pursuing a basic hedonic calculus of the Cyrenaic sort would be imprudent. Recognising that we can be falsely pleased, and falsely pained, so to speak, pushes us towards objectivist conceptions of the good, and the recognition that other values are important to the good life than just having a certain mental state or quality of experience. A rational agent would choose for herself and others a life that respected other values, to the extent that it might contain less than maximum pleasure, and included some pains over a life that just contained the maximum amount of a pleasant mental state, and a minimal amount of a painful one.

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