

Pleasure in the Motivational System: Towards an Empirically Responsible Theory of Value

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ABSTRACT: Theories about value struggles with the problem how to account for the motivational force inherent to value judgments. Whereas the exact role of motivation in evaluation is the subject of some controversy, it's arguably a truism that value has something to do with motivation. In this paper, I suggest that given that the role of motivation in ethical theory is left quite unspecific by the "truisms" or "platitudes" governing evaluative concepts, a scientific understanding of motivation can provide a rich source of clues for how we might go about developing an empirically responsible theory of value.

More specifically, I argue that naturalist hedonists should be eager to join forces with motivational science: the role of pleasure in the motivational system is such that a sound case for hedonism can be built on it.

...if this be all, where is his ethics? The position he is maintaining is merely a psychological one (Moore, 1903)

Ethics must not –indeed cannot – be psychology, but it does not follow that ethics should ignore psychology. (Doris and Stich, 2005)

1. Introduction

The topic of this paper is the relevance of empirical science to meta-ethics, and to theories about value in particular. The first point I'd like to make is that, given that the notion of *value* is fundamentally related to the notion of *motivation*, philosophers interested in value should pay attention to how motivation actually *works*. One incentive to do so is that our motivational and emotional states influences our evaluative judgments *anyway*, so we might as well be informed about it. No matter whether this influence should be of any importance for the *content* or

justification of evaluative judgments, a theory about value that ignores these facts seem to leave something out. The state of constant disagreement in meta-ethics further suggests that if we are to reach any conclusions in this domain, we should not restrict ourselves to a “purely” philosophical investigation. When it comes to philosophically difficult problems, we rightly approach the matter by bringing in *everything* that we believe ourselves to know as evidence. If strictly conceptual means leaves us undecided, we’d better be prepared to engage with other sources of knowledge.

The second point I want to make in this paper is that given that *pleasure* plays a key part in the motivational system, hedonists in particular should be interested in integrating their theory of value with the scientific study of motivation. The plausibility of hedonism has always been tied to conjectures about the role of pleasure in our psychology. A proper understanding of that role should be a key part of the hedonist case. The plausibility of hedonism depends on the function pleasure plays. Whether or not we accept a *naturalistic* version of hedonism, we’d be wise to somehow turn these scientific facts into support for our theory.

More ambitiously, given a certain philosophical methodology¹, observations about the role of pleasure in the motivational system lend support to naturalistic version of evaluative hedonism. Such a theory would claim that pleasure is the property with reference to which we can explain the central features of our evaluative notions and practices. Pleasure is what “causally regulates” uses of the term². This argument for hedonism making use of findings from empirical science (psychology and affective neuroscience) presupposes a certain approach to value theory for which some justification is needed.

In short, the argument in this paper is the following: P1) Value, whatever it is, is something that relates essentially to motivation. P2) Pleasure relates to motivation in interesting and *unique* ways. It could be said to be the only thing that motivates *in itself*. C) Therefore, pleasure is a proper referent for the term “value”.

The argument, as it stands, is clearly not valid. Yet, this is roughly the argument that I painstakingly will try to make. Minimally, I believe we can argue for hedonism *given a certain approach to the problem of value*.

¹ Derived from Lewis (1999) and Boyd (1998) See also Jackson (1998)

² This idea about causal regulation as evidence for property-identity is the guiding principle in Boyd (1988)

2. The relevance of empirical science to value-theory

The role of emotion in moral judgement has been considerable in recent years. A number of studies, introduced to a broader audience by Antonio Damasio in 1994, pointed to the considerable influence of emotion not only in regulating our behaviour, but also for our ability to evaluate things more generally. Damages to emotion-specific areas and pathways in the brain selectively impair the ability to plan and assess the importance of situations in a consistent manner. The fact that emotions plays a role in motivation is, of course, not news, but the ability to study this phenomena in a scientific manner, with the added ability to predict behavioural and cognitive patterns from objective observations made it possible to study these matters in detail, without the problem of bias inherent to introspective methods.

Clearly of interest in their own right, the relevance of these studies for ethics, meta-ethics and value-theory is not exactly obvious. Can they be used to dissect the *content* of evaluative judgments? Do they reveal anything about the *function* of evaluative judgments? Or can they merely account for the causal history of those judgments? None of these questions can be answered merely by appealing to findings in the empirical sciences. Still, the fact that relatively detailed studies of psychological phenomena can be performed puts some pressure on the meta-ethicist who believe concept possession and motivation to have something to do with how our mind works to say what would count as evidence or counter-evidence for his/her view. If a property can be found that *does* causally regulate our evaluative judgments, this would seem to be support, at least, of a theory claiming this property to be what value is.

Theoretical relevance is obviously not theory-independent, so the issue of the relevance of empirical findings to ethical theory depends on what you take meta-ethics, to be *doing*. Should it provide us with an analysis of evaluative terms, or should it furnish us with *explanations*?

If *naturalism*, in the sense that treat “value” as a natural property detectable in the same way other “natural” properties are, is true, it arguably follows that empirical findings are relevant to meta-ethics. At least, it follows if taken in conjunction with a certain methodology for identifying natural properties.

But can empirical science be relevant to the question *whether* naturalism is true? If we treat naturalism as the *default* theory, due to its continuity with other areas of knowledge, non-naturalism is based on the observation that no natural properties are fit to account for things we

believe about value. But this would seem to be an empirical observation. Mackie's argument from queerness seems to be of this sort: a natural property would have to have "to be-doneness" somehow *built into it*³ and since no natural property have "to be-doneness" built into it, value, if it is to exist, which Mackie famously argues it doesn't, must be something other. Arguably, non-cognitivism and non-naturalist realism both are built on the failure of naturalism to answer this challenge and present a promising candidate⁴.

The fact that no natural property is sufficient to accomplish what *value* must accomplish is an empirical observation *provided that* the argument does not concern the *conceivability* that a natural property could be this property. If it were a *conceptual* impossibility that no natural property could do what "value" "does", empirical findings would seem to be irrelevant. But is it not, as Stich and Doris argue⁵, an empirical question whether a certain concept is of that kind? For that matter, how do we know what *type* of concept a particular concept is? Do we have such a clear notion of the concept of value as to be able to rule any theory in or out?⁶ I think not.

3. Disagreement and Agreement in Meta-ethics

The current state of meta-ethics displays a considerable lack of consensus about how to treat value/goodness, and about what the common subject, over which we are supposed to be disagreeing, might be. This lack of consensus concern not only what things are good, or what properties makes things good, but also the nature and meaning of evaluative and normative concepts. The contenders, each with a modicum of plausibility, ranges from naturalism to non-naturalism to non-cognitivism⁷, and the methodologies suggested by these theories have a rather wide range as well. If applicability of a philosophical method, and the success of a theory generally, can be assessed only in terms of the nature of its subject matter, the lack of consensus about the nature of the subject matter of value theory/meta-ethics is rather discouraging.

³ Mackie (1977)

⁴ Smith (1994), for instance, argued that the best argument against naturalism is inductive: all attempts at naturalist *analyses* have been failures.

⁵ Stich and Doris (2005)

⁶ Arguably, we are in a similar situation with issues like "free will", and "time".

⁷ I'm taking the risk here of presupposing that those terms are sufficiently clear.

There seem to be little common ground about what meta-ethics should be thought of as doing, and, consequently, about what might serve as evidence in this area. Given this, it is no wonder that the relevance of empirical science is an open, i.e. debatable, question. The question of this relevance seems to be deeply imbedded in fundamental questions about meta-ethics.

Nevertheless, the fact that meta-ethicists claim to be disagreeing about *the same thing* suggests that there is some measure of agreement about the subject matter. Arguably, there are certain things a meta-ethical theory must *account* for, even if it is an open question *how* these things must be accounted for within the theory for it to be recognisable as a meta-ethical theory at all. These things, what Smith (1994) calls the “platitudes” about the domain (I will now switch to talking about *value/goodness* exclusively, disregarding the wider issue of morality) consist of the things we believe to be true about it, that we believe others holds to be true, and that we believe others to believe that we hold to be true about it. These platitudes constitute the *starting point* for a theory of the disputed domain, and a theory is acceptable insofar as it accounts for *enough* of those features. This strategy is derived from David Lewis work on theoretical and psychophysical identifications. Value is the property that fills the value *role*, i.e. the property about most things that we believe about value is, in fact true, or in terms of which those beliefs can be safely explained away.

3.1. Motivation

For moral and evaluative properties, one of the few things about which consensus can be reached is that the good has some relation to motivation⁸. There is not much further consensus about more precisely what this relation is. We can probably safely say that we usually have some favourable attitude towards an object we call ‘good’, and that failure to display such an attitude is something that must be explained. Such a relation can be accounted for by a theory in a number of ways. For instance: saying that something is good is merely to *express* such an attitude. Alternatively, it is to say that the object is such as to *invoke* this attitude, or to do so in a suitable observer. Or that it *merits* such an attitude, which shifts the question from ‘value’ to ‘merit’.

⁸ I will not here treat the question about the relationship that evaluative terms have to *each other* (for such an analysis, see Jackson & Pettit (1995))

It seems reasonable, then, given the importance of motivation, that we should investigate how motivation actually works. If we don't know what relations holds between the good and motivation, a good way to start is to investigate what stable and interesting relations *exists*. This, of course, involves not only engaging with empirical psychology, but with *every* notion of motivation we have a theory about, preferably one that does not suffer from as much controversy as the issue under consideration. In theoretical endeavours of this nature and at this stage⁹ we rightfully employ everything we can get our hands on¹⁰.

4. The naturalist approach to value, the scientific analogy

If we could reach an agreement about approximately what kind of concept "value" is, the matter would be easier. If we agreed that value is a *property*, for instance, we might be able to argue for a certain method to identify properties generally. But non-cognitivists will typically claim that "value" is not a property-term, and that assigning such a property is not what we do when we say of something that it is valuable.

In order to get of the ground, any theory must rely on some assumptions about the subject matter and/or method at hand. This is not necessarily to argue that the preferred method is how value theory *should* be done: there might not be a truth of the matter. It is rather to suggest a certain approach to the problem. The applicability of the method might not be assessable independently of such assumptions.

In "the Naturalistic Fallacy", Frankena argued that in order to rule a theory of a domain *out*, you need to know what it would take to be a theory of *that domain*. To rule out a theory as insufficient you need to say what *would* be sufficient. And to do that "pre-theoretically" when it comes to matters when this is under scrutiny, seems rather difficult. The method suggested by Lewis (1999) consists of organizing the "platitudes" about the domain and then say that a theory of value is a theory that somehow account for *them*. This method is reminiscent of the way we do science, Lewis argued.

⁹ I realise, of course, that saying that meta-ethics is in a "preliminary" stage is rather presumptuous, but this term is not supposed to say anything about how long meta-ethics has been going on, but about how far it has come as to consensus about its subject matter and preferred methods.

¹⁰ This is preferable to just *inventing* psychology to suit our theoretical needs. This was recently pointed out in an overview article by Darwall, Gibbard and Railton (1993). The sentiment criticised was admirably expressed in an even more recent issue of "the onion": "I am unmoved by these findings. The amount of scientific evidence I've made up in my mind is too significant to refute".

The analogy of choice in naturalist theory is the water - H₂O identity: what we did know, pre-theoretically, was that water is whatever kind makes up (most of) the exemplars we have access to, and is causally responsible for (most of) the properties we assign to it, and of those beliefs themselves. Why not use the same strategy to identify value properties? The property of value is the property such that most of our beliefs about it is true of, or can be explained in terms of it¹¹. Minimally, this would be *a* theory of value.

I admit that it is in no way obvious that naturalism is true, and thus not whether anything would count as identifying the property of value. But neither do I see how the reverse could be demonstrated to be true. The “open question argument” and its contemporary versions (Horgan/Timmons 1992) do not, I believe, show that naturalism is false. It shows that it is an *open question* whether it’s true or false.

The merits of a theory, naturalist or otherwise, depend on what it can explain. If the theory can provide a suitable referent for evaluative terms, and simultaneously somehow undermine any reasons that might arise to doubt its general form, this strikes me as being as good as a theory of a problematic domain ever gets. In other words, I believe that a naturalist theory of value can succeed in its own terms, and that this is all that the theory should be thought of as doing. If in doing so it amounts to a theory of *the* concept of value or not is less important. It is *eliminativist* insofar as it rejects the existence, or relevance, of anything beyond what is pointed out in the theory. Theories of this nature typically undermine *some* of our dearly held beliefs and intuitions about its subject matter¹². It does so, in part by denying their relevance, to show them to actually be intuitions about something else, or by explaining them away¹³. A theory of fire, for instance, had to invalidate the belief that lightening was an instance of fire, and the belief that fire was the stuff actually stolen from the gods by Prometheus.

We are dodging, as well as biting, some bullets here. We do so by making the humble proposal that the things we believe to be true about “value” can be accounted for, or at least enlightened by, a naturalist theory. Indeed, I’m arguing that a naturalist would not be too concerned with refuting the perceived “prescriptive function” of evaluative judgments, for instance. I don’t see why a naturalist of the suggested ilk should doubt

¹¹ This strategy is roughly the one suggested by Boyd in “How to be a moral realist” (1988)

¹² See Lewis (1989)

¹³ As did Peter Railton (1987). See also Lewis (1989).

that evaluative judgments often perform such a function. If we accept that the *uses* of evaluative terms are often quite vague, and that some seem to track a prescriptive function, and others a descriptive one, the naturalist could be satisfied with accounting for *one* of these concepts, that are clearly intertwined in natural language. The naturalist of this kind can accept that there are prescriptive concepts, and that some of our evaluative judgments express those. Just as the statement “I’m angry” can both express and self-attribute an emotion.

In his most recent book Alan Gibbard (2003) developed a theory of a certain type of concept which he called “plan-laden” concepts, a kind of concept that he found to be very useful indeed, and that seemed to behave strikingly similarly to our normative concepts. To *replace* our actual concepts with these would have certain perks, and Gibbard challenged us to say what was lacking from them, that we might think our pre-replacement concept had. This method strikes me as sound philosophical practice, and the sensible naturalist should consider a similar approach.

5. Hedonism and Affective Neuroscience

As we said, some features of the common sense notion of “value” or “goodness” points to psychological features concerning motivation. These features, scientifically investigated, reveal a significant role for hedonic processes. Hedonists, accordingly, should be optimistic about such findings and try to incorporate them as evidence for, or as constitutive part of, their (our) theory. Hedonists have everything to gain by thus engaging with scientific psychology, and should be among the first to champion an “empirically responsible” methodology for value theory.

I claim that hedonism should involve a theory about pleasure, and about what functions pleasure performs, and relate these findings to what we believe to be true about *value*. This is the humble proposal. The more ambitious proposal, one that I’m tempted to accept as well, is that value thus understood has the capacity to explain everything that is relevant about ‘value’. It can account for the platitudes about value.

5.1 A short history of meta-ethics and neuroscience

The following historical account should be taken with a grain of salt. In addition to being no neuroscientist, I'm not a historian of science. Still: It is interesting to note that the decline of hedonism coincide roughly with the rise of neuroscience, if one takes the advent of neuroscience to be the publication of William James monumental "the Principles of Psychology" in the 1890's. Slightly more than a decade later, G.E. Moore dealt what has often been taken to be a near fatal blow to naturalist hedonism. Of course, Moore did not point to findings in psychology to argue against hedonism, quite the contrary: he argued that psychology were irrelevant to ethical theory.

The point is rather that if the hedonist case could have been defended by appeal to findings in scientific psychology, the late 19th and early 20th century would have been a terrific time to do so. But, as things turned out, a quite different argument arose. Neuroscience and scientific psychology, already in its infancy, put into question the *introspectionist* program: the idea that you are an infallible judge about the nature of your mental states. Hedonism had been relying on this program (Mill, for instance, depended on it) to deliver the relevant facts about what is good for us, so the failure of this program resulted in the obliteration of hedonism, after being arguably philosophical orthodoxy for most of the 19-th century. The proposal that we could study and actually *improve* upon our intuitive understanding of our own mental states undermined the "proof" Mill suggested for isolating *desirability*.

Also of importance is that James theory of *emotion* eliminated the aspect of *evaluation* from its analysis. He took emotions (in contemporary parlance: "feelings") to be the experience of physiological changes, in particular the feeling of *arousal*. Later on, *behaviorism* tried to cash out all mental concepts in terms of behaviour, and all mention of evaluative aspects in terms of dispositions. In short: scientific psychology in the early 20th century did little to help the hedonists resist Moore's charge. It undermined the preferred method of hedonists up to that point, and did nothing to replace it.

James argument for the arousal theory of emotion depended on a perceived lack of discrete neurological structures specific to emotion. This has been, not only challenged, but forcibly refuted since¹⁴, and the field of affective neuroscience have made immense progress in charting the neurological substrates of emotions. The fact that there is no specific *sensory* modality for emotions does not undermine the fact that there is an *affective* aspect to them, and this aspect has in recent years been neurologically charted.

¹⁴ Davidson et. al. (2000)

One of the traps for a neuroscientifically naïve philosopher (current writer included) is to look for discrete areas for psychological phenomena, whereas the brain has a tendency to distribute work over different circuits. A number of emotion specific areas have been found, and they have been found to be intimately linked to each other in a circuit which involving, among other things, parts of the “limbic system”, orbitofrontal cortex, cingulate cortex and the prefrontal cortex, commonly believed to be the “seat” of higher cognitive functions. In the light of this research, it has become increasingly likely that motivation and emotion are very closely linked indeed¹⁵.

5.2 *The appraisal theory of emotion*

One of the most influential theories of emotions is the *appraisal theory*. This theory claims that emotions are defined and individuated by complexes of appraisals of their given objects. This appraisal is multi-dimensional: things are appraised as to agency, urgency, direction and, most importantly: *valence*. Emotions are physiological and, often, experiential states that essentially incorporates an *evaluative* aspect, according to this theory. This aspect can in turn be cashed out in two ways: first, by being responsive to our evaluative beliefs, but more importantly (and *primarily*) in terms of *direct valence*. This primary notion of valence is almost universally given a hedonic interpretation: pleasure is positive valence. It is not sufficient for the experience of emotion (feeling) that we appraise a situation in neutral terms and experience mere physiological changes: what is lacking is the essentially evaluative aspect that can only be cashed out in terms of pleasure and displeasure¹⁶.

5.3 *The conditioning model*

The *conditioning model* for motivation takes pleasure to be the unconditioned reward *par excellence*. What this model says is that reward, operationally defined as “that for which the agent is willing to work”, depends on something being an *unconditioned* reward. Whatever we turn out to be willing to work for, to be motivated by, can be traced back to something that resulted in an experience of *pleasure*.

¹⁵ See Berridge (2004) “Motivation concepts in behavioural neuroscience”

¹⁶ Ellsworth et al (2003)

This is *not* to say that we want other things *because* they lead to pleasure, in the *justificatory* sense of “because”. Indeed, many of the things that we want, even *for their own sake*, are things that do not make us happy. The role of pleasure is to *establish* those other things as rewarding. Since conditioning processes can be done in many steps (even rats can be trained to navigate complex mazes), this origin of motivation need not be obvious, or even *accessible* for us via introspection.

Interestingly, manipulating pleasure “centres” by direct stimulation can cancel out the salience of all other commitments in a subject. Arguably, this is what happens in addiction (Berridge 2004¹⁷).

A revival of hedonism in the light of *these* findings is much more likely to succeed than it would have been under the Jamesian or the behaviourist paradigm.

6. Hedonism and motivation

The reasons to accept hedonism depend on how pleasure works in the motivational system. This is to say that a radical revision of psychological hedonism is, in fact, true. What the modern science of motivation and emotion seem to demonstrate is that we are not always aware of what drives our motivation, and thus that the *causal* reason of our actions and the reason we *provide* to justify our action need not coincide. The support for hedonism is not to be found by way of the Millian strategy to follow a chain of justification to its end: we must go further than that to see what *actually* drives our motivation. What *we ourselves* take as our reasons to act is not always what actually turns the motivational wheels¹⁸.

In this manner, hedonism can, and must, *explain away* those substantial evaluations that ascribe value to things other than pleasure. Those values arguably amount to a subset of the platitudes surrounding the value concept, and as such needs to be accounted for, if not

¹⁷ There are two complex issues in Berridge's work, which I gloss over here. The first concerning the relation between what Berridge calls “Liking” and “wanting”. Liking is cashed out in hedonic terms, whereas “wanting” is cashed out in terms of behavioral tendencies. Motivation in the dispositional sense can be artificially dissociated from hedonic processes. These are intimately linked in usual cases, but can come apart. The other concerns that core processes of “liking”, defined in terms of certain *other* behaviors (not “action”) can occur without the *experience* of liking.

¹⁸ Something shown by a number of experiments – see Kahneman et al. (1999)

honoured¹⁹. We do this by showing that our evaluative judgments are dependent on psychological processes in which pleasure plays a key part. This is not an instrumentalist, but more of an *associationist* theory about what we “really” value. The role played by pleasure in the motivational system is not the role filled by what we take as the fundamental objects of our motivational states. Most of the time, our attention is elsewhere. The idea is that pleasure, even when other things motivate us, is what *drives* those motivational state. Pleasure is part of the *explanation*, or even, *constitution* of our motivational states, not, or not necessarily, the *object* of those motivational states.

This theoretical move bypasses the counter arguments against hedonism based on the fact that we value other things than pleasure (as, for instance, versions of the experience machine argument (Nozick 1974)). As Peter Railton has argued (1989): “---to take our theoretically-unexamined intuitions at face value would be to misunderstand the character of our own motivational system.”²⁰

6.1 A non-debunking explanation

An empirically informed meta-ethical argument recently made popular by Richard Joyce²¹, suggest that a proper understanding of the sources and causes of our evaluative judgments have a *debunking* effect. No property of “value”, he suggest, plays a part in explaining why we value what we do value, or behave as we do. This observation, he continues, should be viewed as similar to being informed that some belief we have is actually caused by a pill we have been administered. This information, of course, does not show that the belief is false, but still undermines our confidence in it. Since the truth of our beliefs about value plays no role in the explanation of those beliefs, we should be nihilists about value.

What we have seen here is that pleasure does in fact play such a role, and that an explanation of our beliefs about value, while undermining some of those *particular* beliefs, does not undermine our beliefs about the value of pleasure. Since the theory under scrutiny is a *naturalist* theory that *identifies* value with pleasure, the argument that the *value* of pleasure plays no such role holds no force.

7. Summary: A naturalist hedonist explanation of value

¹⁹ See for instance Smith (1994)

²⁰ A similar, but much more ambitious, proposal was developed by Katz (1986).

²¹ Joyce (2007)

Developments in meta-ethics and in the motivational sciences together clear the way for a naturalist hedonist theory of value. Hedonism can be understood as treating value as a “scientific” problem, in need of an *explanation*. It is thus not concerned primarily with conceptual analysis, but rather with giving an *account* of the things that seem to be troubling about the notion of value. The hedonist can explain why value seems to be essentially motivating: pleasure is uniquely motivating in itself. He/she can account for other motivational phenomena, primarily the fact that we value *other* things: since pleasures are often intentional states we are likely to *project* properties in this manner. The reasons we give for valuing things are often salient features of *those* objects, but the hedonist points out that even though those features of external objects might trigger the response, that response has explanatory primacy over what triggers such responses at all, in accordance with the conditioning model. The fact that we often construct justification that has nothing to do with the features that actually make us behave in certain ways add to the reasons to build a stable meta-ethical theory upon the cause, not the “justification” of our evaluative judgments. The theory can further explain disagreements: the *objects* of our hedonic states differ, and often differ because of the attitudes we have: hedonic processes are integral to, and sensitive to, the content of preferences. The theory can still assign non-relative truth-values to evaluative judgments. It can account for the prescriptive function of such judgments only insofar that saying to someone that something is pleasant is to inform them that something that is intrinsically motivational for them is in the offing.

Such an account, I conclude, is what the naturalist hedonist should be interested in defending.

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