

Passé Pains

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Abstract. Why are pains bad for us? A natural answer is that it is just because of how they feel (or their felt-qualities). But this answer is cast into doubt by cases of people who are unbothered by certain pains of theirs. These pains retain their felt-qualities, but do not seem bad for the people in question. In this paper, I offer a new response to this problem. I argue that in such cases, the pains in question have become ‘just more of the same’, and for this reason have ceased to be bad for the relevant individuals. It is because they (implicitly) recognise this that they are unbothered by such pains.

1. The Problem

Why are pains harmful or bad for us? Why, in other words, do they reduce our well-being or make our lives go worse? By ‘pains’ here, I mean not only physical or bodily pains like cuts, burns, scrapes, hunger, etc., but unpleasant experiences more generally, like nausea, dizziness, sadness, grief, terror, confusion, guilt, ennui, and so on.

Here is a natural answer: they are bad for us just because of *how they feel*, or their intrinsic felt properties (their ‘phenomenology’, as we sometimes put it). Call this answer *The Felt-Quality Answer*. While natural, this answer faces a major problem: there seem to be people who are unbothered by certain pains of theirs, or even who actively like or want them. Many of us feel that these people are not harmed by the pains in question. The problem, then, is: *how can pains be bad for us just because of how they feel, when there are cases where their felt qualities are present but where they are not bad for us?*

This problem has led many philosophers to reject The Felt-Quality Answer, and endorse instead the view that pains are bad for us just when and because we dislike them or want them not to be occurring. This latter view, it is said, can nicely explain why pains are not bad for us when we are unbothered by them—it is just because of our unbotheredness or indifference. Call this *The Attitude Answer*.

In this paper, I will attempt to save The Felt-Quality Answer by giving a new account of what to say about these problem cases. I will start by describing the cases (Section 2). I will then consider Gwen Bradford's *reverse conditionalism*, the best existing attempt to solve the problem, and point out where, in my view, it falls short (Section 3). I will then defend my own solution, explaining how it improves on Bradford's (Section 4). I will then consider two important objections to my solution (Section 5 & 6). Next, I will mention a parallel with pleasures (Section 7). Finally, I will sketch some implications (Section 8).

2. The Problem Cases

There are four main kinds of cases where people are unbothered by certain pains of theirs, and where such pains seem not to be bad for them. Here, I will briefly outline these and the problem they pose for The Felt-Quality Answer.

Asymbolia

Asymbolia patients report feeling pain, but seem not to mind it. In their famous study, Paul Schilder and Erwin Stengel report that

the patient displays a striking behaviour in the presence of pain. She reacts either not at all or insufficiently to being pricked, struck with hard objects, and pinched. She never pulls her arm back energetically or with strength. She never turns the torso away or withdraws with the body as a whole. She never attempts to avoid the investigator...Pricked on the right palm, the patient smiles joyfully, winces a little, and then says, 'Oh, pain, that hurts.' She laughs, and reaches the hand further toward the investigator and turns it to expose all

sides...The patient's expression is one of complacency. The same reaction is displayed when she is pricked in the face and stomach.¹

As Colin Klein points out, a similar sort of case is patients on morphine. Klein writes: "Acutely injured patients given a dose of morphine will often say that they feel pain, but no longer care about it."²

On hearing of such cases, many people have the intuition that these individuals are not harmed by pains they feel.

One way of trying to preserve The Felt-Quality View in the face of such cases would be to say that these patients are feeling only part of what most of us normally feel when we feel such pains. They are feeling pain stripped of its unpleasantness. This is why it doesn't harm them—they aren't truly experiencing unpleasure at all.³ It can be hard for us to get a sense of what such pains stripped of their unpleasantness feel like, but this is only because whenever *we* feel such pains, we feel the unpleasantness, too.

This attempt to preserve The Felt-Quality Theory has some appeal, but does seem to conflict with the sort of things these patients tend to say, and their various behaviours (e.g., from Schilder and Stengel above, "Oh, pain, that hurts", followed by a slight wince). Their words and behaviours suggest that they are feeling unpleasantness.

Sages

Consider, next, a monk who, after many years of meditation, has come to be indifferent to her own physical pain. She still feels pains of various kinds, but doesn't mind them anymore.

Or consider the character of T.E. Lawrence in the film *Lawrence of Arabia*. At one point, Lawrence puts out a lit match with his bare fingers without flinching. Astonished, his friend tries it for himself. "It damn well hurts", his friend cries. "Certainly it hurts", Lawrence replies. "Well, what's the trick, then?" "The trick, William Potter, is not minding that it hurts."

¹ Schilder and Stengel 1928, p. 147.

² Klein (2015).

³ See, for example, Bain (2013) and Grahek (2007).

Or consider fictional characters like Gandalf in *The Lord of the Rings*, or Aslan in *The Chronicles of Narnia*, who are subject to all sorts of intense physical pains throughout their journeys, but who seem, somehow owing to their wisdom, to be above it all, impervious to harm as a result of feeling such things.

All these individuals seem not to be harmed by the pains they appear to feel. Due to their wisdom, the pains seem not to ‘touch’ or ‘get to’ them in the sort of way necessary for harming them.

Routine pains

Consider, next, routine pains associated with, say, giving blood, getting vaccinated, having your teeth cleaned at the dentists, and so on. Many people, after years of such pains, aren’t bothered by them anymore. We shrug, and get on with these things.

Bradford, writing of “minor pains, chronic low-level pains to which we have become accustomed, or athletic endurance such as running”, says

these are unpleasant experiences, but they are not felt as bothersome even though their displeasure is recognized. They are met with an attitude of acceptance, unbotheredness, or equanimity. Right now, in fact, as I write this, my hands ache from typing. I can note the negative feeling tone of the sensation, but am unbothered by it. I accept it among the various sensations that I’m experiencing, but I don’t mind it in spite of its unpleasantness.⁴

An example from my own life is the discomfort of air turbulence during a flight. As a seasoned traveller, it no longer bothers me. It is still uncomfortable, but I can now continue reading or working on my flights, unbothered by the discomfort I feel at being jolted around in an unsteady aircraft. When I first started flying, I was amazed at seasoned travellers around me seeming indifferent in the face of such evident discomfort. But now, having flown hundreds of times myself, I am indifferent, too.

Many of us have the intuition that these sort of routine pains aren’t bad for us at all. Bradford puts it well in the following:

⁴ Bradford (2020), p. 249.

One might think even if I am unbothered by this pain, surely I would be better off in at least that respect if it went away, which would suggest that it is intrinsically bad. But considering the aches in my hands as I type, if this sensation went away, would I be better off, just strictly in virtue of this feeling? I would be better off because I could type more quickly, but this is instrumental and not a matter of the experience intrinsically. *I am simply unbothered about whether or not I experience this mild displeasure, considered in itself. It is simply among the various things that I feel, some of which are pleasant, some neutral, and some unpleasant.*⁵

I share Bradford's feelings here.

Hurts-so-good experiences

The final category of such pains is one best articulated by Bradford herself. She writes:

There are some unpleasant experiences that we do not treat as bad and may even treat as good. These are experiences in which we enjoy physical pain, such as the pain of exertion in intense athletic activity that is relished by many people... There are many instances of these, such as eating very spicy food, getting a deep tissue massage, jumping in a freezing lake, sitting in a very hot sauna, or eating something with a strong bitter or sour flavour. There are further relevant examples that may transpire in the bedroom, but I am going to do my best to make my point while keeping this discussion PG, as it were... I can deliberately probe a loose tooth with my tongue and find the sharp pang which results quite delicious... There are also psychological HSG experiences. Thrill-seekers are familiar with these—many people enjoy unpleasant psychological experiences such as fear. Similarly, many people relish feelings of deep sorrow or other unpleasant psychological experiences when listening to very stirring music or reading a tragic novel.⁶

Bradford goes on:

One might be inclined to say that HSG experiences do not feel unpleasant; they are enjoyed, and that just is what it is to be pleasant. But this is inaccurate. In an HSG experience it is precisely the unpleasantness that is

⁵ Bradford (2020), p. 249.

⁶ Bradford (2020), p. 239.

enjoyed. We find this quality of the experience enjoyable, and relish and welcome it...Enjoying this feeling may have started out as a matter of associating it with health or achievement, but in these cases the feeling itself is now enjoyed, even in the absence of future good, simply for the way it feels...For many people who enjoy spicy food, the burning tingle is not merely tolerated because it is a concomitant of other, enjoyable experiences. Rather, it is itself enjoyed. In fact, the whole experience is pursued at least in part to experience this burning tingle, and one would be disappointed if the food weren't sufficiently spicy so as to produce it...People who enjoy horror movies feel similarly: they are disappointed if they do not feel genuine horror.⁷

Again, I find what Bradford has to say here plausible.

Note also that in these sort of cases, it is not so plausible to say that while these pains *are* somewhat bad for you, their badness is *outweighed* by the goodness for you of certain kinds of pleasures. Rather, the pains in question don't seem to represent *any* kind of negative for your well-being in the first place.

3. Bradford's Reverse Conditionalism

Bradford tries to hold on to The Felt-Quality Answer by advancing her *reverse conditionalism*. According to Bradford, when pain is bad for you, this is because of how it feels (as she puts it, “the feel of unpleasantness explains its badness”⁸), but this badness can be *cancelled* or “defeated” by a person's no longer minding it. She writes, concerning “psychological displeasure”,

it has negative feeling tone, and *in the absence of any higher-order attitude*, it is bad for you. When we relish our misery, as when we enjoy reading a sad novel or listening to stirring music, this is not bad for us, because these experiences are welcome.⁹

And further:

⁷ Bradford (2020), p. 239.

⁸ Bradford (2020), p. 247.

⁹ Bradford (2020), p. 251.

The badness of unpleasantness is explained by its negative feeling tone...But certain attitudes can defeat its badness. Unpleasantness in which one takes an attitude of the relevant sort, typically a pro-attitude such as being welcomed or relished, is not intrinsically bad. An attitude of welcoming or liking toward a feeling with a negative tone defeats its intrinsic badness...Reverse conditionalism thus captures HSG experiences perfectly: these are unpleasant experiences toward which we have certain attitudes, and hence are not bad.¹⁰

Reverse conditionalism, Bradford explains,

falls in the tradition of accounts in which the value of a part is shaped by another part. These, of course, are familiar examples of the principle of organic unity, according to which the value of a whole may differ from the sum of the value of the parts, as discussed by G. E. Moore, Franz Brentano, and throughout the contemporary literature in value theory (Moore 1962 [1903]; Chisholm, 1968, 1986)...If we think of reverse conditionalism as an instance of organic unity, it is best understood along the construal according to which the parts change value in virtue of their relation to one another: the badness of one part is defeated, which is to say changed, in virtue of the presence of another part, namely the attitude.¹¹

Bradford's account yields the right result. But there are, I think, several serious problems with it.

First, Bradford seems committed to saying that coming to not mind or to welcome a given pain is in some sense *irrational*, an ill-fitting response to the pain. After all, such a pain *is* (on her view), before you take up such an attitude, bad for you. Why is it irrational? Well, presumably, feelings that are bad for you merit dislike or some other kind of negative attitude, not equanimity or unbotheredness. Now, if these attitudes of unbotheredness or welcoming are irrational, then how can they defeat the feeling's harmfulness for you? How can an *irrational* attitude (or at least, an attitude acquired irrationally) do that?

Second, it does not seem that coming to be unbothered by these pains is irrational or unfitting. On the contrary, in many of these cases, it seems positively rational, proper, or fitting. Consider the routine pains. These, it is tempting to think, are not bad for you

¹⁰ Bradford (2020), p. 247.

¹¹ Bradford (2020), p. 248.

before you come to be indifferent toward them. Here, it seems to be *because you (implicitly) realise* they are not bad for you that you come to be indifferent to them. Coming to care less about such pains seems to involve or represent a kind of maturity. Part of growing up is seeing that such pains just don't matter or harm you. We expect adults to come not to care about such pains. It is only juveniles who still do.

As adults, these feelings still hurt. There is still pain present. The pain in question screams at you: 'something bad is going on here, *mind me!*' But in these sort of cases, we seem to realise that such feelings are, in a sense, trying to trick us. When they scream at us in this way, we seem to be subject to a kind of illusion.

So, our unbotheredness here is actually rational or fitting. It does not seem itself to be the thing that makes these pains not bad for us, but rather our fitting response to recognising that they are not bad.

A similar thing obtains in the case of extreme athletes, ice-bathers, etc. These people seem to have come to realise (again, often merely implicitly) that the pains they feel are in fact not bad for them anymore. Indeed, I suspect that part of the pleasure they feel here is a kind of revelling in this realisation, an exuberance or even a sense of pride at having recognised that these pains aren't bad for them, and coming to not mind them.

The indifference of sages, also, seems to be the result of their realising that the pains in question aren't bad for them. *Their* attitudes, most clearly, aren't flukes or arbitrary in some way. It is not that they merely happen to no longer care. Rather, they are wise people, and it seems precisely their wisdom that accounts for their indifference here. They have come to realise that these pains are in some sense mere trivia—not merely a little bad, but not bad for them at all.

The third problem with Bradford's view is that there seem to be many instances where coming to be indifferent to or welcome a certain kind of pain does *not* go along with its ceasing to be bad for you. Consider grief, loneliness, guilty feelings, etc. Indifference to these feelings, or a positive attitude toward them, often seems to indicate, not that these feelings have ceased to be bad for you, but on the contrary that they are *so* bad for you that you are unable to deal or

cope with them. At the extreme, such indifference or welcoming can signal a kind of madness.

Fourth, if Bradford's view were right, then it isn't clear why the attitude of welcoming or indifference should have to be *concurrent* with the experience. What principled reason could there be, on such a view, for my now coming to be indifferent to an earlier pain I suffered not to make it the case that this pain never was bad for me? But such a thing is clearly impossible!

4. My Solution

What we need, then, I believe, is an account on which the badness of pains lies just in how they feel, but sometimes certain pains can lose this badness while retaining their feel, and this change in evaluative status can itself lead some agents to come to be indifferent to, and perhaps even welcome, them. The question is: *what could explain such a change in evaluative status?*

The answer, I now want to suggest, is a pain's coming to be 'just more of the same', or 'purely repeated'. Such pains are still painful, but they are painful in ways that the experiencing agent has felt before. Such pains no longer add anything qualitatively new in terms of unpleasantness to your life considered as a whole. They have become, as I will put it, *objectively boring* or *passé*. It is this change that explains why they no longer harm you.

It is to this (that such pains have become objectively boring) that the people in the cases above are responding when they come to be indifferent to such pains. They are responding to these objectively boring pains by becoming *subjectively bored* by or with them. This is why their change in attitude is fitting.

To be clear, on my account, objectively boring pains can still harm you *instrumentally*, or through their consequences. They can make it harder to concentrate or be productive. They can interfere with your enjoyment of pleasures of various sorts. And they can lead to qualitatively new (and so intrinsically harmful) pains—pains like despair at having to endure so much pain. The point is just that they no longer harm you *intrinsically*.

Consider, first, routine pains. These are precisely pains that the people in question have had many times before. It seems highly intuitive that when we cease caring about these sort of pains, this is a matter of our becoming bored by them, in response to our in some sense recognising that they *are* boring (at least, for us, now, having felt them so many times before).

Consider, next, sages. What have these people realised? Wherein does their wisdom lie? It is plausible to think that what these sages have come to understand is that purely repeated pains no longer harm. It is no coincidence that many of them have had to endure quite a bit of physical pain throughout their journeys. Without having had plenty of pain earlier on, their more recent pains would *not* have ceased to be harmful, and so a rational indifference to such pains would not be available to them. On the flipside, it is no coincidence that people who are still having plenty of fresh kinds of pains—say, young people, for whom physical pains of various kinds are still quite new—are not able to rationally take up such indifference. Their pains, unlike those of the more experienced sages, are still harmful to them.

What if you gave a sage a qualitatively new kind of pain? Would *it* be bad for them? Yes. But it might be hard to give them a truly new kind of physical pain, given their wide experience of things.

Turn next to HSG cases. It might be suggested that my account doesn't work for these, since these people don't find their pains boring. On the contrary, they find them exciting.

There certainly is often excitement here. But it seems plausible to me to think that what is found exciting here is precisely the fact that these pains, which used to be so bothersome or even scary, now seem boring. *It is exciting to find them boring.* The victory achieved over such pains, the cause for revelry or exuberance, is that these pains are now run-of-the-mill, hackneyed, passé, just more of the same.

It is no coincidence that in these sort of cases, the people in question typically used to mind these particular pains quite a lot. These are people who used to be scared of heights, traumatised by the cold, put off by chilli, disturbed by horror films, and so on. The pleasure of such people is a rejoicing in their being free of such terror or trauma, and they are free of it because they have realised that these pains are, for them now, just more of the same. HSG people do not

tend to seek out qualitatively *new* kinds of pains to enjoy. And it is certainly not that they enjoy all sorts of pains, but only particular ones. My account explains why these things are so.

Consider, finally, asymbolia patients. Our understanding of such patients is still quite poor, so it is hard to say what is going on in such cases. But my solution offers a new possibility. Namely, that their condition is one that allows them to see, more vividly than most, that certain physical pains, ones they've had before, are objectively boring in my sense.

5. The 'Strangeness' Objection

I now want to consider two objections to my account. The first is that there is something very strange about the idea that earlier events could affect whether a pain you are currently experiencing is bad for you. Alternatively: how could two pains, otherwise the same, have different value for you based on what came earlier? Indeed, it might be said, this is especially strange on an account on which the badness of pain lies in how it feels.

So far I have spoken somewhat loosely in explaining my view. It is time to be more precise. On my view, if you experience two qualitatively identical pains—say, one after the other—it is not the case that the first one harms you, while the second one doesn't. What harms you on my view, strictly speaking, is *that you had some pain of this particular kind during your life considered as a whole*.

On my view, the welfare value of your life considered as a whole (your lifetime well-being) is not calculated by adding up individual elements that have value considered independently of the whole. Instead, we need to start by zooming out, taking a global or holistic view, and seeing what happened in your life as a whole. Did you experience, during the course of your whole life, any pain of kind X? Yes? Well, then, *that* was bad for you (i.e., experiencing some of it during your whole life course). We don't need to say more than this. In particular, we don't need to say (and it would be misleading to say) that particular instances of pain were themselves the things that were bad for you. We have already accounted for their badness for you.

For this reason, my account is not strange in the way suggested.

6. The 'More Pain Is *Worse*' Objection

It might be objected that having more of a certain kind of pain, far from being not bad for you, is actually *worse* for you!

But we must be careful here to ensure we are not imagining the pain changing, becoming different, deeper, or worse in various ways, or giving rise to other sorts of pains, like despair or boredom, etc. We must also be sure that our intuitions are not being affected by the tendency of such further instances of pain to interfere with, or prevent, possible pleasures that this person might otherwise get to have.

If you try hard to imagine a case where what we have is strictly another instance of an earlier pain, not worse, deeper, accompanied by despair, or preventative of pleasures, then I think it becomes much more intuitive that this new instance of the earlier pain does not harm the person in question.

What could be an example of such a case? You might suggest: an animal's pains in a factory farm. My strong suspicion, however, is that the suffering of these animals *does* change in character over time, and indeed worsen (say, by involving increasingly awful despair or boredom), in which case this is not a suitable example. The psychological capacities of these animals, I suspect, are greater than many of us take them to be. Perhaps what we have here is an explanation of why some people are not too concerned at the pains suffered by animals in factory farms. It is precisely because they take a different view than myself of the mental lives of these animals. *They are thinking of these animals as having only purely repeated pains.* If so, this would constitute further evidence for my account.

7. Purely Repeated Pleasures

The solution I have offered in this paper gains further support from a parallel story that is possible for pleasures. Consider the following puzzle: if pleasure is intrinsically good for you, then we must be able

to make any life extraordinarily good by extending it long enough with the same pleasure over and over again.¹² In a previous paper, I argued that the right thing to say in response to this puzzle is that purely repeated pleasures aren't any longer good for you. When certain kinds of pleasures no longer add anything qualitatively new in terms of pleasurable to your life considered as a whole, these pleasures cease adding to your lifetime well-being. The pleasures in question have become *objectively boring*, even if they remain highly pleasurable.¹³ This, it seems to me, is a natural solution to the puzzle.

Purely repeated pleasures, of course, can have great instrumental value. Their shiny appeal can help motivate you to get out of bed in the morning (case in point: your morning coffee). They can also serve as a vehicle or occasion for qualitatively new kinds of pleasures (case in point: a coffee with friends). But in and of themselves, they add nothing.

These explanations (of the limits to pain's badness for you and of the limits to pleasure's goodness for you) are mutually supporting.

8. Conclusion and Implications

Let me finish by suggesting some implications of my solution. One important implication, I believe, is that many of the pains we experience in our everyday lives are not intrinsically bad for us. We are wrong to lament them. I am not saying, of course, that we should not be affected by or complain about them! We can still be justified in taking pain-relief for them. But we should not despair over them, and can take some solace here, in recognising that they are not making our lives worse for us in and of themselves. Recognising that such pains are bad mostly for the way they interrupt your life can help you to ignore or muscle through them. It can help to quieten them, and perhaps even make them less unpleasant.

¹² Note that this is a puzzle not only for hedonism about well-being, on which someone's well-being is fully determined by their pleasures and pains, but for any theory on which pleasure is an intrinsic good.

¹³ Bramble (2016).

This, I think, applies mainly to physical pains, which have a greater tendency to quickly become just more of the same. There is very little qualitatively diversity, I believe, among physical pains. Different sorts of injuries in different bodily locations fairly quickly become just different vehicles for what are qualitatively similar or the same kinds of pains. By contrast, mental or emotional pains admit of great qualitatively diversity, and can easily change or worsen over time. There are a thousand different ways in which, say, a relationship can be troubled, heartwrenching, or otherwise painful.

If this is true, then physical or bodily pains are not our (main) enemy. You can, I believe, actually have quite a lot of physical pain in your life as a whole without this resulting in your ending up with a low level of lifetime well-being. Look to the sages, who have typically had a huge amount of physical pain in their lives. Intuitively, this doesn't seem to bring down their lifetime well-being much at all. Their lives are still very high in well-being, due to the many goods in them. Physical or bodily pain is the most *obvious* manifestation or incarnation of unpleasantness, but by no means the worst thing in the world.

The Buddhists are right that as we progress through life we should strive to 'get over' our physical pains, or achieve a kind of indifference to them. But this is not because doing so itself cancels or defeats their badness. It is because such a change in attitude is the *fitting* response to them, as pains that have become passé or just more of the same.

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