

# Metaethical Experientialism

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**Abstract:** I develop and defend *metaethical experientialism*, the thesis that phenomenal facts epistemically and metaphysically entail certain kinds of value facts. I argue, for example, that anyone who knows what it's like to feel extreme pain is in a position to know that that kind of experience is bad. I argue that metaethical experientialism yields genuine counterexamples to the principle that no ethical conclusion can be derived from purely descriptive premises. I also discuss the prospects for a pluralistic metaethics, whereby different metaethical theories hold for different classes of ethical facts.

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## Introduction

Imagine what it's like for you to burn your hand, break your leg, experience nausea, or feel heartbreak. It's very natural to think that knowing what those experiences feel like puts you in a position to know that those experiences are bad. But that common-sensical claim is in tension with a widely endorsed metaethical principle:

THE EPISTEMIC GAP<sup>1</sup>

No ethical conclusion is derivable from purely descriptive premises.

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<sup>1</sup> This principle more commonly goes by other names. But—at least in the present context—the label 'epistemic gap' is better than the alternatives. Other common names include 'is-ought gap' (but my concern is with value facts, rather than deontic facts), 'fact-value gap' (but there are facts about values), 'Hume's Law' (which is liable to be confused with Hume's Principle or Hume's Dictum), and the 'Open Question Argument' (which arguably concerns reduction relations between properties, rather than entailment relations between facts).

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The epistemic gap strikes many as compelling. How could premises merely about how things are ever suffice for conclusions about which things matter? Although most agree that ethical facts supervene on descriptive facts, few think that the former are epistemically entailed by the latter. And while there are some famous counterexamples to simple formulations of the epistemic gap, these are widely regarded as exposing technical problems with the formulation rather than as challenging the core idea.<sup>2</sup>

I think the epistemic gap is bridgeable. Many authors assume that because the epistemic gap holds for some kinds of ethical claims—for example, claims about what’s morally obligatory—it holds for all ethical claims. But I think focusing on only a restricted class of examples risks overgeneralization. The epistemic gap may very well hold for many kinds of ethical claims. But, I’ll argue, there’s a special class of ethical claims that are genuinely derivable from purely descriptive premises. Here’s my core thesis:

METAETHICAL EXPERIENTIALISM

Value facts about experiences are explained by phenomenal facts.

By *facts*, I mean true propositions. By *value facts about experiences*, I mean facts purely about which kinds of experiences are good or bad. By *phenomenal facts*, I mean facts purely about what it’s like to have certain kinds of experiences. By F-facts *explain*<sup>3</sup> G-facts, I mean that it’s both the case that (a) F-facts epistemically entail G-facts (where this might be understood as a priori

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<sup>2</sup> For some classic papers concerning these technical problems, see Prior [1960], Jackson [1974], and Pidgeon [1989]. For more recent discussions, see Singer [2015], and Fine [2108]. For non-technical discussions of the epistemic gap in metaethics, see Sayre-McCord [2014], Maguire [2017], and Sparks [2021]. For general discussions of epistemic gap principles (including for other domains of facts), see Jackson [1998], Chalmers [2012], and Mehta [2019].

<sup>3</sup> I’m using ‘explains’ in a stipulative way (to mean epistemic and metaphysical entailment). There are forms of explanation (such as causal explanation) that don’t require epistemic and metaphysical entailment, but I won’t be concerned with ‘explanation’ in those senses.

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entailment), and (b) F-facts metaphysically entail G-facts (where this might be understood as grounding).

My formulation of metaethical experientialism purposefully leaves open *which* phenomenal facts explain *which* value facts. The most modest version of metaethical experientialism makes a merely existential claim: *some* phenomenal facts explain *some* value facts about experiences. Since even a single counterexample to the epistemic gap suffices to show that it's false, I'll focus mostly on the modest thesis. But I'll occasionally mention stronger versions of metaethical experientialism over the course of the paper.

Throughout the paper, I'll use the term 'ethical' to cover anything that's standardly taken to be within the subject-matter of ethics. This includes both welfare and morality, and includes not only goodness and badness but also permissibility and obligation, rightness and wrongness, fittingness, and so forth. Although I'll argue that value facts about experiences are counterexamples to the epistemic gap, I'll assume that the epistemic gap remains for other kinds of ethical claims. If that assumption is correct, then there's a source of knowledge for value facts about experiences that doesn't generalize to other kinds of ethical claims.

Towards the end of the paper, I'll explore the prospects for *metaethical pluralism*, the view that different metaethical theories hold for different classes of ethical claims.<sup>4</sup> I'll suggest that metaethical experientialism can provide the foundations for a version of ethical realism (and, more specifically, a priori naturalism), but I'll also suggest that an anti-realist theory may be more plausible for other classes of ethical claims. Perhaps surprisingly, there's been nearly no discussion of metaethical pluralism in the contemporary literature. But I'll argue over the course of this paper that value facts about experiences warrant a different metaethical analysis than other kinds of ethical facts.

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<sup>4</sup> Joyce [2012] uses 'metaethical pluralism' to express the thesis that it's indeterminate which metaethical theory is correct. My view, by contrast, is that it's determinate which metaethical theory is correct (for any given class of ethical facts), but that different metaethical theories hold for different classes of ethical facts.

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Here's the structure of the paper: §1 characterizes and motivates metaethical experientialism; §2 answers a variety of objections; §3 explains how metaethical experientialism relates to other metaethical theories and discusses metaethical pluralism.

## §1 Metaethical Experientialism

Nearly everyone agrees that some experiences—such as the experiences of burning your hand, breaking your bone, feeling nausea, or experiencing heartbreak—are bad. Even if these experiences lead to good outcomes, and even if these experiences have some good features, it's hard to deny that the experiences are intrinsically bad to some degree. Nearly everyone also agrees that at least some of the badness of these experiences is due to how they feel. Maybe there are also other factors that contribute to their overall badness, and maybe the way those experiences feel is itself explainable in non-phenomenal terms, but it's hard to deny that one genuine explanation for why these experiences are bad is that they feel the way they do.<sup>5</sup>

If you have residual doubts, then I recommend the following exercise:

### Exercise

1. Put a skillet on your stovetop. Set the heat to medium. Wait three minutes for the skillet to sufficiently heat up.
2. Press your hand against the surface of the skillet for several seconds. As your hand burns, consider what it's like to have that experience.
3. Ask yourself: Would anyone having exactly *that* kind of experience thereby be having an experience that is bad? Would anyone who

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<sup>5</sup> There are some dissenters. As examples, LaGuardia-LoBianco & Bloomfield [2023] argue that the values of pleasures and pains can be assessed only relative to the contexts in which they occur, and Kammerer [2019] and Delon [2023] argue that the fallibility of introspection gives reason to question whether pain is bad. You might also think that desire-satisfaction theorist will dissent, though I'll explain in §3 why I think that's a complicated matter.

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knows what *that* experience feels like thereby be in a position to know that that experience is bad?

You could quibble that this exercise isn't an argument, or that it won't be persuasive to someone who doesn't already accept my view (though you can't say both!). I'd counter: following these instructions will put you in a better epistemic position for evaluating the entailment relations between the relevant facts, and a vivid reminder of how pain feels is a powerful method of persuasion. But I don't want to fight over the epistemic significance of the exercise. If you aren't convinced—even after directly confronting the phenomenal character of your own pain experiences—then there may be nothing I can say to sway you. But my aim—following Nagel [1980: 109]—is to get “rid of the obstacles to the admission of the obvious,” rather than to convince the skeptic. Think of metaethical experientialism as a possible starting point. The question I want to focus on is whether there are any compelling arguments that force one off that starting point.<sup>6</sup>

### **'Pain' and 'Bad'**

Pain is the canonical example of a bad experience. For the purposes of this paper, I'll use it as my primary example.

By *pain*, I mean the ordinary nociceptive experiences had by ordinary humans. Pains *hurt*, meaning that they have an unpleasant phenomenal character. There may be non-ordinary cases of nociceptive experiences that don't hurt, but I'm using 'pain' in a stipulative way, whereby those experiences

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<sup>6</sup> Here's a striking passage from Nagel [1986: 146] that expresses the spirit of my view: “If I have a severe headache, the headache seems to me to be not merely unpleasant, but a bad thing. Not only do I dislike it, but I think I have a reason to try to get rid of it. It is barely conceivable that this might be an illusion, but if the idea of a bad thing makes sense at all, it need not be an illusion, and the true explanation of my impression may be the simplest one, namely that headaches are bad, and not just unwelcome to the people who have them.”

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won't count as instances of pain.<sup>7</sup> And if you think pain isn't the best example, then you could substitute in a different kind of experience, such as torturous pain, or nausea, or fear. As noted earlier, even a single counterexample to the epistemic gap is enough to show that the principle is false.

By *bad*, I'll always mean final, pro-tanto badness (as opposed to instrumental or all-things-considered badness). I'll stay neutral on whether value facts entail reason facts, deontic facts, or fittingness facts (for example, whether the fact that  $x$  is bad entails that one has a reason to prevent  $x$ , or that one ought not bring about  $x$ , or that it's unfitting to bring about  $x$ ). If you think there are such entailments, then accepting metaethical experientialism will commit you to phenomenal facts entailing those sorts of facts as well. Otherwise, metaethical experientialism may be understood as a thesis solely about value, leaving open questions about facts associated with these other families of ethical concepts.

The term *bad* may be interpreted as concerning either what makes an individual worse off or what makes the world in general worse off. The first interpretation concerns welfare value; the second interpretation moral value. I favor the view that what's bad for an individual in a world is also bad for the world itself. Given this, I think instances of badness in the first sense just are instances of badness in the second sense. But those who wish to pry these notions apart are free to focus on one over the other. For brevity, though, I'll continue to use the unmodified term 'bad'.

You might ask which theory of badness I'm operating with. But that would be asking the wrong question. My claim isn't that phenomenal facts explain value facts *given* some particular theory of badness. Instead, my claim is that anyone who knows the target phenomenal facts (and is

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<sup>7</sup> The most prominent cases involve pain asymbolia, a neurological disorder where subjects report feeling pain sensations that don't hurt. For discussion of pain asymbolia and its philosophical significance, see Grahek [2007], Bain [2014], and Klein [2015]. For an overview of theories of pain, see Aydede [2013].

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competent with the relevant concepts)<sup>8</sup> is in a position to know the target value facts (regardless of whether they know which theory of badness is correct). There are theories of badness that are in tension with metaethical experientialism. But that just means that those theories are rival views; it doesn't mean that metaethical experientialism is false.

Metaethical experientialism is a thesis about entailment relations between facts, rather than reduction relations between properties. To say that value property *F* is reducible to phenomenal property *G* is to say that what it is for something to be *F* is for it to be *G*. To say that phenomenal fact *P* epistemically (or metaphysically) entails value fact *Q* is to say that if one knows that *P* (or if *P* obtains) then one is thereby in a position to know that *Q* (or that *Q* thereby obtains). Even if the fact that *x* is painful entails the fact that *x* is bad, it doesn't follow that what it is for something to be bad is for it to be painful. As an analogy, consider the common view that microphysical facts explain macrophysical facts even though macrophysical properties are irreducible to microphysical properties.<sup>9</sup>

You might wonder whether the epistemic gap is better understood as a thesis about reduction (between properties) instead of entailment (between facts). Well, there are many canonical formulations of the epistemic gap that appeal to entailments between facts. Here's one salient example: Sayre-McCord [2014: §4] discusses Hume's original formulation of the epistemic gap, and characterizes the principle as follows: "If...one infers from the fact that someone is feeling pain that something bad is happening, one is at least presupposing that pain is bad. And that presupposition, in turn, is not entailed by any claims concerned solely with plain matters of fact." My aim is

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<sup>8</sup> Following orthodoxy, I'll assume that the subjects under consideration always have competency with the relevant concepts.

<sup>9</sup> See Fodor [1974] for a classic argument against reductive analyses of the macroproperties studied by the special sciences. See Suikkanen [2016], Sinhababu [2018], and Ridge [2019] on reductive analyses in metaethics. See Sayre-McCord [1988] and Brink [1989] for some proponents of non-reductive metaethical naturalism.

to make a case that the view expressed by that claim is false, at least when we focus on value facts about experiences.

### Other Theories

It's useful to briefly compare metaethical experientialism to other theories that take phenomenal facts to explain facts of another domain. Consider: *phenomenal conservatives* hold that certain kinds of epistemic facts are explained by phenomenal facts;<sup>10</sup> *phenomenal intentionalists* hold that certain kinds of intentional facts are explained by phenomenal facts;<sup>11</sup> and *phenomenal powers theorists* hold that certain kinds of causal powers facts are explained by phenomenal facts.<sup>12</sup> Similarly, *metaethical experientialists* hold that certain kinds of value facts are explained by phenomenal facts. Each of these positions is independent of the others, but they share a common structure.

The view that's closest to metaethical experientialism, though, is a position that I'll call *metaethical hedonism*.<sup>13</sup> Metaethical hedonists accept *hedonism*, the claim that only pleasures/pains are good/bad, on the grounds that (a) ethical beliefs about the values of hedonic experiences are epistemically privileged, while (b) other kinds of ethical beliefs are vulnerable to skeptical worries. If you're sympathetic to metaethical hedonism, then you'll probably be sympathetic to metaethical experientialism. But even if you're skeptical of metaethical hedonism, you still ought to be sympathetic to metaethical experientialism.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> See Huemer [2007].

<sup>11</sup> See Kriegel [2013].

<sup>12</sup> See Mørch [2018].

<sup>13</sup> See Wright [1963], Mendola [1990], Hewitt [2008], Massin [2016], and Sinhababu [2022, forthcoming, ms]. I take the term 'metaethical hedonism' from Carlsmith [2022].

<sup>14</sup> In principle, you could endorse metaethical hedonism without endorsing metaethical experientialism. Suppose, for example, that you think both that (a) introspection reveals that pleasure is good and pain is bad (and that other kinds of ethical beliefs are undermined by skeptical worries), but that (b) phenomenal facts don't explain value facts. By endorsing (a), you endorse metaethical hedonism; by endorsing (b), you deny metaethical experientialism.



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There are a number of claims that are commonly endorsed by metaethical hedonists but that metaethical experientialism stays neutral on. Most metaethical hedonists hold that goodness/badness is reducible to pleasure/pain, but metaethical experientialism is a thesis about entailment relations between facts (rather than reductions between properties). Most metaethical hedonists take pleasure and pain to be certain kinds of phenomenal properties, but metaethical experientialism is neutral on the nature of pleasures and pains. Some metaethical hedonists argue that we know value facts about experiences through introspection, but I'll later explain why metaethical experientialism is neutral on questions about introspection. And some metaethical hedonists take it to be analytic that pain is bad, but I'll later argue that such claims aren't analytic.

But the most important difference between metaethical hedonism and metaethical experientialism concerns hedonism. Whereas the former is committed to hedonism, the latter leaves open what the basic goods/bads are. In fact, metaethical experientialism not only leaves open the possibility that some non-hedonic experiences are good/bad, but also the possibility that some non-experiential things are good/bad. If some non-experiential things are good/bad, then facts about those things being good/bad may not be explained by phenomenal facts. But that's compatible with thinking that value facts about experiences are explained by phenomenal facts. You could, for example, be an objective list theorist (perhaps pleasure, friendship, and knowledge are all basic goods) and a metaethical experientialist (if you accept that the way pleasure feels explains why it's good).

You could even endorse metaethical experientialism while holding that some facts about the values of experiences aren't explained by phenomenal facts. Consider a view on which pain is bad both because of how it feels and because it's disliked (where the badness due to each factor is non-redundant, and where the badness due to how pain feels is explained by the

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However, I suspect nearly everyone sympathetic to metaethical hedonism will also be sympathetic to metaethical experientialism.

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phenomenal character of pain). This view holds that only some (rather than all) facts about the values of experiences are explained by phenomenal facts. But it's still a version of metaethical experientialism. This illustrates how metaethical experientialism is an ecumenical thesis that's compatible with a wide range of views about which things are good/bad.

## §2 Objections

Here again is the core thesis of the paper:

METAETHICAL EXPERIENTIALISM

Value facts about experiences are explained by phenomenal facts.

I'll now address a variety of objections to the thesis.

1. **Good Pains:** Some pains are good. Consider the experiences you have when eating spicy food or receiving a deep-tissue massage.

Let's call these kinds of experiences *good pains*. Suppose we ask: What makes good pains good? Any plausible answer will retain the idea that good pains are good (at least in part) because of how they feel.<sup>15</sup> You could appeal to good pains to challenge the claim that all instances of pain are bad, or to question exactly which phenomenal properties are good-making or bad-making properties, or to argue that merely knowing that an experience is painful doesn't yet suffice for knowing whether it's bad to some degree. But it remains plausible that the fact that good pains feel the way they do explains the fact that they are good.

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<sup>15</sup> Bradford [2020] argues that good pains are good partly *because* they're unpleasant. While I think good pains are good because of how they feel overall, I'm skeptical that good pains are good because of their unpleasantness. However, those who agree with Bradford still ought to accept metaethical experientialism, since taking good pains to be good because of their unpleasantness is a way of taking good pains to be good because of how they feel.

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It may be useful to draw a distinction between *complete phenomenal facts*, which completely characterize what it's like to have an experience, and *partial phenomenal facts*, which only partially characterize what it's like to have an experience. Since metaethical experientialism leaves open which phenomenal facts explain value facts, it's compatible with a view where only complete phenomenal facts explain value facts. If you favor this sort of holist view, then you might deny that the fact that an experience is painful explains the fact that the experience is bad, since merely specifying that an experience is painful leaves out the rest of what it's like to have that experience. But even the holist should accept that complete phenomenal facts explain value facts about experiences.

2. **Appearance vs. Reality:** Just because something is *experienced as* bad doesn't mean that the *experience itself* is bad. And just because an experience *feels* bad doesn't mean that the experience *is* bad.

The following claim is certainly true: just because something is experienced as F doesn't mean that the experience itself is F. But the truth of that claim doesn't undermine metaethical experientialism. To say that *a* is experienced as F is to say that one's experience represents *a* as F. But metaethical experientialism is neutral on questions about what experiences represent. You could, for example, think that pains have evaluative contents (*a* is bad), imperatival contents (stop *a* from persisting), or even no contents at all. But whatever you think, it remains plausible that pains are themselves bad.<sup>16</sup>

If pain merely represented badness (without itself being bad), then it should be possible for pain to be instantiated without anything bad being instantiated. Compare: if phenomenally red experiences merely represent redness (without themselves being red), then it should be possible for a phenomenally red experience to be instantiated without anything red being instantiated. But now imagine finding out that you've been the victim of a

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<sup>16</sup> See Cutter [2017] for an overview on theories of the contents of pain.

Cartesian demon your whole life: all of your experiences have been hallucinations induced by the demon. You might then conclude that nearly all of your experiences have been illusory: even though it appears to you that there's a red tomato in front of you, there isn't in fact any red tomato in front of you. But even in this skeptical scenario, where you might be ready to give up nearly all inferences from 'appears F' to 'is F', there's little temptation to think that nothing bad was actually instantiated whenever you had painful experiences. The badness associated with painful experiences isn't merely a matter of what's represented by those experiences. Instead, it's a matter of how those experiences feel.

The expression '*x* feels bad' is usually used to mean that *x* is negatively valenced (meaning that *x* has a certain kind of phenomenal property). This *phenomenal* sense of 'bad' differs from the *ethical* sense of 'bad' (where 'bad' means what makes an individual or the world worse off). But disentangling these two senses of 'bad' doesn't undercut the plausibility of metaethical experientialism. Even after we disambiguate, it remains plausible that the fact that an experience is negatively valenced explains the fact that the experience makes things worse off (either for its subject or for the world). Moreover—as noted in response to the first objection—you could endorse metaethical experientialism while denying that '*x* feels bad' entails '*x* is bad' (since you could favor a different story about which kinds of experiences are good/bad).

3. **Validity:** To derive '*x* is bad' from '*x* feels painful', we need not only the minor premise ('*x* feels painful') but also a conditional premise ('if *x* feels painful, then *x* is bad'). But the conditional premise contains a value term ('bad'), so we don't have a genuine counterexample to the epistemic gap.

Suppose, *per reductio*, that whenever it's the case that (a) no set of purely F-premises ever logically entails a G-conclusion, it follows that (b) there's an epistemic gap between F-facts and G-facts. Well, an inference from the premise 'F*x*' to the conclusion 'G*x*' is never logically valid. No matter what 'F' and

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'G' are, deriving the conclusion 'Gx' will require a conditional premise 'Fx → Gx'. This means we can substitute in any predicates whatsoever for 'F' and 'G' to yield an epistemic gap. But those who accept an epistemic gap between the descriptive and the ethical aren't merely appealing to the general observation that there's a logical gap whenever 'F' and 'G' are distinct predicates. Instead, there are some pairs of subject-matters (descriptive/ethical, physical/phenomenal, abstract/concrete) where one seems epistemically (rather than merely logically) isolated from the other. Therefore, we should reject the supposition that lack of logical entailment suffices for an epistemic gap. The present objection misidentifies the nature of epistemic gaps; instead of characterizing epistemic gaps in terms of logic entailment, we ought to instead appeal to epistemic entailment.

4. **Analyticity:** The sentence 'Pain is bad' is analytic. Therefore, badness is built into the meaning of the term 'pain'. Therefore, the fact that pain is bad isn't a purely descriptive fact, since the term 'pain' doesn't express a purely descriptive property.

To say that a sentence is analytic is to say that the truth of the sentence follows from the definitions of its terms. There are a number of standard tests for evaluating whether a sentence is analytic: (1) denials of analytic sentences should sound nonsensical, (2) assertions of analytic sentences should sound cognitively insignificant, and (3) analytic sentences should be translatable into logically true sentences through the substitution of synonyms. But these tests all indicate that the sentence 'Pain is bad' *isn't* analytic. Consider: (1) those who deny that pain is bad aren't speaking nonsensically (instead, they're speaking falsely), (2) those who assert that pain is bad seem to be making a substantive (even if obvious) claim, and (3) there seems no way of translating 'Pain is bad' into a logical truth through substitution of synonyms. Furthermore, if it were analytically true that pain is bad, then ethical nihilists ought to deny that pains exist (since they deny that anything bad

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exists). But it's obvious that ethical nihilists can accept that there are pains, which is evidence that badness isn't built into the definition of 'pain'.

5. **A Priority:** It's a priori that pain is bad. Therefore, it's trivially true that the fact that pain is bad is explained by phenomenal facts, since that fact is explained by any fact whatsoever.

It's not obvious whether it's a priori that pain is bad. On the one hand, anyone competent with the concepts PAIN and BAD seems in a position to know that pain is bad. But on the other hand, competency with the concept PAIN seems to require a posteriori knowledge of how pain feels. How we think about this issue turns on delicate issues about what it is for experience to play a justifying role and what it takes to be competent with the relevant phenomenal concepts. I favor a view where (a) it's a conceptual truth that pain is bad, but (b) competence with the concept PAIN requires the capacity to have certain kinds of experiences, and (c) those experiences play a justifying role in acquiring knowledge of this conceptual truth, so (d) the fact that pain is bad is a posteriori. But I won't try to argue for that view here. Instead, for the sake of argument, let's just suppose that it's indeed a priori that pain is bad.

To know a fact a priori, one must possess the concepts needed to grasp that fact. What kind of concept of pain must one possess in order to know the fact that pain is bad? Suppose that you possess a purely functional concept of pain that yields no knowledge of how pain feels (but that still enables you to have thoughts that refer to pain). Even if it's a priori that pain is bad, a purely functional concept of pain would arguably be insufficient for acquiring a priori knowledge of that fact.<sup>17</sup> What more is needed? Well, it's plausible that in order for one to know a priori that pain is bad, one must grasp how pain feels. But this means that even if it's a priori that pain is bad, it remains the case that in order to know that pain is bad, one must know how

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<sup>17</sup> See Kahane [2010] for a more sustained argument that anyone who doesn't know how pain feels isn't in a position to know that pain is bad.

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pain feels. In other words, the fact that pain is bad would still be explained by the fact that pain feels the way it does. Consequently, metaethical experientialism still captures the epistemic structure of how we know pain is bad.

You might be tempted to reiterate the original objection: if the fact that pain is bad is a priori, then isn't metaethical experientialism still trivial? The problem is that this line of reasoning overgeneralizes: analogous reasoning would lead to the result that if there are any a priori ethical truths, then the epistemic gap is trivially false (since any a priori ethical truth would be explained by any fact whatsoever). Yet basically everyone accepts that there are some a priori truths (for example, the fact that nothing is both obligatory and impermissible), even though few people think that the epistemic gap is false. This indicates that the status of a fact as a priori doesn't suffice for that fact to be epistemically entailed by any fact whatsoever—at least not in the sense of 'epistemic entailment' relevant to metaethical experientialism (and the epistemic gap).

6. **Rationality:** For any descriptive fact P and ethical fact Q, it's possible for a rational agent to know P while denying Q. But rational agents don't deny facts that they're in a position to know.

For many ethical beliefs, there are philosophers who have defended the possibility of ideally rational *ethical eccentrics*, or agents with ethical beliefs that are inversions of our own ethical beliefs (for example, a rational agent who believes that killing people for fun is permissible).<sup>18</sup> To my knowledge, however, nobody has defended the possibility of ideally rational agents who believe that pain is good and pleasure is bad.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> For discussion of ideally coherent ethical eccentrics, see Street [2009]. One of the cases Street discusses is Future Tuesday Indifference, which concerns beliefs about pain. However, that case is structurally different from hedonic inversion, and it's possible to accept both my claims about hedonic inverts and Street's claims about Future Tuesday Indifference.

<sup>19</sup> Here's another asymmetry: while there's lots of disagreement over which things are good/bad, there's largely consensus that pain is bad (and pleasure is good). This sociological

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Let's say a *hedonic invert* is someone who has the same kinds of experiences as ordinary people (their pains hurt just as much as yours and mine) in the same kinds of circumstances (nociception leads them to feel pain), but who forms the opposite value beliefs on the basis of those experiences. Both the ordinary person and the hedonic invert know what it's like to burn one's hand. But whereas the ordinary person forms the belief that that kind of experience is bad (on the basis of their experience), the hedonic invert instead forms the belief that that experience is good (on the basis of their experience). Even those who think that there could be ideally rational ethical eccentrics still tend to think that there must be something epistemically defective about hedonic inverts. This generates a puzzle: Why do hedonic inverts seem more epistemically defective than other kinds of ethical eccentrics?

Metaethical experientialism provides an answer. A hedonic invert is in a position to know that their experience is bad (because they know how the experience feels), yet they instead form the opposite belief (that the experience is good). Note the peculiarity of the situation: the hedonic invert has knowledge (of how pain feels) that justifies a certain belief (the belief that pain is bad), yet on the basis of that very knowledge forms the opposite belief (that pain is good). This is epistemically worse than more mundane cases where a subject merely believes  $\neg P$  when they ought to believe that  $P$ , or where a subject believes  $P$  on the basis of  $Q$  when  $Q$  itself leaves open whether or not  $P$ . By contrast, if we suppose that phenomenal facts don't explain other kinds of ethical facts, then other kinds of ethical eccentrics won't be manifesting the same kind of epistemic incoherence.

7. **Modes of Presentation:** The fact that pain hurts explains the fact that pain is bad only if we grasp the former under a first-person (as opposed to third-person) mode of presentation.

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asymmetry calls out for explanation. Metaethical experientialism offers an explanation: there's a source of knowledge for value facts about experiences that doesn't apply to other kinds of ethical facts.



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Suppose, as the objection assumes, that modes of presentation are finer-grained than facts, so that the same fact can be grasped via distinct modes of presentation. And suppose you grasp the fact that an experience is painful experience only via a third-person mode of presentation. This might consist, for example, in grasping the fact that a certain neural state (identical to the experience) instantiate a certain neural property (identical to the property of painfulness). In this situation, it seems clear that you aren't thereby in a position to know that any badness is instantiated. But it also seems clear that you don't even know how the experience feels. To know how an experience feels, one must know what it's like to have that experience. In the situation described above, you don't know what it's like to have the experience. And if you don't know what it's like to have the experience, then you aren't in a position to know (at least not via the route postulated by metaethical experientialism) the value facts explained by how that experience feels.

This move might worry those with physicalistic inclinations. If (a) you know a neural fact, and if (b) that neural fact is identical to a phenomenal fact, and if (c) phenomenal facts just are facts about what it's like to have experiences, then aren't we thereby compelled to hold that (d) you know what it's like to have the experience? Well, one response is to think: so much the worse for physicalism! But another response is to resist one of the inferential steps above. You might, for example, think that knowing what it's like to have an experience requires grasping it from a first-person mode of presentation (as opposed to merely knowing the relevant fact), and that understanding the explanatory connections between phenomenal facts and value facts requires knowing what it's like to have the target experiences.<sup>20</sup> I won't take a stance on which option is best—I only want to note that there are various responses

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<sup>20</sup> For this view, the epistemic entailments from phenomenal facts to value facts would require the additional condition that the subject grasps what it's like to have the target experience. But this strikes me as innocuous: it seems to me that what we mean when we say that one knows a phenomenal fact is that one knows what it's like to have the target experience.

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available to the metaethical experientialist, and that they mirror the responses to familiar puzzles about physicalism and phenomenal knowledge.

8. **Introspection:** Introspective beliefs are fallible. Therefore, the introspective belief that pain is bad is fallible.

The idea that we can introspect value facts is controversial. While I'm sympathetic to such a claim, most think that introspection can yield knowledge only of phenomenal facts (or at least facts ascribing only mental properties). More importantly, though, metaethical experientialism says nothing about introspective beliefs: it says only that we can know value facts about experiences on the basis of knowledge of phenomenal facts. Since introspection is fallible, the mere fact that a belief is formed on the basis of introspection doesn't guarantee that the belief is infallible. But metaethical experientialism makes a claim about what follows from phenomenal facts, rather than a claim about the epistemic status of introspective beliefs. Identifying how we come to know a class of facts is one thing; identifying what those facts explain is another. Hence, you could accept metaethical experientialism even if you think introspective beliefs are no more epistemically secure than beliefs formed on the basis of other epistemic processes.<sup>21</sup>

9. **Easy Knowledge:** Everyone knows how pain feels. But some deny that pain is bad. If metaethical experientialism is true, then those

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<sup>21</sup> Sinhababu [2022, ms] argues for metaethical hedonism on the grounds that introspective beliefs are especially reliable. Although I agree with Sinhababu that introspective beliefs have a distinctive kind of epistemic status, I favor a different view about the epistemology of introspection. In my view, the distinctive epistemic status of introspective beliefs comes from the fact that introspection is immune to certain kinds of error. Consider: perception goes awry when the medium of representation (the perceptual experience) mismatches the target of representation (one's local environment). But introspection lacks a medium of representation (since the target of introspection is the experience itself), which renders introspective beliefs immune to traditional kinds of skeptical scenarios.

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people are denying a fact that they're in a position to easily know. But that's an uncharitable analysis.

You might think it's also easy to know that you're phenomenally conscious, that you have hands, and that tables exist. But consider: (a) illusionists deny that anything is phenomenally conscious, (b) skeptics deny that you know that you have hands, and (c) mereological nihilists deny that tables exist. I don't mean to suggest that any of these views is obviously false (except illusionism); instead, my point is that everyone must accept that people sometimes deny facts that they are in a position to easily know. When someone denies that pain is bad, this is usually because they are moved by philosophical arguments that lead to conclusions that conflict with common sense. But while it's certainly the case that we sometimes ought to reject common sense, it's also certainly the case that sometimes philosophical arguments can lead one to deny the obvious.

10. **Imprecision:** You can know what it's like to have an experience yet not be in a position to know how good/bad that experience is. Therefore, knowledge of what it's like to have the experience doesn't yield complete knowledge of the value of that experience.

If you know what it's like to have an experience, then you're in a position to know at least approximately how good/bad that experience is.<sup>22</sup> It's hard to think of a counterexample to the inference from 'S knows what it's like to  $\varphi$ ' to 'S is in a position to know approximately how good/bad the experience of  $\varphi$ 'ing is'. Consider, as random examples, what it's like for you to drink coffee, swim in a pool, pet a friendly wombat, or read this paper. I suspect you will easily know, to at least some degree of precision, how good/bad those experiences are. There are, of course, cases where you'll be unsure whether an

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<sup>22</sup> See Lee [2023] on approximate knowledge of phenomenal character. See Cath [2023] for a more general discussion of knowledge of what it's like.

experience is overall good or overall bad. But even in those cases, you can usually still know that the experience is close to value neutral.

### 11. **Dislike:** Pain is bad because we dislike it.

To evaluate this objection, we need to ask: What's the relationship between the way pain feels and the fact that it's disliked?<sup>23</sup> There are three options:

OPTION A: *Pain is disliked because it hurts.* This is the most natural option: intuitively, pain is disliked because of how it feels. But if (a) the fact that pain hurts explains the fact that it's disliked, and (b) the fact that pain is disliked explains the fact that it's bad, then (c) the fact that pain hurts explains the fact that it's bad.<sup>24</sup> In other words, anyone who has an experience that hurts would thereby be having an experience that is bad, and anyone who knows what such an experience feels like would thereby be in a position to know that that experience is bad. This means that this first option is compatible with metaethical experientialism.

OPTION B: *Pain hurts because we dislike it.* This option yields an explanation for why pain feels the way it does. But this explanation is compatible with thinking that pain is bad because of how it feels. If you think that the fact that pain is disliked explains the fact that pain is bad (the dislike objection) *and* that pain hurts because it's disliked (OPTION B), then you can still accept that the fact that pain hurts explains the fact that it's bad (metaethical experientialism). Finding an explanation for a fact doesn't undercut the explanatory power of that fact.

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<sup>23</sup> See Street [2006] for an instance of the dislike theory objection. See Heathwood [2007], Bramble [2013], and Lin [2018] on various views on the relationship between pleasure and desire, and Kahane [2009] Bain [2017], and Bradford [2020] for various views on the relationship between the badness, phenomenal character, and the disliking of pain.

<sup>24</sup> If you're inclined to resist the implicit assumption that explanation is transitive, keep in mind that I'm stipulatively using 'explains' to mean epistemic and metaphysical entailment. On this sense of 'explains', it's plausible that transitivity holds.

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OPTION C: *The fact that pain hurts is independent from the fact that it's disliked.* This is the only option where the dislike objection has force. More precisely, one would have to hold both that (a) the way pain feels and its being disliked can come apart, and (b) the fact that pain hurts is independent of facts about its badness.<sup>25</sup> But those who endorse this view face some radical and implausible consequences. Think about the most painful experience you've ever had (or imagine a torturous experience even more painful than that) and consider a phenomenal duplicate who's undergoing the exact same kind of total experience but who doesn't dislike that experience. I think it's very hard to genuinely imagine such a scenario.<sup>26</sup> But insofar as it's conceivable, it's also very hard to believe that that experience isn't bad for that subject.

Here's the core upshot: the idea that pain is bad because it's disliked is credible only if we retain the claim that pain is bad because of how it feels.

12. **Debunking:** We believe painful experiences are bad because it was evolutionarily advantageous, rather than because it's true.

To debunk a belief, you need more than merely the premise that there's an evolutionary explanation for why we have the belief. If that were the only requirement, then nearly every belief would be debunkable. While there's dispute over what more is required for a debunking argument to succeed, it's generally accepted that it must at least be conceivable for the relevant

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<sup>25</sup> You could also hold that pain is bad *both* because it hurts *and* because it's disliked. But (as mentioned earlier) this would still be a version of metaethical experientialism, since such a view entails that some value facts about experiences are explained by phenomenal facts.

<sup>26</sup> If I imagine a subject undergoing the exact same total experience I have when I'm being tortured, then it seems to me inconceivable for the subject to nevertheless like that experience. The closest scenario that could be imagined, as far as I can tell, is one where *some* aspects of the phenomenology are held constant (perhaps the pain sensation), but where other aspects of the phenomenology still vary (perhaps the phenomenology associated with liking or disliking an experience).

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facts to have been different.<sup>27</sup> The role of the conceivability premise is to show that in scenarios where the relevant facts were different, we would still have had the same beliefs that we actually have (because our beliefs track what's evolutionarily advantageous, rather than what's true).

If metaethical experientialism is true, then it's inconceivable that the phenomenal facts obtain without the value facts explained by those phenomenal facts obtaining. This follows from more general principles about epistemic gaps: if there's no epistemic gap from F-facts to G-facts, then it's inconceivable for the F-facts to obtain without the corresponding G-facts obtaining. Compare: it's inconceivable for the microphysical facts to obtain without the corresponding macrophysical facts obtaining (at least assuming there's no epistemic gap from microphysical facts to macrophysical facts). Hence, if you know what it's like to burn your hand, then (according to metaethical experientialism) it's inconceivable for you to have an experience with exactly that phenomenal character yet for that experience to not be bad. Since metaethical experientialism is committed to this inconceivability claim, and since a debunking argument requires the opposing conceivability claim, any debunking argument will have to appeal to premises that the metaethical experientialist already contests. Consequently, appeals to debunking won't have dialectical force against metaethical experientialism.

- 13. Phenomenal Closure:** If P is explained by some set of phenomenal facts, then P is itself a phenomenal fact. Therefore, phenomenal facts cannot explain value facts.

Recall that a value fact is a fact that ascribes only value properties, a phenomenal fact is a fact that ascribes only phenomenal properties, and in general an

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<sup>27</sup> See Street [2006] for a classic example of a debunking argument against ethical beliefs. See Kahane [2011], Clarke-Doane [2012], and Vavova [2015] for some recent discussions of evolutionary debunking arguments.

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F-fact is a fact that ascribes only F-properties. I'll argue that there are compelling reasons to think that phenomenal facts can explain other kinds of facts.

Let a *structural fact* be a fact that ascribes only purely structural properties (meaning the kinds of properties captured by mathematical models).<sup>28</sup> Structural facts don't ascribe any phenomenal properties, so they aren't phenomenal facts. But some structural facts are nevertheless explained by phenomenal facts. Consider, for example, how the similarity relations between color experiences can be represented via a geometrical space, where color experiences that are more similar to each other correspond to regions that are closer in the space.<sup>29</sup> If we consider a purely formal model of color experiences, then the model will specify only structural facts about those experiences.<sup>30</sup> But the structural facts specified by that model will themselves be explained by phenomenal facts about the target experiences. Given this, we have reason to reject the claim that phenomenal facts can explain only other phenomenal facts.

You might point out that the aforementioned structural facts are still facts *about* experiences. But that's irrelevant in the present context, since facts about the values of experiences are likewise facts about experiences. If we were to categorize facts by their referents (instead of by the properties of the they ascribe), then metaethical experientialism would no longer be in tension with the epistemic gap, since the value facts that figure into the conclusion have the same referents as the phenomenal facts that figure into the premises.

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<sup>28</sup> I choose to focus on structural facts because I think it provides the most compelling counterexample to phenomenal closure. But note that phenomenal conservatives, phenomenal intentionalists, and phenomenal powers theorists will likewise deny phenomenal closure, since each of those positions takes phenomenal facts to explain facts of another domain.

<sup>29</sup> See Lee [2021] on the formal structure of quality-space models.

<sup>30</sup> You might object that these structural facts are themselves phenomenal facts. But note that the very same formal models could be used to represent non-experiential things. Since phenomenal facts are facts that ascribe phenomenal properties, and since phenomenal properties are instantiable only by experiences, the structural facts specified by formal models of experiences aren't phenomenal facts. See Lee [2022] for a more sustained version of this argument.

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To draw out the tension between metaethical experientialism and the epistemic gap, we need to categorize facts by the properties they ascribe.

14. **Explanation:** This paper hasn't yet explained *why* phenomenal facts explain value facts about experiences. To justify metaethical experientialism, we need an explanation.

There are many cases where one can be justified in believing that F-facts explain G-facts even when if one doesn't know why that explanatory relation holds. Consider again the common belief that microphysical facts explain macrophysical facts. There's disagreement over how to explain why these entailment relations hold (essences? grounding? conceptual truths? something else?). But you don't need to know the answer to those questions in order to be justified in believing that the explanations hold. By similar lights, you don't need to know *why* phenomenal facts explain value facts about experiences in order to be justified in believing *that* those explanations hold. You can sometimes be justified in accepting an explanation even if you lack an explanation for the explanation.

### §3 Metaethical Consequences

How does metaethical experientialism relate to existing metaethical theories? I'll start by explaining how metaethical experientialism fits into a standard taxonomy of metaethical theories. Then I'll discuss the prospects for metaethical pluralism.

#### Metaethical Theories

Let's start by distinguishing *cognitivism* (ethical claims express truth-evaluable propositions) from *non-cognitivism* (ethical claims don't express truth-evaluable propositions). Since I've framed the discussion in terms of facts (by which I mean true propositions), metaethical experientialism might initially seem incompatible with non-cognitivism. But non-cognitivists have sophisticated ways of reinterpreting apparently truth-evaluable ethical claims,



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including the value claims about experiences that I've focused on. Given this, most non-cognitivist theories will be able to reformulate the claims of metaethical experientialism within their preferred metaethical framework.<sup>31</sup>

For the remainder of the discussion, I'll focus on cognitivist theories. A central divide amongst cognitivist theories is between *realism* (there are objective ethical facts) and *anti-realism* (there aren't objective ethical facts). Amongst anti-realist theories, one position is *nihilism* (ethical claims are systematically false). The nihilist holds that there are any ethical facts whatsoever (aside from trivial facts). It's obvious that metaethical experientialism is incompatible with nihilism: metaethical experientialism presupposes that there are some true ethical claims about the values of experiences.

A more subtle relationship concerns *subjectivism* (ethical facts are true in virtue of the attitudes of valuers). You might think that metaethical experientialism entails that value facts about experiences are subjective, since they're explained by phenomenal facts and since phenomenal facts are themselves subjective. But we should distinguish 'subjective' in the phenomenal sense (where subjective facts are facts about subjective experiences) from 'subjective' in the alethic sense (where subjective facts are facts that are true in virtue of the attitudes of agents). Value facts about experiences are subjective in the phenomenal sense. But they probably aren't subjective in the alethic sense.<sup>32</sup> Since it's the alethic sense that's standardly taken to define 'subjectivism' in metaethics, metaethical experientialism is more naturally

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<sup>31</sup> It's tricky to figure out how exactly to reformulate metaethical experientialism in non-cognitivist terms. But one possibility might be to reinterpret metaethical experientialism as the thesis that if one has knowledge of the relevant phenomenal facts, then it's fitting to adopt the attitude expressed by the corresponding value claims about experiences.

<sup>32</sup> But: consider a version of metaethical experientialism where the phenomenal facts that explain value facts are themselves explained by attitudinal facts. How we classify this view depends on delicate issues about how to distinguish realism from anti-realism. And it may turn out that it's simply indeterminate how we ought to label this view. But I'll set this complication and assume that metaethical experientialism is committed to ethical realism.

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understood as a version of objectivism. Consequently, since metaethical experientialism postulates objective ethical facts, it's a version of ethical realism.

Realist theories are often partitioned into *non-naturalist* theories (ethical facts are non-natural facts) and *naturalist* theories (ethical facts are natural facts). Metaethical experientialism is incompatible with non-naturalism. More precisely, there's an incompatibility if we accept the following two claims: (1) phenomenal facts are natural facts, and (2) if value facts about experiences are explained by natural facts, then value facts about experiences are themselves natural facts. Both these claims strike me as plausible. Even if you're a non-physicalist about consciousness, phenomenal facts arguably ought to count as natural facts in the present context (where we're contrasting descriptive facts and ethical facts, rather than physical facts and phenomenal facts). And it's hard to see how there could be epistemic and metaphysical entailments from natural facts to value facts if those value facts are themselves non-natural facts. A non-naturalist version of metaethical experientialism may be coherent, but it strikes me as unmotivated.

Given this, I'll understand metaethical experientialism as a version of ethical naturalism. Yet metaethical experientialism differs from the most prominent versions of ethical naturalism. One version is *analytic naturalism* (ethical terms are analyzable in purely descriptive terms). Another version is *a posteriori naturalism* (ethical properties can be a posteriori identified with descriptive properties). Both of these views are committed to an epistemology of ethical facts that differs from the picture painted by metaethical experientialism. According to metaethical experientialism, our source of knowledge for value facts about experiences is neither conceptual analysis nor scientific investigation. Instead, metaethical experientialism is most naturally thought of as a version of *a priori naturalism* (ethical facts are a priori derivable from descriptive facts).

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A priori naturalism is an uncommon view in metaethics.<sup>33</sup> The principal reason may be because of the dominance of the epistemic gap: if it's indeed true that no ethical conclusion can be derived from purely descriptive premises, then a priori naturalism is a non-starter. But a core point of this paper has been to argue that the epistemic gap isn't compelling when focusing on value facts about experiences. Nevertheless, my goal has also been to develop a view *only* about value facts about experiences. This means that metaethical experientialism leaves open how to think about the nature of other kinds of ethical facts. In fact—as I'll discuss next—it's possible to combine metaethical experientialism with another metaethical theory to develop a pluralistic metaethics.

### **Metaethical Pluralism**

Nearly all discussions in metaethics assume *metaethical monism*, the view that a single metaethical theory is applicable to all ethical claims. If, for example, non-cognitivism / nihilism / subjectivism / non-naturalism / naturalism is true, then it's true for all ethical claims. By contrast, metaethical experientialism is compatible with *metaethical pluralism*, the view that different metaethical theories hold for different classes of ethical claims. Perhaps, for example, a priori naturalism is true for value facts about experiences, but another metaethical theory is true for other sorts of cases.

If you accept metaethical experientialism, then you accept that (at least some) value facts about experiences are explained by phenomenal facts. But this leaves open the possibility that there are other classes of ethical facts (say, deontic or fittingness facts about non-experiential things) that aren't explained by phenomenal facts. In this respect, metaethical experientialism is a modest thesis: it concerns only value facts about experiences, and says nothing about other kinds of ethical claims. This makes it combinable with just

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<sup>33</sup> See Sparks [2018] for a recent article arguing for this view.

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about any other metaethical theory, so long as that theory is restricted to other classes of ethical facts.

There's been little exploration of metaethical pluralism in contemporary analytic philosophy. All of the metaethical hedonists discussed earlier favor metaethical monism. By postulating a special source of knowledge for facts about pleasures and pains, metaethical hedonists have a story about how we acquire ethical knowledge of hedonic experiences. But since this solution doesn't generalize beyond hedonic experiences, metaethical hedonists have tended to assume nihilism about other kinds of ethical claims. Other metaethical theories likewise tend to take metaethical monism for granted: both in metaethical metaphysics (nihilism, subjectivism, non-naturalism, naturalism, etc.) and metaethical epistemology (intuitionism, analytic naturalism, a posteriori naturalism, etc.), it's standardly assumed that a single metaethical theory will be universally true. But while metaethical monism might be a reasonable default hypothesis, there's no obvious reason to think that it *has* to be true. And if you think about how much heterogeneity there is within the subject-matter of ethics—where discussions cover welfare *and* morality / value, reasons, permissibility, fittingness, *and* rights / experiences, knowledge, desire-satisfaction, *and* equality—you might even find it reasonable to apportion more credence to pluralism than to monism.

A view that strikes me as especially attractive is objectivism about value facts about experiences (and any other ethical facts explainable by those facts) and subjectivism about other kinds of ethical facts. A core challenge in metaethics is reconciling ethical realism with ethical knowledge. If there are objective ethical facts, how is it possible for us to acquire knowledge of them? Metaethical experientialism, in my view, offers a solution: we can come to know objective facts about the values of experiences by knowing what it's like to undergo those experiences. This provides a metaethical story for the class of ethical facts that arguably has the greatest claim for objectivity: if any ethical facts are objective, then the fact that pain is bad is plausibly one of them. But what about the metaethical status of other kinds of ethical facts?

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Speaking for myself, I feel the force of the epistemological challenges alluded to above. I won't try to justify that viewpoint here; I'll just speak to those who share my worries. Suppose that no other objective metaethical theory provides a satisfying epistemology for other kinds of ethical claims (that are independent of value facts about experiences). Then we are faced with the choice of either nihilism or subjectivism for these kinds of ethical claims. In my view, subjectivism is the more attractive option. Instead of taking other ethical beliefs to be systematically false, we could instead take them to have a different metaethical ground. Some things are objectively valuable, but other things are valuable because we value them. There are questions, of course, about the nature of the valuing attitude, about the scope of the class of subjective ethical facts, and about how exactly subjective ethical facts relate to objective ethical facts. But I won't speculate on those matters here.

If the epistemic gap remains for other kinds of ethical facts, then the metaethics of conscious experiences is special. Even if the epistemic gap isolates many kinds of ethical facts from the domain of descriptive facts, there's a class of ethical facts—value facts about experiences—where the epistemic gap is surmountable. This view may feel surprising when it's considered abstractly. But I think it's compelling and defensible upon close examination. The best answer to how we know pain is bad turns out—in my view—to also be the simplest and most obvious: by knowing how it feels.<sup>†</sup>

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