

# Is Pleasure Sensation? And does that Matter?

**Jiyao Tang**

Department of Philosophy-University of Chicago, Illinois, Chicago 60637

## Abstract

The goal of this essay is a twofold one. My first task is mainly negative: I want to show that the heated debate over whether pleasure is a sensation misallocates the central task in understanding pleasure and has been based on an unexamined conception of sensation, despite the long philosophical tradition and topical opinions that hold the opposite. My second task is to bring out attention to a relatively uncharted territory in our investigation of pleasure. I shall argue, Gilbert Ryle's Aristotelian insight on the pleasure in intelligent activities, when properly understood, should have led us, and Ryle himself, to investigate pleasure in connection with intentional action and practical rationality.

## Keywords

Pleasure, Sensation, Gilbert ryle, Conceptual/Intellectual capacities

DOI: 10.47297/wspjhcWSP2515-469902.20200402

## Introduction

As Anscombe comments in *Intention*, philosophers since Plato and Aristotle had been baffled by the concept of pleasure, especially the question whether a

---

### About the author

Jiyao Tang, M. A., Univesrity of Chicago, research areas: Action Theroy, Philosophy of Mind. Email:jiyaot96@gmail.com

certain pleasure is separable from that of which it is a pleasure, or is rather identical with it.<sup>1</sup> This topic only seemed to die out after early modern philosophers identified pleasure with an inner sensation or feeling of the same kind to pain or itch. And it was Ryle who lately criticized this empiricist conception of pleasure and revived the topic, re-enacting the once forgotten Aristotelian difficulties in the modern context.<sup>2</sup>

According to Ryle and Anscombe, the oversimplification of pleasure in the early modern era can be summarized as the following ideas: pleasure in general refers to an internal impression, often called a sensation or feeling, localized in mind or brain<sup>3</sup>; like pain, it is an episode accompanied by various human conducts, and is measured and individuated by its intensity, duration and qualitative experience; though, unlike pain, pleasure is what these conducts ultimately seek, while pain is what they ultimately try to avoid.<sup>4</sup> As Ryle reasonably interprets, the British empiricism most warmly welcomed this single-uniform-sensation-conception of pleasure and incorporated it into their conceptual framework, due to the empiricists' characteristic philosophical ambition for "constructing a dynamic theory of general human conduct", since "the assimilation of liking and disliking into sensation" serves to pave the way for conceiving pleasure and displeasure as calculable "mental counterparts to [forces like] impacts, pressures in mechanical theory".<sup>5</sup>

Though, this should not mislead us to think this sensation-picture of pleasure belongs only to construction of intricate philosophical theories. In ordinary life, we are by no means immune to speak and think of pleasure in similar ways. We are ready to call many pleasures as sensations, such as the warmth from hearth in a winter-night-return to one's chamber, or the cooling breeze of windy valley amid a chokingly hot summer. And we say, *ceteris paribus*, we pursue what pleases us most, and turn away from what we averse. We are also used to weigh disparate or similar pleasures as if we are weighing different piles of wood: one says that he delights more in writing novels than road tripping in the mid-west, or that Tolstoy gives him more pleasure than

---

1 Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, book seven and ten.

2 G.E.M. Anscombe (1956, 77-78)

3 Ibid, Ryle (1954a, 48-49)

4 Ryle (1954a, 49-52).

5 Ryle (1954a, 51)

Dostoevsky.

The difficulty in conceiving pleasure as a sensation goes far back to Aristotle. In *Ethics*, he suggests that, if pleasure is sensation, then, since sensation is an independent episode causally accompanied by the activity enjoyed, the pleasure is only accidentally related to the activity. "Just like," as Kenny following Ryle and Aristotle writes, "the writing of an essay may be made painful by its being accompanied with a headache."<sup>6</sup> This will lead to the absurd consequence that the best we can do is to "*learn* these connections by experience"; further, "it would be a quite contingent matter that the pleasure of drinking did not occur while one was eating"<sup>7</sup>. This simple reflection at least indicates, even conceived as a feeling or sensation, a certain pleasure can stubbornly resist our attempt to adequately analyze it independent of the activity of which it is a pleasure. After all, a pleasure is often called a pleasure *of* playing tennis or *of* writing novel.

However, the simple conception also has a stronghold in ordinary life: pleasure like refreshing breeze does specify a typical sensation of coolness, which seems apparently conceptually separable from, and actually obtainable without, that particular kind of breeze. "It is too hot, I just want to cool down" is an unproblematic expression of one's desire, without specifying exactly how one gets cooled down. Instead of troubling oneself travelling to a mountain resort, a modern citizen would be gladly to turn on air conditioning and stay at home, *to* have the cooling effect it offers, which generates the same kind of desirable sensation.

Here emerges the crucial step of philosophical reflection: out of two rather common and familiar ideas, a paradox is generated: it seems pleasure cannot be, but at the same time must be, identified with feeling or sensation. As Ryle nicely puts it, we can unproblematically talk *with* these words like enjoying and liking, but we are muddled once we start to talk *about* "pleasure".

The thesis of this essay is mainly a deflationary one: I will argue that the heated debate over whether pleasure is a sensation misallocates the central issue in understanding pleasure, despite the long philosophical tradition and topical

---

6 Kenny Anthony (1956/2003, 93)

7 Ibid. Similar arguments made by Aristotle on pleasure of philosophizing and that of music (1175 a 21-b7).

opinions that hold the opposite<sup>8</sup>. As I shall show, Ryle's Aristotelian insight on the pleasure in intelligent activities, when properly understood, should have led us, and Ryle himself, to go beyond this traditional debate and into the investigations of pleasure in connection with intentional action and practical rationality. In the first two sections, I elucidate in which sense we do and do not identify pleasure with sensation or feeling. In section 3, I criticize Ryle's argument that pleasure cannot be sensation, and show that his confusion rises from his uncritical acceptance of the problematic empiricist conception of sensation. Then, in the last section, I propose we inquire pleasure from the agential perspective in relation to intentional action and voluntary happening, and give my positive thesis to distinguish two kinds of pleasure: spontaneous pleasure and receptive pleasure. Finally, I suggest that the ethical implication of my new taxonomy of pleasure gestures towards further investigations of practical rationality and our self-understanding as agents who ultimately act for human goodness.

## **I. Ryle: pleasure (in intelligent activities) refers to a special manner of acting**

Let's first turn to Ryle's observation that pleasure in intelligent activities does not refer to sensation or feeling. Kenny's objection to the simple view above might make one think that the real problem is to understand how the pleasure understood as a sensation can be properly *related* to the actual activity enjoyed, therefore positing a philosophical problem analogous the skepticism of veridical and illusory perception. But Ryle would remind us, that one has already passed something too quick and uncritically presupposed "the pleasure" of playing tennis refers to some sensation or feeling that we qualitatively experience, which is of the same *kind* as that of enjoying air conditioning in summer. But it is even questionable that, for any human activity enjoyed, we can *always* identify a single uniform sensation or a set of those sensations to be *the* pleasure of

---

8 The SEP entry "Pleasure" still lists the debate whether pleasure is a sensation as the first and foremost topic in the academic debate, noticeably discussed through the lens of contemporary cognitive science. <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/pleasure/>

that activity.

Attending the actual usage of language is helpful here. If asked to name pleasant sensations during playing tennis, a tennis player could give a list of them. He might report the thrill when he served an ace, and the pleasing touch from the racket's "sweet spot" when hitting that ace; the glow of pride when hearing the audience's applause, and the clamoring applause; the excitement of retrieving a shot, and muscle contraction when running to retrieve that shot, and so on. All of these are descriptions of salient sensation. But if then asked, "ok but what on earth is *the* pleasure of playing tennis?", the player is likely bewildered, and answers either that all of them are *pleasant moments* of playing tennis, or that none of them is *the* pleasure of tennis, if taken in the sense analogous to a blow of wind which I constantly feel while I am playing, or to a medal which I am awarded when I finish playing it. "So, there isn't *the* pleasure of playing tennis?" Then a somewhat impatient reply could be expected: "Anyway I was enjoying playing the entire game all along!" Here, a holder of the simple view cannot defend himself by claiming that the pleasure of playing tennis is equal to the totality of pleasant sensations the player had during a certain game. First, the "enjoyableness" of an intelligent activity is internally connected to the difficulties and challenges that activity gives can find some nice quote for this. An exciting tennis game almost certainly involves many *unpleasant* and frustrating feelings of the player: double faults, failing retrieving an ace, unforced errors due to exertion, etc. But the player still can and often do say he enjoyed the entire game, which includes all unpleasant episodes, not just pleasant *parts* of it. He might even say: yes, in a sense I enjoyed these challenges. The player "enjoys" these challenges, not necessarily and indeed very rarely in a masochist way. It rather means that one enjoys these challenges in virtue of them being parts of that exciting game, without which the game would become much easier, less exciting and thus *less pleasant*. For the pleasures of other intelligent activities, such as writing a novel, or conversing with friends, the case is very much the same: Finding words to say what one means, or composing a convincing plot can often be very challenging and frustrating. Occasionally these difficulties can even cause one's self-doubt and uncertainty if one is a capable speaker or writer. Yet these "unpleasant feelings are not accidental or contingent failure due to the carelessness of the interlocutor or writer. They are rather natural parts of these activities, something inseparable

from, but constitutive of, their enjoyableness.<sup>9</sup>

Further, one enjoys a game or other intelligent activities the most when he is "wholly absorbed" in the game and, as Ryle nicely puts it, "sucked up every drop of himself that might have been on other businesses."<sup>10</sup> Therefore, even there are these pleasant sensations during the activity, they might be ignored *due to* one's enjoyment and thus unessential<sup>11</sup>. When one is absorbed into a tennis game, one only heeds to the goings-on *on* the tennis court, while ignoring other things like audience's applause *at* the court. A tennis coach would usually tell the player to stay aloof to either an ace or a double fault, since pride or regret can both be distracting.<sup>12</sup> Under such descriptions, those sensations are either "neutral" or "intentionally ignored", and thus not enjoyed at all.<sup>13</sup>

Now Ryle's positive thesis is that, instead of any episodic sensation, pleasure refers to some special manner of the entire activity at question.<sup>14</sup> The paradigm of enjoyment is one's absorption or immersion into the activity, instead of a distinctive feeling or sensation concomitant to some other happenings. When one is enjoying the game, his liking is manifested in the manner of his performance, especially in comparison with the manner of one who plays it reluctantly or gets bored. One enjoys a tennis game if he makes split step attentively, quickly getting back after the hit, and retrieving the shot when possible; on the contrary it is quite apparent the player is absent-minded or tired of the game if he often does not get back but observes the ball after the hit,

---

9 For the constitutive, i.e., ontological, role of "prejudice" in understanding, see G.H.Gadamer, *Truth and Method*.

10 Ryle (1954b, 346) gives an insightful analysis of pleasure as absorption.

11 Ryle's argument implies this claim: since that sensation or feeling does not directly belong to paradigmatic inclination or mood (1949, 106), and that pleasure is a kind of mood (1949, 107; 1954a, 50), feeling and sensation is not essential to pleasure.

12 Ryle (1949, 109; 1954a, 50)

13 Here I, following Ryle, hold that pleasure must be heeded (1954a, 50). I will dismiss the following opinion that thinks pleasure can be what we are not aware of. This opinion is closely connected to the thought that identifies pleasure with psychological/physiological happenings, and is used to defend against Ryle's charge that sensation is not pleasure (SEP entry 2.3.2-2.3.3 "welcoming-attitude"). Since the term "pleasure" is used very differently in those cognitive/psychological researches, holders of such a view should first explain how these research results are properly translated to our current discussions, and then what it means to claim that our pleasure can be something we are not aware of.

14 Ryle speaks of the "special qualities" or "a manner", "of the activity" (1954a, 50).

stands on the court and moves very reluctantly. To enjoy the tennis game does not require one to perform any particular act or undergo any singular feeling additional to his playing. As Ryle famously put it, the playing "is his pleasure, not a vehicle of his pleasure".<sup>15</sup>

However, the pleasure-predication thus understood is not normatively unconstrained and arbitrary. The player who enjoys the game must "*act* and react in some or other of certain vaguely describable, though easily recognizable ways"<sup>16</sup>. To describe someone as enjoying a certain activity, there might not be any action or reaction that is necessary for such description, but the progress of the deed needs to exhibit some recognizable manner that indicate the doer's enjoyment. Though, it is not the task of philosophical analysis to teach us which exact action or reaction properly instantiates which enjoyment. Rather, we gain such knowledge in the course of our normal maturation and, to use Wittgenstein's expression, initiation into human life-form.

This general observation should remind us that, feeling and manner are not two rivals competing with each other, rather they belong to pleasure in intelligent activities in two different ways. Despite Ryle's insight, he goes astray when he excommunicates pleasant feeling or sensation from the shrine of pleasure. On the ground that enjoyment of intelligent activities is not identical with feeling or sensation, Ryle makes a fallacious induction to claim that feelings "does not directly belong to" pleasure but are at most some irrelevant and contingent occurrences.<sup>17</sup> It is true that in order to enjoy a game, one does not need to experience all of them or any single one of them. But enthusiasm, glow of pride, and even one's calmness when accepting his due defeat after an intensive match are not merely "accidental" to the one's enjoyment of a game. They are feelings which we take to be the normal reaction or expression of one's enjoyment, and they can be very important *evidence* of whether one enjoys himself or gets bored. And it will be rather odd if a tennis player expresses *none* of them, but insists he has enjoyed the game all along. To use Ryle's own words, occurrences of feelings can also belong to "vaguely describable yet easily recognizable" signs of one's pleasure. The lesson we should learn from Ryle's

---

15 Ryle (1949, 108)

16 Ibid.

17 Ryle (1949, 106,108)

mistake is, what is not necessary is not therefore merely accidental or contingent.<sup>18</sup> This small correction of Ryle should alert us to resist the theoretical temptation to an overkill of sensation and feeling when we conceptualize pleasure.

## II. Can Sensation be Pleasure?

Ryle's claim that pleasure can never be identified with sensation risks a more obvious overkill. A tennis game is not enjoyed in the same way as an apple is enjoyed. This section will show that Ryle's argument above only covers what he calls *intelligent activities*<sup>19</sup> but cannot speak for other kinds of pleasure which we are familiar with: most noticeably, *sensational* pleasure.

Although we can grant that the enjoyment of a tennis game cannot be identified with feeling or sensation, when we enjoy coffee or ribs, massage and air conditioning, sensation and feeling are not only salient, but also necessary. We are not unfamiliar with the term "sensational gratification" which refers to a wide range of enjoyments, of food, drinks, and other substances. And it is often the default meaning referred to when we simply talk about "pleasure". Moreover, at the beginning of philosophy, this conception is among those primordial "cuttings of nature's joint": Plato names it bodily pleasure, and Kant later calls it mere agreeableness<sup>20, 21</sup>. This objection may seem an obvious one, and finds immediately support in the register of our ordinary language, therefore perhaps making my elaboration sounds a bit redundant and the definition even circular. But seeing how obvious this point is will prepare us to see better what compels Ryle to deny this hard fact.

Consider the enjoyment of food. What is the pleasure of having a good piece of steak? One can taste it and describe it as juicy, tender, buttery, beefy, etc. Or one can simply answer: it tastes delicious. When we compare and rank different steaks, we say, that one is too well done, I prefer a rarer one; I always

---

18 I am grateful to professor Chang Liu for bringing out this point in his comments to this paper.

19 Ryle (1949, 42-44)

20 Plato, *Philebus/Symposium/Republic*, etc; Kant, *Critique of Judgment*.

21 Especially if we consider how unstable the opposite concept of "spiritual or higher pleasure" has been, and how much heated debates of it has undergone.



go for NY strip, and rib-eye has too much fat; I like that grain-fed one for its richer beefier flavor, and this grass-fed one tastes too lean for me, etc. Various sensations of taste are at stake; though one might ignore some of them, (for many the grass-fed vs grain-fed difference is too nuanced to notice) it is senseless to say that one can ignore all of them; one might even identify some of them as essential for the proper enjoyment of a steak. And we do have a ready-made unifying sensation-category prepared for all these detailed descriptions of how the steak *tastes* – namely, the *taste* of the steak. And even for a plate of fine-cooked dish the taste of which involves many different layers of details, and thus a very delicate procedure, we still talk of *the* taste of one dish as a single, measurable episodic sensation, under the concept of which we *unify* all the detailed and delicate tastes the dish offers. Analogously, a body massage produces qualitatively different enjoyments on our different bodily parts, but we are still ready to speak of "the" comfort of massage, unlike our bewilderment when facing "the" pleasure of a tennis game.

That we often identify the pleasure of food and drink with its taste-sensation is compatible with Ryle's observation that pleasure often involves a mood or manner of the relevant activity. But *pace* Ryle, in sensational pleasure, the mood or manner is secondary to the pleasure, while the sensation is the primary factor. It is true that enjoyment of food often brings one into a certain mood and makes him behave in certain easily recognizable patterns. One devours the thanksgiving turkey graciously, reclines to his armchair in a mood of pleasant contentment, and is inclined to fall asleep at the hearth-side amid his daughter's amiable voice reading of Tolstoy's long story. But the sensual gratification is the essence of the enjoyment in the sense that it *unifies* the various actions and reactions of the enjoyer, and as a *formal cause*, informs these behaviors *as* behaviors conducted under certain pleasure-mood. Other recognizable pattern or behaviors are not necessary responses, and would not be proper pleasure-manifestations without the sensational pleasure itself. This point is shown by reflecting on the negative case: if a man at a fine dining tells his companion that he enjoys his caviar, and meanwhile behaves poshly, superior, and presumptuously, we sometimes suspect if he really enjoys this stuff, or after all he orders it just for its symbolic social function for cultural distinction.<sup>22</sup> We

---

22 Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*.

might find the truth either by his admitting that caviar is disgusting, or we notice that he will not have any when he dines alone even if he can easily afford it. Our point is that we do not recognize the latter case as sensational enjoyment of caviar *qua delicious* food, but his enjoying being posh and vain. More generally speaking, we have a contrast between "enjoyment of fact" and "enjoyment of substance".<sup>23 24</sup>

Sensation like the taste of a certain food or drink can also cause our strong emotions, flowery imagination, or nostalgic memory. If there is pleasure (or pain) in those hard "mental happenings", then sensation would not unify these pleasures, but only functions as a trigger towards pleasure (or pain) of other kinds. Consider Monsieur Proust's madeleine. Proust's indulging pleasure, if it can be said to be pleasure at all, is not an enjoyment of food, but of searching, *a la research du temp perdu*, which indubitably is an intelligent activity.<sup>25</sup>

To conclude, for sensational pleasure as a kind, sensation is often *the* pleasure, and it *unifies* other behaviors to be *appropriately described* as manifestations of certain mood.<sup>26</sup>

### III. A Proper Conception of Sensation

The distinction between sensational pleasure and the pleasure of intelligent performances is also registered, in our representation of ethical life form: we normally do not think one's pleasure of feeding on potato-chips as highly as another's enjoyment of writing a novel. There is a lot more to say about the reasons behind this intuitive yet often criticized hierarchical distinction, to which I will briefly return at the end of this essay. Our present concern is that, while Ryle notices that we use "pleasure" to mean "two quite different kinds of things": either the "enjoying or liking" doing something, or the "joy" and "delight" that are com-

---

23 G.E.M. Anscombe, 1981.

24 Some "Rylean behaviorists" may object to this talk of "essence".

25 Even if one comments that the novels by Proust and Joyce are far too sensational for him to enjoy it, he is not using it in the same sense we were using it.

26 My discussion of two kinds of pleasure appears to parallel the conventional dichotomy of higher and lower pleasure. We will later see this is not a coincidence.

monly described as "thrills" or "glows of pleasure"<sup>27</sup>, he nevertheless argues that strictly speaking pleasure cannot refer to sensation or feeling.<sup>28</sup> Here is Ryle's *reduction ad absurdum* argument:

"Some sensations, like some tickles, are pleasant; others, like some other tickles, are unpleasant. One scalding sensation may be distressing, when the equally acute, scalding sensation given by a gulp of hot tea may be pleasant. On rare occasions we are even ready to say that something hurts, and yet we like it, or at least do not mind it. If pleasure were correctly classified as a sensation, we should expect it to be possible correspondingly to describe some of these sensations, too, as pleasant, some as neutral and others as unpleasant, and yet this palpably will not do. The two last would be contradictions, the first either a redundancy or worse."<sup>29</sup>

Ryle argues that (1) whether a certain sensation is pleasant or not depends on considering further and wider concrete situations, since sensations often recognized as painful can also often be very pleasant. (2) Consequently, if we identify pleasure with a single distinctive sensation or a group of sensations, then we *can* always further ask "is this sensation-pleasure pleasant?", which is possible to give a negative or neutral answer. (3) But the idea of an *unpleasant pleasure* is a logical contradiction. Therefore, we must conclude: "sensation can be pleasant, but pleasure cannot be sensation."<sup>30</sup>

This final remark from Ryle is already bewildering and awkward: isn't "a pleasant sensation" just a pleasure? An elephant can be pleasant if it has devoured lots of banana; and speaking of an evening being pleasant means that the evening gives pleasure to us, i. e., "gives pleasure to the mind or senses" (Merriam-Webster). But a sensation is like neither of that. No doubt a sensation is not a living being, thus cannot be pleasant in the same way an elephant can be<sup>31</sup>. But nor is it clear, when I enjoy a gulp of hot tea, if the "pleasant sensation" is not yet the pleasure, then what further "pleasure" this "pleasant sensation" can

---

27 Ryle (1949, 108-109)

28 Ryle (1949, 109)

29 Ryle (1954a, 49, other versions of the same argument in Ryle (1949, 109), (1954b, 340).

30 *ibid*

31 It is not unpleasant to think of the pleasant line Derek Jarman creates for his *Wittgenstein*, as the philosophical hero asks his students: "What's going on behind my words, when I say: This is a very pleasant pineapple."

further *give to* us. Rather, this seems right: when we speak of a sensation or feeling being pleasant, that feeling itself is already a pleasure, though it might at the same time be described as a tiny part of a still higher or more intensive pleasure.<sup>32</sup> In the rest of this section, I will show Ryle's argument is confused and is based on a too narrowed conception of sensation, which has its root in the very empiricist tradition he persistently criticizes.

For the first step, let us pause at Ryle's second premise. From the observation that a same scalding sensation, say gulping down certain amount of water at 60 °C, can be either pleasant or painful, Ryle concludes that for each sensation, it is always possible to further ask "whether it is pleasant or not". Ryle's discussion above takes sensation to be in general *value-neutral*. And this should remind us a more general conception of sensation as *world-neutral*: sensation is a mental episode disconnected from the happenings in the world, and can at most be independent concomitant to those happenings. This conception now brings us back to the second horn of the dilemma in the introduction, namely, the difficulty of thinking sensational pleasure as a mental episode separable from the activity.

The solution to this difficulty is to see that, *pace* Ryle, under many familiar kinds of description, sensations are taken to be intrinsically *value-ladened*. My mother cooked a steak for me, which I tasted and then commented that "it tastes juicy, tender and buttery", meanwhile having finished it quickly and graciously, expressing no sign of hesitation. My mother would then be pleased, without further asking "but did you enjoy it?" Here my sensation, specifically the taste, of the steak so described as juicy, tender and buttery already *means* that the taste is pleasant. And there are plenty of sensation-descriptions of this kind that block the further "whether pleasant" question. In Chinese one stock poetic description for seeing an elegant nymph passing by is "She lightly fluttered like a startled swan.../luster more brilliant than the autumn chrysanthemum."<sup>33</sup> Similarly a medieval monk who visited a cathedral would describe what he saw as something magnificent and divine. If someone asked, "but were you pleased by what you saw?", the monk or the poet would think not the interlocutor was

---

32 I want to thank Zijian Zhu for advising me to analyze different senses of "pleasant" here.

33 Cao Zijian, "Rhapsody on the Luo River Goddess", in *Wen Xuan, or Selections of Refined Literature, Volume III*, translated by David Knechtges, 1996, Princeton University.

trying to further understand what he said, but rather failed to understand what he meant. This kind of descriptions of sensation is intrinsically laden with evaluative judgments, and blocks the further "whether" question, not because it retreats to some shrine of *private* preference or subjective idiosyncrasy, like the reply "I just feel it" implies<sup>34</sup>; but rather because that the significances of these statements points to certain objective aesthetic standard or religious reason, which should be publicly shared by anyone who is so to speak "grown to the age of reason". Had I said that "the steak tastes juicy and tender, but very bad", my words would be unintelligible without more information filling-in the gap. Certainly, this is not to deny that there are also other ways to intentionally describe sensations in a value-neutral and detached manner. I might say that I've perceived a female figure, stayed in a space at 30 °C room temperature, or drunk a cup of water at 60 °C. And it is not a mere accident that these statements normally allow or even *invite* one to ask "is that sensation is pleasant or distressful?"<sup>35</sup>

The difference between these two kinds of sensation-description does not lie in one being specific and another being general, nor in that one is obscurer and another is more accurate.<sup>36</sup> Each is obscure and vague from one perspective, just because it is *ex officio* informative and exact from another. To capture this difference, we might rather say that those value-laden sensation-descriptions, which more often block the "whether-pleasant" question, are described from the first-personal *engaged* and *absorbed* perspective of the agent or patient. By contrast, the value-neutral sensation-descriptions often, though not always, come from a disinterested, (nowadays wrongly called) "objective", and thus *detached* point of view. The engaged descriptions of sensation are permeated with, and revealing of, the patient/agent's manifest self-image (*Selbst-Bild*) as well as his world-view (*Weltanschauung*): they not only tell us a lot about what he loves and hates, endorses and rebukes, hopes and fears, but also reveal what kinds of objects, events and persons which the agent-patient finds to be adorable and wretched, righteous and detestable, rosy and frightening. By contrast, the

---

34 Ryle (1949, 103; also 1971, 287)

35 This suggests that, value-laden sensation-descriptions come first as our natural sensation-expressions.

36 Same point made by J.L. Austin (*Sense and Sensibilia*, chap 1-2), and Chen Jiaying (*Diagnosisis*, 5.18)

detached or disengaged sensation-description is not accidentally intertwined with the standard of measurement in positivist sciences, which reveals, more than anything, the scientifically (quantifiably) measurable facts of what is sensed.

The lesson to be drawn here is that a certain sensation which gets described and individuated from an engaged perspective is not just a *composite* of a core of detached-sensation, *plus* some additional and contingent surroundings. Although we sometimes *can* abstract a detached description *from* the more absorbed description, that does not mean we always do so. We abstract when there is a reason to do so, and even when we do, the detached description is not in *general* more accurate and more superior for individuating sensation than the ordinary discourse. Pleasantly gulping down hot tea is one thing, to gulp down that same scalding water when I thought it was ice-cold is quite another thing. If one insists that what the two persons feel are essentially the same because the water drunk was at the same temperature – such insistence, instead the denial of it, is burdened to explain what he exactly wants to say with this judgment. Equally, two sensations understood as the same from an engaged perspective can appear different from a detached perspective. For Monsieur Proust and maybe for those who are educated in the French literary tradition as well, the madeleine which his mother prepares tastes exactly the same as the one he ate when he was a child at his aunt's in Combray. Yet they could very easily be two different pastries which cause, under a detached investigation of a biochemist, two different qualitative experiences.

With this distinction between engaged and detached sensation-description, now we can see, when Ryle rejects that sensation can be directly identified with pleasure, he argues from the uncritical assumption that the identity of sensation is only to be understood in their detached sense, thus conceiving two "equally acute" scalding sensations as occurrences of a same distinctive experience. Had Ryle noticed the distinction I just made, he should have agreed with that pleasure can sometimes be identified with sensation.

We can also address the Aristotelian difficulty that if pleasure can refer to a feeling or sensation, how can one avoid seeing pleasure as a mere contingent concomitant of the activity enjoyed? The answer is the following. By the nature of engaged-sensation-description, sensational pleasure is *not even intelligible*, or more precisely, they *are simply non-being*, without reference to what is enjoyed. Sensational gratification of a steak is not some accidental happening external to

my eating of it, but *qua* enjoyment of a steak it is describable at all only in reference to the steak which I have eaten. Both Kenny's objection that we must learn the connection by experience, and Aristotle's worry that pleasure of music would be indistinguishable from that of philosophizing are not applicable to the proper conception of sensational pleasure we have worked out.

To conclude, Ryle correctly sees both that the empiricist restricted notion of sensation has distorted the discussion of pleasure, and that pleasure can often refer to the manner of intelligent activities. But, instead of correcting the empiricist's too narrowed conception of sensation, Ryle carelessly lets that very conception sneak into his view, thus is compelled to claim that pleasure can only refer to manner or mood of actions, and never sensation or feeling.

#### **IV. Pleasure, Intention and Agency: Receptive Pleasure and Spontaneous Pleasure**

So far, one may further object, even though sensational pleasure under my account does not risk of being an unintelligible causal episode, it is still different from the pleasure in intelligent activities. And it seems that the only differentiating factor is whether the pleasure is primarily a sensation or a manner. Consequently, I have been, in effect, against my claim for a deflationary thesis, saying all along that sensation is the decisive factor for distinguishes two kinds of pleasure – that of intelligent activities and that of sensational pleasure. My reply here is that, above I've only explained in which sense sensation can be pleasure, but the two kinds of pleasure discussed so far do not constitute a complete taxonomy of pleasure. Further, I take sensational pleasure to be only a species of what I will call receptive pleasure. And receptive pleasure is a genus of pleasure on a par with what I call spontaneous pleasure in intelligent activities. This distinction between *spontaneous* pleasure and *receptive* pleasure is closely connected to the concepts of agency and intentional action. We need to go beyond the discussion of sensation to investigate pleasure in connection to concepts like intention, voluntariness, and agency.

The paradigmatic cases of what I call spontaneous pleasure refer to the pleasure in Rylean intelligent activities. Three points are worth notice. First, the activity enjoyed must be intentional and heeded. Absorbing oneself in a



conversation or being deeply touched by a piece of artwork requires logically, not psychologically, one's self-knowing of what one's doing and one's heeding.<sup>37</sup> One can pick up a novel by chance or get involved in an unexpected conversation, but can never read or converse unintentionally. This brings us to the second point: spontaneous pleasure is inseparable from the activity enjoyed in the sense that it is a special manner of that intentional action. So, Ryle's claim does hold in this sense: pleasure and the activity are not two things but one. Finally, Ryle's observation that absorption is a paradigmatic manner of enjoying intelligent activities touches an important Aristotelian insight: these are actions that are enjoyed not for some exterior or further end, but are enjoyed for its own sake as ends of themselves.<sup>38</sup> To say that one absorbs or immerses himself into an activity means the activity "occupies" him entirely, and "becomes his whole world", therefore the activity's normal "unimpeded operation" becomes the goal of the activity. I name this kind of pleasure spontaneous also in the sense it is a "natural" part growing out of the normal unimpeded operation of the activity.

By contrast, receptive pleasure refers to those pleasures which *can* be unintended, though still *voluntary*. Three points can be made from this idea. First thing to notice, receptive pleasure includes not only sensational pleasure, but also pleasures of many other kinds, such as the pleasure of finding one's key, of sighting your bus coming by, or of fame. This is another reason why I claim sensation is not a decisive factor for understanding pleasure. Second, by receptive pleasure I mean those pleasures that can be unintentional but voluntary: as Anscombe explains, they might "not [be the results] of one's own doing at all, but which happen to one's delight, so that one consents and does not protest or take steps against them."<sup>39</sup> For example, attending an autumn harvest feast in a Chinese northern village, one could happen to eat a certain fried bug or stewed sneak-meat, and enjoy its taste very much, while (and precisely because)

---

37 Ryle, 1954a, 50.

38 Anthony Kenny, (1963 100) But he goes astray when he immediately asserts in the next sentence that, these "are precisely those actions which are done *for pleasure*." This is clearly an odd expression, since writing poems and philosophizing are actions of such kind even in Kenny's own discussion. Though we enjoy philosophizing, we do not philosophize *precisely for pleasure*, but, I'd like to say, for human goodness.

39 Anscombe (1956, 89). Jian Ma (2021, forthcoming) gives an illuminating analysis of different senses of "voluntary" Anscombe uses. Here I use this term in the sense of one being moved "voluntarily", i.e., voluntary passion (Hyman 2015, 10).



he was no attention to whatever he was eating, i. e., his *eating sneak or bug* is unintentional<sup>40</sup>. Thirdly, most receptive pleasures are happenings that are primarily intentional, like that of enjoying food. One's eating sneaking is unintentional, but eating is not. Or in other words by Anscombe, their descriptions are "dependent on our possessing the form of descriptions of intentional actions"<sup>41</sup>, although sometimes they can be *consequences* of unintended happenings. Though, there are also marginal cases like Anscombe's example of the pleasure of "being pushed and sliding down to the hill into that party of people", in which is unclear if that pleasing sliding can be intentional. But Ryle is clearly wrong when he persistently insists that we *cannot* act intentionally to have pleasant feeling or sensation in general.<sup>42</sup> The juicy and buttery taste of a steak is a *result* of my intentional action of eating that steak, while tasting the sneak was a *consequence* of my carelessness<sup>43</sup>.

## Concluding and Anticipatory Remarks

To conclude, in this essay I argued that in discussing pleasure, sensation should not occupy the center of our debate. I critically appropriate Ryle's neo-Aristotelian insight on pleasure in intelligent activity and propose to focus on the connection between pleasure and practical rationality.

But one question remains. My distinction of spontaneous and receptive pleasure turns out to parallel the traditional hierarchy of higher and lower pleasure. Pleasures in philosophical dialogues, artistic creation, and athletic competition are spontaneous and were considered higher and better by philosophers from classical to modern age. By contrast, bodily pleasures in food, drink, and enjoyment of one's own fame are receptive pleasures and were deemed base and crude.

I believe the parallel is not a mere coincidence, but has to do with the

---

40 Realizing what he has eaten, he might ask more fried bug and sneak, or become sick and throw up. According to the analysis above, in the latter case, his eating sneak will be "protested", thus involuntary.

41 Anscombe, (1956, 84)

42 Ryle (1949, 109)

43 The distinction between result and consequence is noticed by Zeno Vendler (2002, 10, 272)

notion of practical rationality and our self-understanding as practical agents who ultimately acts for our goodness. The enjoyment of a NY strip, even if I devour it devilishly, seems something that stands essentially external to who I am, but the enjoyment of playing tennis or writing novels constitutes my self-understanding as an agent as well as a cultivated person. Here I can only suggest that, a deeper understand the concept of pleasure and its relation to human goodness now requires us to depart from the traditional emphasis on sensation, onto a further investigation on the relation between pleasure and agency, and our self-understanding as agent. And the positive and deflationary theses this essay has argued are therefore only a preparation to this further project. But this work remains to be done.

## Reference

- [1] Anscombe G E M. Intention[M]. Harvard University Press, 2000.
- [2] Anscombe G E M. On the Grammar of "Enjoy"[M]. Blackwell Press, 1981, 94-102.
- [3] Austin J L. Sense and Sensibilia[M]. Oxford University Press, 1964.
- [4] Chen Jiaying. Dianoesis[M]. Huaxia Publishing House, 2011.
- [5] Hyman J. Action, Knowledge, and Will[M]. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015.
- [6] Kenny A. Action, Emotion, and Will[M]. Routledge Press, 2003.
- [7] Ma Jian. Anscombe on Voluntariness of Human Action[J]. Analytic Philosophy in China, 2021.
- [8] Ryle G. The Concept of Mind[M]. The University of Chicago Press, 2002.
- [9] Ryle G. Pleasure(1954a)[M]. Cambridge University Press, 1954.
- [10] Ryle G. Pleasure(1954b)[M]. Routledge Press, 1971.
- [11] Ryle G. Sensation(1956)[M]. Routledge Press, 1971.
- [12] Ryle G. Thinking and Reflecting (1966)[M]. Routledge Press, 1971.
- [13] Vendler Z. Linguistics in Philosophy[M]. Cornell University Press, 1967.