

This paper is forthcoming in *Analysis*. This is a draft copy – please cite the published version where possible.

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## Reflective Blindness, Depression and Unpleasant Experiences

### Introduction

This paper defends a desire-based understanding of pleasurable and unpleasant experiences. More specifically, the thesis is that what makes an experience pleasant/unpleasant is the subject having a certain kind of desire about that experience. This thesis has been argued for before, but recent work by those such as Bramble (2013), Rachels (2000) and Haybron (2008) brings it into question. This paper will show those objections to be mistaken. In Section 1 I will introduce the thesis – the ‘Desire Account’ – in more detail and give some initial arguments in its favour. In Section 2 I will explain and refute a prominent set of contemporary counter-examples, based on subjects who might have ‘Reflective Blindness’, looking particularly at the example of subjects with depression. I will do so in a way that makes a wider case for why the Desire Account is persuasive, by highlighting more general mistakes that its opponents make.

The thesis of this paper will not just be of interest to those concerned with understanding pleasure and pain. It has a wider relevance, one that is clear from the paper’s second aim: to promote a better understanding of the complexity of depression in relation to wider philosophical issues. As I will show, philosophers are mistaken to conflate depression’s two most prominent symptoms. Although they may often come together, they represent two different psychological phenomena.

### 1. The Desire Account

This section will first explain the Desire Account<sup>1</sup> and briefly demonstrate why it's plausible. I'll also briefly clarify a few potential misunderstandings.

The thesis of the Desire Account is this:

*A subject is having an unpleasant experience at any given time T if, and only if, at T they non-derivatively<sup>2</sup> desire for that experience to stop. The converse applies for pleasant experiences.<sup>3</sup>*

This paper looks to defend the account through a case study of subjects experiencing reflective blindness, and – more specifically – those experiencing it through depression. This is something taken to be a counter-example in the literature, but that I will demonstrate can be fully explained by the Desire Account. For ease of discussion I will restrict the rest of this paper specifically to unpleasant experiences, although symmetrical arguments apply to pleasant ones.

The most convincing argument for the Desire Account is what I call the 'argument of consistency'. As the argument goes, for every instance of unpleasantness the subject experiences a certain desire, and the strength of the desire matches the strength of the unpleasantness.<sup>4</sup> The best explanation for this seems to be that the desire explains the unpleasantness. As Korsgaard says,

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<sup>1</sup> The account is sometimes referred to as the 'motivational account' in, for example, Heathwood 2007. I've re-labelled it here to avoid confusion between explaining unpleasantness in terms of motivation and explaining it in terms of desire.

<sup>2</sup> I take non-derivatively here to mean the agent desires it *for its own sake*, rather than desiring it only as a means to some other desired end.

<sup>3</sup> This formulation is largely taken from Chris Heathwood, (2007). He followed and developed upon previous work on this topic by authors such as Alston (1967), Brandt (1979), Carson (2000), Korsgaard (1996) and Parfit (1984). Attitudinal accounts (including the Desire Account) tend to be contrasted with accounts that explain unpleasantness in terms of something about the phenomenology, usually either in terms of a distinctive feeling or a kind of 'hedonic tone'. For a recent example of the former see Bramble, (2013) and for examples of the latter see, eg. Morillo, (1995), Hardcastle, (1999), Kagan, (1992), Schroeder, (2004) and Crisp, (2006).

<sup>4</sup> Another common argument (eg by Heathwood, 2007 p.26) is the heterogeneity argument: the argument that other qualities of unpleasant experiences differ so much from case to case that they cannot be what makes the experience unpleasant. For example, the difference in feeling between heartbreak and a stubbed toe. I take this to be different from the consistency argument, which doesn't rely on the success or failure of other explanations of what my constitute unpleasantness, but rather works on its own terms. See also Aydede (forthcoming), Korsgaard, (1996) and Feldman, (2006).

“The painfulness in pain consists in the fact that these are sensations which we are inclined to fight.” (Korsgaard, 1996 p.147) The more painful or unpleasant something is, the more desperately we want it to stop.<sup>5</sup>

Because the argument from consistency is the main reason why the Desire Account is so appealing, defending the account against counter-examples is of the utmost importance. My role in this debate will be both to reject a certain prominent set of counter-examples (those of reflective blindness) and, by doing so in a methodical, generalizable way, to bolster the case for consistency.

The rest of this section will briefly rule out some things that the Desire Account *is not*, to make it even clearer what it *is*. Many supposed counter-examples to the Desire Account come from misunderstandings, so a few initial clarifications should help clear things up and make way for the more detailed analysis of cases of reflective blindness.

Firstly, the Desire Account does not advocate the idea that a subject’s desire would always be overriding, or that they must necessarily desire to stop having that experience more than they would like to continue it. I am happy to claim that agents can have conflicting desires; my desire to have a nap is not silenced by my desire to continue writing a paper; my desire to call out injustice is not silenced by my competing desire to avoid becoming a target. Furthermore, the desire to stop having a certain experience is not the only kind of desire that someone can have. I may often have instrumental desires to continue doing the unpleasant thing, whatever it may be.

Similarly, the Desire Account does not deny that a subject can have different kinds of experience at one time. The experience – or part of the experience – that the subject wants to stop is the part that they find unpleasant. At one given time, for instance, a subject could experience both a sharp pain from a needle in their arm and a certain satisfaction from knowing that they are donating blood. The fact that the latter is enjoyable does not stop the former being unpleasant; they may at the same time want the positive feeling to continue while being keen for the sharp

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<sup>5</sup> It’s worth noting here that unpleasantness and painfulness are not the same, although what’s painful is usually (if not always) unpleasant. See, for example, Corns, (2014). When I refer to pain in this paper I mean to refer to pain insofar as it is an unpleasant experience.

pain to end. And although they may desire to experience the sharp pain, they do so not *non-derivatively* as specified above, but rather they desire it instrumentally: because it is a way to do something good. This clarification also rules out potential counter-examples like that of masochism. Many people find something pleasant about some experiences as well as something painful about them, and it's coherent to describe them as having a desire for the pleasant part to continue and a simultaneous desire for the unpleasant part to stop.

A final clarification is that this account doesn't require that the subject is explicitly thinking about their desire. There's no requirement for higher-order thoughts: thoughts from the subject about what their mental states are, and about whether they want those mental states to change. Just as I can want a glass of water without explicitly thinking so, or a dog can want to be taken to the park without the capability to express that want in a language, so too can desires of the kind I discuss here be implicit.

Now these brief clarifications about the Desire Account are out of the way, I will move on to describing the main family of counter-examples that this paper focuses on: cases of reflective blindness.

## 2. Reflective Blindness Counter-Examples

Examples of reflective blindness have been described as 'decisive' objections to the Desire Account, (Bramble, 2013 p.203) as well as against any other account of pleasure and pain which relies on the subjects' attitudes rather than something like feelings or phenomenology (see fn.3). Reflective blindness is the state a subject is in when they have a pleasant or unpleasant experience but are unaware of it at the time. If subjects can be reflectively blind, as the objection goes, the unpleasantness of that suffering cannot consist in a certain kind of desire, because we cannot have desires directed at something we're unaware of. This can happen in a variety of situations, such as

when a subject is distracted or the unpleasantness occurs in such small increments that it's difficult to notice.

For the rest of this paper I'll focus on one example of reflective blindness: depression. I'll then reply that one of two things is happening, depending on the specifics of the example: either (1) the subject *is* aware of the experience, but there is something misleading about the examples that might make you think otherwise or (2) the examples aren't of the subject having an unpleasant experience at all.

After this I'll have two more moves to make. Firstly, I'll show how the response in this case can be generalised to other counter examples to the account, and what we can learn from it. Secondly, I'll demonstrate some lessons that can be learned about depression more generally as an example in metaethics.

## **Depression**

The first example of reflective blindness, and the one that will be the focus of the majority of my paper, is depression: it can often affect the subject slowly and gradually, without them being aware. The subject may never have thought to categorise themselves as having depression. Haybron describes it like this:

For the most part of the last few decades, [Glen] has been fairly unhappy, afflicted by a low-grade but steady mix of depression, anxiety and stress. Not that he paid it much mind: when his sister, a therapist, first inquired about his feelings, his response was dismissive. "What in the world kind of question is that? Who gives a goddamn how I feel? If you have to know, I suppose I feel fine. Got nothing to complain about. Yeah, sure, I'm happy." (Haybron, 2008 p.199)

And although Haybron limits himself here to depression in its ‘milder’ forms,<sup>6</sup> the nature of depression is such that we could be blind to our own experience of it even when it’s more severe. It can cloud your thoughts in such a way that you might not be able to see that your experiences (as awful as they are) are anything other than ‘normal’.<sup>7</sup>

This kind of counter-example can make one of two mistakes about the Desire Account, depending on how the details are filled out. So, for each of the two examples I will respond in two steps. Firstly I will demonstrate why, if you fill out the details one way, subjects in the examples *do* desire for their experiences to stop. Next, I’ll consider what it would be like if we really took the agents in the examples not to have those desires, and I’ll show why situations like that don’t look like plausible cases of unpleasant experiences at all.

An important feature of my first response will be that it doesn’t dispute the existence of cases of genuine reflective blindness. Whether we are aware of the unpleasantness of our experiences, or on what levels we’re aware of it, doesn’t matter; my response stays neutral on it. What does matter is that I can demonstrate that when there is unpleasantness (conscious or not), the relevant desires are there.

### **Response one: unpleasant experiences and hidden desires**

Depression is, indeed, a good example of reflective blindness. Subjects can suffer for years without realising that anything is wrong with them, or that their experiences are coloured by a pervasive illness. But although these subjects may not know that they’re depressed, they will still be aware of other things about their experience, and these other parts of their experience can be the object of their desires. Feldman makes this point in his book *What Is This Thing Called Happiness?* (2010) He argues that depressed agents can still have negative attitudes (such as desires) about their everyday experiences, even if depression itself cannot be the object of those attitudes. Instead, the objects

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<sup>6</sup> Haybron also talks about ‘milder’ forms of depression as cases of reflective blindness on p.222.

<sup>7</sup> For a much fuller examination of the phenomenology of depression than I am able to cover here, see Ratcliffe (2015).

can be something as simple as going to the shops, going to work, seeing friends. The badness of depression, after all, manifests itself in the way we experience the rest of life.

### **Response two: no desires, no feeling of unpleasantness**

Suppose now we consider a subject who really doesn't have any such desires at all, even a desire to avoid the experiences of leaving the house or a desire to stay in bed. Sometimes this might be explained as the subject simply having a good day (relatively speaking) or a good moment in a wider context of their depression. Perhaps, for example, they can sometimes successfully distract themselves or employ some coping mechanisms that briefly lift them out of their depressed mood.

But this isn't perhaps the most paradigmatic way in which depressed subjects will have reduced desires. Rachels, for example, makes this specific criticism against the Desire Account: "[s]ome depressives have no impulse or only a slight impulse to change their condition, perhaps because they cannot imagine feeling happy". (Rachels, 2000 p.192) The worry is that depressed subjects can suffer from a lack of desires even while they're still intensely suffering.<sup>8</sup>

The mistake being made here is to confuse two of depression's key symptoms. The DSM-5 (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders) lists a number of depressive disorders, and characterises them in the following way:

The common feature of [depressive] disorders is the presence of *sad, empty*, or irritable mood, accompanied by somatic and cognitive changes that significantly affect the individual's capacity to function. (American Psychiatric Association, 2013. Emphasis my own.)

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<sup>8</sup> Ratcliffe, for example, refers to themes in descriptions of depression as including a "loss of hope" or experiencing the world as lacking "enticement" in Ratcliffe, (2015).

Depressive disorders generally, then, may be characterised by low mood but also by an ‘empty’ mood. The manual goes on to describe Major Depressive Disorder as the ‘classic condition’ of the set of depressive disorders, and gives the following diagnostic criteria:

Five (or more) [...] symptoms have been present during the same 2-week period and represent a change from previous functioning; at least one of the symptoms is either (1) *depressed mood* or (2) *loss of interest or pleasure*. (American Psychiatric Association, 2013. Emphasis my own.)

The two symptoms are distinct: low mood or loss of interest or pleasure. This latter symptom is described elsewhere in the manual as ‘anhedonia’: “Lack of enjoyment from, engagement in, or energy for life’s experiences; deficits in the capacity to feel pleasure and take interest in things.” (American Psychiatric Association, 2013.)

Depression is a paradigmatic example of when subjects tend to feel less desire. But the difference in felt desire does not match onto the unpleasant feelings of the subject, rather it seems to match onto the anhedonia: the diminished capacity to feel happiness. Lack of desire in depressed subjects is a kind of numb (or ‘empty’) feeling, an inability to want to act, perhaps related to an inability to conceptualise what it would be like to be happy again. (Ratcliffe, 2015) The psychological literature seems to support this; recent work has expanded on the definition of anhedonia to emphasise its ‘motivational’ aspect.<sup>9</sup> When we think about depression as a paradigmatic case of a subject having reduced capacity for desire it’s the anhedonia that we’re thinking of – not the depressed mood.

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<sup>9</sup> See, for example, Thomsen, (2015), Berridge and Robinson, (2003) and Treadway and Zald, (2011). This isn’t to say that a reduced capacity for motivation will always be connected to a reduced capacity for desire (or vice versa), but rather that this is still the phenomenon philosophers will think of when they think about depression and desire.

This, of course, makes perfect sense under the Desire Account, because we also understand pleasant experiences as consisting of a kind of desire. It isn't that depressed subjects don't want their unpleasant feelings to go away when they feel them, for their suffering to end. It's that depression can sometimes grip them in such a way that they have a reduced capacity for motivation (and, often, desire) for other experiences, including those that once gave them happiness.<sup>10</sup>

But it's not as obvious that anhedonia is distinct from unpleasant experiences as it is that unpleasant experiences are distinct from cases where depressed subjects are distracted or employing coping mechanisms. To justify this position, then, I'll say two further things.

Firstly, it's tempting to associate anhedonia with depressed mood because anhedonia will often go alongside unpleasant experiences. At least one of those two symptoms must be present for a diagnosis of major depressive disorder, for example, but that doesn't mean that the subject won't experience both. Anhedonia can even *cause* unpleasantness: it's a horrible feeling to reflect on the way you don't enjoy things like you used to, to feel like you're not able to participate in the world in the same way. Nothing here contradicts the Desire Account; as I clarified in Section 1, experiences are complex, and many experiences can have multiple aspects. Just as the feeling of anhedonia can go alongside displeasure, so the reduced capacity to have positive desires for things you once enjoyed can go alongside a desire for *that* experience – the anhedonia – to stop. What matters is that the anhedonia is a different phenomenon to the displeasure itself.

Secondly, it will be tempting to describe even the anhedonia on its own as an unpleasant experience because of all the other ways in which we can appreciate how bad it is. Anhedonia can be unhealthy, incapacitating, and something that overall makes a person worse-off.<sup>11</sup> But it can be

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<sup>10</sup> That's not to say that depressed subjects will never have desires aimed towards things that once made them happy. In some cases they will, for example, want to see their friends, to go back to work, for their life to return to the way it used to be, etc. The depression will sometimes instead prevent them from being motivated to act in ways that might bring those things about. See, for example, Swartzler, (2015).

<sup>11</sup> For more discussion on the relationship between anhedonia and well-being (as opposed to unpleasant experiences) see Tully, (2017).

all of these things without being the same thing as being a felt unpleasant experience at that particular time. It's an inability to experience the pleasures one once felt, and sometimes that is really *bad enough*.

I've now addressed the phenomenon in which depressed subjects can experience a reduced capacity for desire. In doing so, I demonstrated that one of the symptoms of depression was anhedonia: 'diminished interest or pleasure in almost all activities', and I argued that this is what people are thinking of when they think of depression as something that diminishes a subject's desires. Such an explanation is supported by the Desire Account: a reduced capacity for desire would accompany a lack of feeling pleasure.

## **Lessons**

From this examination of depression and reflective blindness we can learn two main things, and the first of these is a lesson about the Desire Account. I hope that the close study of the phenomena can be generalised more widely to other counter-examples, as I showed that the details of the case could go one of two ways: either the desires are there but hidden or mischaracterised (such as a desire to avoid having to go to work instead of a desire to not be depressed) or the experience (or that particular aspect of the experience) isn't unpleasant at all. Here instead we saw this was likely to happen in cases where an experience is complex, and made up of other phenomena that can be separated.

The second thing we can learn from this argument is about the nature of depression itself, and what lessons we take from it when we use it as an example in metaethics or to understand desires and moral psychology. We need to remember that the nature of depressive disorders is such that we may *sometimes* feel something better described as 'neutral'. We also need to remember that anhedonia is just one symptom, and one that often but *not always* goes alongside a depressed mood.

## Conclusion

This paper defended the Desire Account of unpleasant experiences. It did this by rejecting counter-examples of reflective blindness, by specifically looking at subjects with depression. To have depression is not *always*, as I showed, to be having an unpleasant experience. This would be a gross over-simplification. Depressed subjects can instead sometimes just suffer from anhedonia: a lack of capacity for pleasure rather than depressed mood. Other times (because depression can be a long-term companion) a depressed subject can even be coping well, even find some things pleasant. When the experience of depression *is* unpleasant, I've argued that the desire for the experience to stop will always be there. My opponents might have thought otherwise because the depressed subjects might have reflective blindness and cannot tell they're depressed, but in these cases they still desire for other experiences that are aware of – the ones coloured by depression – to stop.

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