

Abstract for the general public

Pleasure and displeasure play an important role in our lives. Despite their ubiquity, defining them or finding out their specific role in psychological functioning is no easy task. It is not surprising, then, that they have been a prominent object of study for sciences, though under different guises – utility, affective valence, flow, pain, etc. Indeed, the different fields of research that have dealt with pleasure and displeasure employ a diversity of methods, assumptions and conceptualizations.

By making the most out of this opportunity for fruitful dialogue, the goal of this project is to understand how best to delineate and measure pleasure and displeasure in an ethically responsible way. Ultimately, I hope to contribute to a more integrative picture of pleasure and displeasure.

To achieve this, I intend to use an interdisciplinary approach that draws on both philosophical theorizing and empirical evidence, at the intersection of ethics, philosophy of mind and empirical sciences. My methodology will be analytical, as I intend to critically review, interpret, and assess the assumptions, concepts, and results of these various fields of research to answer my research questions.

I will focus on two research topics: (1) pleasure, displeasure and awareness and (2) measuring pleasure and displeasure. These can in turn be broken down into the following research questions:

1.1 Can pleasure and displeasure occur unconsciously?

This question has cropped up both in a recent discussion in the philosophy of pleasure and in debates in neuroscience, where many authors tend to think that there are unconscious pleasures and displeasures.

To answer this question, I will start by analyzing the notion of awareness to disentangle its different senses. I then intend to assess the scientific case for phenomenally unconscious pleasures and displeasures through a careful analysis of several limit cases such as subliminally-induced emotion or pain during anesthesia or deep sedation. I will argue that in spite of these cases we should take phenomenal awareness as a necessary condition for pleasure, but that other, more cognitively demanding forms of awareness are unnecessary.

1.2 What ethical significance would unconscious pleasures and displeasures have?

Pleasures and displeasures are widely thought to contribute (respectively positively and negatively) to well-being. What about pleasures and displeasures which we are not aware of? My goal is to develop a general theory of the mediating role of awareness in the contribution of pleasure and displeasure to well-being.

2.1 What is the quantitative structure of pleasure and displeasure?

I will explore the quantitative structure of displeasure, i.e. the set of quantitative features that pleasure and displeasure have. I will focus on two debated quantitative features: value superiority or inferiority, i.e. experiences that would be “infinitely” more pleasant or unpleasant than others, and the oppositeness of pleasure and displeasure. Both debates have important ethical implications.

2.2 Are existing measures of pleasure and displeasure fair?

It is commonly accepted that a satisfactory measure has to represent truthfully the property that it intends to measure, in other words it has to be valid. It is less recognized, however, that a measure that fails to be valid might be unfair. To explore this overlooked topic, I will look into how hedonic measures might distort the subjects’ true hedonic levels. For example, according to Bartoshuk (2014), some measures of pain would consistently underestimate the intensity of the pain experienced by women. Such measures of pain, it could reasonably be argued, would be unfair to women, with potentially serious consequences like inadequate clinical treatment of women.