8.2 Hedonic Reasons as Ultimately Justifying and the Relevance of Neuroscience

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Richard Joyce, who believes that morality is globally mistaken in making normative claims on people that do not wholly derive from their own desires or institutional commitments (2001, 2006a), in his chapter defends ethics from more piecemeal undermining by neuroscience while suggesting that it will be undermined globally in other ways. My perspective is very different. I think that while some parts of natural human morality may rest on illusion, hedonically grounded practical reasons, and at least those parts of morality that rest on them, very likely have some objective normative standing. I will suggest that the hedonic good and bad in human life provide a grounding for this. Since harms and benefits are central to much, although not all, of natural human morality (including duties not to harm or deprive of goods), and suffering is often an unproblematic and important harm, just as pleasure, or happiness, is often an unproblematic and important good, the normative status of hedonic reasons bears importantly on central parts of natural human morality. Their standing is subject to undermining by any neuroscientific and other discoveries suggesting that they are based merely in recently evolved adaptations for shared confabulation that serves social cooperation. However, their standing is also open to similarly scientific confirmation that our intuitive hedonic judgments and reasons really respond to perceptions of psychologically and biologically deep affective realities that are plausibly a source of ultimate and objective normatively justifying reasons.

Hedonic Reasons, Evolutionary Debunking, and the Relevance of Neuroscience

Ethics is concerned not only with what we as individuals owe each other (as is central to morality narrowly conceived; e.g., Scanlon, 1998) but also with what is ultimately good and bad in human life and what makes it so.

Denying truth or objectivity to all of ethics (as in Joyce 2001, 2006a; cf. Nichols, 2004b) involves rejecting (in their unqualified and unrelativized form) all such questions, or at least all their possible answers except "Nothing at all." If not only all of morality but all of normative ethics is falsehood or fiction (Joyce 2001, 2006a), then that life is ever at all good, worthwhile, or bad, or any of these more at some times than at others, would be a falsehood or fiction, too. On the other hand, if life is really sometimes good or bad, or better or worse, and can sometimes be made better or less bad, there are ultimate considerations in favor of doing so, ultimately justifying normative reasons for action.

Pleasure (feeling good or happiness) seems to be really good and (affective) pain (suffering or feeling bad) really bad, so that our having either of them really matters. If so, we have reasons in favor of pleasure and against pain. Hedonically based reasons seem to apply not only to the person whose pleasure or suffering is immediately concerned who thereby has reason to seek or avoid it. Such reasons seem also to apply generally and most saliently to others who can prevent or end suffering (cf. Nagel, 1986, pp. 156–162). Such reasons thus seem to be objective, or perspective invariant. Further, it is hard to see how the seeming perception of one's own pleasure and of its goodness or of one's own suffering and of its badness could be discredited by being shown to be based in affective reactions in the way that, it has been claimed, undermines many moral judgments (see Greene, chapter 2 in this volume). Where then is there room for projective error here? It may even seem that the notion of projective error, to which projectivist nonrealists about value appeal, presupposes some real value that we erroneously project upon outward things. These sources, it has seemed to many persons seeking a rational basis for ethics, are just the real goodness of pleasure and badness of suffering.

Evolutionary debunking, such as Joyce envisages here and argues elsewhere (Joyce 2001, 2006a), apparently for all of ethics, seems a different strategy. All our beliefs about value, even those about hedonic value, may be argued to be illusory on the ground that they are most parsimoniously explained, not by their truth, but by natural selection for fitness-enhancing adaptations to which the truth of these beliefs is irrelevant. There is then no reason to believe that these adaptations track (as perception does) rather than distort any corresponding reality (Street, 2006). If this strategy works for all of morality, it seems we would have no reason to regard any of our moral beliefs as true rather than illusory, even, for example, that we have objective reasons to avoid causing others needless suffering by inflicting gratuitous bodily harm.

However, plausible alternative evolutionary stories may be told about the origins of some ethical beliefs that are less damaging to their epistemic standing and even supportive of it. For example, it is plausible that pleasure and suffering, by whatever mix of natural necessity and historical contingencies of the evolutionary acquisition of function, reliably track aspects of our physiological well- and ill-being. In the mammalian and perhaps also in the avian lineages, a strong selection for infantile and juvenile displays of affective states that can be readily understood and used by caregivers seems the rule. These displays seem crucial to the young receiving the nutrition, warmth, and emotional nurture needed for survival. Such states and their recognition may then come to provide a basis for affective communication among adults in social species. There seems to be considerable overlap between coevolved neural mechanisms for perceiving one's own emotional states and those of others (e.g., Preston and de Waal, 2002; Panksepp, 2005; Singer & Frith, 2005). That the representations involved are affective representations would not make them any less information giving. If experiencing pleasure really has objective value and suffering has objective disvalue, they could carry that information, too. However, if the neural states, affective experiences, and values are not distinct in nature, but only conceptually different, no additional information or complexity in the world would be involved. This, rather than simplicity or parsimony relative to conceptual frameworks that are more finely grained than the world (in separating physiology, experience, and value), seems to be what we should consider when we weigh the relative plausibility of competing views. Thus, considerations of parsimony need not favor views of nature as devoid of either experience or value.

The scientific details that may fill out such a story are being supplied by neuroscience. So is information that may support alternative, more debunking stories, in which pleasure's apparent value is only a misleading projection of our desires or pursuits. Perhaps neuroscience suggests *some* positive affect is like that, but it seems not all is (see Katz, 2006, 3.2, 3.3; references and links to scientists' websites supplied there). And even if the good of life, the ill of suffering, and the importance of which of these we experience are constructed, the result would be no merely anthropocentric construction, as Haidt and Björklund (chapter 4 in volume 2) and Greene (chapter 2 in this volume) seem to suggest for all of morality and presumably for all of value as well. Rather, any such construction would seem to be one in which at least many higher vertebrates share. In our search for practical reasons that can withstand the test of objectivity (Nagel 1970, 1986), this much invariance in perspective may seem no trifling achievement and to provide a basis from which we may seek more.

Substantive Normative Practical Reasons versus Structural Rationality

In value-realist versions of hedonistic utilitarianism and indeed in any view that contains a value-realist hedonic component, the value of pleasure and the disvalue of suffering are no illusions, but figure among the truths on which whatever of ethics survives the test of rational reflection is to be built. In such a view, to say there would be no such value in a universe without life is not to say that truths about it can be only "true for us" or are created by our collectively accepting them, as Haidt and Björklund seem to say (volume 2, chapter 4) about all morality. Rather, there being no such value without life would be an ordinary fact, on a par with (and perhaps identical to) there being no physiological activity of some kind in a world without life. Even if there were no actual life worth living or avoiding, there would still be facts about the value of the pleasure or suffering that would obtain if there were such life, facts that would still obtain without anyone creating or accepting them.

Modern rejection of such realism about all normative practical reasons is older than liberal distaste for browbeating moralizing (e.g., Bernard Williams 1981, 1995, on whose relevant views see, contrastingly, Scanlon, 1998, pp. 48–49, 363–373 and Joyce, 2001) but not as old as awareness of moral diversity (which different prioritizing of shared values, e.g., social peace and collective well-being versus justice and individual liberty, along with differences in circumstances, may go far to explain). Its essentials may be found in Thomas Hobbes (1651), whose views of reason as mere calculation (*Leviathan* part I, chap. v, chap. 1–6,) and of goodness as a projection of our survival-driven desires (Part I, chap. vi, par. 7 and Part I, chap. xv, par. 40) foreshadow the explicit means-end instrumentalism about all practical reason (supported by evolutionary debunking of any more absolute value claims) that writers such as Joyce now maintain (2001). In this view, all normative reasons for action (for Joyce, outside institutions) derive from agents' aims, wants, or desires and can have validity only relative to these. (I assume Joyce's use of "interests" is similarly relativized to these and thus does not extend substantially beyond them.)

On such views, someone miserably depressed and consequently so unmotivated as to have lost all desires that would be served by seeking treatment known to be efficacious would have no reason to accept such treatment. Similarly, drug addicts single-mindedly given over to their craving and living a miserable life as a result would have no reason to change (but only instrumental reasons not to), to the extent that addiction excludes all competing or potentially controlling desires (and, for Joyce, would continue to do so under conditions of full information and careful reflection). This would presumably hold even if the sufferers acknowledged in a merely cognitive way the (supposed) reasons we (mistakenly) urge upon them, while lacking any corresponding desire to change. The depressive and the addict, if they acknowledged any such objective and absolute reasons, independent of their wants or desires, would, like us, be making mistakes. This seems a high price to pay for the (dubious, as I have argued) parsimony of a value-free metaphysics, especially when, as post-Newtonians and contemporaries of first-generation string theorists, we know we inhabit a world far richer and stranger than any allowed by Hobbes's purely mechanistic materialism and the evolved intuitive physics on which it is based.

Views that similarly based practical reason in actual or hypothetical choice, preference, or desire, and value in the fulfillment of one or the other of these, were common in the twentieth century, not only in areas of the social sciences that aim only at descriptive or predictive adequacy (e.g., in those parts of economics concerned with prices in markets), but also in more prescriptive fields such as welfare economics, game theory, decision theory, and ethical theory. However, the past few decades have seen a revival among analytic philosophers of more classically realist views of practical reason, in which practical reasons are seen as normatively applicable to action, planning, wanting, and sometimes also to feeling in much the same way as normative reasons apply to theoretical thinking and reasoning (e.g., Thomas Nagel, more fully in his later work, e.g., 1986, chaps. VIII and IX, and 1997, chaps. 6 and 7, than in his seminal 1970 work; Joseph Raz, 1975 and 1999, chap. 2; T. M. Scanlon, 1998, chap. 1; Derek Parfit, 2001 and forthcoming, chap. 1).

This perspective need not involve saying that people who fail to respond to such reasons ideally are irrational or "reasoning badly," as Richard Joyce suggests here in discussing Peter Singer, who explicitly disavows similar claims (1995, pp. 232–233). Both expressions may be best reserved for narrower uses marked by inconsistency in acknowledged commitments or errors in inference. One may say this while maintaining that there are other failures to respond appropriately to normative reasons that are not irrational in these ways (Scanlon, 1998, pp. 25–30 and 2007; Kolodny, 2005; cf. Parfit, forthcoming). One may even maintain that there are substantive normative practical reasons that are supplied by the facts of a case, while denying that we have similarly noninstrumental reasons to comply with the structural rationality of consistency and reasoning (Kolodny, 2005; Scanlon, 2007).

From this perspective, just as there are failures to respond appropriately to reasons for belief that are not failures in consistency or reasoning (as when one unreasonably refuses to accept the evidence of one's senses or mechanically accepts the conclusion of a valid argument when it would be more reasonable to reconsider one's premises), similarly one may fail to respond appropriately to substantive normative practical reasons as one should. And one can do this without any logical inconsistency or "reasoning badly" that would implicate one in structural irrationality consisting in internal incoherence among one's attitudes of believing, desiring, intending, willing, and the like (which some in the older rationalist and continuing Kantian philosophical traditions have thought to be involved in any failure to respond appropriately to moral reasons).

Objective Experiential Values versus Projections of Present Desires

Writers in this value- or reason-realist tradition often regard cases of hedonic reasons or value as providing clear illustrative cases of justifying reasons given directly by the facts of the case, rather than deriving from the direction of our aims or desires. However, two recent opponents see the same cases as supporting their own desire-based views (Copp & Sobel, 2002, p. 272; Sobel, 2005). In Scanlon's example (1998, pp. 42–47; 2002, pp. 339–340), the fact that one's current appetite for coffee ice cream will make eating it enjoyable gives one reason to eat some now. However, that is very different from one's having an ultimate reason to fulfill this appetite, let alone any and all desire merely as such, as those holding desire-based views of reasons for action have supposed. Use of the language of wanting, preference, liking, and desiring in describing hedonic cases by some on the realist side of this controversy (e.g., Parfit, 1984, pp. 493–494; Katz 1986, pp. 47–48, on which see Katz 2006, n. 35; Parfit, 2001; Scanlon, 2002) has led their opponents to believe they thus concede, even as they deny, that desire plays an ultimate justifying role in the case of hedonic reasons, and even that their refusal to believe in desire-grounded reasons more generally is therefore unmotivated (Copp & Sobel, 2002; Sobel, 2005; cf. Kagan, 1992).

There are, however, different kinds of state that may be legitimately called "desires" and the like. Few if any of these provide ultimate sources of reasons to fulfill the desires by achieving their aims, which is what is at issue here. Some even involve an appearance that there are reasons grounding the desire on which its correctness depends (Nagel, 1970, pp. 29–30; Schueler, 1995; Scanlon, 1998, pp. 32–49 and 2002, pp. 337–342). “Liking” also has various relevant uses; one, like one use of “being pleased,” involves nothing beyond pleasure itself. Since the experience of pleasure would not be separable from this liking, there is no room for the objection that, since any experience might not be liked, pleasure could not be a valuable experience grounding reasons, so that any hedonic value or reasons must ultimately derive from the contingent direction, upon an experience, of a desire.[1] Further, if good moods are to count as pleasure (as they should, at least for some purposes of value theory), pleasure, at least in the general case, seems neither to be nor to involve any intentional attitude (such as desire is), but at most a preintentional stance that may be objectless, although it may naturally extend to intentional attitudes if suitable psychological contexts arise (Katz, 2006, esp. 2.3.3).

Recent work in neuroscience suggests a dissociation between the neural dopamine systems often involved in motivation and the more properly hedonic systems (e.g., Berridge, 2004; Depue & Morrone-Strupinsky, 2005; Katz, 2005, 2006). What is relevantly at issue in this science is not whether Berridge’s core neural process or processes of “liking” are purely affective and distinct from all processes that have some motivational function (which Berridge denies). Rather it is whether the natural view—that hedonic value or reasons fundamentally concern the quality of the subject’s affective experience—coheres better with science than the opposed view, which makes any hedonic justificatory reasons instead derive from the direction of the subject’s desires or aims—and presumably attributes all appearances to the contrary to confabulation. Whatever the exact relations of (the possibly diverse forms of) pleasure to motivational processes may be, and even if pleasure is one or more neural motivational processes that may broadly be considered forms of desire, it still seems plausible that what matters fundamentally is how it (affectively) feels. Pleasure, however it is biologically or psychologically caused or constituted, does not seem to be the same thing as desire’s fulfillment conditions coming to pass. This may happen after the subject is dead or in the pleasureless craving of addiction, which may be simultaneously fulfilled without felt hedonic satisfaction. This is what we should anyway expect; the logical relation of fulfillment (analogous to satisfaction, in the logician’s special sense) and felt experience seem radically different. While our naïve and natural concept of pleasure (which perhaps has its reference fixed by ties to behavioral and social affective displays, such as the genuine Duchenne smile) may prove too undiscriminating for many purposes of neuroscience, hedonic psychology, and hedonic ethics, it seems likely that at least some of its emerging neurally and experientially more refined successors would then serve in its place to show a coherence between science and a realist picture of hedonic value (cf. Katz, 2006).

Nature, by whatever mixture of chance and natural necessity, of natural selection and other less predictable evolutionary processes, has given us capacities for theoretical understanding in fundamental physics and higher mathematics that were of no conceivable use (as such) in the adaptive environments in which our hominid line evolved. For similarly unknown reasons it has made us phenomenally conscious experiencers of affective happiness and suffering. More comprehensibly, given this, it has made us social animals who use the same affectively qualified representations by which we think of our own affective experiences to attribute similar experiences to others, to react emotionally to these, and to construct human moralities in part on the basis of the responses that such experiences seem to demand. That, in part, is why Joyce's projected science of sociolinguistics, which presumably would look only at the communicative and strategic uses of ethical language, would not satisfactorily dispose of this part of morality. Language is here intimately bound up with thoughts and purposes with deeper roots, which reach below group-level and dyadic sociality to phenomenal experience itself, with which the experienced reality of hedonic value seems intertwined. We are acquainted with these before we distinguish ourselves from others.

Perhaps it was not for nothing that the radically empiricist Epicureans attributed epistemic priority to the infant's unqualified and unenculturated perception of the goodness of pleasure and badness of pain (Brunschwig, 1986). It may be not such perceptions (or the conceptually elaborated cognitions and ethical reasons to which they give rise), but rather our employment of our later-developing distinctions between oneself and others and between in-group and outsiders to justify special spheres of self-interest and particular loyalty, that should be regarded as epistemically discredited by their genealogies in natural selection and cultural evolution (cf. Katz 1986, sect. 5.4).

Perhaps pursuing this line of thought rather than following Joyce would be only exchanging one evolutionary just-so story and metamythology for another. In my favorite story, real hedonic value grounds substantive ultimate normative practical reasons, with any additional self-interested reasons illusory. In Joyce's account, merely instrumental reasons are grounded only in groundless desire, whose ends in themselves have no real value. In stark contrast, some of us think desire in itself, and taken as such, adds no new reasons at all, as cases of desire for worthless ends (that are also without good causal consequences, such as one's increased enjoyment in games one wants to win) seem to show. Unpacking elements of these two packages and reassembling them into others is of course possible. However, the contrast between these broad theoretical pictures may serve to illustrate, better than a bare appeal to impartial reason, what is at issue in the passage from Peter Singer (1995, pp. 225–233) quoted in part by Joyce in his chapter (p. 389), in which Singer seems to follow the fuller arguments of Henry Sidgwick (1874/1907, Bk. III, chap. xiii and Bk. IV, chap. ii) and Thomas Nagel (1970, 1986), without, however, the cognitivist and realist perspective they share. Which stories will provide the best guidance in working toward a unified understanding of all that our experience and its scientific understanding bring to the table remains to be seen. An informed decision on whether hedonic value provides a plausible stopping point in any debunking of ethics, as I have suggested, must await a more complete understanding of our intermeshed cognitive, motivational, and affective constitution and situation; in achieving this understanding, the neurosciences, along with other sciences, have roles to play. One might say that such questions matter greatly were it not that part of what is in question is whether anything really does. Matters, that is, not by being something people care about or desire, but in a way that gives such caring and desiring their correctness and point. This, affective experience (not through any motivational force or intentional direction upon objects which it may or may not have, but by how it feels) seems most clearly to do.

Note

1. This objection is posed in Sobel (2005) against Scanlon and also against Parfit (2001), using Scanlon's own example. See Scanlon's earlier response (2002, pp. 337–342) to Copp and Sobel (2002, pp. 269–272). Compare, with Sobel's objection, Trigg (1970, pp. 121–123); compare, with Scanlon's response, Sidgwick (1874/1907, pp. 46–47). For a discussion of the nature of pleasure that is relevant to Sobel's repeated claims that pleasure is not an experience, apparently following Ryle, see Katz (2006). See also Ruth Chang (2004), whose view of the controversy discussed here and of its upshot is in some ways similar to Scanlon's, Parfit's, and my own apparently slightly differing views, although it is not identical to any of them.