Attitudinal Theories of Pleasure, and Unconscious *De Re* Desires

# Abstract

This paper has two main aims. Firstly, it will defend an ‘attitudinal’ account of pleasure; that is, an account of what it is that makes an experience pleasant in terms of a certain kind of *de re* desire that the subject has towards that experience. Secondly, in doing so, the paper aims to further our understanding of unconscious desires, and what the subjects of such desires can be.

The paper begins by introducing two existing accounts of what makes an experience pleasurable. It then offers a unique diagnosis of a recent objection and existing responses, arguing that the two positions are currently at a stalemate. Then, I argue for the possible existence of unknown and unconscious de re desires, and show how such desires provide the best defence of such 'attitudinal' accounts.

# Introduction

This paper has two main aims. Firstly, it will defend an ‘attitudinal’ account of pleasure; that is, an account of what it is that makes an experience pleasant in terms of a certain kind of *de re* desire that the subject has towards that experience. Secondly, in doing so, the paper aims to further our understanding of unconscious desires, and what the subjects of such desires can be.[[1]](#footnote-1) The paper will draw on contemporary work on the existence of unconscious desires generally, as well as our more commonly held intuitions about what desires are like, and then apply this in the context of desires that are *de re* for a particular experience. As I will argue, understanding that we can have *de re* desires for experiences that we’re not aware of provides us with the tools that attitudinal accounts of pleasure need to deal with some important counter-examples.

In Section 1 I will do the necessary groundwork by explaining the two of the most important approaches so far in understanding the nature of pleasurable and unpleasant experiences: ‘phenomenological’ and ‘attitudinal’ theories. In Section 2 I’ll introduce a recent problem for attitudinal theories, put forward by Bramble: that of the existence of unconscious pleasurable (or unpleasant) experiences. Two attitudinal theorists so far, Heathwood and Feldman, have stepped up and denied, in one way or another, the existence of such completely unknown pleasures. In Section 3 I’ll briefly describe these attempts and a rebuttal from Bramble. I’ll give an argument for why *neither* side is successful in determining whether unknowable experiences provide a counter-example to attitudinal theories. A better option, as I’ll argue in Section 4, is to show how attitudinal theories *do* allow for the existence of unknowable pleasurable experiences, if they exist. And that is through arguing for the existence of unconscious *de re* desires, towards those unknowable experiences.

Not only does this overcome the current stalemate, but in making this argument, I will also show that there are broader lessons to take away about the nature of pleasure, desire, their relationship, and our self-knowledge of these states. In particular, I will show that desire-based theories in ethics generally have the tools to argue against accusations of ‘over-intellectualisation’.

# S1. The Set Up: Attitudinal and Phenomenological Theories

Suppose I reflect upon an experience that seems pleasurable to me: drinking coffee. What is it about this experience that makes it feel so good to me? After all, I find it to be more than just a neutral collection of sensations, such as that of the coffee’s taste, texture, smell; I also find those sensations to be something enjoyable. Furthermore, what is it that makes those sensations seem pleasurable to me, but not to some others who don’t like coffee? These questions aren’t about understanding brain chemistry and hormones and the *physical* structures of the way our bodies are at the moment of these sensations, but rather they’re questions about our minds, about what is it that makes these sensations *seem* to us the way that they do. If there really is something that it means for an experience to be pleasurable or unpleasant, then perhaps there is some unified feature of these experiences that makes it so.

One way to divide up theories about the nature of pleasure is to categorise them as either ‘phenomenological’ approaches,[[2]](#footnote-2) or as ‘attitudinal’ approaches.[[3]](#footnote-3) Theories of the first kind say that whatever it is that makes an experience a pleasurable one is something about the way the experience *feels*. Some versions explain this in terms of a kind of ‘hedonic tone’,[[4]](#footnote-4) but the one I’m most interested in will be Bramble’s version of the ‘distinctive feeling’ theory. According to the distinctive feeling theory,

…for an experience to be pleasant (or unpleasant) is just for it to involve or contain a distinctive kind of feeling, one we might call ‘the feeling of pleasure itself’, or simply ‘the pleasant feeling’ (or, in the case of unpleasant experiences, ‘the unpleasant feeling’).[[5]](#footnote-5)

Included in the regular sensations of an experience, then, can be a specific and distinct feeling of pleasurableness or of unpleasantness. When an experience is more pleasurable it will have more of the feeling, and when it is less so it will have less accordingly. The thing that makes the coffee seem pleasurable to me is that the other sensations – the taste, the smell, the texture – are all permeated with this additional feeling of pleasure. A person who doesn’t like coffee may have no such sensation as a part of their experience, but rather the same taste, smell, and texture may even be accompanied by a distinctive *unpleasant* feeling.

The second approach is an ‘attitudinal’ one, according to which the explanation comes not from the feelings themselves but from our attitudes towards those feelings. Most commonly, attitudinal theories try to explain pleasure in terms of a desire – and when I refer to attitudinal theories in this paper, the desire-theory in particular is the kind that I’ll be thinking of.[[6]](#footnote-6) Heathwood formulates it like this:

a sensation S, occurring at time t, is a sensory pleasure at t iff the subject of S desires, intrinsically and de re, at t, of S, that it be occurring at t[[7]](#footnote-7)

So when a particular experience is a pleasurable one for a subject, according to the attitudinal theorist, that subject has a specific kind of desire for that experience to be occurring. As I sip the coffee, the sensations of taste, smell, and texture are each ones that I want to be having (insofar as I find *each* of them pleasurable). And for my coffee-disliking counterpart, when they drink coffee they want *not* to be having those sensations.

As it’s clear from Heathwood’s formulation above, not just any desire will constitute pleasure. For example, if I don’t like coffee but I have an instrumental desire for those sensations in order to get a boost from the caffeine, then those instrumental desires won’t constitute a pleasurable experience. Narrowing down the kind of desire in question can help address a number of similar initial objections and counter-examples.[[8]](#footnote-8) The desire that constitutes pleasure is intrinsic, it occurs at the same time as the experience itself, and it is towards that same experience *de re*.

Because it will be an important focus of this paper later on, I’ll say more in particular about what it means for a desire to be *de re*. The term refers to the content of the desire; for a desire to be *de re* means that it is for *the thing itself*, as opposed to a de dicto desire that might be for something more generally. In the context of the kinds of desire that attitudinal theorists care about, it means that the desire for a particular experience to continue must be a desire for *that particular experience* to be the one that continues. Heathwood says the following:

…one’s desire must be genuinely about the very sensation one is getting— […] it must be a de re desire about that particular sensation. Indeed, this does seem to capture the metaphor […] about giving the sensation a thumbs up, as well as the talk of having a desire directed towards the particular sensation. One couldn’t really give a sensation a thumbs up, in the sense intended, or have a desire directed towards the particular sensation, unless one were directly acquainted with the sensation.[[9]](#footnote-9)

So suppose I am enjoying another cup of coffee. The desire that would make this experience pleasurable for me is a desire for the experience of drinking the coffee to continue. But it can’t just be the de dicto desire for *whatever sensation I am having in virtue of drinking the coffee* to continue. The desire must be about those particular sensations themselves to continue.

# S2. A Problem: Unknowable Pleasures

The existence of unknowable pleasures provides a supposed ‘decisive objection’ to attitudinal theories.[[10]](#footnote-10) In this section I’ll begin by explaining the objection, and then why existing responses are unconvincing.

Supposedly, there are some experiences that subjects find pleasurable or unpleasant without realising, at the time, that they are either pleasurable or unpleasant.[[11]](#footnote-11) This might be because they’re distracted, or they’re not thinking clearly, or reflecting well on their experiences – or it may even be too insignificant or have infiltrated their experience too gradually to be noticeable at all. It’s for this reason that Bramble refers to it as the ‘reflective blindness objection’, taking the term from Schwitzgebel.[[12]](#footnote-12) The experience might be such that we wouldn’t even notice it upon careful reflection at the time. Suppose, for example, that I sip on a coffee while I write a paper. There are a wide range of things going on in my mind: I’m puzzled by a philosophical theory, and some difficult phrasing. I’m trying to resist a lurking temptation to abandon the sentence I’m mid-way through writing, in order to check for messages from friends and an important email that I’ve been waiting for. There’s a cool breeze on my feet, birds chirping outside, and the coffee at my lips tastes creamy and feels lukewarm. Some of these things I’ll be aware of, at the time – they’ll feature fairly prominently in the foreground of my mind. Others I might not be aware of at all, while they’re happening. Perhaps because they’re very insignificant sensations in a busy and distracted mind, or because they’re occurring somewhere beneath the surface of our conscious thoughts. More still might be completely beyond my reach – such as a low humming sound from the light or a fluctuation in my mood that I just would not be able to notice at the time.

Some of the experiences that we’re not aware of, argues Bramble, are experiences that are either pleasurable or unpleasant. He then goes on to argue that such cases make the attitudinal theories completely implausible. One example he uses is that of an older person:

…imagine being suddenly transported into a younger body. Isn’t it likely you would learn immediately, due to the contrast, of unpleasant experiences you had been having in your older body that you had been completely unaware of at the time (say, ones due to physical pressures being put on your body as a result of aging)? Unpleasant experiences seem to be capable of sneaking up on us by starting in very small amounts or very low intensities and then slowly accumulating or intensifying over time. In this way, we can come to suffer a considerable amount without ever having any idea of it. Unpleasant experience of this variety we might refer to as ‘suffering by stealth’.[[13]](#footnote-13)

It's important to note a distinction here between mental states that a subject *isn’t* aware of and mental states that a subject *cannot be* aware of. For advocates of this objection, it’s not just that some pleasurable experiences might be ones that we’re not attending to at a certain time, but some will be those that we could not attend to even if we tried. The mental states are not, as Williamson put it, ‘luminous’ to the subject.[[14]](#footnote-14) For this reason, I will refer to the objection as one of ‘unknowable pleasures’, instead of, for example, ‘unknown pleasures’[[15]](#footnote-15) or ‘unconscious pleasures’.[[16]](#footnote-16)

Bramble argues that such cases provide strong counter-examples to attitudinal theories of pleasure, because subjects cannot have desires for unknowable pleasures to continue, “…one can hardly have the relevant kind of attitude (be it disliking, not wanting, disvaluing, or whatever) toward an experience that one is entirely unaware of.”[[17]](#footnote-17) At least, not the particular kinds of desire that they think would constitute a pleasurable experience.[[18]](#footnote-18) It’s this that I’ll argue against in S4. Before then, I will briefly analyse a response from advocates of attitudinal accounts Heathwood and Feldman, and argue that neither are successful.

# S3. A Solution: Knowable Pleasures

Heathwood and Feldman both deny the force of the reflective blindness objection by denying the existence of fully unknowable pleasures, suggesting instead that they are in some way conscious or knowable. Although I won’t completely reproduce their arguments here, I will briefly describe them, before focusing on two responses that Bramble makes to them in defence of the existence of unconscious pleasures: 1) objective physical signs, and 2) later inference. With this focus in mind, I will argue that *neither* side is able to make progress as things stand – rather than refuting their arguments, Bramble has left things at a stalemate.

To begin with Heathwood’s argument, he tries to deflect the reflective blindness objection by making a distinction between different levels of unawareness: strong and weak. In cases of reflective blindness, a subject might not be aware of the sensation enough to notice it even upon reflection, but they might be ‘weakly aware’, which is enough that they would notice the change if the sensation stopped.[[19]](#footnote-19) Such weak awareness would be enough for the subject to have the required desire about those sensations.

Feldman responds by denying that reflective blindness cases are cases of pleasurable or unpleasant experiences at all.[[20]](#footnote-20) He goes through some of the examples and suggests why we might be mistaken about them, and puts his foot down – when we really have no awareness at all at the time about the experience, or no capacity for awareness, it is simply not a sensory pleasure or sensory unpleasantness. Instead, for example, we might be thinking of an experience that was unpleasant once but that stopped being unpleasant when we got used to it.[[21]](#footnote-21)

It’s not clear that these responses work in every instance, though, and nor is it clear that Bramble successfully refutes them. He responds by giving two reasons why we should think some of these unknowable experiences can be both unpleasant and unknowable, beyond even ‘weak’ awareness. For example, instead of noticing the cessation of an experience, and the difference between that experience stopping and our current one beginning, sometimes we might reflect on facts about our *current* phenomenology and use that to *infer* a previous pleasure or displeasure.[[22]](#footnote-22) It might not even be immediately after the sensations stop – we might realise it a while later. Presumably in a lot of cases we never become aware.

But whether we’re (correctly) inferring that those experiences were *unpleasant* for us at the time seems to be exactly what’s up for debate. The same is the case when Feldman and Bramble disagree on whether all of the cases of reflective blindness really are unpleasant or pleasurable for the person. The real crux of their disagreement, when it comes down to it, just seems to be about what a pleasurable or unpleasant experience *is*. And so, they’re unable to make any progress.

Secondly, Bramble argues that there are physical signs that can show us we’re experiencing pleasure,

That one’s heart is beating faster than it should be, one has goose pimples on one’s arm, one’s face is growing redder, etc., might alone be evidence of certain phenomenology in one, including pleasures and pains (whether one is in a position to introspect this phenomenology or not).[[23]](#footnote-23)

If these observable manifestations can appear without the subject being conscious of any pleasure or pain, and the observable manifestations are reliable signs of such pleasure and pain, then perhaps we can trust those external signs over the conscious thoughts of the subject.

But this won’t be enough, still, to make progress in the debate and persuade attitudinal theorists. Once again, whether these physical symptoms *are* reliable indicators of pleasure is exactly where the sides disagree. Appealing to these cases, in which there’s disagreement about the intuitions, isn’t going to be enough.

In this section I didn’t aim to give a decisive defence of attitudinal theories. Rather, I have aimed to give a clear diagnosis of the debate as it is so far, and to point out the unanswered questions. With disagreement about the nature of pleasurable and unpleasant experiences, it looks like we need to turn to other arguments. The real defence, I will show, is hinted at in the concluding section of Feldman’s paper. And that’s what I’ll turn to now.

# S4. A Better Solution: Desires for the Unknowable

After giving his argument against the possibility of unconscious pleasures, Feldman’s concluding section points towards an alternative response. He says:

Perhaps a critic will be doubtful about the existence of unconscious de re attitudinal pleasure, displeasure and desire. But if there can be unconscious pleasurable sensations, and there can be other unconscious attitudes, why can’t there be unconscious attitudinal pleasure, displeasure and desire?[[24]](#footnote-24)

This turns out to be, I will argue, the best defence of attitudinal theories, and it is this response that I will develop more fully in the rest of this paper. The attitudinal theorist doesn’t need to first determine whether we can have unconscious (or unknowable) pleasures, since, as I argued above, such a project has so far only gone in circles. Instead, the attitudinal theorist can skip straight to explaining how such pleasures can – if they exist – be accounted for.

In this section, I’ll argue briefly favour of the existence of unconscious desires, taking inspiration both from our more commonly-held intuitions and from the contemporary literature on desire. Next, I’ll narrow my target, arguing specifically that the kinds of desires that are said to constitute pleasure – those that are *de re* – can not only be unconscious, but they can be directed towards the kinds of experiences that constitute the cases of reflective blindness.

It seems that not all of our desires at any one time can be found floating through our consciousness, and appearing explicitly in our thoughts. My desire to be a respectable philosopher doesn’t go away in the mornings when my thoughts are completely distracted by the warmth of my bed, and when the thoughts of being a respectable philosopher leave me as cold as the world outside of it.[[25]](#footnote-25) Neither does it go away if I’m so comfortable in my bed that I completely forget – in the moment – what philosophy even is. And if you wanted to rouse me you might say “look, you want to be a respectable philosopher, so you’d better get up!” and not “well, I suppose you don’t currently want to be a respectable philosopher, so I guess I have no way to argue with you.”

The existence of unconscious desires is not a new discovery. Tim Schroeder, for example, talks about ‘standing desires’, which he compares to ‘occurrent’ ones.[[26]](#footnote-26) Here he aims to describe the difference between the desires which are currently “playing some role in one’s psyche” (occurrent) and those that are not (standing). The latter kind, then, are certainly unconscious. Similarly, Pettit and Smith demonstrate that the desires we have that feature in the ‘background’, rather than in the foreground of our consciousness, can even motivate us and influence our deliberations.[[27]](#footnote-27)

As far as Bramble is concerned, it’s not that he thinks that desires can’t be unconscious, but rather, the problem seems to come from the *de re* nature of the required kind of desire. He says:

One cannot want de re that a feeling be occurring if one has no idea that it is occurring.[[28]](#footnote-28)

And, later:

There is so much going on hedonically in our experiences at any one time, it is implausible that we could be aware of it all—let alone that we are always, necessarily, aware of it all—even weakly or unconsciously. But this is just what attitudinal theories require, for if we were not aware of it all, these sensations would not be so much as available for us to form the sort of *de re* attitudes toward them that, on these theories, make them count as pleasures and pains. For this reason, attitudinal theories require that we possess unbelievably vast unconscious cognitive processing powers. They must, as I put it then, ‘‘attribute far more than is plausible to the unconscious mind’’.[[29]](#footnote-29)

What is it about this kind of desire in particular that seems to pose such a problem? Why does a de re desire presume there to be some extra level of awareness?

Part of the worry, then, is that a de re desire needs something to latch onto, to be about. And it cannot be about a general experience that one *is* conscious of or familiar with, because it is de re – it must be the actual experience itself that the desire is about. And, according to the objection, that desired experience to be something luminous, that the subject is aware of, in the sense that they *could* notice it. And if that’s the case, then these cases of reflective blindness come up again, and we’re back to our stalemate in trying to determine whether they really are cases of pleasure.

The worry *also* seems to be one, in part, about this kind of desire over-intellectualising an otherwise fairly basic mental state. That by requiring there to be an extra desire as well as just an additional kind of phenomenology, the attitudinal theorist risks attributing too much complexity for a state that one is unaware of. This objection might be implicitly doing some of the work in determining why Heathwood and Bramble don’t think that de re desires can be directed towards a non-luminous experience.

A recent example of this kind of criticism against attitudinal theories comes from Aydede (although without the specific concern with unknown pleasures). He says:

The intentionality of desire and other pro-attitudes that are supposed to reduce sensory pleasure entails that any creature that is capable of having pleasant sensations can form an intentional state about its own sensations. This entails that the creature be capable of occupying states that refer to its own sensations and that can attribute (predicate) a feature to them thus referred — be it in indicative mood or conative mood. Again, Heathwood is explicit about this in his formulation above: the subject ought to be able to make a de re reference to its own sensation and make a predication. So it turns out that, according to attitudinal views, in order for a creature to be able to undergo pleasant sensations, the creature needs to be capable of forming thoughts about its own sensations, which is to say, it needs to be able to introspect its sensations. This is simply not credible.[[30]](#footnote-30)

Aydede, like Bramble and Heathwood, takes it that de re desires require some potential (at least) for introspection about the sensations being desired. If we take the ability to introspect, again, to be the same sort of thing that Heathwood understands by the sensations being luminous, and that Bramble means by talk of awareness, then the cases of unknowable pleasures that we’ve been looking at are a perfect exploration of this kind of criticism, and solving the former should also give us a good answer to the latter.

To address this worry, then, I need to take a closer look at what the attitudinal theorist really is committed to in terms of desire. I’ll do this by going into detail on a possible case of an unknowable pleasure, and comparing what the attitudinal theorist would need to say about it compared to the phenomenological theorist. The former, I hope to show by the end, does *not* require us to problematically over-intellectualise pleasure and displeasure after all, and the unknowable experience is still a plausible candidate for an unconscious de re desire to be about.

Let’s suppose, then, that there really are some unknowable pleasurable experiences, and compare what the attitudinal theorist must say about a case next to the phenomenological theorist. Let’s say that Archibald is getting on in age, and has slowly accumulated aches in his joints that crept up on him in such small increments that he hadn’t noticed them at all. When he goes about his day the aches in his knees are an unpleasant sensation, but he simply isn’t aware of it – and would deny having the aches if asked. Nonetheless, the aches are there. Both theories (if these experiences really are both unknown and unpleasant) will have to agree that the bare sensations themselves are there in the subject’s mind on some level, even if they’re unknown, unknowable, unconscious, etc. After all – a person can’t have an unpleasant sensation if there isn’t a sensation there to be unpleasant.

But neither can you have an unpleasant sensation without it being unpleasant, and so both theories will also have to agree that there’s something more about this particular sensation that *makes* it unpleasant. Its *unpleasantness* is also there. Compare this to having the sensation alone and it not being unpleasant. Sometimes we can experience the same bare sensations and they’ll be unpleasant, sometimes we can have them and they’ll be pleasant, sometimes they’ll be neither. I might have the same bare sensations in my knee that I used to have and no longer find them unpleasant, for example. I might have the same bare sensations now of what broccoli tastes like as I used to have when I was young, but now I find those sensations delightful and as a child I found them to be torturously unpleasant.

The theories do differ in their explanations of what that unpleasantness consists in. For the attitudinal theorist, that additional component of unpleasantness just *is* a kind of desire – one that, I argue, can be unconscious just as much as the unpleasantness can be. But the attitudinal theorist isn’t alone in having to add something onto the sensation – the phenomenological theorist also has to say something else is there in virtue of which the sensation is unpleasant. For Bramble it’s something that can be found in the sensation. The sensation, when it’s unpleasant, is “permeated” by the distinct feeling of unpleasantness.[[31]](#footnote-31) And when it’s pleasurable, it’s permeated by the distinctive feeling of pleasure.

So we’ve established that on both accounts there need to be sensations, and that there is something additional to those sensations in virtue of which they’re pleasurable or unpleasant. Why, then, is the pleasantness and unpleasantness of the attitudinal theory more problematic, why does it require more of our minds than the phenomenologist requires?

Well the phenomenologist doesn’t require *much*. And the thing it does require isn’t of a different *type* to what’s already there. The distinctive feeling is just another feeling, one that’s there whether or not it’s ‘available’ to us or prominent enough for us to notice upon a careful reflection or introspection.

From here, I’ll make a number of points in support of the attitudinal theory’s *de re* desire not being ‘too much’ to expect for an unknowable experience either. My first point I’ve already made – that the attitudinal theory doesn’t require an additional *number* of parts, compared to the alternative. Where the attitudinal theorist requires the presence of a desire, the distinctive feeling theorist still requires a distinctive feeling.

My second point defends the *type* of additional part. Our de re desires, too, can be very simple. They don’t require complex psychological machinery, or detailed conceptual frameworks. In describing his objection, Aydede says: “Many animals that we intuitively take to be capable of having affective sensory experiences, as well as young infants, don’t have the capacity to think (have desires) about their own sensations.”[[32]](#footnote-32) But what *do* they have desires for, if not that? Think about a small child who’s bumped their head. They have a new and sudden phenomenology, of the way the impact feels to them. What’s so complicated about that child wanting these new feelings to stop? Think of an animal enjoying a snack and giving a kind of mental ‘thumbs up’, as Heathwood put it, towards the sensations that they’re enjoying, or who wants the feeling of fear to go away when they’re at the vet’s. There doesn’t seem to be any extra complex conceptual schema required for a subject to have a desire directed towards a mental state than one towards, say, the food itself or the objects that they’re afraid of. What could be easier to have an intentional state towards, than the phenomena or sensations or feelings that one is directly acquainted with? And these desires are exactly the kinds of de re desires that the attitudinal theorist needs to be able to explain those experiences as being pleasurable or unpleasant.

This brings me to my third point: that if anything, it seems like the *de re* nature of the pleasure or displeasure means that there is even less worry about the over-intellectualisation of it. After all, there’s no need for more complex concepts. If I’m enjoying the ice cream I don’t need to know that it’s ice cream, I don’t need to know what flavour it is, or how long it will last. The only thing I need to have a desire about is the sensations themselves that I am experiencing at the time.

Perhaps this works in terms of ice cream, but people are usually aware of ice cream when they’re eating it. So what about cases of reflective blindness? Well, a proper understanding of the advantages of the *de re* nature of desire also gives us a solution to some supposed counter examples here, ones where we don’t have the proper concepts for or knowledge of what we’re really experiencing. Take the example of depression – a kind of unpleasantness that a subject can suffer from for years without knowing that they’re depressed. It seems right that the subject cannot have a de dicto desire to stop being depressed, but they can still have a de re one. After all, if there are still sensations that the subject *is* aware of – sensations, for example, of simply getting out of bed or going to work – and the subject finds those unpleasant because of the way that depression has tinted them, then that’s enough for the attitudinal theorist to point at as an object of the desire. The subject can de re desire *those* experiences to stop, because those experiences are the ones that they *are* familiar with.[[33]](#footnote-33) The subject is not aware – or perhaps even capable of being aware (at the time – of their depression, but they are conscious and aware of the way in which it manifests: through reduced enjoyment of things the subject would normally enjoy, through feelings of alienation, through not wanting to get out of bed, etc.

Fourth, and finally, I will say that our de re desires just need not be something knowable and conscious to us, nor directed towards sensations that are. It’s certainly not the case that our desires generally are knowable to us, and there’s nothing special about de re desires for sensations that changes that. Remember our direct comparison of Archibald above, and what his unconscious discomfort would feel like according to attitudinal and phenomenological accounts. Even the phenomenological theorist agrees that the sensations themselves, and the unpleasantness, are both there in *some* capacity, even though Bramble describes those sensations as being ‘unavailable’. The fact that the desire is de re doesn’t mean that it needs to, itself, be something that we’re aware of on *any* kind of higher level, nor does it mean that it needs to be directed towards something we’re aware of. If the unpleasantness of Archibald’s ache is there, then he can – consciously or not, knowing about it or not knowing about it – want it to stop.

Whether or not cases of reflective blindness are actually cases of sensory pleasure or displeasure is still up for grabs. But if there are such cases, unconscious and unknown desires allow the attitudinal theorist to account for them.

# Conclusion

This paper argues for the (possible) existence of unconscious and unknown de re desires, as well as those in particular that are directed towards unknowable experiences. Furthermore, it shows that the possibility of such desires provides the attitudinal theorist with their best defence against supposed ‘reflective blindness’ counter-examples.

It began by setting up two possible explanations for what makes a sensation a pleasurable (or an unpleasant) one. Attitudinal theories aim to explain pleasurableness in terms of a desire, where phenomenological accounts aim to explain it in terms of something about the feeling of the sensation itself.

Although there were worries that the specific kind of desire required for pleasure and unpleasant experiences was too complex to be unconscious and unknown, I argued that such worries are unfounded. I gave four reasons for this: 1) the additional desire didn’t mean there would be an additional number of parts in an explanation of pleasure, since the distinctive feeling theory also requires a distinctive (pleasurable) feeling, 2) de re desires can be very basic, 3) de re desires require even less complexity than de dicto desires, and 4) simply that we have no reason to think de re desires need to be knowable and conscious than for any other kind of desire.

As well as providing a sturdy defence of attitudinal accounts of pleasure, I hope that this paper has done some work in developing our understanding of unconscious states generally, and of giving desire-based theories a good tool to answer similar objections about how they might over-intellectualise other matters. Desire-based theories of normativity, of reasons, and of well-being, might benefit here too.

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1. The importance of such a topic shouldn’t be underestimated, given the relevance of understanding desire to such a wide range of other areas in ethics: theories of well-being, theories of reasoning, and theories of moral worth, to name a few. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. I’ll use the label of ‘phenomenological’ theory here, following Bramble’s (2013), but I take felt-quality theories to be the same type. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. It might not be the case that all theories can fit neatly into these categories, and that, too, might depend on how broadly we understand their scope. But the present discussion has the most bearing on the current debate between proponents of these two categories, so I’ll stick to discussing these two in this paper. A more careful analysis of how other views are divided will have to wait for a different paper. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. For an example of a hedonic tone theory see Crisp (2006). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Bramble, (2013) p.202. I use his theory as an exemplar of phenomenological accounts because I take it to be the strongest, as it seems to be the best placed to overcome other obstacles, more details of which can be found in his 2013 paper. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Heathwood refers to this version as the ‘motivational theory’ in Heathwood, (2007), but I prefer the term ‘desire theory’ from, eg, Ventham (2019) to avoid problems where motivation and desire might come apart. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Heathwood, (2007) p.32. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Heathwood addresses a number of these potential worries in his (2007), when he explains the reasoning behind the different parts of his formulation. More initial counter-examples and misunderstandings are addressed by other defenders of the theory, such as in Ventham (2019) where she argues that many of these are solved by the fact that the desires in question need not be overriding of a subject’s other desires, and that experiences are complex – often being pleasurable in some ways and unpleasant in others. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Heathwood, (2007) p.31. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Bramble refers to it as a ‘decisive objection’ in Bramble, (2013) p.203. He refers to the experiences as ‘unknown’ in his (2020) response, rather than unconscious (as Heathwood and Feldman describe them), and I’ll go into more detail on this distinction in S4. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. For the sake of simplicity, in most of this paper I’ll only refer to one out of either pleasurable or unpleasant experiences, although the objection and the responses apply to unpleasant ones as well. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. The Schwitzgebel he takes it from is Schwitzgebel, (2008). Although Schwitzgebel is where he gets the term from, he also credits Haybron, (2008) for similar work on unconscious pleasures that leads him to developing such examples as an objection to attitudinal theories. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Bramble, (2013) p.206. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. For much more detail on luminosity, and an argument in favour of the luminosity of sensations, see Williamson (2000). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Bramble titles his 2020 paper this way. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Heathwood (2018) and Feldman (2018) both include this term in their title. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Bramble, (2013) p.204. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. It’s worth noting that Heathwood also agrees, saying that “…if a person has a de re attitude with respect to some sensation, then he is directly acquainted with it; and from this it follows, I take it, that the sensation is luminous.” Heathwood, (2007) p.32. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Heathwood describes weak awareness: “if the sensations were to cease, the subject would notice their cessation.” Heathwood, (2018) p.223. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. “What’s really wrong with Bramble’s objection is the original assumption that there are unconscious pleasures and pains. Sorting this out will require reflection on the phenomenology of our experience of the passage of time.” Feldman, (2018) p.479. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. This example in particular is in Feldman, (2018) p.479. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Bramble, (2020) p.1336. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Bramble, (2020) p.1337. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Feldman, (2018) p.482. Heathwood’s (2018) p.226 also hints towards the possibility of this line of response, although it isn’t one that he wants to take himself – he thinks that the *de re* nature of the desire means one has to be ‘acquainted’ with the experience (2007) p.31. Bramble doesn’t mention these final lines in his response to Feldman and Heathwood. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. This example is taken from Foot, (1972) p.306. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Schroeder, (2017). Another feature of standing desires, as opposed to occurrent ones, is that they tend to be more long-term. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Pettit and Smith, (1990) Also discussed in *Mark* Schroeder’s (2004), particularly chapter 8. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Bramble (2020) p.1334. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Bramble, (2020) p.1339. The ‘as I put it then’ refers to Bramble, (2013) p.201. Emphasis added. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Aydede, (2018) p.14. I use Aydede as a particularly recent example of this criticism, and because I find the example to be clearly detailed in a way that’s particularly helpful for this current discussion on reflective blindness. But the criticism has appeared elsewhere before this, including in Sumner, (1998) p.177 and Mason, (2007) p.384. Aydede also describes the criticism elsewhere, such as in Aydede (2014) p.126. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. For where Bramble describes this best, see his (2013) p.210 in particular. For example, “If the distinctive feeling theory is correct, and I enjoy listening to Bach, while you do not, then the difference between our experiences of Bach has got to be that mine is permeated by ‘the pleasant feeling’, while yours is not”. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Aydede, (2014) p.126. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Depression is mentioned as a case of reflected blindness in Haybron (2008), which Bramble picks up on in Bramble (2013). It’s also used as a counter example to attitudinal theories in Rachels, (2000). For more on how the attitudinal theorist can account for it, see Ventham, (2019). [↑](#footnote-ref-33)