

THE INTERESTING AND THE PLEASANT

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THINK OF the most recent remarkable experience you have had. Perhaps it was reading an engrossing novel that opened your eyes to a new depth of poverty, stamina, and kindness. Perhaps it was attending a sporting event you thought would exemplify stereotypes on the basest level yet turned out to deliver an unexpected but welcome insight into empowerment and dedication. Perhaps it was a walk in the woods, just after the fall leaves dropped, transforming the previously lush forest into a network of brown sticks. Perhaps it was simply a conversation you had with a stranger in line at the coffee shop, which quickly moved from the expected small talk to a brief but memorable exchange about the healing powers of sound baths.

A shared aspect of these experiences is that they are interesting; they are ones that engage, captivate, and enthrall a subject. Exactly how experiences become or are interesting is variable. The quality of any experience depends upon the interaction between the subject and the activity with which she is engaging. Whenever a subject engages in an activity, the mental states she brings to it shape her experience of it. While some qualitative experiences are fairly predictable—scary experiences arise when the activity generates fear within the subject, and pleasurable experiences arise when the activity generates positive affect within the subject—in the case of the interesting, whether or not an experience is interesting is much more difficult to predict, because it depends heavily on the *particular* interaction between the subject and the activity. Sometimes experiences are interesting because they are novel; here what the subject brings is simply a lack of experience, which generates its interesting feeling. Sometimes experiences are interesting because they are unexpected; here the subject brings expectations that turn out to be false and it is the clash of expectations that generates its interesting feeling. And sometimes experiences are simply just interesting; here the subject may bring a sense of curiosity that allows her to become stimulated and enthralled.¹ In

1 The interesting is thus importantly different and not to be confused with “interested,” which I take to describe experiences that align with an agent’s particular, preexisting interests. Sometimes the interesting derives from preexisting interests, but, as the examples

each of these instances, the quality of the experience—its being interesting—arises from the particular interaction between the subject and the activity, which I will describe in terms of a “synthesis.” But most importantly, in each of these instances, the subject finding the experience interesting adds value to her experience.

We live lives full of interesting experiences, and many seek out interesting experiences as a way to enrich their lives. But the concept of the “interesting,” and its status as a prudential value, has received very little attention from philosophers.² It is time to remedy this neglect and explore what it means for something to be interesting and what kind of value interesting experiences embody.

In what follows here, after talking a little more about “experiential value” in general, I will begin my defense of the value of the interesting by showing the parallels between the interesting and the pleasant. I will argue that the interesting is an intrinsic prudential value, in largely the same sense that feeling pleasure is valuable: both present a value that is experientially realized and has its roots in the interaction between the agent and the activity. I will go on to argue that, despite sharing the same kind of value, the interesting is distinct from pleasure. Insofar as it challenges the hedonist’s assumption that pleasure and pain are the only evaluative dimensions of our phenomenological experiences, my argument here serves both as a defense of the value of the interesting and as an important critique of hedonism.

1. PRELIMINARIES: EXPERIENTIAL VALUE

In identifying the interesting to be an experiential value, my suggestion is that one of the ways in which experiences can be valuable is in virtue of being interesting. While I suspect there are many experiential values, the most familiar is the pleasant. Pleasant experiences are widely taken to be valuable for the subject; that a subject finds pleasure within an activity makes that experience a valuable one. There may be other valuable aspects of the activity and of the

above show, often it is the case that an agent finds experiences interesting even when they do not align with her interests.

- 2 Grimm discusses the interesting from an epistemological perspective (“What Is Interesting?”). Kraut hints at the interesting in his discussion of wonder and puzzlement (*The Quality of Life*, 49–50). Matthen describes aesthetic engagement in terms of a distinctive form of psychological engagement that is reinforced by pleasure such that it becomes self-motivated (“The Pleasure of Art” and “New Prospects for Aesthetic Hedonism”). His account comes the closest to mine in its emphasis on cognitive engagement, yet his analysis describes the value of this engagement in terms of the pleasure that attends arousal, whereas the suggestion of this paper is that there is value to the engagement itself.

subject's engagement in it. The activity might be morally valuable, insofar as it helps someone else. The activity might also be such that the subject's engagement in it allows her to develop her capacities, therein having perfectionist value. That the subject finds the experience to be pleasant is a separate and additional source of value. Its value lies solely at the phenomenological level, whereas moral and perfectionist values have their basis within the nature of the activity or within the nature of the subject. While some analyses of these values maintain that there is also a phenomenological component to them, rarely is the phenomenological level sufficient to explain them. Aristotle, for example, locates moral value in the development or exercise of the virtues; he maintains that the experience of exercising virtue generates pleasure within a virtuous agent, but that the virtuous agent finds pleasure in her activity does not *add* to its moral value. Rather, it more properly reflects the moral value of the subject—for she would not find pleasure in the exercise of virtue were she not herself virtuous.³

The concept of “experiential value” thus describes a fairly limited kind of value. It describes a value that is good for the subject, in the moment she experiences it. Pleasure has long been regarded as an experiential value. It is something a subject feels as she engages in an activity and gives value to that experience. While hedonism maintains that the experiential value of pleasure exhausts the category of prudential value—such that for the hedonist, experiential value just is prudential value—it is also possible to see experiential value, in general, as *one* form of prudential value. That is, experiential value presents one thing among possibly many things that are valuable to a subject. Just as it can be prudentially valuable for a person to develop virtue, or to exercise their capacities, it can be prudentially valuable for someone to experience value.

Exactly how experiential value weighs up against other sources of prudential value is an important question but will not be my focus here. My aspirations are modest; they are limited to showing the experiential value of the interesting, while leaving open the question of how this experiential value contributes to one's overall good life.⁴ Answering this question requires taking stands on the overall nature of prudential value that are not necessary to the current aim, which is to show that the interesting is an experiential value, something that is good for the subject, in the moments in which she experiences it.

3 Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, bk. x.

4 In this respect my perspective on the role of experiential value differs from Kraut, *The Quality of Life*. Kraut's analysis of experiential value parallels mine, yet Kraut seeks specifically to defend experientialism as a form of well-being.

2. WHAT IS THE INTERESTING?

While there are many different senses of the word “interesting” used within ordinary language, I focus here on the sense of interesting as it is used to describe experiences: What do we mean when we say that an experience is interesting, such as when we walk away from a conversation with someone and think, “that was so interesting,” or when we find ourselves so utterly enthralled by a film that we just cannot look away? We find an activity interesting when something within it captures our attention in a way that stimulates curiosity and leads us to both notice and seek out the nuances of the activity. When something is interesting this aspect of it tends to linger beyond the immediate engagement. When we walk away from an interesting conversation, we often find ourselves returning to that conversation in our thoughts, and in revisiting that conversation we may even find that thinking about the conversation is itself an interesting experience. Finding something interesting shapes and transforms our experiences and often impacts our perspective. Finding something interesting triggers something within us.

To better illustrate the nature of the interesting, and why some experiences are interesting and others are not, compare the following two experiences.

Ingrid reads a Jack Kerouac biography and finds herself completely enthralled. She focuses on all of the details, thinking through how Kerouac’s real life events play out and compares to the ones in his novels, finding the descriptions of his complicated relationships with others to be a gold mine full of examples of how our interactions with others can shape our values, and of how even the smallest encounter can set one on a new course in life. At the end of reading the biography, she just wants more and makes a plan to read all ten current biographies.

Anna reads a Jack Kerouac biography and has to force herself to finish it. She cannot understand how (or why) one would choose to live the life that he did. She cannot understand his fascination with Neal Cassady, nor, for that matter, why Cassady deserves such a notorious position within the counterculture movements of the ’50s and ’60s. The one piece of Kerouac’s life that she found worthy of reading about was about the daughter he left behind. While she found this piece of information worth knowing, it also operates as a deal breaker for her, as once she learned this aspect of Kerouac’s life, it prevented her from finding anything about the rest of his life interesting. She made it through the biography but sets it aside and never again voluntarily thinks about Kerouac or his novels. When something else reminds her of him, all

she remembers is that he left his kid. She does not really care about any other aspect of his life.

Here we have an activity that one person finds interesting while another does not.⁵ The activity, *qua* reading the biography, is the same. But the experience could not be more different. Ingrid's experience was interesting; Anna's experience was annoying. Whereas Ingrid might describe her experience as life changing, Anna would describe it as a waste of time.

It cannot be that what makes the experience interesting is that the biography was itself interesting. Rather, what differentiates these two experiences is that they are distinct experiences: i.e., different subjects engaging in an activity. The activity, *qua* reading the biography, may be the same, but the subject's experience depends upon her interaction with the activity, which is informed by her specific mental states.

In this case, we might speculate that Anna's commitment to family roles, and to overall good citizenship, might have prevented her from finding the activity interesting. In contrast, we might speculate that Ingrid's rather conservative and sheltered upbringing prompted her to find learning about Kerouac's lifestyle an interesting activity. Our past experiences, and our beliefs and values, certainly factor into how we engage in the activity. Our personality does too: a naturally curious person probably finds a lot more activities interesting than does a person with less curiosity, an observant person might find certain activities such as walking or driving more interesting than a less observant person, and so on.

That which a person brings to an activity plays a central role in whether or not her experience turns out to be interesting; it is likely that the individual's contribution to the activity plays a more important role than features of the activity. The Kerouac example supports this, as do our countless experiences of finding something interesting that others do not. The best explanation of this common phenomenon appeals to the fact that experiences arise from the interaction between a subject and an activity, an interaction that is specified by the subject's mental states and comes together in a synthesis that makes each person's experience unique.

Whenever we engage in an activity, there is some kind of synthesis, and this synthesis determines the phenomenological feel of the experience itself. Attitudinal hedonists point out that when we engage in activities that we desire, we find ourselves pleased: the synthesis created in this case generates a pleasing phenomenological feeling. In this case, if attitudinal hedonism is correct, the

5 Yet notice that it would not necessarily be apt to say that Anna finds it *boring* simply because she does not find it interesting. I discuss the relationship between the interesting and the boring in the appendix.

synthesis is clearly specifiable in terms of the interaction between a person's attitude and its direction of fit with the activity. But the synthesis that generates interestingness is not one that can be so specified. Sometimes a subject's values and desires drive the synthesis—as is the case with Anna, whose values inhibited her from finding learning about Kerouac's life to be an interesting experience. But sometimes values and desires factor into the synthesis in more dynamic ways, as is the case with someone who finds the experience of reading books about Charles Manson to be interesting. A teenage girl with limited experience of those outside of her rural community may find interest in the sheer differences between her lifestyle and the free yet dangerous lifestyle of those her own age living as part of Manson's values; here the distance between the values she inherited through her upbringing and the values embodied by those so similar in age yet so different in attitude and lifestyle stimulates her curiosity and generates interest. In this instance, values and desires may be relevant, but only because they clash with the content of the activity. And finally, sometimes values and desires do not influence the synthesis at all: sometimes we find reading a book interesting just because the author's writing style "clicks" with us.

We cannot provide a uniform analysis of the interactions that generate interesting experiences, for ultimately whether or not something is interesting depends on unique features of the subject and how she engages in the activity. There are many mental states a subject brings to an activity, including expectations, desires, values, beliefs, general likes and dislikes, and curiosity and other features of one's personality. And there are many ways in which these features can combine with the activity: we expect not to learn anything from our third or fourth reading of the same book, but find that we do; we have strong family values that prevent us from finding anything but negativity when we read about one who abandons his family, or we have values so different from another that they stimulate curiosity and interest, and so on. It is unreasonable to think that we can specify uniformly the features a subject brings to an activity that result in an interesting experience, and, indeed, I think it a central feature of the dynamic quality of the interesting that there can be no such specification.

That the details of the synthesis resist uniform specification does raise the question of whether the various experiences we find "interesting" track something that is uniform across all of its instantiations. When I find reading a philosophy book to be an interesting experience, is this the same phenomenological quality that others find when reading books that are of a very different kind and scope? Is it the same phenomenal quality that others might find on their Sunday drives, or while birdwatching? The concern is straightforward:

Given the vast array of experiences that we find interesting, is it reasonable to assert that there is a shared phenomenological aspect of these experiences?⁶

I find reading philosophy books to be an interesting activity, at least most of the time. I also often find looking at trees to be interesting, and always find thinking about what goes on in my dog's head to be an interesting activity. Even if we keep the subject constant (and so do not take into account that other people very well may not find these activities interesting), is it really plausible to think that all of these experiences share one phenomenological quality of being interesting? I think they do, and that we can helpfully describe this phenomenological quality in terms of a state of cognitive arousal. When we find something interesting, it is because we find that the experience has activated a state of cognitive arousal—it sets in motion the activation of cognitive mechanisms that were previously at rest. Experiences can be vastly different yet have the same phenomenological feel in virtue of the ways in which they stimulate our cognitive capacities.⁷

We can, of course, identify common factors that tend to facilitate or inhibit the degree of interestingness found within an experience. While ultimately an empirical question, it is plausible that facilitators include curiosity, open mindedness, a secure sense of self that allows a person to be open to risk taking and challenges, and a strong sense of autonomy that allows a person to fully emerge in her activities.⁸ Inhibitors likely include dogmatism, judgmentalism, fear and insecurity, and depression. These tendencies tend to prevent a subject from fully embracing an activity and so from allowing oneself to be captivated by it. This would be unfortunate, because interesting experiences, as I will argue in the next section, are a source of intrinsic prudential value.

6 This is the “problem of heterogeneity” often discussed within literature on hedonism. Within hedonism, the question is whether pleasure tracks a homogenous “felt quality” that explains the wide variety of ways in which we experience pleasure. Is the pleasure I take in reading a book the same as the pleasure I take in getting a massage or someone else takes in eating tripe? Some take the heterogeneity problem to be decisive against hedonism, and reflection on the heterogeneity problem has led to the development of attitudinal hedonism. The stakes of this issue are less pressing for the current discussion than they are for hedonism, however, for what makes the heterogeneity problem especially problematic for hedonism is hedonism's claim that there is *one* intrinsic value (pleasure). This makes it particularly pressing to show how the variety of forms that pleasure seems to take amount to the same thing. Where a plurality of experiential values is on the table, the concern is less pressing.

7 Notice that my appeal to cognitive arousal helps to explain the phenomenology of the interesting but is not intended to explain the value of the interesting.

8 Besser and Oishi, “The Psychologically Rich Life”; Oishi et al., “The Psychologically Rich Life Questionnaire.”

3. THE VALUE OF THE INTERESTING: JUST LIKE PLEASURE

Having isolated the “interesting” as a qualitative feature of our experiences, let us now consider the kind of value found within the interesting. It is clear, I hope, that interesting experiences are prudentially valuable. They benefit us and they enrich our lives. Interesting experiences are ones that tend to stand out, penetrate our memories, and linger. But just what kind of value do they have? In this section, I will argue that the kind of value found within interesting experiences is parallel to the value of pleasant experiences. Both the interesting and the pleasant are intrinsic prudential values.

First, the above analysis shows the value of the interesting to be fundamental and not derivative of something else. It does not depend on any particular attitude; it does not depend upon a particular skill or the exercise of particular capacities; it does not depend upon success; it does not depend upon one’s own values or any kind of objective value the experience might possess; nor does it depend on any value attached to our cognitive capacities. It does arise from the interaction between the agent and the activity, but the synthesis that generates an interesting experience is unspecifiable. The interesting is, indeed, a unique form of value. That it is unique gives it a fundamental value, insofar as its value is inexplicable by appeal to other sources.

Second, the value of the interesting is intrinsic, insofar as its value is inherent to and inseparable from the experience. Where an experience is interesting, it presents an intuitive, undeniable value to the subject in the moments she experiences it. Where an experience is not interesting, it lacks this value, although it may be valuable in other respects. Keeping in mind that being interesting is a feature of the experience but not the activity itself, let us return to our opening pair of examples. Ingrid’s experience reading Kerouac had an undeniable value for her. This is *evidenced* by both her decision to read the entire catalog of biographies and by the positive attitude that she takes toward her experience, but the value itself is explicable solely in terms of the phenomenological feel of her experience. In contrast, Anna’s experience reading Kerouac was not interesting and so lacks this value. The activity might be valuable, but Anna’s experience of reading it was not itself valuable.

We can now see that the kind of value associated with the interesting very much parallels the value hedonists attribute to the pleasant. Hedonists maintain that pleasure is an *intrinsic* value—its occurrence is itself always valuable. Moreover, hedonism most often interprets pleasure to be a *prudential* or *relational* intrinsic value: its occurrence is always valuable to the subject. This is the kind of value we find within interesting experiences. Interesting experiences are intrinsically valuable for the subject. If I am right about this, then

this challenges hedonism's position that there is only *one* intrinsic value. Yet before developing this line of criticism against the hedonist, let us first consider the similarities between the interesting and the pleasant. Doing so affirms the status of the interesting as an intrinsic prudential value.

As we move into this analysis, the form of pleasure I will focus on is the phenomenological account of pleasure, according to which pleasure is defined by its distinctive feel, or "felt quality." While some hedonists locate intrinsic value in attitudinal pleasure, it is the phenomenological account of pleasure that parallels the interesting in several respects, and as such will be our focus here.⁹

When we think about pleasure and try to wrap our heads around why it is valuable, we likely find ourselves stuck with the simple fact that *pleasure just is valuable*. The value associated with pleasure is undeniable and therein intuitive. We can argue about degrees of value and whether or not the value of pleasure outweighs other concerns, but the claim that an experience is pleasant, yet *entirely lacking in value*, lacks plausibility. The pleasure counts for something. As Katz observes:

Pleasure presents as good and attractive—itsself, when it comes to our notice, and all else that appears aglow in its light. This suggests simple explanations both of why people pursue pleasure and why there are reasons to do so. That we may prefer and choose something for its pleasure suggests that there are facts about pleasure that make some such choices better than others. Philosophers, taking this suggestion further, have sometimes taken pleasure to be a *single simple (feature of) experience that makes experiences good and attractive to the extent it is present*.¹⁰

The presence of pleasure itself is valuable. While we do not often recognize the interesting to be of undeniable value, I hope that the analysis of the interesting that I have offered reveals the plausibility of this claim. Once we have isolated the interesting as a qualitative aspect of our experience, we see the value of it, a value backed up by our first-personal experiences of interesting experiences. We feel the pull of the interesting. We may feel it in different degrees and frequencies, but once we have felt it, we recognize its value to be undeniable.

The interesting and the pleasant, moreover, are both experiential values. They present the same kind of value in virtue of being qualities of our experience; that is, they are features of the experience itself, rather than products of

9 I will return to discussion of attitudinal pleasures in the next section, where I argue against the move to reduce the interesting to a form of attitudinal pleasure.

10 Katz, "Pleasure."

that experience.¹¹ In a similar vein, Bramble explains, “that the pleasantness and unpleasantness of experiences is right there in the experiences themselves” is commonsensical:

if you are walking along a suburban street, and find yourself suddenly struck by a pleasant smell, say, of jasmine (or some other flower—take your pick) wafting from a passing garden, the experience you become aware of seems already to be pleasant, i.e., pleasant even before you have had a chance to take up any kind of attitude toward it.¹²

This is an important point: even though pleasing experiences typically generate positive attitudes, pleasure is the quality of our experience that generates those positive attitudes. We judge that our experiences are pleasant when they are pleasant; our judging them to be pleasant is not what makes them pleasant. The pleasure of eating a perfectly textured and rich chocolate mousse lies in the experience of eating it.

While the interesting does not just *strike* us as does the pleasant smell of jasmine, and often requires active engagement, it is nonetheless a *quality* of the experience in the same sense in which pleasure is a quality of experience—they are both qualitative aspects of our experience that are independent of the subsequent judgments or attitudes a subject may develop toward that experience.

Nor does the interesting derive from any preconceived judgments or attitudes we form prior to the experience, such as *being interested* in an upcoming activity. Experiencing something to be interesting is distinct from being interested in something. Often this attitude precedes a subject’s engagement. We read a book because we are interested in it; we take a particular class because we are interested in it. While it is tempting to think that interesting experiences derive from a subject’s sense of interest, and so derive from an antecedent attitude she has toward her activity, it takes only a quick reflection to realize that this is not true. There is an important difference between being interested in *X* and *X*’s being interesting. I might be interested in reading Kant’s *Critique* but very well might not find the experience interesting. Whether or not I find the experience interesting depends upon more than just my attitude. One’s attitudes contribute to the experience insofar as they help shape one’s engagement in the activity and the synthesis arising from that engagement, but, as we have

11 Ordinary language often identifies objects or activities themselves to be pleasant or interesting. It does so in a dispositional sense. A pleasant temperature is one that people tend to experience as pleasant; an interesting book is one that people will tend to experience as interesting to read. Both values are located within an experiencing subject and require an experiencing subject to be realized.

12 Bramble, “The Distinctive Feeling Theory of Pleasure,” 203.

seen, there is no formula to this synthesis. Being interested in something does not *make* the experience interesting. Sometimes I am interested in activities that do turn out to be interesting, and it is plausible to think that my attitude helped make the experience interesting, but it could very well go the other way. My prior interest in something might lead me to develop such high expectations that the experience cannot compare, and so would serve to detract from the interestingness of the experience.

Given that the interesting (and the pleasant) is a quality of our experience, claims to its value are (as with the value of the pleasant) compatible with the experience requirement, which holds that in order for something to be of *prudential* value for a given individual, it must factor into her experience.¹³ The experience requirement is often invoked in the context of hedonism; indeed, Sumner describes it as “the important insight in classical hedonism.”¹⁴ The experience requirement appeals to those who worry about making claims that something is good for someone even if it does not impact her experientially. For instance, an oft-cited objection to desire theories of welfare concerns cases where desires are satisfied without the subject knowing it. Is it really plausible to maintain that her welfare has been improved when the determining factor (desire satisfaction) occurs without her being aware of it? Most agree that it is not.

While the experience requirement is intuitively plausible, we should notice that appreciating the value of the interesting does not *commit* one to the experience requirement, which is typically formulated as the claim that something *must* enter into your experience in order to contribute to your welfare. We can recognize that the interesting is an experiential value in the same sense in which the pleasant is an experiential value without having to also maintain that *all* prudential values must be like this.¹⁵

Finally, the interesting and the pleasant are similar in virtue of being prudential values. They benefit the person experiencing them and make her life go better for her. Goldstein makes this point especially well with respect to pleasure. He argues that we can understand the prudential value of pleasure through reflection on its reason-giving character. To say that pleasure is an intrinsic value is to make reference to its status as a self-justifying end. It affords “valid, intrinsic grounds for desire.”¹⁶ While I do not follow Goldstein in his claim that pleasure is the *only* intrinsic good, his construal of the value of

13 Griffin, *Well-Being*.

14 Sumner, *Welfare, Happiness, and Ethics*, 128.

15 Compare to Bramble, who maintains that the plausibility of the experience requirement anchors hedonism (“A New Defense of Hedonism about Well-Being”).

16 Goldstein, “Pleasure and Pain,” 275.

pleasure as intrinsic to its psychological occurrence, which on its own grounds desire, provides a good illustration of why we think pleasure is a prudential value. Pleasure is good for me—why? John Stuart Mill was not that far off in claiming that we know it is valuable because we desire it.¹⁷ Whatever limitations this style of argument may have, that we desire something provides a good indication of *prudential* value.

The value of the interesting is like this. Its value is experienced from the inside. Kraut frames this idea in terms of “internal observation,” arguing that

some things are known by internal observation: this is how we know what pleasure and pain are like, what it is like to desire something, entertain doubts about something, find something intriguing, feel sadness, remorse, guilt, and so on. So, when we judge that an experience we are having or have had is immeasurably rich and worth having for itself—as when we are absorbed in a great work of art or surrounded by great natural beauty—we have some basis for valuing this experience precisely because it is our experience and we know it from the inside.¹⁸

When considered from the inside, we see that having an interesting experience taps into our desires: it makes us want more; it leads us to have positive attitudes toward that experience and to see more generally that the fact that something is interesting is a reason to engage in it. That the interesting has this reason-giving effect reveals it to be of prudential value. Yet, just as some people find the value of the pleasant to be *more* reason giving than others, some people find the value of the interesting to be *more* reason giving than others.

This variety of responsiveness to the values of the pleasing and the interesting should not make us question the value inherent to them. It is enough to establish intrinsic value to find that there *is* responsiveness to it, not that there are equal degrees of responsiveness to it across subjects. Railton argues that it seems “to capture an important feature of the concept of intrinsic value to say that what is intrinsically valuable for a person must have a connection with what he would in some degree find compelling or attractive, at least if he were rational and aware, but that it would be an intolerably alienated conception of someone’s good to imagine that it might fail in any such way to engage him.”¹⁹

17 I refer to Mill’s infamous proof of utilitarianism in which he argues that pleasure is valuable because we desire it (*Utilitarianism*, ch. 2). While I agree with those who point out that desiring something does not make it valuable, it also seems plausible that desiring something *prima facie* indicates that it is of value and that we can reflect on what we desire to help us identify what is valuable in itself.

18 Kraut, *The Quality of Life*, 51.

19 Railton, “Facts and Values,” 9.

This seems right. In identifying something as an intrinsic value, we commit to saying that it will engage—or resonate with—most of us. We do not commit to saying that the degree to which people respond to its value will be consistent across subjects. Likewise, in identifying something as a prudential value, we commit to saying it is good for a subject. We do not commit to saying that it requires that people structure their lives around it. Thus, in claiming that the interesting is an intrinsic prudential value, my claim is simply that, where present, the interesting adds value to a subject's experiences and so benefits her. But there are lots of values like this, pleasure included, and it is within the individual's prerogative to choose which prudential values she prioritizes and structures her life by.²⁰

The view I am putting forward here maintains that, as an intrinsic prudential value, the interesting (and the pleasant), when present, is always a valuable aspect of our experience. It is thus *pro tanto* reason giving. Its actual reason-giving force for any particular person, however, depends upon that person's responsiveness to its value. We all respond to the interesting—this is at root what it means for it to be an intrinsic value—but the degree to which we respond to its value informs the degree to which we see it as reason giving. Just as some take the fact that something is pleasant to be decisive, while others take it to simply count in favor of that experience, some will take the fact that something is interesting to be decisive, while others may not. Particularly because both are prudential values, their actual reason-giving force will vary between subjects, according to the degree to which they respond to its value.

This analysis of responsiveness is similar to what some have described in terms of "psychological resonance." Dorsey argues that the fact that something psychologically resonates with an agent indicates its relational intrinsic value.²¹ What can it mean for something to be intrinsically good for a subject? Dorsey argues that the answer must be, at least in part, that it always resonates with her. This resonance is partly if not wholly what makes it good for her. We can extend this thought by recognizing the *degrees* in which something resonates within a particular subject. For example, most people will accept that the experience of pleasure resonates as an intrinsic value. But people differ widely in their reactions to the experience of pleasure. For some, this value resonates strongly and decisively; for others, this value resonates—but not very strongly, such that its value may not be decisively reason giving for them.

20 The line of argument echoes Tiberius's theory of well-being as value fulfillment, which holds that a person's well-being depends on the degree to which she lives life according to her own values (*Well-Being as Value Fulfillment*).

21 Dorsey, "Intrinsic Value and the Supervenience Principle."

We can look around at the people we know and recognize the different degrees in which something's being pleasant resonates with them; I think the same holds for the interesting. Something's being interesting to that person indicates some degree of psychological resonance (and it might very well be that something's being interesting is itself a particular manifestation of psychological resonance), but the degree to which it resonates varies, both between subjects and even within the same subject. It is a familiar occurrence to one day feel like pursuing interesting experiences, while the next day to feel like pursuing pleasant ones. Sometimes something just resonates more for us at a particular moment. Claiming that an experience has intrinsic prudential value involves making the claim that such experiences resonate with subjects, but it does not involve making a claim about the extent to which such experiences resonate.

4. THE VALUE OF THE INTERESTING: TOO MUCH LIKE PLEASURE?

I have argued that the pleasant and the interesting share the same kind of value: they are both prudential, intrinsic values that are experientially realized. This conclusion leads to the question of whether or not the interesting is *too much like pleasure*, and therein subject to some of the same objections often raised against the pleasant.

The first objection runs roughly as follows. The view of pleasure invoked by my argument, which takes pleasure to be characterized by its phenomenological feel, may be the ordinary sense of pleasure, but philosophical literature on pleasure invokes more sophisticated understandings of pleasure that focus not on its felt quality, but rather on its connection to attitudes. This is the position of attitudinal hedonism, according to which pleasure derives from the positive attitude a subject takes toward an activity, rather than the felt quality of her experience. Defenders of this move make it largely to avoid some of the counterintuitive implications that arise when hedonism combines with a phenomenological view of pleasure. While many of these implications are not relevant to the current analysis, one stands out as especially relevant. This is the concern that, absent a more sophisticated analysis of our attraction to pleasure (e.g., one that connects pleasure to attitude), experiencing pleasure is a contingent experience with a questionable value.

Noting its roots within Findley's critique of pleasure, Bramble describes this concern as "Findley's objection."²² The basic worry is that the story I have presented thus far, which appeals solely to the phenomenological experience of pleasure to determine its value, cannot go far enough to establish the prudential

22 Bramble, "A New Defense of Hedonism about Well-Being."

value of pleasure. If, as I have argued, the value of the interesting likewise has its roots solely within its phenomenology, it is open to the same concern. If we cannot explain why the pleasant (or the interesting) resonates with us, why should we think the fact that it does reveals intrinsic value? After all, we have all kinds of attractions and aversions to aspects of our experiences. That I am averse to the combination of seafood and cheese does not imply anything about its value. Why should we think our attraction to the pleasant (and the interesting) is different?

Bramble responds to this line of argument by emphasizing the nature of the claims we are making when we say something is pleasant. He argues that

a pleasant experience, even if its subject has no notion that it is going on, still possesses the phenomenal feel characteristic of pleasures. This is why it is good. Why is it the involvement of “the pleasant feeling,” rather than, say, the sound of Ella Fitzgerald’s voice, the smell of jasmine, or yellow phenomenology, that is what makes an experience good? There is no answer to this question, but also no need for one.²³

His point, I take it, is that it is the simple experience of *pleasure* that leads us to recognize an experience as valuable. There is nothing more to it; the features that contribute to our experience of pleasure (e.g., the smell of jasmine) are not the good-making feature of the experience—the pleasure is. Thus there is not a further account of *why* the pleasure is valuable and we do not need such an account to establish the experience as valuable.

This line of response works just as well, if not better, with respect to the interesting. We know the interesting has intrinsic value because of our experience of it. And especially because the current argument is that the interesting has intrinsic value that is neither exclusive nor decisive, there really is no need for further explanation.²⁴

This focus on the *experiential* quality of the pleasant (and the interesting) takes us to a second objection frequently raised against hedonism, which calls into question whether *all* instantiations of pleasure have value. People find pleasure in all kinds of experiences, including experiences that harm others or violate

23 Bramble, “A New Defense of Hedonism about Well-Being,” 214.

24 This is not to say that there *is* no further explanation possible of why we are so responsive to pleasure, or to interesting experiences. There very well may be one and I think it likely that in the case of the interesting, this explanation revolves around the nature of cognitive arousal. The point is that the further explanation is tangential to the questions of why it is valuable, for their value lies within the experience. Whatever explanations of these experiences we can offer will provide insight into their value, which lies solely with their phenomenology.

well-entrenched standards of morality: torturing bunnies, having sex with dead people, inflicting pain on others. It seems mistaken to claim that the pleasure in these contexts is valuable, even if it shares the same felt quality we recognize to be a value in other contexts. Surely, we might think, these kinds of examples suggest we have erred in locating intrinsic value within the experience of pleasure.

In a similar fashion, it seems possible that people find the interesting in all kinds of experiences, many of which we might hesitate to attach value to. Are we prepared to accept as valuable the interest one finds in reading about the gory details of Charles Manson's violent crimes? Or what about the interest one finds in staring at picture after picture of dead bodies? It is possible that people find these experiences to be interesting, yet it also seems counterintuitive to say that these experiences have intrinsic value for the subjects engaging in them.

In response to this line of criticism, I, like the hedonist, maintain that, despite the counterintuitive nature of these experiences, if there is a subject who finds them interesting (or pleasant), there is indeed prudential, intrinsic value in them—they are valuable for the subject. Yet we can assuage the counterintuitive impact of biting this bullet by acknowledging the existence of a plurality of intrinsic prudential values, as well as moral values that may constrain our pursuit of prudential value.²⁵ Recognizing a plurality of values allows us to accept that an experience's being interesting has intrinsic prudential value, even though the experience overall might have negative value for the subject. It might have negative prudential value, perhaps by stimulating within the subject desires that stand in tension with her aims, or it might have negative moral value, insofar as it displays a lack of respect for humanity.

My argument does entail that where an experience is interesting, it has intrinsic value for the subject, even if that experience is otherwise morally reprehensible. Acknowledging the existence of other forms of value (both prudential and moral) provides grounds to rationally criticize a person's engagement in these kinds of activities, while allowing that the fact that they are interesting

25 It is not clear that hedonism can make this move, at least not as persuasively. Hedonism maintains that all and only pleasure has intrinsic value. Some forms of hedonism limit their claim to the singularity of pleasure to cover prudential value, while others cover moral value, but distinctive to hedonism is a claim about the singularity of pleasure as the only relevant value within a context, be it prudential, moral, or both. My understanding of experiential value carries with it no such singularity, and indeed embraces the notion that there is a plurality of experiential values, for it is certainly possible that there are more experiential values than the pleasant and the interesting. My analysis of experiential value moreover takes it to be one species of prudential value and claims neutrality with respect to moral value; therein it is compatible with the stipulation that there are moral values, some of which may override prudential values, including experiential prudential values, or that there are more pressing prudential values that outweigh experiential prudential values.

does deliver that experience some form of value, therein mitigating the counterintuitive nature of these examples.

A related concern arises with respect to locating value in meaningless experiences, such as the pleasure a subject might take in compulsive masturbation, or the interest one may develop in clicking on meme after meme on social media. In response to this concern, we first ought to seriously challenge whether they genuinely present experiences of the pleasant or the interesting, or whether these kinds of examples are just pseudo-experiences of these values that we label as pleasant or interesting. This strategy helps to put into perspective the examples: the person clicking away on Instagram probably is not having an interesting experience, just as the compulsive masturbator probably is not finding a lot of pleasure in her activities. A more accurate description of these examples is that the subject seeks out experiential value in activities that are not the best situated to deliver the experience they are looking for. But this strategy will not work to show that meaningless experiences *cannot* ever be experientially valuable. They can. And I think it important to recognize this: there can be experiential value in otherwise meaningless activities.

It may seem meaningless to find value, as I have claimed to do, in looking at trees, or, to address Rawls's example, in counting blades of grass.²⁶ But the fact that the interesting can be found in many sorts of otherwise meaningless activities is a *good* thing.²⁷ That I am able to find the interesting in looking at trees means I am able to transform otherwise mundane activities into valuable experiences. When I am sitting in the dentist's chair getting my teeth drilled and am able to look out at the trees outside the window and find doing so to be interesting, I have been able to insert some value into an otherwise painful experience. We can think of plenty of examples where being able to find an intrinsic value in an experience *transforms* that experience for the better. If a blade counter truly can find her activity to be a source of interest, that is representative of a critical skill that she can enrich her life by harnessing.

5. THE INTERESTING VS. THE PLEASANT

I have argued that the interesting is a prudential value in much the same sense in which the pleasant is a prudential value. Both present as intuitively valuable aspects of our experience that make our lives go better. Given the parallel form of value within each, at this point it is natural to question whether the

26 Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, 379.

27 And to the extent that we can find pleasure in meaningless activities, that is a good thing too.

interesting is distinct from pleasure. Perhaps the interesting is another form of pleasure in disguise, in which case we have not departed from hedonism at all.

We find seeds for this line of argument within Bramble's defense of hedonism. Bramble argues that all experiential value is hedonic; that is, that as soon as we have embraced the experience requirement and take prudential value to be an aspect of our experiences, hedonism intuitively follows:

There is a powerful reason, however, to accept the hedonist's view. This is what has come to be known as the experience requirement. The experience requirement says that for something to be good or bad for someone it must affect his experiences in some way—specifically, it must affect their phenomenology or “:what it is like for him to be having them. If the experience requirement is true, then hedonism is almost certainly true as well—indeed, it would be the reason why the experience requirement is true. There is little plausibility, after all, to the idea that any non-hedonic phenomenology (i.e., phenomenology that is neither pleasurable nor painful) is intrinsically relevant to well-being.²⁸

Is it really so implausible to think that experiences could be not pleasant yet have intrinsic value? I do not see it. It seems that our experiences are multidimensional and have many different valences and degrees of intensity and being pleasurable is not the only way in which an experience can be of intrinsic value.²⁹

Interesting experiences are sometimes positively valenced, but not always. They can be uncomfortable, as when we are reading the details of Charles Manson's life and empathizing with the young women who dedicated their lives to him, or when we stumble across a snake sunning itself in our path. Here the discomfort is part of what makes the experience so interesting; it does not detract from its value. When interesting experiences are positively valenced, such as an encounter with someone whose lifestyle could not be more different than your own, that generates fascination and intrigue but is also a pleasant conversational experience that makes you feel warm; the interesting aspect often carries the tone. We walk away from such an encounter thinking about how interesting it was, not just about how pleasing it was.

28 Bramble, “The Role of Pleasure in Well-Being,” 207.

29 Kraut echoes this line of thought, writing, “our phenomenological world is a highly variegated matter, and pleasure is just one small aspect of it. If we consider in isolation from the riches of the other components of our experience, it remains something to which we are attracted, but we are (and ought to be) far more attracted to the complex phenomenological array of which it is a part. [Pleasure] is only a small part of a full account of what is good for us” (*The Quality of Life*, 39).

Defenders of hedonism, such as Bramble, must explain these kinds of experiences in terms of pleasure in order to maintain their commitment to hedonism's claim that all and only pleasure has value. Bramble would argue that the experiences I describe as interesting are really just pleasant ones, for he maintains that pleasures are more diverse than we often realize and a lack of positive affect does not automatically entail that the experience is not pleasant.³⁰ It might rather be the case, he argues, that we have limited introspective access to the positive valence of the experience, as there is increasing empirical evidence that calls into question our introspective capacities.

The felt-quality hedonist will thus strive to maintain that experiences of the interesting share the same felt quality as the pleasant, even if we may not be able to identify them as such. In contrast, an attitudinal hedonist will strive to explain the value we find in the interesting in terms of the subject's positive attitudes toward that experience. Because the attitudinal hedonist defines pleasure in terms of attitudes, this move amounts to claiming that the value of the interesting is identical to that of the pleasant.

Heathwood, for example, defines pleasure exclusively in terms of a subject's attitude: if a subject wants something to occur (intrinsically, for its own sake) then it counts as pleasure for her.³¹ Working from this framework, we might say that interesting experiences are valuable because we want them to occur, i.e., because they are pleasant. Even if we did not antecedently desire them, as long as we contemporaneously desire them the positive attitude we take toward them counts as pleasure and gives the experience its value.

It seems we are all working in the same ballpark. Both Bramble's and Heathwood's versions of hedonism recognize that there is more to prudential value than identification of the warm feelings associated with positive affect and both go very different ways—even from each other—to describe this aspect. But they both remain committed to hedonism and so move to develop more inclusive understandings of pleasure in order to accommodate these aspects of prudential experiential value. Here I cannot do justice to their sophisticated arguments, but I will simply ask: Why not just recognize the intrinsic value of the interesting? Why keep striving to reduce experiential value to the pleasant?

There are at least two pressing reasons why we should recognize interesting experiences as intrinsically valuable in virtue of being interesting and not just as another form of pleasure in disguise. First, given the rise in interdisciplinary research on prudential value, it is important to use a sense of pleasure that crosses borders. In other disciplines where pleasure is studied, including

30 Bramble, "The Distinctive Feeling Theory of Pleasure."

31 Heathwood, "The Reduction of Sensory Pleasure to Desire."

psychology and economics, pleasure is interpreted in the sense I employ here as something that feels good and is defined by its positive valence. While I am sympathetic to the reasons why literature on hedonism has moved toward a more inclusive notion of pleasure, I worry about the limitations this move places on the applicability philosophical notions of pleasure have for empirical research.

The problem is multilayered. It concerns not just the likelihood that concepts developed on solely philosophical grounds will depart from the concepts as they are studied scientifically, but concerns also the additional threat that these concepts themselves are of limited use to scientific research insofar as they are less apt to inform constructs that can be measured and so used within research.³² This problem is particularly acute in the case of pleasure, wherein the sense of pleasure invoked by ordinary discourse— i.e., taking “pleasure” to refer to a felt quality of positive affect—*can* be measured and *does* inform current research. Introducing (or continuing to use) theoretically developed concepts of pleasure in the face of these practices begets a gulf between philosophical theories and scientific research.

Second, and independently of the first, I think it is crucial to recognize the value of the interesting insofar as recognizing it as such not only validates those who choose to pursue the interesting, but also opens up a new dimension of value for others to pursue.³³ Part of the project of exploring experiential value is a normative one: our philosophical interest lies not solely in describing forms of value but in putting forward values as ones that are worthy of pursuing. Many people have interesting experiences yet may not recognize or appreciate the value this adds to their lives. Identifying the interesting as an intrinsic prudential values both validates the role these experiences play in people’s lives and encourages people to seek out interesting experiences. It opens up a new dimension of the good life for them, one that might be better suited to them than the pursuit of pleasure. Redescribing the interesting in terms of pleasure threatens to erase a significant source of value in life.

32 This line of thought echoes Alexandrova, who worries that, in the context of well-being, in particular, the theoretical definitions offered by philosophers are not capable of informing the constructs used in the science of well-being. The philosopher’s theoretical goals, she argues, stand in tension with the goals of the scientist. The scientist needs to work with definitions of well-being that are “sensitive not only to the normative theories of the good life but also to the practical constraints of measurement and use of this knowledge” yet the “goals of theorizing about well-being in philosophy as it is currently practiced are not sensitive in this way” (Alexandrova, *A Philosophy for the Science of Well-Being*, xxxi).

33 A conclusion I explore in more detail in Besser and Oishi, “The Psychologically Rich Life.”

6. CONCLUSION

Recognizing the value of the interesting opens up a new framework from which to think about the phenomenal character of our experiences and the prudential value they offer. I have argued that the value of the interesting shares the same kind of value as sensory pleasure yet is distinct from it. This translates to a rejection of hedonism's claim that pleasure is the only intrinsic value, but it does not call into question the status of pleasure as an intrinsic value. Rather, I have suggested that there can be a plurality of intrinsic, prudential values that people respond to differently. We may not all *seek out* interesting experiences, but we find value in them. And so we probably should seek out interesting experiences more often.

Our daily lives consist in having experiences. While there is more to life than the sum of our experiences, and other forms of value than experiential value, finding value in the experiences we have is important. We do not always have to find the pleasant in our experiences for them to be valuable. Sometimes we just need to find them interesting. The reality is that it may be easier to find the interesting than the pleasant. To find the interesting, we might just need to open up our minds and engage in our activities with a sense of curiosity. Our minds might be able to transform an activity, allowing us to find value within an experience that might otherwise have simply been something we did on a Monday.

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APPENDIX: BOREDOM

One question that arises with respect to the claim that the interesting has intrinsic value is what its opposite might be. The dichotomy between pleasure and pain is so clear, with one having positive value and one having negative value, that it is natural to assume that a parallel structure arises with other qualitative aspects of our experiences. The opposite of the interesting seems to be the boring. Boring experiences are dull, monotonous, uneventful. Rather than create a compelling spark within the individual, boring experiences generate anything from apathy to annoyance and aversion.

If the boring is the opposite of the interesting, and the interesting has intrinsic value, does the boring have intrinsic disvalue? The *prima facie* challenge is that some people do not mind boring experiences, and some people may even find the boring aspects of an experience appealing, so might even see it as a positive aspect of experience. After an extremely active or hectic time, some

people seek out “boring” experiences as a way to balance themselves. If the boring can be choice worthy, that is an indication that it may not always be associated with negative value.

I worry that this line of reasoning embraces a misleading use of the term. When we seek out “boring” experiences, what we are really seeking out are *quiet* times, experiences that do not cognitively engage in the way that interesting experiences do. I do not think that this—a state in which the mind is at rest—is genuinely a state of boredom. States of boredom, rather, arise when our minds strive toward activation, yet are frustrated. We want to find something interesting, to be cognitively aroused, yet those wants go unfulfilled. This state of frustration more accurately tracks boredom—and notice that it *prima facie* presents as a negative value. Its negative value is explained by the individual striving to find something interesting and their failure to succeed. If so, then it is likely the intrinsic value of the interesting does, like pleasure, have an opposite, whose value, like pain, is negative.³⁴

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