

# THE PHENOMENOLOGICAL VALUE THESIS AND THE LIMITS OF WELFARE EUDAIMONISM

Christopher L. Holland

August 15, 2025

## Abstract

Welfare eudaimonism links well-being to nature fulfillment: one is doing well to the extent that they are fulfilling (or perfecting) their nature. Dan Haybron (2025), Guy Fletcher (2022), Gwen Bradford (2020), and Richard J. Arneson (1999) all argue that welfare eudaimonism cannot account for the following value thesis: pleasure is good for us and pain is bad for us because of what they are like. Call this *the hedonic phenomenological value thesis*. Taking cues from Haybron and Arneson, I argue that it is true and that eudaimonism is, at best, an incomplete theory of well-being. To rebut the argument, a eudaimonist must argue that it is false or explain it in eudaimonic terms, such as capacity or goal fulfillment. I give a hedonic inversion argument to show why neither approach succeeds.



Draft

Do not cite or distribute without permission.

Other things being equal, your life goes better for you when it is pleasant and worse for you when it is painful. The people who care about you, who want what's best for you, don't want you to have fewer pleasures and more pains, or if they do, their real target will be some other benefit (e.g., your health). Pleasure is a basic welfare good and pain is a basic welfare bad.<sup>1</sup>

So far, so good. Let's take this a step further. Pleasure is good for us and pain is bad for us *because of what they feel like*. Call this the phenomenological thesis about hedonic value, which I will shorten to *the phenomenological value thesis*.<sup>2</sup> It is an explanatory thesis about basic prudential value.<sup>3</sup> In other words, it concerns what is basically or non-derivatively good or bad for us (the basic prudential value part) and why (the explanatory part). If the phenomenological value thesis is true, then a successful theory of well-being will account for it. In this paper, I defend a weak version of this thesis and argue that welfare eudaimonism lacks the native resources needed to affirm it.

There are four major well-being theory families: *hedonic*, *desire satisfaction*, *eudaimonic*, and *list* theories.<sup>4</sup> Hedonic and list theories of well-being can easily accommodate the phenomenological value thesis. Hedonic theories are often the phenomenological value thesis writ large.<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Here, the terms pleasure and pain should be understood broadly. In other words, I call positive feeling tones "pleasures" and negative feeling tones "pains." On my account, pleasures and pains are positively or negatively valenced *experiences*. Readers who prefer to restrict the terms "pleasure" and "pain" to bodily or sensory experience might substitute "pleasant experience" for pleasure and "unpleasant experience" for pain.

<sup>2</sup> What I have termed the phenomenological hedonic value thesis should not be confused with a *general* phenomenological value thesis, i.e., that consciousness is either a necessary or sufficient condition for welfare subjectivity (see Bradford 2023).

<sup>3</sup> I borrow the terms "basic value" and "derivative value" from Heathwood (2021, 5). Philosophers generally and well-being theorists in particular use different terms for the most fundamental sense of value. Others may prefer to use terms such as final, non-instrumental, or intrinsic value. See Korsgaard (1983) and Dorsey (2021, ch. 2) for a discussion of this issue.

<sup>4</sup> Here I ignore hybrid theories, which complicate the landscape by combining two or more of these four basic theory types. The four theory types are roughly based on Parfit's ([1984] 1987, app. I) influential three-fold division of *hedonistic*, *desire fulfillment*, and *objective list* theories. My four-fold division differs in the following respects. (1) I've replaced objective list theories with list theories. List theories of well-being are a broader category than objective lists—one that includes both objective and subjective lists. (2) I restrict list theories to *enumerative* (or *brute*) lists, as opposed to *explanatory* (or *principled*) lists (see Fletcher 2013; 2008, 36). Enumerative lists eschew explanatory unity and place multiple welfare intuitions at the foundation of their theorizing. (3) I've added eudaimonism, which Parfit omits. Welfare eudaimonists link well-being to nature fulfillment: one is doing well to the extent that they are fulfilling (or perfecting) their nature. Welfare eudaimonists often build lists (e.g., Finnis [1980] 2011; Murphy 2001; Nussbaum 2000), but they are principled lists.

<sup>5</sup> Often, not always. For example, Roger Crisp (2021, sec. 4.1) distinguishes *substantive hedonism* and *explanatory hedonism*. According to substantive hedonism, well-being consists in the greatest balance of pleasure over pain. According to explanatory hedonism, the pleasantness of pleasure makes pleasure (prudentially) good, and the painfulness of pain makes pain (prudentially) bad. Explanatory hedonists are committed to the phenomenological value thesis, but merely substantive hedonists are not.

Not only are pleasures good and pains bad because of what they are like, but all and only pleasures are basically good for us and all and only pains are basically bad for us. List theories propose a set of basic welfare goods—for example, friendship, achievement, health, and virtue—and provide intuitive support for each member. Lists differ by theorist, but pleasure often makes the list.

The relationship between desire satisfaction theories and the phenomenological value thesis is more complex. This family of theories identifies basic prudential value with the satisfaction of our desires, or some other pro attitude. Here, *satisfaction* is typically understood in an objective sense, akin to satisfying the terms of a contract or the victory conditions of a game. In this case, it is good for a person that the objects of their positive attitudes obtain (and bad for them that the objects of their negative attitudes obtain). Suppose that I find evening walks pleasant and that I desire to take a Sunday evening stroll for this reason. Taking my walk would satisfy my desire in an objective sense (I did, in fact, take the walk) and in a subjective sense (I enjoyed my walk). Desire theories that rely solely on the objective sense of *satisfy* do not account for the phenomenological value thesis. Desire theories that incorporate both the subjective sense of satisfaction and an attitudinal account of pleasure and pain are better situated to account for the phenomenological value thesis.

Welfare eudaimonism, sometimes called *perfectionism*,<sup>6</sup> identifies basic prudential value with nature fulfillment. (I'll refer to it simply as *eudaimonism* going forward.) The idea of nature fulfillment can be further expressed in terms of capacity fulfillment, goal fulfillment, or both (Haybron, forthcoming, ch. 3, sec. 4.3; see also Haybron 2023, 110–12). Capacity-fulfillment eudaimonism assigns basic prudential value to “realizing one’s potential, or developing and exercising one’s capacities” (ch. 3, sec. 4.3). Goal-fulfillment eudaimonism assigns basic prudential value to succeeding at one’s goals. Here, the term *goal* should be understood in a broad sense of the word and include, among other goal-related concepts, fulfilling one’s innate desires and natural inclinations.

While some eudaimonists grant that pleasures and pains have basic prudential value, it is difficult to reconcile the explanatory clause of the phenomenological value thesis with eudaimonism. If pleasant experiences are good for me (and painful experiences bad for me), then eudaimonism *grounds* that goodness (or badness) in my nature rather than my experience. Phenomenology can play an indirect role; I am naturally inclined to pursue pleasure and avoid pain because of what they feel like,

---

<sup>6</sup> I prefer to treat perfectionism as a sub-species of eudaimonism (see Haybron 2008, chap. 8).

but this feeling does not explain the goodness of pleasure or the badness of pain.

## 1. HEDONIC VALUE AND THE PHENOMENOLOGICAL VALUE THESIS

I am inclined to think that pleasure is always basically prudentially good and that pain is always basically prudentially bad. This is not to say that pleasures are never derivatively bad or pains derivatively good. Yesterday's pleasures can cause tomorrow's pains, and vice versa. Still, each pleasure will increase a person's well-being and each pain will decrease it. Add that the goodness of pleasure and badness of pain are grounded in what they feel like and you have what I will call the strong phenomenological value thesis.

### **Strong Phenomenological Value Thesis**

Pleasure is always basically good for us and pain is always basically bad for us. And, the prudential goodness or badness of our pleasures and pains is grounded in what they feel like.

While I'm inclined to accept the strong version of the thesis, my arguments in this paper are predicated on a weak version of the thesis.

### **Weak Phenomenological Value Thesis**

Sometimes pleasure is basically good for us and sometimes pain is basically bad for us. And whenever pleasure is good for us or pain is bad for us, their prudential goodness or badness is, at least partly, grounded in what they feel like.

This modest claim does not give a sufficient condition for welfare constituency. To affirm it, you needn't think that pleasure always adds basic value and pain always subtracts basic value. The weak thesis is even compatible with the claim that some pleasures and pains lose, or invert, their basic prudential value in certain circumstances. For example, you might think that base and immoral pleasures are either bereft of prudential value or that they undergo a value inversion and thereby detract from a person's well-being.<sup>7</sup>

The weak phenomenological value thesis is also compatible with the idea that some pleasures and pains have basic prudential value or disvalue for non-phenomenological reasons. For example, you might think that some pleasures are good because they are instances of objective desire satisfaction (and that some pains are bad because they are instances

---

<sup>7</sup> Here, I have in mind G. E. Moore's (1922) organic unities (see also Chisholm 2001) and W. D. Ross's ([1930] 2002, 138) claim that pleasure is a *prima facie* good.

of desire frustration or aversion satisfaction<sup>8</sup>). In this case, some satisfied desires will be pleasures (and some frustrated desires will be pains) *and* those pleasures and pains will be prudentially valuable (and disvaluable) by the standards of objective desire satisfactionism. Of course, if the weak phenomenological value thesis is true, they occasionally bear additional value (or disvalue)—value grounded in their phenomenology.

Alternatively, you might think that some pleasures are good because they are instances of nature fulfillment (and that pains are bad because they are failures to fulfill one's nature). For example, Gwen Bradford (2021) has proposed a eudaimonic theory of well-being that employs both capacity- and goal-fulfillment ideals. She calls the theory *tripartite perfectionism*. For tripartite perfectionists, there are three elements to consider when making a prudential value claim: a capacity, an activity, and their output. Bradford then suggests that we have a standing end to pursue pleasure and avoid pain. If so, pleasure is good for us because it fulfills one of our standing ends. Let the capacity be practical rationality, the activity pursuing pleasure, and the proper output experiencing pleasure. When we exercise practical rationality to pursue pleasure and succeed, our success (experiencing pleasure) is basically prudentially good. Conversely, when we exercise practical rationality to avoid pain and fail, our failure (experiencing pain) is basically prudentially bad.<sup>9</sup> Bradford refers to this kind of failure as a *malfilment*. One might accept both the phenomenological value thesis and Bradford's claim that pleasure is good *qua* achievement and plain bad *qua* failure. However, if the weak phenomenological value thesis is true, then fulfillment and malfilment will not provide an exhaustive explanation for the total basic value or disvalue of every pleasure and pain.

The heart of the issue is that both objective-desire satisfactionism and eudaimonism offer alternative reasons for thinking that pleasure is basically prudentially good and pain basically prudentially bad. In this paper, I focus on eudaimonism. There are three ways eudaimonists respond to the basic value of pleasure and pain: (1) Deny it. Some eudaimonists exclude pleasure and pain from their list of basic goods and bads (e.g., Finnis [1980] 2011; Murphy 2001). (2) Grant it for non-phenomenological reasons. Others include pleasure on their list of basic welfare goods (and pain on their list of basic bads) but assign no direct role to phenomenology in their explanation of pleasure's goodness (and pain's badness) (e.g., Bradford 2021). Finally, (3) some eudaimonists defend the compatibility

---

<sup>8</sup> On aversion satisfaction, see Pallies (2022); Heathwood (2022); Tiberius and DeYoung (2022).

<sup>9</sup> In the second case, the capacity is practical reason, the activity is avoiding pain, and the improper output is experiencing pain.

of eudaimonism and the phenomenological value thesis (e.g., Kauppinen 2025).

In the next section, I use the phenomenological intuition to argue for the truth of the weak phenomenological value thesis. If the thesis is true, then proponents of (1) and (2) should either abandon eudaimonism or supplement it with a version of the phenomenological value thesis. I consider replies in [Section 3](#) and further support the phenomenological intuition with a thought experiment in [Section 4](#). In [Section 5](#), I consider replies to the thought experiment and share some reasons for thinking that (3) will not succeed.

## 2. THE PHENOMENOLOGICAL INTUITION

The phenomenological value thesis is justified by *the phenomenological intuition*: a widespread, common intuition that pleasure is (at least partly) good for us and pain is (at least partly) bad for us because of what they feel like.<sup>10</sup> The simplest way to pump the intuition, or at least one side of it, is to focus our attention on human misery. Intense suffering is non-derivatively bad for the person suffering. Moreover, whenever we reflect on what makes excruciating physical pain or devastating emotional distress bad for its subject, there is always an irreducibly phenomenological component to the suffering. These afflictions disrupt a person's agency and frustrate their goals, *but they also feel bad*. The phenomenological intuition kicks in and tells us that feeling bad is non-derivatively bad for its subject. If we could spare the afflicted from all the other devastating effects and aspects of their suffering, save what it feels like, there would still be something to lament. Something that “can only be explained in brutally phenomenological terms” (Haybron 2025, 188–89, 208; see also Haybron 2016, 354).

Our intuitions about intense pain and suffering are the clearest, but a similar point applies to pleasures—again understood broadly as any pleasant experience. Consider what Richard Arneson calls a “cheap thrill.”

“Cheap thrills” [are] activities that provide pleasure and excitement without any significant effort or sacrifice on the part of the agent and also without the exercise or development of any

---

<sup>10</sup> I've borrowed the term *the phenomenological intuition* from Dan Haybron (2016, 354), and have labeled the corresponding value thesis to match. To avoid complications related to restricted uses of the term “pain” and stilted locutions like “unpleasure,” Haybron prefers to state the phenomenological intuition in terms of pleasure and suffering. For example: “The badness of suffering has to do with its phenomenological character, or at least that's very much how it seems. Relatedly, the goodness of pleasure, of pleasant experience, also appears to be grounded in its character *qua* conscious experience” (Haybron, forthcoming, ch. 6, sec. 2).

of the agent's significant talents. Cheap thrills are pleasures with no redeeming social value beyond their pleasantness. The world being as it is, and human nature being what it is, such pleasures seem to me to be important sources of enjoyment that significantly enhance many people's lives in ways for which there is no practical substitute. I take it that the pleasures of cheap thrills will not register at all on a perfectionist measure of the prudential value of people's lives, but I would think that if these pleasures were to disappear without replacement, the world would be immensely worse and most human lives would be significantly blighted. (1999, 120)

Arneson does not give any examples, but some candidates include amusement park rides, a glass of beer, cat videos and other memes, an hour of peace and quiet, and the feel of warm sunlight on your skin.<sup>11</sup> Cheap thrills intuitively add prudential value to one's life. If so, the best explanation is phenomenological.

We can pump the intuition further with thought experiments involving zombies, Vulcans, and robots. Many philosophers think that there is a tight connection between welfare subjectivity and consciousness—that consciousness is necessary for welfare subjectivity. (For a dissenting opinion and a literature survey, see Bradford 2023.) Still, if philosophical zombies (p-zombies), contrary to the prevailing opinion, are in fact welfare subjects, then they are better off to the extent that they do not suffer and worse off to the extent that they lack any pleasant experiences. Suppose you were to undergo a “pheno-ectomy” (a term coined by Charles Siewert 1998, 320). Even if you remained a welfare subject after the operation, there would be significant consequences for your well-being.

David Chalmers (2022), the philosopher most closely associated with p-zombie thought experiments in the philosophy of mind, has recently asked us to consider philosophical Vulcans (p-Vulcans): a conscious alien race similar to the Vulcan race from *Star Trek* but lacking valenced consciousness. Surely they are missing out on some welfare goods and bads. In addition to Siewert's pheno-ectomy, consider the ramifications of p-Vulcan reassignment surgery—a partial or selective pheno-ectomy that targets your capacity for valenced consciousness.<sup>12</sup> Again, there will be significant consequences for your well-being.

A purely eudaimonic theory of well-being must account for these welfare disparities using one of the nature fulfillment ideals: capacity or goal

---

<sup>11</sup> Some examples here are pleasant but not “thrilling.” This is inconsequential to the argument, which focuses on pleasure.

<sup>12</sup> Siewert (1998) introduces the partial pheno-ectomy on page 322 but does so for different purposes (e.g., to avoid the kills-the-patient objection to his full-pheno-ectomy thought experiment).

fulfillment. This may give us part of the story (and I'm inclined to think it does), but it cannot be the whole story. P-zombies and p-Vulcans are missing out on what pleasure feels like and spared from what pain feels like. The phenomenological difference between me and my p-zombie or p-Vulcan twin is also a well-being difference.<sup>13</sup>

Robot thought experiments run in the other direction. *Star Trek: The Next Generation* fans might call to mind storylines featuring the android Lieutenant Commander Data's "emotion chip." Presumably, installing the chip gives Data new ways to be benefited and new ways to be harmed. The emotion chip certainly supplies Data with new capacities and goals to fulfill, but it also adds a phenomenological dimension to his life. The phenomenological intuition helps us make sense of this: positive emotions are (at least sometimes) good for him because of what they are like, and negative emotions are bad for him (at least sometimes) because of what they're like. I'll return to the robot theme in [Section 4](#), but this is a good place to pause and take stock.

### 3. EUDAIMONIST RESPONSES TO THE PHENOMENOLOGICAL INTUITION

I've used examples and thought experiments above to evoke the phenomenological intuition, which, in turn, supports the phenomenological value thesis. Eudaimonists who reject the phenomenological value thesis—groups (1) and (2) from the end of [Section 1](#)—must respond to the phenomenological intuition. I will consider three responses: first, they might deny the intuition; second, they might attempt to debunk it; finally, they might offer eudaimonic reasons for thinking that pleasure is basically good and pain basically bad and insist that these reasons better explain their value.

Eudaimonists who want to deny the phenomenological intuition might draw attention to scenarios involving pleasure or pain that either challenge the intuition or fail to elicit it. Consider Bradford's (2020) "hurts so good" argument against the strong phenomenological value thesis. Some people enjoy the painful burn of a spicy pepper, the feeling of fright or dread prompted by a horror film, or sadness evoked by a good tearjerker. More to the point, they enjoy these things because they are unpleasant. Bradford calls these hurts-so-good experiences, HSGs for short, and the mark of a genuine HSG is that it is enjoyed because it feels

---

<sup>13</sup> Is there a well-being difference between my p-zombie twin and my p-Vulcan twin? Perhaps, but if there is, it will not be hedonic. For example, my p-zombie twin by definition, will not know what it is like to know something. My p-Vulcan twin will know what it is like to know something, but will not know what it is like to feel pleased or disturbed by what he knows.



bad (i.e., because of its negative hedonic tone).<sup>14</sup> Consequently, scenarios involving genuine HSGs are less likely to elicit the phenomenological intuition—perhaps they feel bad without actually being bad for you. HSGs can even trigger alternative value intuitions; for example, that the painfulness of an HSG is good for its subject because it is desired.

Supporters of the strong phenomenological value thesis are likely to reject Bradford’s characterization of HSGs and insist that the net valence for any putative HSG is positive. I suspect that something like this is true.<sup>15</sup> However, in this paper I aim to defend the *weak* phenomenological value thesis. So, it needn’t be the case that *all* instances of pleasure are good because of what they are like (and *mutatis mutandis* for pain). HSGs are outliers. Of course, it would be nice for the phenomenological intuition to apply in all contexts. I think it does, but your mileage may vary. HSGs and other abnormal cases (e.g., immoral pleasures, base pleasures, pain asymbolia, and morphine pain) may temper the phenomenological intuition, but they do not erase it.<sup>16</sup>

---

<sup>14</sup> HSGs are similar to masochistic pleasures. Whether they are identical to masochistic pleasures will depend on one’s account of masochistic pleasure.

<sup>15</sup> I not sure that I’ve ever had a genuine HSG, at least under Bradford’s description. Returning to my earlier examples, I enjoy spicy peppers (frequently), horror films (occasionally), and tearjerkers (rarely). However, to the extent that I enjoy each, I find them pleasant—that is, I enjoy them to the extent that they have a positive hedonic tone. I want the pepper to burn, but not so much that it hurts and I want the horror film to hold me in a state of suspense or anticipation, but not real fear. As far as tearjerkers go, I like the scene in *Wreck-It Ralph* where Ralph wrecks Vanellope’s car because I find it cathartic. Perhaps my penchant for spicy food leads to an occasional HSG. I have in mind times when my experience has both positive and negative hedonic tones, with at least some of the positive tones having what Colin Klein (2014) calls a *penumbral* quality. As he puts it: “Having a pain that is almost, but not quite too much to bear is, under the right circumstances, pleasant” (49). So, in these cases, the unpleasant part of the experience remains unpleasant, but the penumbral quality (which is pleasant) both compensates for this unpleasantness and requires it. If this is correct, my experience does not align with Bradford’s definition of an HSG: enjoying the unpleasant part of the experience. Instead, I’m enjoying a penumbral pleasure. Of course, Bradford’s central concern is the prudential value of HSGs. On her account, HSGs include no basic prudential badness. I don’t think this is right. Instead, I suspect that all HSGs are a mixed bag with enough compensatory pleasure to make them worthwhile—undercompensation results in an overall unpleasant experience and a net loss in well-being, and overcompensation in an overall pleasant experience and a net gain in well-being.

<sup>16</sup> It is also worth noting that Bradford initially responded to HSGs with a defeasible version of the phenomenological intuition. Focusing on pain, she claimed that: “S’s experience E (at t) is intrinsically bad for S (at t) if and because E has negative feeling tone, *unless* S has a relevant attitude towards E, intrinsically, de re, and at t” (2020, 247). She calls this claim *reverse conditionalism* and notes that it “is able to hold that some displeasure is not bad, while still maintaining that the feeling of displeasure explains its badness” (250). The eudaimonic account that Bradford calls *tripartite perfectionism* was proposed shortly after she introduced reverse conditionalism. Tripartite perfectionism is incompatible with reverse conditionalism and Bradford is aware of the conflict. “What’s bad about pain is that it *hurts*. Indeed, [tripartite perfectionism] leaves out the seemingly most relevant aspect of pain’s badness from the explanation. But as I discussed earlier, this will be a disadvantage for any perfectionist account of pain’s badness (or pleasure’s goodness) since the view does not have the resources to capture the relevance of hedonic tone as directly explanatorily significant. However, the tripartite scheme enables hedonic tone to be indirectly relevant insofar as its avoidance (or experience) can be an end, and the

Second, eudaimonists might attempt to debunk the phenomenological intuition. They could model their argument on the debunking strategies Matthew Silverstein (2000) and Roger Crisp (2006) use to defend hedonism against Robert Nozick's Experience Machine ([1974] 2013). In response to Nozick, Silverstein and Crisp argue that our resistance to the Experience Machine—our sense that contact with reality matters for well-being—is best explained by hedonism itself. As Silverstein puts it:

Our experience machine intuitions reflect our desire to remain connected to the real world, to track reality. But ... the desire to track reality owes its hold upon us to the role it has played in the creation of happiness [pleasure<sup>17</sup>]. We acquire our powerful attachment to reality after finding again and again that deception almost always ends in suffering. We develop a desire to track reality because, in almost all cases, the connection to reality is conducive to happiness. Our intuitive views about what is prudentially good, the views upon which the experience machine argument relies, owe their existence to happiness. (2000, 296)

Crisp adds an evolutionary twist:

Valuing honesty, transparency, genuineness, and so on, has a clear pay-off: It fends off deception, and thereby assists understanding of the world, which itself issues in a clear evolutionary advantage. (2006, 639)

Perhaps eudaimonists can unearth a similar origin story to debunk the phenomenological intuition. For example, a eudaimonist might note the instrumental role that our pleasure and pain systems played for the survival of our ancestors and suggest that the phenomenological intuition is an evolutionary byproduct required for the survival of our species.

The debunking strategy I've outlined here is incomplete and I'll leave it to interested eudaimonists to fill out the details for themselves. Perhaps successful debunking would render the phenomenological intuition inert. However, debunking arguments also tend to prove too much. As Ben Bramble put it in his response to Crisp's debunking argument in favor of hedonism: "If ... we can ignore well-being intuitions that we have *only*

---

success or failure regarding this end is directly good or bad for us. In any case, the aim here is not to give the best explanation of pain's badness; rather it is to show that perfectionism has the resources to explain it and other bads" (2021, 603).

<sup>17</sup> Silverstein refers to happiness rather than pleasure to avoid controversy over the nature of pleasure (2000, 283). Unfortunately, controversy is unavoidable. "Happiness" is often used as a synonym for *eudaimonia*, which could obscure Silverstein's meaning here. There is also controversy over how to classify the psychological notion of happiness. For example, happiness may refer to a feeling, an emotion, or a mood.

because it was fitness-enhancing for our ancestors to have certain dispositions or beliefs, are there any intuitions that do not fall into this category?” (2016, 141).

Finally, eudaimonists might set the phenomenological intuition aside and give a eudaimonic explanation for the basic prudential goodness of pleasure and the basic prudential badness of pain. Gwen Bradford’s tripartite perfectionism (discussed in Section 1) is one such account. Michael Hayes (2021) has suggested that Thomas Aquinas also took this route. Hayes notes that, for Aquinas, pleasure is “good simply” and “good in itself” (284; cf. Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, I-II Q. 34, art. 2) and reconstructs Aquinas’s view as follows:

On top of the realization of some perceived good—that is, some perceived perfection or fulfillment—“there is added another good, which is pleasure” (Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, I-II Q. 34, art. 2). This is because pleasure itself is an additional kind of perfection or fulfillment. Pleasure is how we subjectively experience the completion of an operation, movement, or inclination when recognized or perceived as such (ST I-II Q. 32, art. 1). It is “the emotional response to a present [perceived] good,” which itself “perfects” the activity, operation, or inclination (ST I-II Q. 31, art. 1; Renard 1953, 40). ... It is the subjective, experienced end towards which an inclination, operation, or activity is directed. (284)

Hayes does not address the badness of pain, but eudaimonists interested in this approach might add that pain is bad because it disrupts the basic goods (e.g., 2001, 96–100, 118–26).

This third response—providing a eudaimonic explanation for the basic goodness of pleasure and badness of pain—is arguably a two-edged sword. The fact that eudaimonists like Bradford and Hayes seek to affirm the basic goodness of pleasure and the basic badness of pain for eudaimonic reasons speaks to the phenomenological intuition’s resiliency. Bradford, for example, notes that failure to vindicate the phenomenological intuition “will be a disadvantage for any perfectionist account of pain’s badness (or pleasure’s goodness)” (2021, 603). Focusing on the badness of pain, she writes:

Ideally an account of the badness of pain would ground the explanation in the quality of its feel, or hedonic tone. Pain is bad, goes the natural thought, because it hurts. But perfectionism must let go of any aspiration to capture this thought. Hedonic tone, good or bad, is simply not part of the perfectionist framework as it stands. The theory simply does not have the

resources to explain the basic badness of pain in the quality of its feel—or any feel alone. (599)

In the next section, I double down on the phenomenological intuition and use it to drive a wedge between the eudaimonic and hedonic aspects of well-being. My tool is a robot-themed thought experiment, inspired by a similar thought experiment from Dan Haybron (2022).

#### 4. A HEDONIC INVERSION ARGUMENT

The thought experiment I have in mind involves two security robots. Haybron's original involved a single robot and was designed to support his emotional state theory of happiness by highlighting the dispositional aspect of happiness (2022). I have no such concern. My goal is to present a case in which the eudaimonic and hedonic aspects of well-being diverge. The thought experiment is also inspired by the inverted qualia objection to functionalism in the philosophy of mind.

Suppose that the Sensible Robotics Company has developed two security robots: Anxious Robot and Zealous Robot. Each robot is “a simplified analogue of a person” (Haybron 2022, 90) designed to protect a warehouse from major and minor threats (e.g., burglars and pests). The robots monitor an environment and address threats as needed. Pests will be eliminated (Haybron's robot is equipped with a laser and dust pan). Faced with a human intruder, the robot will secure valuables, sound the alarm, and alert the authorities.

Anxious Robot most resembles its counterpart in Haybron's original thought experiment. Like Haybron's robot, Anxious Robot is “a robotic security system whose ‘emotional’ repertoire consists entirely of varying degrees of anxiety” (90).<sup>18</sup> Haybron is silent on this next detail, but for present purposes, we will suppose there is also something it is like to be Anxious Robot. At times, Anxious Robot is behaviorally, dispositionally, and phenomenologically anxious.

Now let's compare Anxious Robot to Zealous Robot. Zealous Robot is externally identical to Anxious Robot and built for the same purpose. However, Zealous Robot's emotional repertoire consists entirely of varying degrees of enthusiasm. As with Anxious Robot, there is something it is like to be Zealous Robot. So, Zealous Robot is behaviorally, dispositionally, and phenomenologically enthusiastic.

Now, Anxious Robot and Zealous Robot are not only built to perform the same task, but they are also behaviorally equivalent. For example, we

---

<sup>18</sup> Haybron likens Robot to the character in the original *Lost in Space* television series. I've omitted this reference above, as Robot's aesthetic and anthropomorphized behavior patterns (e.g., Robot's flailing arms and catchphrase) can distract from the point.

might imagine that Sensible Robotics' product testers put each robot through the same series of tests with externally equivalent results. Purchase either robot; it will do the same thing in every situation. Of course, this will mean that Zealous Robot is behaviorally anxious and Anxious Robot is behaviorally enthusiastic, but this shouldn't concern us. All this means is that there will be no difference between Anxious Robot and Zealous Robot *from the outside*.

For Anxious Robot, the successful exercise of its capacities is mapped to an overall negative phenomenology. For Zealous Robot, the successful exercise of its capacities is mapped to positive phenomenology. Borrowing terminology from Hayes (2021, 284), Zealous Robot's positive phenomenology is the subjective, experienced end towards which Zealous Robot's inclinations, operations, or activities are directed—which makes it a basic prudential good by eudaimonic standards. *Mutatis mutandis*, Anxious Robot's negative phenomenology is the subjective, experienced end towards which Anxious Robot's inclinations, operations, or activities are directed—also a basic prudential good by eudaimonic standards. This leads to the following unintuitive result: Once the product tests are complete, eudaimonists should assign Anxious Robot and Zealous Robot the same amount of well-being—and positive values at that! But surely Anxious Robot is worse off than Zealous Robot.

The thought experiment challenges eudaimonism by sharpening the phenomenological intuition in a manner that capacity- and goal-fulfillment paradigms fail to track. Each robot has fulfilled its goals and exercised its capacities to the same degree. Yet it's clear that we should not assign them the same amount of well-being. Zealous Robot is better off than Anxious Robot and Anxious Robot is worse off than Zealous Robot, and the difference is hedonic! Call this *the hedonic inversion objection to eudaimonism*. Finally, I should clarify that the thought experiment serves as an objection to *pure* eudaimonism. The welfare difference between Anxious Robot and Zealous Robot needn't imply that they receive no benefit from their respective capacity and goal fulfillments, only that purely eudaimonic accounts of well-being must be incomplete.

## 5. EUDAIMONIST RESPONSES TO THE HEDONIC INVERSION ARGUMENT

Faced with this hedonic inversion argument, I see two paths forward for those who insist on a purely eudaimonic theory of well-being. Neither is promising.

Eudaimonists on the first path will deny that hedonic difference leads to a value difference. I don't think this is a viable response, but the most I can do is cite the phenomenological intuition. A debunking argument

could bolster the response, but it could also pull the rug right out from under the eudaimonist using it. As I noted in [Section 3](#), intuition-debunking arguments have a wide scope. It's not clear to me that one can successfully debunk the phenomenological intuition without debunking intuitions that undergird eudaimonism's nature fulfillment ideals as well.

Eudaimonists on the second path will accept that hedonic difference leads to a value difference and then supply a eudaimonic explanation for the value difference. This is to reuse the third eudaimonic response from [Section 3](#). For example, they might adopt an attitudinal theory of pleasure and pain on which pleasant experiences are subjective desire satisfactions (i.e., having an experience and simultaneously desiring that it continue) and painful experiences are instances of subjective aversion satisfaction (i.e., having an experience and simultaneously desiring that it end). Eudaimonists could adopt this theory of pleasure and pain and then link subjective desire and aversion satisfaction and nature fulfillment and malfilment. This would give them a eudaimonic reason for thinking that Anxious Robot is worse off than Zealous Robot.

There are two problems with this approach. First, the best attitudinal theories are phenomenologically enriched (see, e.g., Pallies and Dietz 2023; Kahane 2009). This means that there will still be a brutally phenomenological aspect to the pleasure and pain (see Fortier forthcoming). The second, and more serious problem, is that these eudaimonists would still have an incomplete account of the basic goodness of pleasure and basic badness of pain. This is because the non-phenomenal elements of pleasure and pain do all the value work. In this respect, the view still dismisses the phenomenological intuition and rejects the phenomenological value thesis.

Attitudinal theories of pleasure and pain are generally classified as externalist theories of pleasure and pain. Antti Kauppinen (2025) has recently suggested that some internalist theories of pleasure and pain can fit eudaimonism's nature fulfillment paradigm. According to Kauppinen, eudaimonists should include a "capacity for valenced experience" among the self-defining capacities of human nature. He adds that the "formal aim" of our capacity for positively valenced experience is to continue having or have more of the experience and that "the formal aim implicit in the functioning of our capacity for negatively valenced experience is not having negatively valenced experiences, or self-elimination for short" (222–3).

To get a better idea of Kauppinen's proposal, consider Luca Barlassina and Max Khan Hayward's (2019) reflexive imperativism on which the phenomenal character of a pleasant experience is explained by its imperative content ("more of me") and the phenomenal character of an

unpleasant experience is explained by the imperative content (“less of me”). Focusing on unpleasant experience, Kauppinen argues that

Pain [amounts] to failure by the internal standards of our capacity for valenced experience precisely *because of how it feels*. Very roughly, the phenomenal character of negative experience as such directly or indirectly offers for our agency the end of getting rid of such experience. This formal aim will necessarily be frustrated as long as the pain continues. Suffering is a special kind of failure by standards inherent to conscious experience. So, for a telic perfectionist, it is in a sense bad because it hurts—the explanation of its badness makes ineliminable reference to its phenomenal character. (214)

At this point, we might wonder if Kauppinen has given us a eudaimonic account that honors both the phenomenological intuition and the phenomenological value thesis—group (3) from the end of [Section 1](#). The answer is no. Here’s why.

On Kauppinen’s account, it is the intentional contents of our pleasures and pains—not their felt qualities—that explain why pleasures are good for us and pains bad for us. Yes, he also thinks that the intentional contents of our pleasures and pains explain their felt qualities, but the basic value of pleasure and the basic disvalue of pain are explained by the successful realization or frustration of a formal end (219). As Kauppinen puts it, “the explanation I have given of pain’s badness fundamentally appeals to frustrating formal aims” (228). So, if we adopt his account and return to the thought experiment, the fact that Anxious Robot is worse off than Zealous Robot will be grounded in the frustration of Anxious Robot’s formal aims, not in what it feels like to be Anxious Robot.

## CONCLUSION

In this paper, I have defended the truth of the weak phenomenological value thesis—that sometimes pleasure is basically good for us and sometimes pain is basically bad for us because of what they feel like—and I have argued that welfare eudaimonism lacks native resources to affirm it. It follows that eudaimonism is at best an incomplete theory of well-being. The primary reason for accepting the weak phenomenological value thesis is the phenomenological intuition. I’ve reinforced the intuition through thought experiments involving cheap thrills, zombies, Vulcans, and robots. A eudaimonist might respond by invoking competing intuitions (an issue that problematizes the strong but not the weak phenomenological value thesis) or by attempting to debunk the intuition.

I argued that the first approach is insufficient and that the second proves too much.

Finally, I've attempted to clarify the phenomenological challenge for eudaimonism with the Anxious Robot and Zealous Robot thought experiment. This scenario illustrates a hedonic inversion problem for eudaimonism: the prudential value of nature fulfillment differs from the prudential value of phenomenologically valenced states. The intuitive conclusion—that Zealous Robot is better off for purely phenomenological reasons—reveals a significant problem for eudaimonic theories.

## REFERENCES

- Arneson, Richard J. 1999. "Human Flourishing Versus Desire Satisfaction." *Social Philosophy and Policy* 16 (1): 113–42. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0265052500002272>.
- Barlassina, Luca, and Max Khan Hayward. 2019. "More of Me! Less of Me!: Reflexive Imperativism about Affective Phenomenal Character." *Mind* 128 (512): 1013–44. <https://doi.org/10.1093/mind/fzz035>.
- Bradford, Gwen. 2020. "The Badness of Pain." *Utilitas* 32 (2): 236–52. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0953820819000475>.
- . 2021. "Perfectionist Bads." *The Philosophical Quarterly* 71 (3): 586–604. <https://doi.org/10.1093/pq/pqaa055>.
- . 2023. "Consciousness and Welfare Subjectivity." *Noûs* 57 (4): 905–21. <https://doi.org/10.1111/nous.12434>.
- Bramble, Ben. 2016. "The Experience Machine." *Philosophy Compass* 11 (3): 136–45. <https://doi.org/10.1111/phc3.12303>.
- Chalmers, David J. 2022. *Reality+: Virtual Worlds and the Problems of Philosophy*. Kindle. New York: W. W. Norton & Company.
- Chisholm, Roderick M. 2001. "The Defeat of Good and Evil." In *Ethics and Intrinsic Values*, edited by John R. White. Philosophy and Realist Phenomenology 12. Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag C. Winter.
- Crisp, Roger. 2006. "Hedonism Reconsidered." *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 73 (3): 619–45. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1933-1592.2006.tb00551.x>.
- . 2021. "Well-Being." In *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, edited by Edward N. Zalta, Winter 2021. Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University. <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2021/entries/well-being/>.
- Dorsey, Dale. 2021. *A Theory of Prudence*. Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198823759.001.0001>.
- Finnis, John. (1980) 2011. *Natural Law and Natural Rights*. 2nd ed. Clarendon Law Series. Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press.
- Fletcher, Guy. 2013. "A Fresh Start for the Objective-List Theory of Well-Being." *Utilitas* 25 (2): 206–20. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0953820812000453>.
- . 2022. "A Painful End for Perfectionism?" *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 46 (July): 233–50. <https://doi.org/10.5840/msp2022112328>.



- Fortier, Nikki. Forthcoming. "The Trouble with Genuine-Attraction Desires." *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*. Accessed June 27, 2025. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00048402.2025.2515861>.
- Haybron, Daniel M. 2008. *The Pursuit of Unhappiness: The Elusive Psychology of Well-Being*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- . 2016. "Mental State Approaches to Well-Being." In *The Oxford Handbook of Well-Being and Public Policy*, edited by Matthew D. Adler and Marc Fleurbaey, 347–78. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- . 2022. "Happiness and the Metaphysics of Affect." *Les Ateliers de l'éthique / The Ethics Forum* 17 (1-2): 81–111. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1097015ar>.
- . 2023. "Well-Being: Taking Our Selves Seriously." In *Philosophy and Human Flourishing*, edited by John J. Stuhr. The Humanities and Human Flourishing. Oxford University Press.
- . 2025. "Well-Being and the Problem of Suffering." In *Ill-Being: Philosophical Perspectives*, edited by Mauro Rossi and Christine Tappolet, 184–212. Oxford: Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/9780191955853.003.0011>.
- . Forthcoming. *The Lives We Should Want*. May 9, 2023, manuscript. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Hayes, Michael. 2021. "Finding Pleasure and Satisfaction in Perfectionism." *Utilitas* 33 (3): 270–86. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S095382082000045X>.
- Heathwood, Chris. 2021. *Happiness and Well-Being*. Cambridge Elements. Elements in Ethics. Cambridge University Press.
- . 2022. "Ill-Being for Desire Satisfactionists." *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 46 (July): 33–54. <https://doi.org/10.5840/msp2022112226>.
- Kahane, Guy. 2009. "Pain, Dislike and Experience." *Utilitas* 21 (3): 327–36. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0953820809990070>.
- Kauppinen, Antti. 2025. "Telic Perfectionism and the Badness of Pain." In *Ill-Being: Philosophical Perspectives*, edited by Mauro Rossi and Christine Tappolet, 213–31. Oxford: Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/9780191955853.003.0012>.
- Klein, Colin. 2014. "The Penumbral Theory of Masochistic Pleasure." *Review of Philosophy and Psychology* 5 (1): 41–55. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13164-013-0169-9>.
- Korsgaard, Christine M. 1983. "Two Distinctions in Goodness." *The Philosophical Review* 92 (2): 169–95. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2184924>.
- Moore, G. E. 1922. *Principia Ethica*. London: Cambridge University Press.
- Murphy, Mark C. 2001. *Natural Law and Practical Rationality*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Nozick, Robert. (1974) 2013. *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*. Kindle. New York: Basic Books.
- Nussbaum, Martha C. 2000. *Women and Human Development: The Capabilities Approach*. The John Robert Seeley Lectures. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Pallies, Daniel. 2022. "Attraction, Aversion, and Asymmetrical Desires." *Ethics* 132 (3): 598–620. <https://doi.org/10.1086/718083>.

- Pallies, Daniel, and Alexander Dietz. 2023. "The Dilemma for Attitude Theories of Pleasure." In *Oxford Studies in Philosophy of Mind Vol. 3*, edited by Uriah Kriegel. Oxford University Press. <https://philarchive.org/rec/PALTDF-4>.
- Parfit, Derek. (1984) 1987. *Reasons and Persons*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Renard, Henri. 1953. *The Philosophy of Morality*. Milwaukee, WI: The Bruce Publishing Company. <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/uc1.b3363887>.
- Ross, W. D. (1930) 2002. *The Right and the Good*. Edited by Philip Stratton-Lake. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Siewert, Charles. 1998. *The Significance of Consciousness*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Silverstein, Matthew. 2000. "In Defense of Happiness: A Response to the Experience Machine." *Social Theory and Practice* 26 (2): 279–300. <http://www.jstor.org.ezp.slu.edu/stable/23559087>.
- Tiberius, Valerie, and Colin G. DeYoung. 2022. "Pain, Depression, and Goal-Fulfillment Theories of Ill-Being." *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 46: 165–91. <https://doi.org/10.5840/msp20231635>.