



# Clearing our Minds for Hedonic Phenomenalism

Lorenzo Buscicchi<sup>1</sup> · Willem van der Deijl<sup>2</sup>

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## Abstract

What constitutes the nature of pleasure? According to hedonic phenomenalism, pleasant experiences are pleasant in virtue of some phenomenological features. According to hedonic attitudinalism, pleasure involves an attitude—a class of mental states that necessarily have an object. Consequently, pleasures are always *about* something. We argue that hedonic attitudinalism is not able to accommodate pleasant moods. We first consider this argument more generally, and then consider what we call *the globalist strategy response* to the possible objectless of moods, namely that pleasant moods have general, or undetermined, objects. We then discuss the case of blissful meditative states, and argue that the globalist strategy is not able to accommodate all pleasant states.

## 1 Introduction

Perhaps you are reading this sentence feeling a painful dread, perhaps you are pleasantly elated. Perhaps these feelings are directed at the prospect of reading this paper, perhaps they appear to be about nothing in particular. Regardless of whether you are in a pleasant or unpleasant state, we can ask, in virtue of what are you experiencing this pleasantness and unpleasantness? In other words, what is the nature of pleasure?

Theories of pleasure typically come in two strands. A first strand, hedonic phenomenalism, maintains that a feeling is pleasant in virtue of its phenomenology, its feeling a certain way. Hedonic phenomenalism has been challenged on grounds that it is unable to account for the wide variety of experiences that are pleasant, which casts doubt on the idea that they share a kind of phenomenology. This has been called

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✉ Lorenzo Buscicchi  
lorenzobuscicchi@hotmail.it

<sup>1</sup> University of Waikato, Hamilton, New Zealand

<sup>2</sup> Tilburg University, Tilburg, Netherlands

the heterogeneity problem. A second strand, hedonic attitudinalism refers to a set of theories that maintain that pleasant mental states necessarily involve an attitude. Crucially, attitudinal theories are intentionalist theories of pleasure, on these accounts, pleasure necessarily involves an attitude the subject holds towards an object.<sup>1</sup>

In this paper, we present and analyze an argument against attitudinal theories of pleasure, which we will call the Cheerfulness Objection:

P1<sub>CO</sub>) If hedonic attitudinalism is correct, all pleasures are pleasant in virtue of a kind of attitude towards their objects.

P2<sub>CO</sub>) Cheerful moods are pleasant, but do not necessarily involve attitudes towards objects.

C<sub>CO</sub>) Hedonic attitudinalism is false.

The Cheerfulness Objection is not a new objection, and has presented a significant challenge to intentionalist theories of mind more generally (see Deonna and Teroni 2012; Bordini 2017).<sup>2</sup> In this paper, we investigate a common intentionalist response to the problem of moods that is open to the hedonic attitudinalist. We argue that this response becomes untenable when we look at the pleasant states of meditative bliss that some meditators report, even in states of consciousness that appear to be contentless otherwise (Lutz et al. 2008; Woods et al. 2020, 2022).

Recently, some have also used meditative states as counterexamples to intentionalism. There are nevertheless a variety of intentionalist ways to account for moods (such as Mendelovici 2013; Kriegel 2019; Rossi 2021). In this paper, we remain agnostic about the success of either side of this debate. Our main argument, however, is that *attitudinal theories of pleasure* cannot account of the pleasantness of cheerful moods generally, and the pleasantness of blissfulness meditative states in particular.

We first outline our notion of pleasure (II), and the two groups of theories that have shaped the debate, phenomenism (III) and attitudinalism (IV). We then introduce the Cheerfulness Objection in more detail (V), the globalist strategy response, the available move for attitudinalists (VI), and our rebuttal of this response in light of blissful, but objectless meditative states (VII). Section VIII concludes.

<sup>1</sup> As presented by Moore (2004), there are also hybrid phenomenalist/attitudinal theories. This group of theories is affected by the cheerfulness objection too. As an example of hybrid theory, see Helm (2002) and Lin (2020).

<sup>2</sup> Following Crane (2009), by “intentionalism” we mean the general thesis that the nature of a conscious mental state is determined by its intentionality (the term “representationalism” is sometimes used interchangeably). A related but different claim is “Brentano’s thesis”, the view that intentionality is the “mark” of the mental. An anonymous referee of this journal noted that among philosophers writing on the nature of pleasure, it has been recognized that the discussions around intentionalism are highly relevant. While we agree, it has also been widely observed that the debate on intentionalism in philosophy of mind and the debate on pleasure in moral philosophy have generally proceeded separately. In 2001, Schroeder stated that pleasure “has been the high-exclusive province of moral theorists” (p. 508). Decades later, we hold his claim to still be largely true.

## 2 Pleasure

Following Katz (2005), we employ pleasure in an encompassing sense that includes all positively valenced states, e.g. joy, happiness, enjoyment, satisfaction, etc.<sup>3</sup> Theories of pleasure describe in virtue of what a mental state can be classified as pleasant. In light of the heterogeneity problem, some may wonder whether we can provide a unified explanation to all the varieties of mental states we call pleasure.<sup>4</sup> Bentham (1817/1983, p. 87), for instance, identified fifty-four synonyms of pleasure. The more contemporary McCloskey (1971) notices how pleasure-expressions can be nouns, adjectives, active or passive verbs, or adverbs. Despite this semantic and grammatical diversity concerning pleasure, we should not be tricked. When we ask what the nature of pleasure is, we are not dealing with a linguistic issue but a substantive one—in virtue of what property are pleasant experiences pleasant? in fact, neuroscientific evidence seems to provide some evidence for the existence of a commonality in pleasant experiences. As Berridge and Kringelbach (2015) write:

A growing set of results from neuroimaging studies have suggested that many diverse rewards activate a shared or overlapping brain system: a ‘common currency’ reward network of interacting brain regions. Pleasures of food, sex, addictive drugs, friends and loved ones, music, art, and even sustained states of happiness can produce strikingly similar patterns of brain activity. (p. 651)

The question remains, however, which property this is.

## 3 Hedonic Phenomenalism

According to hedonic phenomenalism, pleasantness is a phenomenal property<sup>5</sup>—pleasures feel alike in some way. Pleasant experiences are pleasant in virtue of the way they feel—their phenomenology. Examples of scholars that adopted hedonic phenomenalism include: Bentham (1789/1970), J.S. Mill (1863/1998), Moore (1903); Broad (1930); Tännsjö (1998); Crisp 2006a); Bradley (2009); Labukt (2012); Smuts (2011); Bramble (2013).

However, since Sidgwick (1874/1981, p. 127), a common challenge to this view maintains that it is not possible to introspectively identify a felt-quality shared by all pleasures. Parfit (1986) writes:

<sup>3</sup> The broad use of pleasure is generally accepted by philosophers and seems uncontroversial for non-philosophers. According to Cassin et al. (2014, pp. 768–99), in the main European languages, the broad use of pleasure is inherited from Platonism: Plato linguistically unified pleasures under “*hēdonē*”. Nevertheless, the linguist Wierzbicka (1999, pp. 279–82, 292–93) explains that all languages can express “feeling good”: the broad use of pleasure does not seem specific to European languages.

<sup>4</sup> The idea that there is a single property within all pleasures is called hedonic monism (Moore 2004). This property exists independently from how we speak about it. Because of this pleasantness-property, it is not arbitrary to class some mental states as pleasures.

<sup>5</sup> A felt-quality, feeling, quale, feels like, phenomenology, phenomenal quality, felt-character, etc.

Compare the pleasures of satisfying an intense thirst or lust, listening to music, solving an intellectual problem, reading a tragedy, and knowing that one's child is happy. These various experiences do not contain any distinctive common quality. (p. 493)

This issue is usually called “heterogeneity problem”. The heterogeneity problem is considered an objection to hedonic phenomenalism.<sup>6</sup> We formalize the argument (HP) based on it this way:

- P1<sub>HP</sub>) If hedonic phenomenalism is true, all pleasures share a felt-quality.
- P2<sub>HP</sub>) All pleasures do not share a felt-quality.
- C<sub>HP</sub>) Hedonic phenomenalism is false.

Hedonic phenomenologists have responded in two ways. According to one approach—the distinctive feeling view (Bramble 2013; Labukt 2012)—we should reject the idea that we can reliably establish that there is no commonality, given the opacity of our experiences, and hence rejects the force of the objection altogether.<sup>7</sup> Pleasure is a distinctive feeling after all. A second approach—the hedonic tone view—accepts the claim that there is no distinctive feeling of pleasure common in pleasant experiences, all pleasant experiences share a subtler phenomenal determinable commonality, or hedonic tone (Duncker 1941; Crisp 2006a; Smuts 2011; Lin 2020). It may simply be that what all pleasant experiences have in common is that they “feel good” (Smuts 2011). This may be a highly general description, but the idea that pleasant experiences can feel quite differently, while still having a common phenomenology aligns well with laypersons’ conceptions of the concept (Dubè & Le Bel, 2003).<sup>8</sup>

In sum, phenomenal theories of pleasure fit well with our intuitive understanding of pleasure, but have been challenged by the heterogeneity problem. But both the distinctive feeling view and the hedonic tone view provide tools to respond to this challenge.

<sup>6</sup> As mentioned above, hedonic monism is the view that there is only one property corresponding to pleasantness. Hedonic pluralism consists in the claim that there are multiple sufficient conditions for pleasure. Thus, as indicated by Labukt (2012) and Alwood (2018), the move from hedonic phenomenalism to hedonic attitudinalism was not the only strategy available to overcome the heterogeneity problem. Nevertheless, the literature generally does not consider pluralist phenomenalist accounts.

<sup>7</sup> Bramble (2013, p. 221) writes: “If I am right about what ‘the pleasant feeling’ would have to be like for the distinctive feeling theory to be true, and Schwitzgebel, Haybron, and Smuts are right that we can be grossly mistaken about important aspects of our own occurrent phenomenology, then our inability to gain a clear sense of ‘the pleasant feeling’, or to introspect a felt similarity between all pleasant experiences, should not weigh all that heavily against the distinctive feeling theory.”

<sup>8</sup> As the Dubè & Le Bel (2003), write: “laypeople’s representations of unitary and differentiated pleasures shared a set of common positive affective qualities but also that they can be distinguished on the basis of unique affective qualities” (p. 290).

## 4 Hedonic Attitudinalism

Hedonic attitudinalist accounts of pleasure are typically motivated by the heterogeneity problem. According to attitudinalists, the heterogeneity problem should lead us away from analyzing the unity of pleasant experiences in terms of the phenomenology of such experiences, but rather, in terms of an attitude. According to Katz (2005), hedonic attitudinalism, has been defended in at least two forms:

1. The attitude constitutes pleasure from within. On this version, the attitude itself constitutes the pleasure.
2. The attitude picks out and unifies experiences of pleasure from outside. On this version, the experiences constitute the pleasure in virtue of the attitudes we hold towards them.

In both formulations, the view is shielded from the heterogeneity objection, because no matter how different experiences feel, they may all constitute pleasure if we hold a kind of attitude towards it.

Attitudinalism makes attitudes central to the nature of pleasure. So, what is an attitude? Unfortunately, there is not a standard use of “attitude” in philosophy and psychology.<sup>9</sup> What matters for our purposes is, first, that attitudes necessarily have an object: attitudes are necessarily about something. Secondly, the realisation of pleasure, on attitudinal accounts involves thoughts, and, more precisely, belief-states. In order to see this, we need to look in more detail at the two most cited defended versions of attitudinal pleasure: Feldman (2004) and Heathwood (2006; 2007).

As contemporary examples of different attitudinalist theories consider Heathwood and Feldman. On Heathwood’s desire-based account (2006; 2007), we are experiencing pleasure when we have an intrinsic desire for *X* and believe *X* to be the case. On Feldman’s attitudinal theory, “A person takes attitudinal pleasure in some state of affairs if he enjoys it, is pleased about it, is glad that it is happening, is delighted by it”

<sup>9</sup> Katz (2005) writes: “There’s also no standard single use of attitude language in academic philosophy. Uses predominant in the analytic philosophy of language and thereby in the philosophy of mind usually involve relations to propositions, about which there is much literature but no standard account of what they are or what ascribing relations to them involves. Belief is standard example. A different or narrower use more influenced by psychology and common in ethics involves being motivationally, affectively, or evaluatively (rather than cognitively) for or against.” The term “propositional attitudes” descends from the fact that their content can be understood as the proposition they point to. It is not settled whether all intentional states are propositional attitudes. While Feldman (2004) takes the relevant attitude for pleasure to be an propositional attitude, Heathwood (2007, p. 29, fn. 12, fn. 26) seems to deny this. That said, although some attitudinalist account different from Feldman’s can react to our objection by relaxing this cognitive belief-like understanding of pleasure, the strength of this move is limited by the need of not making attitudinalism undistinguishable from phenomenism. In other words, even if we take an attitude to involve a good feeling, an attitude must necessarily have an object to still meaningfully be “an attitude”. More, by rejecting the traditional separation of intentionality and phenomenology, hybrid phenomenalist/attitudinal theories might be advanced (for example, Helm 2002; Lin 2020). Nevertheless, if they hold object-directedness a necessary feature of pleasure, hybrid theories are affected by our argument too.

(Feldman 2004, p. 56). For both, a pleasure thus necessarily involves a belief-state.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, all forms of pleasure are reducible to attitudinal pleasure, on this view (2004, appendix B1). What matters for our argument is the supposed intentional (act/object or attitude/content) structure of pleasure, and the fact that pleasure involves belief-states. Consequently our argument affects all hedonic attitudinalist theories, either sub (1) or sub (2).

Hedonic attitudinalism faces its own challenges. First of all, by leaving the phenomenology out of their conception of pleasure, attitudinalists appear to “take the fun out of pleasure”, as Haybron (2008, p. 64) writes in response to Feldman’s theory of pleasure (see also Crisp 2006b; Norcross 2007; Mason 2007; Zimmerman 2007).<sup>11</sup> Attitudinal theories seem incapable of giving an adequate portrayal of what pleasure is: a hedonically neutral state has a different “feel” (or better “no feel”) compared to a pleasure. Lazari-Radek & Singer explain this well:

I might, for instance, be pleased to learn from a newspaper article that the distribution of bednets by aid agencies has led to fewer children dying from malaria. This does not necessarily mean that I have a warm inner glow, or any other kind of cheery feelings. (...) If my belief that fewer children died does not involve any positive emotions or feelings and fails to make my own state of consciousness more desirable in any way, we cannot see why this belief should be regarded as contributing to my happiness. (2014, p. 249)<sup>12</sup>

Desire-based theories especially face challenges. Plato (1975, 51 A–C) already noticed that we often take pleasure in experiences, such as novel sights, sounds, and fragrances, without having desired them. In these cases we experience pleasure without any desire for that sight, sound, fragrance, or emotion.

To reply to this counterexample, Heathwood (2006; 2007) suggests that desire can arise during the experience. This modification is supposed to accommodate the aforementioned cases in which pleasure is not preceded by desire. The arising desire is supposed to account for the unexpected pleasures we experience without any prior desire for them. However, this reply does not do justice to the phenomenology of

<sup>10</sup> This is perhaps surprising, but it is an explicit part of the views of both authors. Heathwood makes it part of his definition of pleasure: “MTP: S is intrinsically pleased at t that p if S intrinsically desires at t that p and S believes at t that p” (2006, p. 557). Feldman writes: “If you take pleasure in a certain state of affairs, you must believe it to be true. Thus, if I am pleased to be cutting these tenons, then I must think I am cutting these tenons. I might be pleased about it without its being at the forefront of my consciousness. But then I will believe it in approximately the same way. My belief that I am cutting tenons will not be at the forefront of my consciousness” (2004, p. 59).

<sup>11</sup> Feldman (2007) holds that he had not left out the pleasant bit. Feldman (2010, p. 143) reiterates this claim while repeating that pleasure is not a feeling. Incidentally, in many passages, Feldman seems to argue against a strawman: he concludes that pleasure is not a feeling by showing that pleasure is not a sensation. As an example of this conflation considers Feldman’s (2010, p. 144) exemplificatory cases of feelings (in reality sensations): warmth or cold, pressure, itches, tickles, burning sensations, pins and needles. Nevertheless, Feldman does not actually provide any explanation of how his theory might save pleasure’s feels good. In fact, a “cold fun” or a “feelingless fun”, some expressions that might represent Feldman’s reply, seem more oxymorons than credible accounts of pleasure’s “fun”.

<sup>12</sup> Lazari-Radek and Singer refer to their target as happiness, but make clear that they understand happiness and pleasure to be substantively the same.

pleasures that does not seem mixed with the anticipation characteristic of desire's phenomenology. Unless someone proves, perhaps neuroscientifically, the reality of unconscious desires inextricably linked to pleasure, we are facing a speculation.

Indeed, neuroscientific evidence provides a foundation against this claim. Berridge's research (2007) was able to demonstrate that pleasure and desire constitute independent mental states that we tend to mistakenly merge because they regularly co-occur (see also de Lazari-Radek and Singer 2014, p. 246; Schroeder 2004, pp. 81–83). Neuroscientists were able to experimentally tease apart these brain mechanisms. These states and their attendant behaviors were experimentally dissociated such that one can be elicited and observed completely independently of the other. Becker et al. (2019), in their recent review of the literature, cite Laurent et al. (2012) as confirming the double dissociation of the neural systems underlying wanting and liking.

However, in this article, we develop a more general challenge to attitudinal accounts: pleasant moods.

## 5 Cheerfulness Objection

There are many different positive moods, such as elation, euphoria, ecstasy, exuberance, high spirits, light-heartedness, joy, merriment, enthusiasm, etc. It is likely that there are other pleasant moods, even ones that do not have a name in English. We use the term cheerfulness to refer to all of these positive moods in general. The problem that a mood like cheerfulness generates for hedonic attitudinalism is that cheerfulness sometimes feels undirected.<sup>13</sup> Katz formulates a version of this objection in his *Stanford Encyclopedia* article on pleasure, discussing Feldman's attitudinalism approach to pleasure:

An act/object or attitude/content account, again, seems not to fit the phenomenology of someone enjoying a pleasant nap, daydream, or *diffuse good mood*, as it must if it is to be an account of inclusive pleasure. (Katz 2005; italics ours)

Mendelovici puts this as a challenge to intentionalism more generally:

Moods, such as sadness, elation, and irritation, present a special challenge to the intentionalist project. The problem is that they really seem like “raw feels.” They seem entirely undirected, pervading our experience, rather than representing things as being a certain way. (Mendelovici 2013, p. 126)

Intuitively, it seems that someone can be cheerful at a given time, without having to be either cheerful about *x* or cheerful that *p*. To see this, imagine a conversation in which an interlocutor says “I believe/desire” (respectively, a belief and a desire).

<sup>13</sup> Examples of scholars claiming that moods are prima facie objectless include Searle (1983, p. 1), Kriegel (2019), Mendelovici (2013), Deonna and Teroni (2012, p. 4), Thalberg (1964, p. 46), Lamb (1987), Sizer (2000, p. 747), Bordini (2017), Frijda (1993, p. 381).

You ask what the interlocutor believes/desires and they reply: “nothing”. This answer would strike you as problematic. Now imagine someone saying “I’m cheerful/irritable” (moods). You ask them what they are cheerful/irritable about and they reply: “nothing”. This answer would appear to you as legitimate. Kind (2013) writes, the claim that moods are usually not directed at anything generates a large consensus.<sup>14</sup> We can consider an example:

*Waking up with a Good Mood:* the weather has been gloomy lately, and while nothing is especially wrong, Emily has been feeling down. On a Saturday morning she wakes up and the gloominess has been replaced by much more pleasant, cheerful mood. She feels much better.

Emily’s cheerfulness indeed appears to be about nothing at all. She simply feels better. At the same time, it is definitely pleasant, her experience in general is much more pleasant than it has been in previous days.

Notice that claiming that cheerfulness *can be* non-intentional does not imply that it is *necessarily* non-intentional.<sup>15</sup> Indeed moods tend to elicit mood-congruent appraisals: if I am cheerful, I will often be more open to the world. It will be more likely that I will find a chat with a colleague entertaining. So, we can acknowledge that moods are sometimes object-directed. Alternatively, we may presuppose that the chat with the colleague elicited an intentional emotion. But if so, this intentional amusement about the chat is distinct from the baseline non-intentional mood. Nevertheless, what matters to the cheerfulness argument is not that moods cannot involve directed attitudes. They may involve such attitudes. What matters is that they do not necessarily do so.

To reiterate, cheerfulness, by at least occasionally being non-intentional, constitutes a problem for hedonic attitudinalism. To see this, we can go over the steps of the Cheerfulness Objection:

P1<sub>CO</sub>) If hedonic attitudinalism is correct, all pleasures are pleasant in virtue of a kind of attitude towards their objects.

P2<sub>CO</sub>) Cheerful moods are pleasant, but do not necessarily involve attitudes towards objects

C<sub>CO</sub>) Hedonic attitudinalism is false.

As we discussed above, according to hedonic attitudinalism, pleasures necessarily involve an attitude towards some object: a desire, or an attitude of “taking pleasure in” something. P1<sub>CO</sub> simply represents this feature of attitudinal accounts. As the example of Emily illustrates, one can be cheerful, without this being directed at anything at all. Perhaps an attitudinalist would say that as a result of her mood, Emily

<sup>14</sup> Kind (2013) and Kriegel (2019) notice that sometimes we say that moods are “about” something but what we mean is a causal relationship rather than an intentional relationship. For example, a psychoanalyst might say that your depression is about your relationship with your mother meaning that it is caused by it rather than being directed at it.

<sup>15</sup> For example, in his empirical investigation, Siemer (2005) concludes that there are both objectless and object-directed moods.



will experience sensations she desires, or that she takes pleasure in. Perhaps she takes a bath after work, and she takes more pleasure in the bath than she did at other times, even though the bath is just as hot, and her working day equally long. It is plausible that this may occur, but it does not account for the pleasantness of the mood itself. Pleasant moods are pleasant even if they do not involve specific pleasant sensations. The mood itself is pleasant. If so, P2co is correct.

Attitudinalists appear to overintellectualize the experience of moods in general, and the pleasantness of moods in particular. Mendelovici (2013, p. 130) puts this especially well:

according to intentionalists “[i]n order to experience moods, one would have to be able to represent particular objects, the world as a whole, or unspecified objects. This seems to be too sophisticated a requirement for experiencing a mood.”

At this point, a reader may object that cheerfulness may simply be an exception: except cheerfulness, all pleasures are characterized by a kind of attitude.<sup>16</sup> This consequence would be problematic for hedonic attitudinalism. This theory does not tolerate exceptions. This is due to the fact that hedonic attitudinalism is concerned with the nature of pleasure. To claim that pleasures are characterized by an attitude with the exception of cheerfulness seems to admit that it is not in the nature of pleasure to be attitudinal. Just as monistic hedonic phenomenalism would be refuted by heterogeneity, similarly, if cheerfulness is indeed both pleasant and sometimes non-intentional, hedonic attitudinalism cannot provide such a property shared by all pleasures.

Importantly, cheerfulness is far from being a marginal case of pleasant mental state. Following Katz (2005), although we biasedly tend to think of salient episodes when thinking about pleasure (e.g., orgasm), “baseline affect and small deviations from it cumulatively matter most to the affective quality of life”. A theory of pleasure that does not account for cheerfulness cannot be considered an adequate theory of pleasure.

## 6 Response: Globalist Strategy

Zooming out from cheerfulness and hedonic attitudinalism, moods are considered a thorn in the side of intentionalism, the more general theory of mind. The most prominent move that has been employed to try to rescue intentionalism from the apparent non-intentionality of moods is the globalist strategy. By taking a closer look at this response to the challenge to intentionalism more generally, we can also assess how an hedonic attitudinalist may respond.

The globalist strategy consists in attempting to save the intentionality of moods by claiming that their apparent objectlessness is a consequence of the broadness of

<sup>16</sup> Dretske (1995, p. xv), for example, admits that all mental states are representational “plus or minus a bit”. This is due to the fact that, in his view, experiences like a general feeling of depression might not be representational.

their intentional objects. According to it, moods are directed at things in general, or the world as a whole. The globalist strategy is often considered the most prominent account aiming at defending the intentionality of moods (Bordini 2017, p. 61<sup>17</sup>; Kriegel 2019, p. 3<sup>18</sup>; Mendelovici 2013, p. 147<sup>19</sup>). To reiterate, according to the globalist strategy, moods are not directed at something in particular, rather they are directed at some general intentional object.

The globalist strategy can also be adopted by defenders of attitudinalist accounts of pleasure. Applying the globalist strategy to cheerfulness, Moore (2004) illustrates how hedonic intentionalists could reply to the Cheerfulness Objection:

[Hedonic] intentionalists, by contrast, must insist that every pleasure and displeasure has an object. They might argue, for example, that allegedly objectless euphoria and ecstasy or anxiety in fact do have objects, even if these objects are not fully determinate; perhaps, for example, they are directed at *things in general*, or *one's life in general*.

Accordingly, employing one of Moore's expressions, when Emily is cheerful, although her cheerfulness seems objectless to her, it is actually directed at "things in general". Emily's cheerfulness represents things in general as wonderful (or positive, or good).

Feldman (2010) discusses a similar objection, but rather than discussing cheerfulness, he discusses a person who is generally depressed, and generally feels bad without appearing to have an attitude towards any object (in this case, as a counterexample towards attitudinal hedonism about happiness). He responds by denying that he does not have attitudes towards objects, and more precisely, he holds negative attitudes towards "higher-order" objects:

In some cases, he takes displeasure in "first-order" objects such as the fact that he is stuck in traffic. In other cases, he takes displeasure in "higher-order" objects such as the fact that he is taking an inordinate amount of displeasure in things." (2010, p. 140)<sup>20</sup>

<sup>17</sup> "The standard solution is to say that moods are experiences of *very general entities* such as the whole world or everything. For example, when one is depressed, one does not seem to experience this or that particular thing or event as pointless, but one does experience the *whole world* as pointless. This would explain the peculiar phenomenal character of moods: they do not exhibit directedness toward anything *in particular*, because they represent something *very general*. Accordingly, on this view, describing moods as phenomenally undirected is simply inaccurate: they are in fact better described as exhibiting a directedness of a more *generalized* (or unspecific) sort toward, for example, *everything* or the *world*."

<sup>18</sup> "The extant literature contains a number of intentionalist treatments of mood. The leading account suggests that although moods do not represent anything in particular, they do represent the world as a whole, or everything indiscriminately. We may call this the 'globalist strategy.' It has recurred with persistent regularity in philosophical discussions of moods, and has often been motivated by the thought that an indiscriminating representation could account for the distinctively diffuse character of moods."

<sup>19</sup> "Another intentionalist strategy is to maintain that moods have a special kind of intentional object. For instance, one might maintain that moods represent everything, something, or the world as a whole as having certain properties."

<sup>20</sup> Heathwood (2022) discusses a similar objection (with respect to a desire-based view on happiness), and maintains that in apparent objectless instances of happiness, we hold attitudes towards our affective state itself.

If this response is plausible, then the intentionality of cheerfulness is saved, and hedonic attitudinalism may be rescued from the Cheerfulness Objection.

## 7 Meditative States and the Globalist Strategy

The globalist strategy may appear to be quite attractive in cases like Emily's: while Emily has not changed her attitudes towards anything in particular, it appears plausible to say that she has changed her attitude towards the world. This, however, seems to make a claim about Emily's attitudes that appears to be contingent: she may have changed her attitudes towards the world as a whole, but in many mood shifts, such as Emily's, this is not necessary. Moreover, this presumed attitude towards general, or indeterminate object does not appear to correspond to the typical experience of pleasant moods. As Rossi (2021, p. 7128) writes:

if moods were [...] directed at general, indeterminate, or plural objects, the individual experiencing [them] should typically be able to recognise and experience these objects as the objects [...] However, when we experience moods we seem to be much more in the dark than this. We seem to have no clue, or very close to no clue, about what our moods are directed at.

Perhaps we are not always in the dark about why our moods suddenly change. Sometimes, perhaps, they do result from changes in our outlook on the world. Again, however, at least sometimes they do not.<sup>21</sup>

This may nevertheless not sway the hedonic attitudinalist. However, insofar as the globalist strategy might work, it may work for certain types of pleasant moods, such as Emily's upliftedness. However, there are also pleasant mental states for which this solution becomes increasingly less plausible. Consider for instance the experiences that some individuals have when they achieve a meditative state that is characterized by an absence of thoughts and wants as reported by Candace and Brent (2019):

the practitioner's experience during, and as a result of, meditation, and involves achieving a state of mental silence, wherein the practitioner's self-monitoring precludes the litany of thoughts automatically marching through her conscious experiential field. (p. 6)<sup>22</sup>

This "mental silence" is often described as an intensely enjoyable, blissful experience (see Hinterberger et al. 2014; Metzinger 2020; Gamma and Metzinger 2021; Srin-

<sup>21</sup> According to Rossi (2021), we are always in the dark about the objects of moods, if we become aware, the mood transforms into an emotion.

<sup>22</sup> Someone might claim that self-monitoring has an intentional structure with consciousness being the intentional object of the meditator's awareness. Yet, Dunne and colleagues (2019) report that this claim is denied by the "mental quiescence" practice in Tibetan Buddhism and in contemporary mindfulness. Thus, this is how the authors conceptualize "mindful meta-awareness": "non-propositionally yet consciously monitoring the quality of one's attention, without perturbing attention on an object" (p. 310).

vasan 2020; Lutz et al. 2008; Woods et al. 2020; 2022). Such states are sometimes called states of minimal phenomenal consciousness.

It is significant for our argument that this mental state may, or even typically, still involves bliss, but that such states are at the same time described by meditators as states void of thoughts and wants. Concerning the non-intentionality of these states, this is put explicitly by Smith (2011):

According to classical phenomenological—phenomenographic—reports through the ages: in sustained meditation the sense of object disappears, i.e. the intentional content or object-specifying sense disappears. (p. 480)

The example of the pleasantness of such meditative states is not structurally different from cheerful moods: they are pleasant states, involving no attitudes towards anything in particular. However, while the meditative states are states that not everyone is familiar with, the reported absence of thoughts and other content, even a sense of selfhood, besides a blissful awareness makes it especially challenging for the attitudinalist. Both Heathwood and Feldman, for instance, argue that pleasures involve the belief that the object of their pleasantness-constituting attitude is realized. Taking pleasure in drinking white wine involves the belief that one is actually drinking white wine. However, these mental processes are exactly of the type that the described meditators suggest disappears.

A healthy skeptic may object that these are mere subjective reports by meditators. However, there is at least some neuroscientific evidence that appears to corroborate these subjective reports. Hinterberger and colleagues (2014) conducted an EEG study of different meditators, and found that, what they call “thoughtless emptiness” meditation:

constitutes a conscious and wakeful state of reduced resting rhythms, but also reduced higher frequencies suggesting diminished conscious representations of mental contents as well as reduced self-referential and attentional networks and maybe sensory awareness. Absence of activations related to decision making suggest a non-judgmental attitude. (2014, p. 11)

Feldman (2004) does not discuss these types of states specifically. He does report on a stoic who wants to live a life of tranquility and meditation. According to Feldman, the stoic may “enjoy the meditation” (p. 69), but he does not discuss how exactly this happens. Feldman does discuss the Epicurean view of pleasure, according to which the highest form of pleasure is the state of the absence of pain. He then argues that such static states of pleasure can only be pleasant if “[t]hey are attitudinal pleasures taken in a specific sort of object—one’s own lack of pain” (2004, p. 97). While this accounts consistently for this type of pleasure on his attitudinal view, it does not give Feldman any tools to address the pleasure that can arise in the described meditative states. Note that an attitudinalist must maintain that there is an attitude the meditator must hold during these experiences. However, this is precisely the type of judgment some meditators are getting away from. These meditative states are void of thoughts

(see the Candace and Brent quote above). This creates the following problem for the hedonic attitudinalist:

- I) Meditators sometimes experience a state of pleasant bliss.
- II) At the same time, these meditators are in a mental state void of thoughts and attitudes.
- III) One experiences pleasant bliss in virtue of attitudes that involve objects and belief in those objects.

These three statements cannot all be true at the same time. Either meditators are not in fact experiencing states of pleasant bliss, or they are not in a state of mental void, or hedonic attitudinalism is not correct.

There are of course several ways in which one might object to either claim I or II. A first may be that the primary source of evidence for meditative experiences is the introspection of experienced meditators. While there is some additional neuroscientific evidence (see Deolindo et al. 2020 for current limitations of this type of research), the main reason to believe in the discussed mental states is through the self-reports of experienced meditators. This may be seen as unreliable. However, it is also a necessary feature of research on mental states' phenomenology, that it relies on introspection. The opposite claim that attitudinalists are committed to—bliss is always object-directed—also relies on introspection. Rejecting the arguments on these grounds, will thus throw away the baby with the bathwater for that attitudinalist.<sup>23</sup>

Secondly, someone may object that despite these reports, we should treat both I and II as uncertain. But our argument is here that the burden of proof here should lie with the hedonic attitudinalist. On their view, these experiences are not only insufficiently reliable, but are in fact conceptually impossible. Hedonic attitudinalism, at least as Feldman and Heathwood have defended it, denies the very possibility of experiencing pleasure while one clears one's mind of thoughts. Doing so in spite of widely reported experiences to the contrary would be epistemically dogmatic. At the very least, these reports should count strongly against hedonic attitudinalism, and the burden of proof is with them, to show that such experiences are indeed impossible, despite being widely reported.

## 8 Conclusion

In this paper, we have analyzed the Cheerfulness Objection to attitudinalist theories of pleasure. We have built on a familiar problem for intentionalist theories of mind: moods appear to have no object. As moods can be pleasant, this is a significant challenge to hedonic attitudinalism, which maintains that all pleasant states necessarily have an object towards they are directed. As pleasant moods are a ubiquitous

<sup>23</sup> Notice that it seems plausible that meditation experience enhances introspective skills. In other words, it seems that introspective reports from meditators should be treated as more reliable than the reports of subjects not trained in introspection. See, for example, Fox and colleagues (2012).

phenomenon, it is difficult to deny the significance of such states for the hedonic attitudinalist. While the hedonic attitudinalist can build on some pathways that intentionalists have used to parry the challenge—such as postulating general or indeterminate objects as the objects of moods—we have argued that these moves get increasingly less promising for the hedonic attitudinalism if we consider pleasant, but objectless meditative states. As those states are reportedly both pleasant and objectless—at least in terms of the intentional mental states—they provide a challenge to the attitudinalist for which the globalist strategy cannot work. It seems that the only way the hedonic attitudinalist can respond is to deny the possible existence of those states, which seems an implausibly strong commitment.

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## Declarations

**Conflict of Interest** None.

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