

Felt Evaluations: A Theory of Pleasure and Pain

Bennett Helm (2002)

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Introduction

Helm's big picture: Pleasure and pain aren't isolated phenomenal bodily states, but are conceptually tied to such mental states as emotions and desires. As such, pleasures and pains are evaluations we feel.

- These kinds of “felt evaluations” have intentional content that is responsive to the broader context of the subject's background cares and concerns (import).
- Pleasures and pains motivate us to act by virtue of their connection to such backgrounds of import.

§ I. Pleasure, Pain, and Evaluation

Helm presents a brief survey and criticism of preceding evaluativist theories of pain.

Helm's critique of Nelkin (1994)

- Nelkin doesn't sufficiently explain the way pain motivates action. Although Nelkin appeals to desire to explain pain's motivation, he holds that pain *usually* involves desire; it is not a necessary causal consequence of pain.
- Helm holds that there seems to be a more direct and necessary connection among pain, desire, and motivation. If we don't have a desire to cease pain, it's unclear how pain can motivate us to act.

§ I. Pleasure, Pain, and Evaluation (cont.)

Helm's critique of Tye (1995), et al.

- Tye (1995) claims that the pain sensation itself causes the subject to desire to get rid of it.
- Thus, Tye characterizes this desire as “immediate dislike for itself together with anxiety about . . . the state of the bodily region where the disturbance is located” (Tye, 1995).
- Helm claims that desire has a feature that Tye and others miss: desire is distinct from mere goal-directedness. The motivation of desire “stems from a recognition of its object as worth pursuing or avoiding” (Helm, 15).
 - Evaluation in evaluative judgment vs. evaluation in desire
 - The evaluation implicit in desire is a kind of felt evaluation: that is, the evaluation of desire pleases or pains us and that's what motivates us to act.

§ II. Emotions as Felt Evaluations

- *Emotional Reason* (2001): Helm's framework for understanding emotions
- Emotions aren't just phenomenal states, but are evaluative responses to one's situation. As such, they have intentional objects, targets at which the emotion is directed.
 - Formal object of emotion: a characteristic evaluation implicit in the type of emotion that distinguishes it from other types of emotion.
 - The emotion is determined to be warranted, or appropriate, according to whether its formal object pertains to the situation.
- According to Helm, there are three features of emotion: a target, a formal object, and a "focus."

§ II. Emotions as Felt Evaluations (cont.)

- **Emotional Cognitivism** is the view that emotions are reducible to beliefs and desires.
 - For example, anger is composed of a belief that its target is offensive and a desire to lash out.
- However, we can have beliefs and desires without having emotions. There must be some additional element that constitutes as having an emotion that isn't just having beliefs or desires. What's the "emotionality" of emotion?

§ II. Emotions as Felt Evaluations (cont.)

- Emotions are kinds of felt evaluations
 - Although cognitivist accounts take emotions to involve the sensations of pleasure and pain, they overlook the way that pleasure and pain conceptually constitute emotion.
 - “Emotions do not merely involve some pleasant or painful sensation among other components . . . Rather, they *are* pleasures and pains and can be redescribed as such” (Helm, 16).
 - This is a broad conception of pain: it isn’t just bodily damage. Is Helm conflating pain with negative evaluation?

§ II. Emotions as Felt Evaluations (cont.)

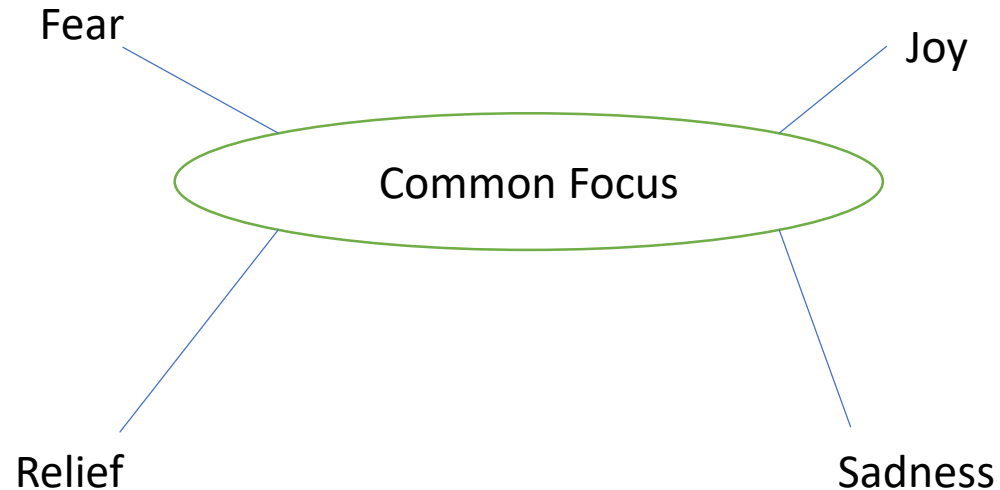
Import

- Emotions are feelings; they're passive. In having emotion, we become receptive to evaluative content. The evaluative content we receive is the "import" involved with the targets of our emotions.
 - "To have import is to be a worthy object of attention and action: insofar as something has import for one, one ought to pay attention to it and so be prepared to act on its behalf" (Helm, 17).
 - In other words, import designates what we care about and what has worth for us.
 - Subjective
 - Objective

§ II. Emotions as Felt Evaluations (cont.)

In feeling an emotion, we're committed to the import of its target.

- “Emotional commitment” indicates a commitment to a broader rational pattern of other emotions when feeling an emotion.



§ II. Emotions as Felt Evaluations (cont.)

- Import is subjective in that individuals have their own distinct set of cares and concerns. However, import is also has a limited objectivity in the following way.
 - Import impresses itself upon us.
 - Import establishes a broad rational pattern according to which we can judge whether any emotion in a given situation is warranted.
- “Emotions are pleasant or painful—they feel good or bad—precisely because, as felt evaluations, they are feelings of positive or negative import, where such feelings are modes of caring about something as a proper focus of one’s concern” (Helm, 19).

§ III. Desires as Felt Evaluations

Explaining the evaluation in desire in terms of Helm's framework for understanding emotions

- The evaluation implicit in desire is distinct from mere goal-directedness and the evaluation implicit in evaluative judgment because it is felt in terms of pleasure or pain.

Long-term desires vs. Occurrent desires

- (a) Long-term desires: desires we have over time and various situations.
 - Not felt evaluations
- (a) Occurrent desires (ODs): desires we feel on particular occasions.
 - ODs are kinds of felt evaluations.
 - To feel an OD is to have the import of its object impress itself on me, focusing my attention on that import and motivating me to act accordingly.

§ III. Desires as Felt Evaluations (cont.)

Felt evaluations are a *sui generis* kinds of evaluation, under which emotion, desire, and bodily pleasure and pain fall.

- Feeling desire, like feeling emotion, commits oneself to a rational pattern of emotions and other ODs. This establishes what has import.
- Simultaneously, this pattern establishes what's warranted—or justified—concerning desire.

In short, ODs are felt evaluations because they involve pleasures and pains. The feeling of goodness or badness involved in having import impress itself upon us in a desire *is* the feeling of pleasure and pain (Helm, 21).

§ IV. Bodily Pleasures and Pains as Felt Evaluations

Bodily pleasures and pains can, too, be understood in terms of Helm's emotional framework.

- The feeling of bodily pleasure and pain itself is evaluative and motivational.
 - Bodily pleasures and pains are both subjective and objective, like the other felt evaluations, since they're intelligible in terms of the subject's background context of cares and concerns.

§ IV. Bodily Pleasures and Pains as Felt Evaluations (cont.)

The subjectivity of bodily pleasures and pains

- In feeling pleasure or pain, we feel what's going on in a particular body part to be good or bad.
- How we understand that evaluation is in terms of import that the body part in question functions properly for the subject.

The objectivity of bodily pleasures and pains

- The goodness or badness of bodily pleasures and pains impress themselves on us directly in feeling it.
- We're committed to the import and relevant emotions and desires in experiencing bodily pleasure and pain.

§ IV. Bodily Pleasures and Pains as Felt Evaluations (cont.)

Objection: Pleasure and pain are sensations we feel without all of this cognitive baggage.

- Bodily pleasures and pains are mere qualia, purely phenomenal states without any intentional content.
- Helm's response: The objection can't explain the badness of pain nor the goodness of pleasure, nor how they motivate us to act.
 - How are bodily pleasures and pains warranted under the objection's view?

Conclusion

Bodily pleasures and pains are conceptually tied to other mental states such as emotions and desires as kinds of evaluations we feel.

- Bodily pleasures and pains are passive, but responsive to and constitutive of import and the broader rational pattern of subjects' cares and concerns.