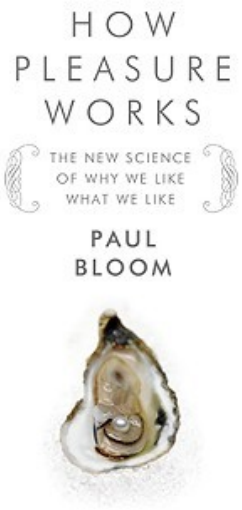

How Pleasure Works: The New Science of Why We Like What We Like

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Yale psychologist Paul Bloom presents a striking new vision of the pleasures of everyday life.

The thought of sex with a virgin is intensely arousing for many men. The average American spends over four hours a day watching television. Abstract art can sell for millions of dollars. Young children enjoy playing with imaginary friends and can be comforted by security blankets. People slow their cars to look at gory accidents, and go to movies that make them cry.

In this fascinating and witty account, Paul Bloom examines the science behind these curious desires, attractions, and tastes, covering everything from the animal instincts of sex and food to the uniquely human taste for art, music, and stories. Drawing on insights from child development, philosophy, neuroscience, and behavioral economics, *How Pleasure Works* shows how certain universal habits of the human mind explain what we like and why we like it.

How Pleasure Works: The New Science of Why We Like What We Like Details

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From Reader Review How Pleasure Works: The New Science of Why We Like What We Like for online ebook

Michele says

Fun fluff. I really hate to give this guy two stars for a decently written, well researched book. But for all the interesting anecdotes, experiments, and theories, the book doesn't begin to deliver what the title promises. In other words, the book promises to tell us why pleasure works, but the writer doesn't give us any concrete conclusions. He does suggest that we find pleasure with things and ideas that have an authentic, true "essence" - in other words, we have no tolerance for fakes. Each of us, even small children, possess a finely tuned fake-detector. But if essentialism is the key to pleasure, then the writer could have covered that theory in a book one third as long. Instead, the book drags on with endless examples and expert opinions, all leading to more questions. At the end, we've learned theories about how pleasure works, but no delineated point of view. A more realistic title would be "Why do we like what we like? Who the hell knows?"

Richard says

Paul Bloom, author of *How Pleasure Works: The New Science of Why We Like What We Like*, wrote a fascinating essay for the New York Times Magazine entitled The Moral Life of Babies (with the adorably cute accompanying video, Can Babies Tell Right From Wrong?).

Although this book doesn't appear to related directly to the moral life of babies, if his quality of writing is as high then his treatment should be engrossing.

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Bloom's book is reviewed favorably in the New York Times' *The Psychology of Bliss* .

Louise Chapman says

Having listened insatiably to Paul Bloom in his captivating Yale course to Introductory Psychology, when I tracked down his literature on Amazon, I had to buy this book. I do not regret the purchase whatsoever. The man writes with incredible lucidity and wit, and he conveys his points effectively until the end. 'How Pleasure Works' really made me think twice about why I get so much pleasure from certain activities, and, more importantly, why others get pleasure from things that I might personally judge as unappealing.

This book was full of insight, which is appropriate since it is psychology, and I can recommend to anybody who has the merest interest in understanding human-nature better. I am just about to begin Bloom's 'Descartes' Baby' about childhood development and its implications on adulthood, and I cannot describe my excitement at the prospect! Bloom really is the most accessible popular science writer of his generation.

'How Pleasure Works' was impossible to put down. It reads as grippingly as good fiction, but better since I felt on every page I was learning something new; having my mind further and further prized open by his

incredible insights. Bloom's writing style is deliciously smooth and accessible, making this book suitable for those who would usually shy away from science literature. The humour present in this book definitely allows it to transcend any stereotypes that 'science is for bores'. Arguably, if more science writers delivered their arguments in the humour-laced packages that Bloom does, the modern world would be brighter, more enlightened, and more tolerant.

In short, Bloom is an utter joy to read and to listen to: may he too provide you with the joy and enlightenment he has endowed upon me.

Manal Omar says

Our very motivations and impulses sliced into bits. Why we like what we like is not at all an easy business; and explaining it would have us running in circles. A very interesting and- surprisingly entertaining-book.

James Kittredge says

A fine book that made for great listening on a week of commutes to a workshop. It's one of a spate of recent tomes on cognitive neuroscience. I tend to enjoy these books (some others are Outliers, Predictably Irrational, and Herd), but I'm starting to feel like I'm just setting myself up for disappointment. In each of them, the author states a basic, completely intuitive thesis, and then spends the next several hundred pages beating it in to the dirt. I'm not sure what I expect at this point, but I think I'm stuck in a feedback loop.

Bloom's examples range from the simply interesting (Discussions of how we 'essentialise' objects such as art or sports memorabilia) to the lurid (What have some people become cannibals? Why are people excited by sexual fetishes?) These illustrations are fun to read about/listen to, and the author's writing style is academic, while also being appropriately humorous (and often tongue-in-cheek). Finally, I appreciated the time he spent discussing the evolutionary advantages and history of many human behaviors (from musical expression to dating behaviors). As a non-scientist, I was fascinated.

By the same token, many of his inferences and observations are just plain obvious. For example, who knew that we tend to like things with which we are familiar?! Did you also ever imagine in a million years that you may be at least initially reluctant to eat chocolate shaped like dog feces, because it reminds you of actual dog feces? Sometimes, it just felt like Bloom was spinning his wheels and trying to pad out a book that could have easily been a bit shorter.

All that said, I still liked the book, even if there were plenty of 'DUH' moments, and even if the one note thesis about essentialism started to sound like the proverbial broken record. It was well researched, colorfully written, interdisciplinary, and entertaining. I just think that I might need to switch the genres of nonfiction I read/listen to for a while.

Daniil Bratchenko says

I chose this book because I was interested in what effects pleasure (or lack of thereof) has on human psychology. Some of my self-experiments include fighting desires (like eating high-carb food) and I was

interested in what effect they may have.

While this book did not answer my questions (The Willpower Instinct is much better in that regard), it was very informative and entertaining.

The author explores why we like or don't like things, people, and experiences. He especially focuses on counter-intuitive preferences of a typical human. Why do we like original paintings if we cannot tell them apart from forgeries? Why do we like horror movies? And even why people eat other people (usually not because they are hungry).

While this was not one of the most inspiring books I have read recently, I enjoyed it a lot.

Elliot de Vries says

Each chapter of *How Pleasure Works* attempts to demonstrate that a particular subset of the things we enjoy (e.g. food, art, love) at least partially depends on what Bloom calls our "essentialism" in order to give us pleasure. By "essentialism" Bloom means our tendency to believe that the things and people around us have various hidden essences which make them what they "truly" are. Examples of "essentialism" provided include: the way in which we naturally attribute a "life force", "chi" or "élan vital" to living things but not the dead or non-living; the pleasure we take in an authentic Vermeer as compared to a copy, even when we wouldn't be capable of distinguishing them; the way in which people, randomly divided into groups, automatically attribute different qualities to themselves and others based on those groupings; the way in which we might say "I won't wash my hand for a week" after shaking the hand of someone famous. In all these cases, there is something immaterial or not directly perceived which is nonetheless necessary for us to respond the way we normally do. Obviously this is far from an explicit definition, but for me at least the idea has enough *prima facie* plausibility to agree that there's likely something fairly important hidden under all the examples.

Something I particularly like is the rejection of the idea that we are necessarily "fooling" ourselves when we take pleasure in these hidden essences: as Bloom has it, we get far more pleasure from our "essentialism" than we would without it when we enjoy an "authentic" Vermeer, "vintage" furniture, a "homemade" cookie, an "heirloom" tomato or a guitar pick that was used by Pete Townsend at Woodstock. When we find out that the pick wasn't Townsend's, or that it has gone through a sanitizing wash cycle since he used it, or that while it was his, it was never used, we aren't *wrong* to be disappointed — even though we never would have noticed if someone had secretly swapped it out with a relatively non-storied pick. We weren't enjoying it *as a guitar pick* in the first place. We were enjoying the "essence" of its connection to people and events, something which cannot readily be restored once that essence has been somehow defiled or stolen. Similarly, if we find out that the "homemade" cookies we have been eating can be had for $1.99 at Safeway, while their chemical composition remains the same we will nonetheless lose any pleasure we were taking in the thought of the time, consideration and effort that went into their making. Once we know that we have been drinking Folger's Crystals, we really cam't help but enjoy the coffee less.

Of course, it's not impossible for this "essentialism" to lead us into bad decisions or bad policy, but it certainly seems to be a mistake to think we'd be better off entirely freed from these "illusions". Consider that even friendship and romantic love share in this "essentialism". Spending time with others causes us to develop a sense of uniqueness and importance in regard to them, at least partially separate from the actual utility and pleasure we take in their company. As a question of fact, there's little doubt that an entirely

different set of persons would have been able to take up this same importance and uniqueness to us if conditions had been different, but it is effectively impossible to maintain close friendship with someone — even less so romantic love — while simultaneously bearing this replaceability in mind. As a sort of eerie exemplification of this, Bloom mentions a rare psychological condition in which the sufferer believes that their loved ones have all been replaced by doppelgangers — one interpretation of this being that for some reason the sufferer can no longer connect them with their familiar, imperceivable “essences”.

Summing up: It’s clear that even Bloom would agree that “essentialism” does not really explain “how pleasure works”. It would be more apt to say that without “essentialism” we cannot fully understand pleasure — something that’s hardly less interesting. And since “essentialism” is not limited only to things in which we take pleasure, no doubt any exploration of it is useful. I suspect that someone could just as well have written a book called *How the Sacred Works* using the same idea. On the whole there are a few questionable leaps and strange conclusions, and the treatments of the various topics are not evenly good, but for the reasons mentioned above, as well as that a lot of the psychology Bloom covers is interesting in its own right, *How Pleasure Works* is worth a read.

Stephanie H says

I had nothing against Paul Bloom's style for the durration of the book. In fact, I rather enjoyed his style and thought his simple language and format would be an adequate way of describing why we like what we like.

You can sum up Bloon's entire 200 page argument in about 2 sentences. "We like things when we feel there is an associated essential quality to their being, imparted from either and internal or external source. The extent of our likes vary across several categories, including food, sex and religion; however, all of those categories are based on the same desire for essentialism."

Although this book has a "why" in the title, every explanation is based on correlation, not causation. Again, these are fine conclusions to draw, but they are only interesting for about chapter. The anecdotes and transitional stories were great, but I wanted a greater overall theme, not something that could be summed up so quickly with a slew of anecdotal evidence.

Nikki says

How Pleasure Works is an accessibly written book which mentions some theories and interesting experiments, without really delivering on the promise of "science" that explains "why we like what we like". Mostly, what Bloom has to offer are theories and interpretations: well presented and interesting, but judging from various reviews, not conclusive enough for people who want hard and fast answers. Luckily, I wasn't really expecting any, although I was hoping for a bit more science. I'm still left thinking the answer to "why do we like what we like" is "because we're bloody minded and irrational".

I took Paul Bloom's Coursera course, Moralities of Everyday Life, and recommend both that and this book as a relatively mild introduction to the psychology surrounding these topics.

Santhosh says

Why and how humans are different from the other animals. Explains and talks about the oft-quoted "sixth sense" of ours. Talks about essentialism, how the history of anything is as important to humans as the thing itself (auctions of personal items of famous people, security blankets, attachments to personal belongings), importance to material things, imaginary friends, our enjoyment of music and art, sexual subterfuge, imagination, delight in good food, voyeurism, empathy, fiction, black humour, horror movies, S&M, daydreaming, adventure sports, museums, our mind hasn't yet evolved to catch up with the world we've created and are now living in and thus causing conflict, play-acting, etc.

I found most of the content to be superficial in its treatment, and felt the book as a whole could also be better structured and edited.

My suggestion: Watch Paul Bloom talk about this.

Maryana Pinchuk says

As far as the popularizers go, this is more substantive than a Gladwell but far less so than a Pinker. In fact, much of the research and insights discussed were pulled directly from other popularizers, including Pinker, to the point where I felt some serious deja vu (deja lu?).

Also, for a book about pleasure, a nontrivial portion of it being devoted to cannibalism as compared to other lurid but not-that-lurid pleasures just feels like whatever the book equivalent is of clickbait. Amazon one-clickbait?

Kevin says

I loved this book it. It starts off

> Goering was an obsessive art collector and had already plundered much of Europe. But he was a huge fan of Vermeer, and this was the acquisition that he was most proud of.

a forgery, by disapointing Hermann Goering on his deathbed, and then goes on to explain how a collector was able to purchase Napoléon’s penis

> it was (severed by the priest who had administered last rites to him.)

before going onto the market.

But really it makes you doubt that objects have any essence aside from what we assign them.

> This theory of pleasure is an extension of one of the most interesting ideas in the cognitive sciences, which is that people naturally assume that things in the world—including other people—have invisible essences that make them what they are.

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lola says

This book sets up a theory for you (essentialism) and then puts a principle in place (that we like and derive pleasure from things because we perceive something "essential" about them) and expounds on it different ways: food, sex, collecting, whatever. The big problem with the book is that food, sex, collecting, whatever are humongous topics, each with their own "home theories" that are virtually ignored.

I felt this most acutely in the sex chapter, which was largely based around that fucking "parental investment" bullshit I've had crammed down my throat forever--an old theory, taken down a million times. Were you guys aware that there are only two genders, and women act one way and men act another way, all of the time, no matter what, because they are motivated to reproduce? I know, right? An easy evolutionary psych bingo: "The dynamics of our savannah ancestors looked curiously like those of 1950s America." "Confusion over whether they're rationalizing polyamory or nuclear-family patriarchy, but whatever they're rationalizing, only men evolved to enjoy it."

I feel bad, because the dude seems kind and smart and I love that this book was written. But as I read I often felt like I was trying to hold in a wince as my favorite uncle spouts of poorly-informed political beliefs during Thanksgiving dinner.

Maria says

I bought this book after following a few captivating online talks by Paul Bloom. It was a pleasant read and it will prove insightful to anyone with a minimum knowledge of psychology. However, more experienced readers might feel disappointed, like I did, by the lack of a deeper explanation of his thesis. Basically, he argues that people are essentialists, that we believe in "an underlying reality or true nature that one cannot observe directly" but matters most and is the basis of us finding pleasure in unusual things. He also proves how, despite our beliefs, we are not evolved enough for the environments we live in, which is the reason for most of our misfortunes. Overall, I preffered Dan Ariely's "Predictably Irrational".

Trish says

What could be more relaxing and interesting than a conversation with a learned friend about what pleasures us? Bloom doeosn't shrink from describing the more depraved pleasures humans claim to like, nor does he ignore the mundane and ordinary things that make our lives interesting and fulfilling. And at the end, he mentiones the BIG questions of transcendence and truth, possibility and destiny. But what struck me now, perhaps at this time in my tiny life, so constrained by circumstance and my own limited nature, is that man

appears to crave nature, and contact with the natural world brings a deep and abiding, one might say life-giving, pleasure. At a time when man is struggling to understand and control or contain the forces of nature, nature itself appears to be the key to our survival as a species, and to ignore, desecrate, or belittle it will, if nothing else, make us miserable. I put this on my "religion" shelf, only because, at the end, Bloom mentions Dawkins, and introduces the concept of science inducing in us an awed wonder that "makes life worth living."
