

Evil Pleasure is Good for You!

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Evil Pleasure

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Many people are uncomfortable with the idea that pleasure from certain sources is genuinely beneficial. These sources can be sorted into two classes: ones that involve others' pain; and ones that involve what seems to be damage rather than benefit to the person involved. Here's an example of the latter: a woman who claims that she enjoys her work performing in hard-core pornographic films. Some find it hard to take such a claim at face value – they instinctively assume that the woman is insincere or self-deceived.¹ The reason seems a strongly paternalistic one: because the activity is assumed to be bad, it's thought that only someone who was in some way damaged could genuinely like it. A statement from Brian Hill, the director of a documentary about such women, illustrates this: 'I felt certain that she couldn't enjoy what she does, that there must be some reason why she's undergoing this kind of experience. But there was nothing: no messed-up childhood, no sense of pain or humiliation.' (Smith, 2003, 17) Forced to conclude that the woman in question really does enjoy her work, Hill changes his view to imply that the pleasure gained cannot be truly beneficial: 'When I hear a young woman talking about doing videos of fisting and asphyxiation, I have to wonder what it's doing to her – even if she says that she's having fun.' (Smith, 2003, 17)

In the following discussion, I'll concentrate on the other kind of 'bad' pleasure – pleasure gained from others' pain. My conclusions will, I think, generalise to apply to both forms.

Some of us, some of the time, get enjoyment from other's misfortunes. It is a rare person who hasn't experienced at least at certain amount of *schadenfreude*. Some people have greater tendencies in this direction than others; thus we encounter the figure of the sadist: one who derives subjective satisfaction from other's pain, perhaps even from inflicting pain upon them. The question is, does the sadist benefit in doing this, or is her subjective satisfaction an instance of the fact that objective well-being and subjective satisfaction are not one and the same?

This is a question that is particularly (though not exclusively) troubling to utilitarians, since the idea that the sadist benefits from committing sadistic acts has proved a rich source of objections to utilitarian moral theories. Consider the case of the Sadistic Superhero.² Being a superhero, the SS fights crime and brings evildoers to justice. Sometimes, his actions cause suffering of various sorts to those evildoers. He only inflicts as much suffering as he must (he is a superhero, after all), but unlike most of his superheroic colleagues, he enjoys it. Now imagine two possible worlds which differ only in whether or not this superhero is sadistic. The same amounts of suffering are inflicted on third parties, and the same good results are achieved. The only difference is that the sadistic superhero gains extra pleasure from the suffering of the bad guys, whereas his non-sadistic counterpart does not. If this pleasure contributes

¹ See, for instance, the documentary makers quoted by Rupert Smith (Smith, 2003, 17)

² This figure was introduced to me by Ed Rochfort.

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to his well-being, the utilitarian is forced to say that the SS possible world contains more good and is therefore morally preferable, but this seems counter-intuitive.³

Consider now the action of rape⁴. I am not, of course, about to suggest that utilitarianism is so odious that it does not regard rape as wrong. Clearly, any reasonable set of empirical assumptions along with the principle that one should seek to maximise well-being will tell us that rape is a very bad act to commit. The amount of suffering caused far outweighs the amount of pleasure gained and so the action is condemned as wrong. But what if the rape was a multiple rape? It will still be wrong, certainly: the scales will never tip the other way, but nevertheless at some point more pleasure will be caused to happen and so the scale will shift in that direction ever so slightly, despite the fact that to our eyes it seems that the more men were involved the worse it is. The point is that it seems truly odious that utilitarianism considers the pleasure gained *at all*; that it sees the wrongness of a crime as great as rape only after weighing the victim's pain and torment against the 'good' which is also produced by the act.

Examples of this kind are often used as objections to utilitarianism. If there is some reason, then, to think that sadistic satisfaction does not contribute to well-being, a major source of difficulty for utilitarians will be nullified.

The claim that we derive no benefit from sadistic satisfaction has of course an ancient pedigree. While I suspect that it is still widely held, few arguments are explicitly offered in its support. Robert Adams holds that a good life is one that is 'characterized by *enjoyment of the excellent*' (Adams, 1999, 93, emphasis in original). So while some element of subjective satisfaction is a necessary element of well-being, that satisfaction must derive from an excellent object or activity. Evil satisfaction does not contribute to well-being. Adams provides no real argument for this view, but gestures towards two reasons for adopting it. The first is that enjoyment is more often enjoyment of the excellent than one might think, e.g. 'the enjoyment of physical pleasure as such is normally an enjoyment of healthy life, which I believe is an excellence' (Adams, 1999, 100). The second is that satisfaction that really is derived from evil sources (Adams mentions *schadenfreude* and 'savoring...inflated fantasies of one's own importance') is 'bad in a way that diminishes the excellence of our lives' (Adams, 1999, 101). The argument here appears to be that while I may get satisfaction from seeing someone else harmed, this enjoyment is harming me. I'll return to this argument in a more explicit form later.

Fred Feldman is at some pains to show that even hedonism need not admit that evil satisfaction contributes to well-being. He establishes the possibility of holding a position he calls 'Desert-Adjusted Intrinsic Attitudinal Hedonism (DAIAH)' (Feldman, 2004, 120-123). In many ways this view is a mirror-image of Adams': the idea is that pleasure at the possession or exercise of some object is what well-being is, but that this attitudinal pleasure derives from an 'object [that] deserves, to some degree, to be an object of pleasure' (Feldman, 2004, 120). So while Adams' view is

³ This example has some features in common with Smart's account of different possible worlds, one of which contains a deluded sadist (Smart, 1973, 25). Of course, Smart offers his example in utilitarianism's support – but that's often not the effect it achieves.

⁴ I am indebted for this example to Joss Walker. I believe the example to be original to him, but see a similar point about racism made by Bernard Williams. (Williams, 1985, pp 86-7)

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that engaging in excellent activity is the good, but that enjoyment is a necessary condition for it; Feldman sketches a position in which enjoyment is the good, but excellence (of the object of enjoyment) is a necessary condition for it. Feldman's aim, however, is not to argue for DAIAH, but merely to show that it is one 'of the many forms that hedonism can take' (Feldman, 2004, 123). He defends it only to a limited extent, and his point in its support is that 'if we tweak our hedonism by adding some assumptions about the pleasure-worthiness...of certain objects, we can get the theory to yield evaluations consistent with our firm and unshakeable pre-analytic assessments' (Feldman, 2004, 122). These 'pre-analytic assessments' are our intuitive judgements about whether certain sorts of life are good ones. Thus DAIAH enables us to agree that someone who greatly enjoys spending 'all his time in the pigsty, engaging in the most obscene sexual activities imaginable' (Feldman, 2004, 40) does not thereby have a good life.

In what follows, I'll be arguing that even if we agree that a life of evil pleasure is not a good life; the issue of whether evil pleasure contributes positively to well-being is still open. I argue that it's important to keep these two issues distinct: the issue of whether a particular item is good for some subject, and the issue of whether a life consisting largely of such items would be a good life. It seems to me that positions like those of Adams and Feldman become less plausible when we keep this distinction in mind. Consider enjoyment of something that does not merit enjoyment (that is not on the 'objective list'). It might be something trivial, like getting fleeting pleasure from scratching, or throwing a piece of screwed-up paper into the bin from across the room. The fact (let's assume that it is a fact) that a life of such pleasures is not a good life doesn't mean that the fleeting pleasure makes no contribution to wellbeing. The way to test whether something makes a contribution to wellbeing is to think of two people whose lives are alike in every respect other than whether they have this enjoyment. If the person who experiences the enjoyment is thereby benefited, then the enjoyment contributes to wellbeing. This makes Adams' view that only enjoyment of the excellent contributes to wellbeing implausible, in my opinion. If Smith and Jones have identical lives, save that Smith gets pleasure from some trivial source and Jones does not, then Smith has a little more wellbeing than Jones. Note that this is true regardless of what sort of life Smith and Jones have. If they each of lives replete with objective goods that they enjoy, then they both have good lives, but Smith's is ever so slightly better. If on the other hand they both live lives deprived to a large extent of objective goods that they enjoy, then they both have bad lives, but Smith's is ever so slightly less bad. I'll return to this sort of comparison in the case of evil pleasure below.

Before turning to a fuller defence of the badness of evil pleasure, I want to point out the extent to which people with different views agree that pleasure of some sort contributes to well-being. Of course hedonists like Feldman think so, but so does an objectivist like Adams. Even someone like Richard Arneson, who rejects the view that excellent activity must be 'endorsed' by the subject in order to contribute to her well-being, stipulates that a life must have a certain amount of subjective satisfaction in it in order to be a good one (Arneson, 1999, 139-141). Unlike Adams, Arneson claims that something may be intrinsically good for me even if I hate it and would rather be rid of it. Nevertheless, even he admits that there must be some threshold level of subjective satisfaction that a life must have if it is to be a good one. I'll argue

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that people who accept that pleasure makes some sort of contribution to wellbeing have no good reason to deny that evil pleasure does the same.

Geoffrey Scarre has attempted to show that sadistic satisfaction does not contribute to well-being. (Scarre, 1996, 154 – 162) Scarre's argument, in brief, is this:

Self-respect is an essential component of well-being.
Respect for others is necessary for self-respect.
Gaining sadistic satisfaction involves failing to respect others.
So a gain in sadistic satisfaction cannot be a gain in well-being.

This is an argument which seems to me to be extremely vulnerable. Scarre himself raises objections to the second premise, that respect for others is necessary for self-respect. He acknowledges the way in which it is possible for us to regard other human beings as members of special categories; categories ill-treatment of which seem quite compatible with self-respect. He uses the example of racism: if I regard people of other races as undeserving of good treatment, then I experience no self-debasement in ill-treating them. The extent to which I approve of myself may even increase. Scarre's response to this objection is to say that the racist is deceived – he thinks he is happy, but he is not. Were he able to make the 'imaginative leap' of realising that people from other races have lives that are just as human as his 'from the inside', he would find that 'there are richer, more rewarding ways to relate to human beings than by scorning and abusing them. In part those ways are better because of the wider repertoire of satisfying responses – mutual kindness and cooperation, respect, sympathy, affection, love – that they bring into play. In addition, they provide the basis for a deeper self-respect, by enhancing the sense that humanity matters'. (Scarre, 1996, 161)

But it is surely not the case that just because I'd benefit *more* by recognising the common humanity I share with other races, I fail to benefit *at all* when I enjoy degrading them. Nor is it true that I cannot have self-respect if I maltreat others, even if it is true that I might achieve a 'deeper self-respect' by treating them well. Let me elaborate.

Scarre commits two separate, parallel conflation here. One conflation concerns self-respect. He takes it that since my self-respect is enhanced by recognising that humanity matters, I can have no self-respect (or at least insufficient self-respect for well-being) if I fail to acknowledge this. A racist may derive self-respect from many sources. Perhaps he is self-consciously honest in his business affairs, good to his family and friends, kind to animals, etc. Scarre wishes us to believe that the self-respect he derives from these things and others like them is less rich, somehow, than that of someone who does these things and also acknowledges that people of other races matter too. Maybe he's right, but the self-respect enjoyed by the racist doesn't seem so etiolated that it simply doesn't count as self-respect at all. At any rate, Scarre gives no reason to think this, and yet it is the position that his argument seems to need.

Scarre also conflates the issue of which dispositions it is best to have (from the point of view of individual well-being) with the issue of which satisfactions contribute to well-being. If I could choose the sort of person I wanted to be, what choice should I

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make? Scarre suggests that someone who can recognise the humanity of all other human beings is better off than one who cannot. The racist's 'blindness to human value closes off a major source of happiness. The loss they suffer is no less grievous because they do not apprehend it as such' (Scarre, 1996, 162). I'm not persuaded that Scarre has given a convincing argument for this claim, but I'm happy to concede it, and I hope that it is true. Even if it is true, however, this is another question: if I'm not that sort of person; if I do enjoy other's pain; does that enjoyment constitute a benefit to me? Just because virtue is the best long-term strategy for achieving well-being, that doesn't mean that it is impossible to derive genuine well-being from the satisfaction of a vice. This point cuts against Adams and Feldman as well: even if a life of evil pleasure is less good than one of virtuous pleasure, that does not mean that evil pleasure makes no contribution to well-being.

Here is an example. Three people are in the vicinity of a public torture session. The first is a good person who is sickened by the sight. The second is a sadistic person who enjoys it. The third is a sadistic person who would have enjoyed it had he seen it, but who passed by, unaware that the event was taking place. I'll happily concede that the first person is the best off (although in fact this seems to me unproved). From the point of view of long-term self-interest, let's accept that their dispositions promise the most well-being. The second person gets more enjoyment out of this particular situation, but being the kind of person who can enjoy torture means that he is the kind of person for whom many other sources of well-being are unavailable. But is the second person the worst-off of the three? The third person is even worse-off. He has dispositions that are equally inimical to achieving well-being from the sources open to the virtuous person, and he doesn't even get his day brightened up by watching a spot of torture. The conclusion seems as unavoidable as it is unpalatable: there is no reason to deny that sadists benefit, at least in the short term, by enjoying other's pain, misery and suffering.

One way that we might try to avoid this unpalatable conclusion would be to say that the second person in the example above is harmed in a way that the third is not; for he has his sadistic inclinations stimulated and encouraged, leading him even further away from virtue, and hence from true happiness, than he was before. In this way the third man is better off despite not gratifying his sadistic impulses, since he has avoided one more step away from well-being.

This seems to me the best that can be done to say that sadistic pleasure fails to contribute to well-being, but unfortunately it is not a strong argument. To see why not, just suppose that the two sadists are both long-confirmed in their vice, such that one occasion to enjoy another's suffering makes little or no difference to their degree of depravity. In such a case, it is extremely implausible to say that the sadist who sees the torture is harmed thereby, in that it hardens his sadism. Each man is as hardened already as it is practically possible to be: no difference in the strength of their sadistic dispositions will be detectable following one instance of this sort.

Perhaps some will want to dispute whether the figure of the hardened sadist is a plausible one. When we encounter sadists and others who take pleasure in unusual or morally iffy sources, we have a strong tendency to look for explanations – that they have been damaged by past experience, and so on. Such people may be far more likely to lead lives in which the misery they suffer as a result of their immoral

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inclinations far outweighs the pleasure. Someone who enjoys inflicting pain on others may in various ways be very much like an addict. They will get a thrill, a brief spasm of pleasure, when they commit the act, but that pleasure is dwarfed by subsequent feelings of guilt, self-loathing and disgust. Thus the utilitarian may be able to reject the evil deed objections after all – if causing pain to others always produces a net decrease in the subject's own welfare, then it is clear that no case of causing pain to others is ever likely to turn out to be right by the lights of utilitarian calculation.

The weaknesses in this line of thought are many. Most obviously, it rests on an empirical claim, which is not obviously true (the claim that the suffering I endure after the sadistic act always outweighs the pleasure I gain). Perhaps many sadists are like addicts in the way described, but do we have any reason to think that they all are? Even if the empirical claim is true, it seems worryingly contingent. There is no obvious reason to think that it must be true for all possible agents. It would be uncomfortable to think that causing pain to others for the enjoyment of oneself and other sadistic witnesses is wrong only because it so happens that sadists hate themselves afterwards. Most of us would tend to think that such acts are wrong quite irrespective of what happens to be true about whether the perpetrators are later filled with bitter self-recrimination.

This reveals the slightly less obvious weakness in this reply. It does nothing to show that the sadistic pleasure gained is not, in itself, good for the sadist. The argument goes that performing the sadistic act is bad for him, because when all the affective results are collated, the resultant misery outweighs the fleeting pleasure. But that just means that the sadist's act has some consequences that are good for him and some that are bad. There is no reason why we should not see the pleasure gained as being beneficial in itself. That means that the central objection to utilitarianism remains unanswered. The point of the evil deed objection is not to claim that utilitarianism gives us the wrong result too often – the examples commonly used are too obviously contrived to give any worry on that score. Rather, what they bring out is the objectionable nature of the utilitarian way of thinking about right and wrong. We imagine large numbers of sadists enjoying a torture seen to make vivid the point that for the utilitarian, a single sadist's pleasure *counts as a good thing*.

For a utilitarian who makes the argument above, the wrongness of a sadistic act inheres in the balance of harm over benefit to all subjects. That there is such a balance is established by placing the well-being produced and lost by the act onto the utilitarian scales. Onto the negative side go the pain suffered by the victim, and the subsequent pain suffered by the sadist. Onto the positive side goes the sadist's pleasure. This remains true even if we accept that all sadists in the end do themselves more harm than good. This is the truly objectionable feature. It is merely brought out by the observation that were the sadist's pleasure a little greater, or their subsequent guilt a little less; the act would be that much closer to being permissible according to utilitarianism.

If anyone still wishes to insist that the pleasure gained by means such as this doesn't contribute to well-being, let them say why not. Is it intrinsically different from the pleasure you or I might get from pleasant company, or a good book, or scoring a goal, or whatever? It seems not: from the inside the pleasure is not significantly different.

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That means that the only reason to say that sadistic pleasure is not part of well-being whereas these other pleasures are, is the origin of the pleasure in an immoral act. But to say in the absence of further reasons that immoral pleasure does one no good is simply to beg the question, and to insist on making a difference where there is nothing to make the difference.

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