**PAIN AND EVIL**

In *The View from Nowhere*, Thomas Nagel asserts that it is an objective moral truth that pleasure is good and pain is bad. Further, he appears to hold that the goodness of pleasure and the badness of pain are intrinsic to these states of consciousness considered as such, and that the prospect of pleasure and the likelihood of pain always provide me with reasons to pursue those things that promise the former and avoid the things that portend the latter. Nagel regards all these claims as self-evident, and uses them as a platform to argue that the intrinsic goodness of pleasure and intrinsic badness of pain provide not just myself, but everyone equally, with a reason to secure for me that which causes me pleasure and to refrain from imposing on me that which causes me pain.

A simplistic claim like this, especially one so boldly stated, has no chance of surviving philosophical scrutiny and, of course, Nagel’s claim that pleasure is good and pain bad does not.[[1]](#footnote-1) Numerous obvious counterexamples to the thesis lie ready to hand (some of which will be presented in what follows). Further, Nagel’s use of “gives us a reason” in this context is notoriously ambiguous. On the one hand, it could mean “gives us what Kant calls an *incentive* or *motive* for pursuing pleasure and avoiding pain” or it could mean “gives us a *moral justification* for pursuing pleasure and avoiding pain.” The first of these might have some plausibility as a roughly true empirical generalization. The second, however, seems initially much less intuitive and, I suggest, seems much less so the more we reflect on it. However, my interest in this paper is not to critique Nagel’s claim – the reader is probably well-equipped to do that him- or herself. Instead, I want to take a fresh look at the relation between good and evil, pleasure and pain, focusing on the latter member of each pair, and see if we can’t make some progress on this topic.

The first step, I think, is to get some purchase on the notions of “good” and “evil” and I shall here propose a version of a traditional theory that, while familiar to most philosophers, is currently quite unpopular. According to this theory, the good is the realization of being in accordance with nature, and evil the privation of the natural good. I shall go on to argue that this account of things, when applied to the case of pleasure and pain, conforms to our intuitions much better than does Nagel’s claim, suggesting that the relation between pleasure, pain, good and evil is more complex than he represents it. Although I think that this view bids fair to be, at least in outline, the correct account of the matter at issue, the attentive reader will recognize that it has profound implications for many currently popular moral (or, perhaps, at best amoral and at worst immoral) beliefs and practices. However, I will not stop to draw those consequences here.

I

I will begin by discussing good and evil in relation to being; this is traditionally known as *ontic* good and evil. This account of the nature of the good has its roots in Plato and Aristotle, and through the influence of Augustine of Hippo, has always been a central element in Latin Christendom’s understanding of the metaphysics of good and evil, even among Aristotelians like Thomas Aquinas. Derived from the same source, it is also a central tenet of traditional Natural Law theory.

According to this account of the ontology of good and evil, “good” is convertible with “being,” i.e. the real, the actual, the existent conceived of not as something static but as *operare*, activity-as-such and its modes. On this view then, whatever is is good to the extent that it is, or exists as the actualization or realization of this fundamental activity. At the same time, being is not merely aimless, structureless activity. For each kind of thing there is an essence or nature that endows it with an *ergon* (a function, work, characteristic activity, or terminal state) and through so endowing it dictates the *telos* of that kind of thing, the proper, correct, or optimal performance of that kind of thing’s *ergon*. Individuals of a kind are good to the extent that they approximate their *telos*, and thus the perfection of their natures each in accordance with its kind. This account allows us to make comparisons between individuals within kinds (by reference to differential approximation to their end) and also between kinds (by reference to the natural subordination and significance of their various *erga*.)

Thus, although the good for each kind of thing, and thus for the individuals belonging to that kind, is unique and different, the foregoing abstract account of what the good consists in serves as general template that can be tailored to each such kind in order to give an account of the good for that kind. For our purposes here we can reduce it to three questions:

1. What is *a* good X? (“X” is the name of kind.)

We arrive at the answer to this question by answering a second question

2. What is X good *for*? (This specifies the *ergon* of that kind of thing.)

When we have answered this question, we are then in a position to take on the third and final question

What is good *for* X?

Having identified the thing’s *ergon*, we are then in a position to specify its *telos*, its performing its *ergon* well. We then specify the good for X as consisting in whatever contributes to the achievement of X’s *telos*, and the bad for X as consisting in whatever prevents or retards its achievement of its *telos*.

It is at this point that we are now in a position to identify the nature of evil. If good is the realization of a thing in accordance with the nature of its kind, realized or actualized (= made to be or exist) through its own activity (a mode of being, i.e. activity-as-such), then evil is the privation of the good that belongs to a thing by nature, the good that should be there. In this sense, then, evil is non-being, the privation of the natural good, something that has no positive reality of its own, despite having consequences that are all too real in their effects. Of course, not every lack or inability constitutes a privation of the natural good – it is a privation in a human not to be able to talk but not for a pigeon, whereas it is a privation in a pigeon to be unable to fly but not in the case of a human. The reason is the same in both cases: it belongs by nature to a human being to talk, inasmuch as human are rational beings, but not by nature to a non-rational being like a pigeon. In the same way, it belongs to a pigeon by nature to be able to fly, but not to an Earth-bound human being, who has to build artificial devices if he wishes to be transported through the air. We must emphasize, then, that the privation we identify as ontic evil is relative to the nature of each thing in virtue of the impact that privation has (through inhibiting the operation or exercise of its *ergon*) on that thing’s achieving or approximating to its *telos*.

In Augustine, we find a distinction between two kinds of ontic evil: natural and moral. Natural evil is any privation of the natural good that results from non-rational causes or processes governed by morally neutral laws of nature. Evils of this sort simply occur as part of the course of non-rational nature and need not be seen to be the direct product of any intentional agency decreed for any specific purpose. Blindness caused by a genetic defect or an accidental death resulting from a landslide are ontic evils of this kind, evils for which no finite agency is directly responsible or blameworthy. By contrast, moral evils are those ontic evils intentionally caused or negligently permitted by rational moral agents in willful contravention of the requirements of morality. These evils, too, are the consequence of a privation, namely, the lack of the proper ordering of the parts of the soul, understood in this context as the human personality and its motivational structure. Due to this lack of proper ordering, which is virtually universal among the members of our species, the human motivational structure identifies its happiness with actions, practices, and a style of life that opposes and ignores the requirements of morality because these oppose the fondest wishes of its heart. As such, the individual human being faces a constant internal struggle over whether to accede to those demands, at significant cost to oneself, or give in to temptation and pursue what one wants without regard to one’s moral obligations to oneself or to others.

Both kinds of ontic evil can give rise to pain, suffering, and deprivation for sentient creatures, and especially for human beings. In turn, these three notions, though closely related and partially overlapping (some pains, but not all, involve suffering and much suffering occurs without any sort of literal, physical pain), are nevertheless distinct concepts that we are in position to wholly disentangle here. In this context, I will concern myself only with *pain*, conceived of as a particular kind of bodily sensation associated with kinds of bodily states and conditions, such as illness, injury, tissue, bone, or organ degeneration due to age or genetic deficiency, the application of corporal punishment, and torture. In assessing the truth of the claim that pain is bad, I shall discuss it in this context by asking the more specific question, “What is the relation of pain, considered as a particular sort of bodily sensation, and ontic evil?” Since in discussing pain the sensation of pleasure provides both a useful contrast *and* complementary notion, I shall also extend my treatment to pleasure as well, also considered merely as a bodily sensation, such as that associated with the gratification of an appetite. Although many philosophers will find this at best a matter of merely academic interest, it does apply the only well-worked-out theory of good and evil that the Western tradition has produced to the analysis of the “badness” of pain and produces some surprising results that, I believe, can help us to better understand role and significance of pain in the lives of sentient beings.

II

Pain, as I have said, is a bodily sensation. There are many such sensations: itches, tickles, aches, pains, pleasures, tingles, heat and cold, etc. Sensations of this sort are *had* or *felt*, not perceived, and carry with them no direct information about their causes, at least on their first occurrence. They consist solely of a particular, distinctive sense-content and have no object; for this reason, they wholly lack intentionality. Although judgments with regard to these states are no more infallible or less open to skeptical questioning than any other knowledge claims, that is not incompatible with its being the case that our faculty of introspection is *reliable*. In that case, *contra* Wittgenstein, our ability to re-identify such sensations on different occasions over time is simply a matter of our ability to remember having experienced that same or very similar sense-content on a previous occasion, one based on no external, shareable, or publically observable criterion.[[2]](#footnote-2)

This does not mean that these sense-contents are completely simple, however. They can possess other qualities as well. For example, bodily sensations can be classified as pleasant and unpleasant, though perhaps not exhaustively so. Pain is uniformly classified as an unpleasant sensation, and it is important to note that this is neither a tautology nor a necessary truth. We may roughly say that a sensation is unpleasant if it is one that we generally dislike and are naturally disposed to avoid, tend to anticipate with anxiety, and so on. Many sensations besides pain have this quality – itches and tickles, for example. The anticipatory sensation of nausea that precedes and is relieved by vomiting is extremely unpleasant, yet it is neither a sensation of pain nor accompanied by such a sensation in most cases. So, then, that a sensation is unpleasant is not sufficient for it to be classified as a pain. Neither is it necessary for this to be the case. Imagine someone who has been in an accident and is currently paralyzed below the waist. His doctors are uncertain if his paralysis is permanent, but tell him that the first sign that he is recovering his mobility will a throbbing pain in the big toe on his right foot. In that case, we may suppose our injury victim will desperately desire and hope to experience that throbbing pain, and far from wanting to avoid it will be overjoyed if he actually begins to experience that pain and not just imagine that he is doing so.

A similar point can be made about pleasure. While the claim that pleasure is pleasant might seem to be somehow pleonastic, these two notions are not in fact convertible. Imagine for example a certain toxic mushroom that is fatal when ingested by human beings and suppose that the primary symptom of impending death is that the body is flooded with an intense sensation of pleasure. In that case, not only would one not find this sensation pleasant, but would find its onset an occasion for dismay and terror and the object of a fervent but futile wish that one was not feeling this sensation of pleasure now. So, if a sensation of pleasure is one that we like, enjoy, and no have tendency to extinguish and hope to enjoy again, then this sensation of pleasure is mostly certainly not a pleasant sensation. Similarly, it is arguable that a sensation can be pleasant without being or involving a sensation of pleasure – the sensation of the sun on one’s skin on a warm day is a pleasant sensation but however enjoyable is not a sensation of pleasure or accompanied by such a sensation as a distinguishable element or accompaniment. So, once again, there appears to be no conceptual or necessary connection between something’s being a sensation of pleasure and its being pleasant.

One might want to insist on such a connection by suggesting that if we focus just on the sensation *as such* that such a thesis can be preserved. Pain hurts and pleasure *feels good* and these are natural facts about these sensations, so that on this ground we ought to affirm the theses that pleasure is pleasant and pain unpleasant as more than simply roughly true generalizations. To make this move threatens the thesis with triviality, but even in that case it is doubtful. There appear to be some people – masochists – who seek out and desire painful experiences simply because they *are* painful (they hurt) and others – repressed or abstemious persons – who find sensations of pleasure unpleasant and distasteful precisely because they pleasurable. If this is so, then the fact that pain hurts and pleasure feels good will not be enough to justify the thesis that pleasure is always pleasant and pain always unpleasant even if we limit this thesis to the sensations involved *as such*. At this point, then, there seems little left of the thesis that there is some sort of conceptual connection between pleasure and the pleasant and pain and the unpleasant or any necessity in the claim that sensations of pleasure are intrinsically pleasant and pain intrinsically unpleasant. What remains, however, is the roughly true generalization that pains hurts and that pleasure feels good and that, for most people on most occasions, the presence of the latter is enjoyable and that of the former is not.

III

The next question that arises concerns the relation between pleasure and pain, so discussed, and ontic good and evil. Right away, I think we can dismiss the idea that pleasure is identical with the ontic good and pain the sole ontic evil. To take this view is to suppose that good and evil are essentially nothing more than, or are reducible to, sensations and I doubt that anyone would seriously defend this view. Nevertheless, I can think of a reason for supposing this might be the case, one that may be operative at some level in similar views about pleasure as the good. After all, it is possible for us to take pleasure as our object, something that nearly all of us actually do on at least some occasions. One can eat merely for the sake of the pleasure associated with the taste of certain foods, smoke cigarettes, drink “for effect” or take drugs simply to get high, and engage in sexual activity solely for the sake of experiencing the pleasurable sensations associated with orgasm. Pleasure feels good and feeling good can be our aim in acting; as such, pleasure can be the object of our act. As J. S. Mill argues, the fact that pleasure in this sense is actually desired for its own sake (as the object of one’s act) proves that pleasure is desirable as an end in itself. Similar considerations could be applied to argue that, since we typically avoid pain simply because it hurts and for no other reason, this shows that pain is undesirable in and of itself, and so intrinsically bad.

Although the ancient Cyrenaic Hedonists appear to have held that pleasure considered as a bodily sensation is the only intrinsic value (and by parity of reasoning that the sensation of pain is the only intrinsic evil) no one today, not even a modern day follower of J. S. Mill, is likely to follow this line. A life devoted simply to the pursuit and enjoyment of the *katasthenic* pleasures seems to most of us to limit the possibilities and concerns of human life too severely, leaving too many aspects of our personalities and potentialities for human existence undeveloped and ignored in exchange for something that neither compensates for what we have thereby lost or makes that preference intelligible to anyone, even the one who makes this aim the object of his act. The life of a heroin addict is replete with sensations of pleasure of this kind, the more so the greater his or her devotion to the acquisition and enjoyment of this drug. However, the sensations of pleasure that such a person enjoys hardly seems to make such a life worthwhile, let alone preferable to one that enjoys a much lower level of such sensations.

Further, as we all know perfectly well, some pleasures are wicked, not just circumstantially, but in and of themselves, because they arise from the commission of a moral evil that essentially involves the imposition of ontic evil on oneself or others. The sadist, for example, derives pleasure from the physical torture, humiliation, and degradation of others precisely because these actions and practices impose pain and suffering on their victims, whether this be a boy pulling the wings off a fly or a Marquis de Sade brutalizing prostitutes. Again, rapists and serial killers derive intense pleasure, often of a sexual nature, from assaulting and killing their victims. These pleasures can hardly be called good, or even merely morally neutral; it is morally wrong to take pleasure in these actions and so to deliberately and intentionally undertake these actions for the sake of the enjoyment of that pleasure is itself to be and to do something wicked. And, lest we think that these extreme examples exhaust the range on cruelties that we can impose on others for the purpose of enjoying the wicked delight of so doing, we need to note that it lies within every one of us to take pleasure in causing pain and suffering to others through a myriad of ways – bullying, making cutting remarks, exposing others to public ridicule, gossiping, lying, showing contempt or disrespect as well as in many other ways. Even to indulge in *schadenfreude* or to fantasize about doing such acts is clearly as morally objectionable as it is common. We each of us have our own Augustinian “pear orchard incidents” in our lives where have done things, and enjoyed them, just because we knew that they were wrong to do. One need not be a sociopath in order to derive pleasure from doing what is wrong.

Even so, cannot the pursuit of pleasure sometimes constitute something good in and of itself even if it is not the sole such good? I contend that the proper answer to this question is “No.” This may strike many people as obviously wrong or even crazy but it is neither. Recall that we are limiting our discussion here simply to sensations of pleasure when these are the object of our act, i.e., the enjoyment of such sensations is the sole or primary goal of acting. This leaves aside, then, other pleasant sensations or states-of-affairs, whether or not these are the objects of our acts, as well as such sensations when they are merely the byproducts of actions or states-of-affairs brought about by our actions undertaken with other ends in mind. These sensations are associated either with the appetites, such as those for food, drink, and sex, or pursuits and activities that produce these sensations, such as the use of exercise, breath-control, chemical stimulants such as nicotine and alcohol, drugs, and so on. Such sensations reveal to us neither their causes nor any information about our bodily condition and thus lack all intentionality. Neither, despite the extravagant claims sometimes made for them, are they any sort of pathway to a higher wisdom or “spiritual” perspective on things, achieving their entire effect through interference with the ordinary operation of our brain chemistry or the production of elevated levels of beta-endorphins.[[3]](#footnote-3)

In non-human animals, the appetites are generally well-regulated, inasmuch as they are for the most part ordered efficiently to the natural ends of those appetites: nutrition, hydration, and reproduction. Animals are driven by instinct, and will generally find appetitive satisfaction in teleologically appropriate objects: nutritionally appropriate food, healthy drink, and sexual partners appropriate for the continuation of the species. Only in human beings do we observe a strong divergence between what we appetitively want and what is good for us. Most of us would prefer what tastes good to what is good for us to eat, to drink sugary and alcoholic beverages in preference to healthier alternatives, and to pursue sexual experience without any regard to procreation beyond simply acting to prevent its occurrence. In each case, it is the heedless pursuit of sensations of pleasure that motivates us and serves as the object of our act, an impulse so powerful in most of us that we will risk significant loss in many cases to pursue them, even when the dangers are palpable and well known – witness the number of smokers who persist in the habit despite the known health risks.[[4]](#footnote-4) There is much more sad and sober truth in Alexander Wolcott’s witticism than most of us are willing to acknowledge.[[5]](#footnote-5)

I thus make bold to claim that the sensations of pleasure as such, and the pursuit of the enjoyment of such sensations for their own sakes, is never good for us even if, on some occasions, we are able to accomplish this without any harm to ourselves and others. There are two reasons for this. First, because the pursuit of these sensations for their own sake is generally contrary to the natural end of these appetites, they are focused on ends and pursued by means and practices that are generally deleterious to physical and mental health and the proper development of character. They are thus not only not good for us, or even relatively harmless to us, but are in fact largely bad for us when pursued solely for the sake of their own enjoyment. Their sole value lies in their feeling-tone, which may be momentarily intense but typically vanishes without residue or follow-up and which is naturally productive of ontic and moral evil.

Secondly, each of these modes of sensation is highly addictive and has a natural tendency to dominate our psychic lives to our cost without adequate compensation simply through the enjoyment of these sensations considered as such. Indeed, the opposite seems to be the case: the more one enjoys the euphoria induced by tobacco, alcohol, and drugs the greater the risk that one will suffer ontic evil as a result and so the greater the deleterious impact on health and human functioning that one will typically observe in the case of others and experience in one’s own case. It is therefore never wise to seek such sensations as ends in themselves and run the risk of addiction/obsession and the attendant bad consequences of these conditions. What may initially seem like harmless fun or mere experimentation is in fact a dangerous flirtation with forces that are much more likely to overwhelm us than be successfully managed in such a way as to be harmless for ourselves and others. Further, those addicted to the pursuit of these sorts of sensations are generally in self-deception about both the fact and level of their addiction and so resistant to change with regard to their pursuit behavior. Those who persist in pursuing them must either suffer the natural, deleterious consequences of these practices (which can be evaded only by mere luck), embrace a long, difficult, onerous and uncertain course of “rehabilitation” to overcome their addictions, or to embrace ever more extreme, risky, and antisocial behavior in order to avoid burnout, *ennui*, and maintain the “high.” Even for those who “recover” there is usually some level of permanent damage or loss for which the mere memory of all the “fun” one had “back in the day” is generally inadequate compensation and diluted either by guilt and embarrassment in many cases or the feeling that life has completely lost its savor in many others. Surely, someone whose major peak experiences in life are mainly constituted by the enjoyment of sensations of pleasure can hardly be said to have lived a very full human life.

I conclude, then, that sensations of pleasure are not only not the good, they are not good at all considered in themselves and indeed are generally bad for us because they are associated with practices and states-of-affairs productive of ontic and moral evil. In that case, if the claim that “pleasure is good” is understood as the claim that sensations of pleasure pursued as for their own sakes as the object of our act are either the good, or good in themselves, or even productive of ontic good, that claim is false on all counts. The counsel of prudence, known to common sense and available to anyone willing to consult it, is that these pleasures need to be very carefully regulated and that is much better to be abstemious or “repressed” with regard to them than bold and self-indulgent.[[6]](#footnote-6) Of course, this advice is always easier given than followed, since it seems that doing so puts us in direct opposition to the natural bent of our appetites, which constantly goad and tempt us to pursue sensuous pleasure in preference to what reason approves as genuinely good for us. Paradoxically, our spontaneous “natural bent” appears to be normatively contrary to our true and genuine nature, since instead of directing us toward our ontic good it in fact prompts us to pursue a course of life that robs us of our chance to attain that ontic good while at the same time burdening us with ontic evil in its place. To resist these temptations, then, often requires a strenuous moral effort on our parts, one that increasingly puts oneself at odds with culturally dominant mores and so finds little cultural support or validation. Indeed, such resistance is much more likely to be opposed and criticized than respected in the current cultural context. It is perhaps no wonder, then, that many in our time have simply embraced their bentness and decided to constitute a life in pursuit of a surfeit of such sensations (“sex, drugs, rock and roll”) as *la dolce vita* and thus the only sort of life to which human beings can realistically aspire, a life only worth living while the good times roll and becomes progressively less valuable as those good times diminish. More than this, many can no longer even conceive of any better life or, even if they can, can form no desire for it. However, this has no bearing on the philosophical results we have gained here.

IV

Even if pleasure is not the good, one might still want to resist the notion that pain (here again considered merely as the collection of the various kinds of sensuous pains or bodily sensations of pain) is anything but intrinsically evil, evil *just because it hurts*. However, in line with the account of ontic good and evil given earlier, I think we have good reason to affirm that (contrary to what most of us unreflectively suppose) that sensuous pain *as such* is *never* evil, however unpleasant it may be for us to experience. This does not mean that to suffer pain is *never* an evil but merely that its being so is a matter of attendant circumstances, not merely by its being present as a subjective mental content in the consciousness of a sentient being.[[7]](#footnote-7) I shall now go on to explain and justify this claim.

Whereas sensuous pleasure seems to have no necessary role to play in the governance of behavior in sentient beings – mere need to relieve discomfort would be enough to motivate pursuit of the appropriate objects of appetition even without accompanying sensations of pleasure – the same is arguably not true for pain.[[8]](#footnote-8) Pain has an obvious and indeed indispensable epistemic function for finite sentient creatures because it is by means of bodily sensations of pain that it typically attends to and draws an organism’s attention to the imminent presence of ontic evil in its environment. These ontic evils can be either states or conditions arising in the body itself or states and conditions resulting from the organism’s interaction with its environment and include conditions such as disease, injury, bodily limitation, and deficiency. Pain is the primary means of awareness of these conditions and the primary motivation to do something about them. Further, it is primarily due to the fact that pain hurts that it can accomplish this function. An organism in pain acts so as to relieve its pain and make it cease; in so doing, it generally addresses the ontic evil of which pain is a byproduct and makes possible its correction. An organism in the presence of a painful stimulus will generally act so as to avoid that stimulus, which almost always constitutes a source of ontic evil for that organism. An animal with an injured foot will limp in order to avoid the pain associated with normal use of that appendage, and thus allows it to heal. An animal suffering from a chronic condition will limit its activity in order to avoid feeling the pain associated with that condition and thus keep from exacerbating it. In the same way, an organism whose activity exceeds its capacity will feel the pressure of its limitations in the form of painful sensations and cease the activity producing them. In these cases, then, pain is a valuable and immediate stimulus to the avoidance of ontic evil and even indirectly an aid to the pursuit of the ontic good. Seen in this light, pain hardly seems something intrinsically bad or even an ontic evil of any kind, even if it is usually caused by such evil.

Indeed, it is far better for us that we feel pain in these conditions than that we should fail to do so; more than this, it is good for us (from the perspective of the pursuit and maintenance of the ontic good) *that pain hurts*. In evolutionary terms, it makes perfect sense that organisms that are pain-averse should outbreed those that are pain-tolerant and thus liable to ignore its ontically evil causes.[[9]](#footnote-9) In the same way, those rare human beings who lack the ability to feel pain are in constant danger of serious injury or death simply because they are unable to recognize when their behavior is deleterious to their proper functioning, health, or survival. Indeed, despite what Paul Draper contends, it is hard to imagine a more direct and efficient way to inform non-rational organisms of that which is objectively harmful to them than sensations of pain strong enough to immediately influence their behavior away from the ontic evil and toward the ontic good.[[10]](#footnote-10) Sensations of pain can accomplish this only if they are both arresting and compelling, and in non-human animals pain mechanisms work efficiently to this end.[[11]](#footnote-11) In the case of human beings, we note once again that only a rational being can be immoral and irrational. Despite the arresting and compelling nature of pain (and other unpleasant sensations, such as those associated with fatigue and illness) human beings routinely ignore these sensations, treating them simply as a nuisance or interference in the accomplishment of their important tasks, often seeking temporary pain relief without bothering to correct the condition that is causing the pain, and this typically to their cost. Professional athletes, gymnasts, and ballet dancers are almost constantly injured, because despite their talent and conditioning, the sort of physical activity in which they are engaged involves constantly pushing beyond the limits of what the human body can do, which results in bodily damage and injury. Among these communities, however, there is a strong *ethos* of “playing with pain,” “taking one for the team,” etc. and even a tendency to valorize those who risk or incur serious injury in order to play or perform. If not even pain can prevent this sort of behavior, it is hard to imagine (*pace* Hume and Draper) that anything less could do the trick.

For the same reason, relief of pain is not always a good thing, i.e. something that is good for us, even for the person whose pain is being relieved. This will especially be the case for those individuals, such as those just mentioned, who see pain merely as a nuisance or impediment to the pursuit of their own ends or tasks and are willing to ignore pain and other unpleasant sensations in order to pursue those ends more efficiently. Such persons will typically be less concerned than they should be about the ontic evils that they are leaving unaddressed in their single-minded devotion to those ends, and thus at risk for greater ontic evils as a result. In such cases, to relieve pain is simply to become a willing accomplice in the patient’s self-destructive project, and so to relieve pain in these circumstances is rightly regarded as both unethical and immoral in the medical community. Treatment of pain is, and must always be, secondary to the detection and removal of its cause, whether this is an immanent bodily condition or something in the environment introduced into the body from outside. Pain treatment or mitigation can only become a primary medical objective in those cases in which the condition is chronic or incurable – *in extremis*. Given that pain is not evil in and of itself, however unpleasant, it is not obvious that there are not absolute moral limits on what anyone may do in order to accomplish this end.

Not only is pain neither an ontic evil considered in itself or something that ought always to be relieved, it is sometimes morally deserved by those who suffer it. The ontic evil that produces sensations of pain is more often the consequence of one’s willful irrationality than we are generally willing to admit. In cases like this – such as when a smoker, fully apprised of the dangers of his smoking habit, comes down with lung cancer – we say that the person in question has no one but him- or herself to blame. In other cases, it certainly seems possible in principle that corporal punishment involving the imposition of pain on the guilty can be the appropriate, earned penalty for one’s crimes, in which case we have a positive moral obligation from justice to impose that punishment upon those who have earned it. At any rate, given the foregoing, we cannot object to such practices simply on the ground that they involve the imposition of pain. Indeed, such imposition, though demanded solely by justice, may also produce a change of heart (rehabilitation) in those upon which it is imposed, or at least deter them and others from committing similar crimes, in which case both they and society will be benefitted.

I conclude, then, that just as pleasure understood as sensations of pleasure taken as the object of one’s act is not intrinsically good or even good for us for the most part, so too is it the case that pain is not intrinsically evil and is for the most part good for us (in its epistemic function) and in other cases deserved by those who are subject to it (whether they like it or not) and can even be beneficial to them. Sensations of the first sort when pursued for their own sakes are naturally associated with the production/presence of ontic evil in those that choose to pursue them, whereas those of the second sort, by informing us of the presence of such evils, indirectly point us toward the pursuit of the ontic good and even in some cases may be productive of them. Of course, it will not be so if we refuse to heed its warning or treat pain as simply a nuisance to be medicated in order not to be felt and thereby allowed to slow us down. Pain is almost always the byproduct of ontic evil and our most direct evidence for the presence of ontic evil in our body or our immediate environment; the proper response to pain is to seek treatment for whatever bodily or environmental condition is causing these unpleasant sensations. In this way, pain points us in the direction of the ontic good.

These conclusions, though perhaps unpalatable to many, are nevertheless patently obvious to reflection. If accepted, they have many implications for a number of moral and philosophical questions of a sort decidedly contrary to the current consensus both among philosophers and ordinary people – too many to take up here. As I have already said, the astute reader will be able to work these out for him- or herself; for my part, I hope to address some of these in another place.

1. See Christine Korsgaard, *The Sources of Normativity*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 1996, 40-41, where she mentions Nagel’s view, and 145-155, where Korsgaard denies that pain is bad/evil as such, though from a different perspective than that adopted here. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Indeed, as I have argued elsewhere, there can be no public criteria for language use that we can somehow have access to independently of subjective states of awareness that are simply had; see “From Private Experience to Public Language,” also on this website. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Contemplative prayer, which need not involve any form of navel-gazing, self-hypnosis, or breath-control, may be an exception to this rule; see Mario Beauregard and Denyse O’Leary, *The Spiritual Brain*, New York, HarperOne, 2007. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. This is only one of many examples of our seemingly incorrigible irrationality when it comes to what are traditionally known as sensuous pleasures. See Sarah Conly, *Against Autonomy: The Case for Coercive Paternalism*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 2013 for extensive documentation of this phenomenon. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. “Everything I like is either illegal, or immoral, or fattening.” (1934) [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. In my *A Primer of Modern Virtue Ethics*, Lanham, MD, University Press of America, 1995 I argue that the rational standard for the enjoyment of such pleasures with minimum risk is to be found in their subordination to and integration into other activities with genuinely intrinsic goods as their objects – see pages 20-23. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. This will clearly be the case when, for example, when the imposition of ontic evil for the purpose of causing gratuitous pain as the object of one’s act in order to experience sadistic pleasure; this will be a case of moral evil. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Pleasure at best might be seen as what B. F. Skinner called a *reinforcer*, a contingency that increases the likelihood that a particular behavior will be repeated. So, for example, one supposes that (at least among human beings) sexual activity would be much less frequent, and so too the necessary conditions for procreation obtain, if sex were not so pleasant. It is not surprising, then, that those who experience pleasure in sexual activity would outbreed those who did not, or to the same degree, thus leading to its general prevalence among the human population. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Sharon Street argues this point in her provocative paper, “A Darwinian Dilemma for Realist Theories of Value,” <http://as.nyu.edu/docs/IO/1177/DarwinianDilemma.pdf>, 36-44, subsequently published in *Philosophical* *Studies* (January 2006). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. See Paul Draper, “Pain and Pleasure: An Evidential Problem for Theists,” in Daniel Howard-Snyder, *The Evidential Problem from Evil*, Bloomington, IN, Indiana University Press, 1996, 12-29. Draper takes it for granted that pleasure is good, pain is evil, and that happiness is simply the positive balance of pleasure over pain in life. None of these claims is true on the analysis given here. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Hume suggests in the *Dialogues* that God could have managed animal pain simply by substituting a diminution of pleasure for pain. It is not even clear on the face of it what Hume is actually proposing here; even if that can be cleared up, it is doubtful that a mere diminution of pleasure would be either arresting enough or compelling enough to guide dumb animals in the avoidance of ontic evil and the indirect pursuit of the ontic good, which is not a state of consciousness. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)