MALICIOUS PLEASURE EVALUATED: IS PLEASURE AN UNCONDITIONAL GOOD?

BY

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Abstract: I examine and criticize the thinking that leads people to deny malicious pleasure's goodness.

Pleasure is one of the strongest candidates for an unconditional good – an event good unconditionally and so in every possible circumstance. Yet, apparent exceptions exist. Many people regard *schadenfreude* or malicious pleasure – roughly, pleasure in another person's troubles – as an exception. Particularists think every substantial ethical rule faces exceptions. No event is good *necessarily*. Good and bad must be judged case by case.

I believe pleasure and pain have unconditional value. Pleasure is good, and pain is bad, unconditionally, in a fundamental respect.[1] In this paper I support the view that malicious pleasure, too, is good in this respect. The thinking that leads people to deny this pleasure's goodness I examine and undermine. The basic respect in which, I believe, every pleasure is good I identify.

1. *Axiological* particularism differs from 2. *reason-giving* (or *valence*) particularism. Proponents think there is no x such that, unconditionally: 1. x is good, 2. x presents reason to choose x. The support I give for the view that pleasure is an unconditional good constitutes reason to reject an unqualified form of 1. – axiological particularism.

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I. We can correctly judge some intrinsically good events to be bad (simpliciter)

Many people claim malicious pleasure is bad and then infer it is not good. Such thinking is crude.

We usually attribute properties to objects on the basis of predominant features. A *green dress* may have non-green parts. When we regard a dress as not merely green in some respect but green *simpliciter* or without qualification, we judge it through a predominant feature. *Interesting writers* say uninteresting things. *Irritable people* have contented episodes. To assign properties to objects on the basis of their dominant features is usually unproblematic. Dominant features are usually what interest us.

Dominant features also guide judgments of good and bad. What we judge as bad overall, a bad thing, or bad (*simpliciter*) usually has at most more bad than good. Bad movies usually have redeeming features. We call war bad not because it does no good but because the bad predominates.

Unconditional intrinsic goods – objects that are intrinsically good, unconditionally – may be bad in some respects. The bad might sometimes outweigh the good. People might judge such instances of the unconditional intrinsic goods to be bad (*simpliciter*). Thus, thinking pleasure is an unconditional intrinsic good is compatible with judging some pleasure a bad thing or bad (*simpliciter*). Hence, we do not prove some pleasure is not intrinsically good by identifying pleasure we may justly deem bad (*simpliciter*).

Immanuel Kant might have been justified in calling some happiness *extremely bad.* Happiness might still be an unconditional intrinsic good. (Kant grounds this negative evaluation of happiness in bad effects. Happiness "may encourage pride or presumption if there is not a good will to correct (its) influence," he says (*Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*).) Kant uses this evaluation to support the claim that happiness is not unconditionally good. Kant rightly thinks some happiness is not good overall or good (*simpliciter*). Happiness is not good (*simpliciter*) unconditionally, he concludes. This reasoning is compatible with happiness being an unconditional intrinsic good.

Pleasure might be an unconditional intrinsic good and Jonathan Dancy might still be right in saying, "A feature or part may have one value in one context and a different or opposite value in another."[2] Were every pleasure an intrinsic good, pleasure's overall value could still vary from case to case. Some pleasure might be bad overall and properly judged bad (*simpliciter*). Thinking of overall value and using good or bad *simpliciter* judgments, people might assign pleasure "one value in one context and a different or opposite value in another." Pleasure may be very good in one situation, less good in a second, and bad in a third, they may say.

Every pleasure might be intrinsically good even if some pleasure did not make the world better. A pleasure might produce so much bad that the bad outweighs the good, and the world is worse.

We might consistently accept that all pleasure is intrinsically good and deny that it is good to seek every pleasure. We might claim some pleasure should not be sought or chosen. ("Every pleasure is good but not every pleasure is to be chosen," Epicurus writes.[3]) When an intrinsically good event is bad overall, and its presence makes the world worse, seeking it is *prima facie* not good. We might think this good ought not exist.[4]

Suppose we understand discrete event *e* as an event whose defining properties lie in determinate intrinsic properties. Then, there could be an *e* such that (1) *e* is *intrinsically* good unconditionally. (Pleasure is such an *e*, I believe.) However, (2) No *e* is *predominately* good unconditionally (in every conceivable case). Hence, (3) No *e* is justly deemed good (*simpliciter*) unconditionally.[5] Insofar as particularists endorse (3) they are right.

II. Malicious pleasure may be intrinsically *bad*

Some people think malicious pleasure is *intrinsically* bad. Suppose it is. Does it follow that malicious pleasure is not an intrinsic good?

The *bad in a moral offense* differs from the *bad in adversity*. Deception, viciousness, and promise breaking are bad in the former way. They are offensive.[6] Blindness, sickness, and insanity are bad in the latter way. They are adversities. The good in a *moral virtue* contrasts similarly with the good in a *personal benefit*. Benevolence and kindness are virtues. Wealth and longevity are benefits.

Moral offensiveness has a social dimension. A person is morally offensive by relating to others in a particular way. No relation to others is needed for sickness or other adversity, however.

When people deceive, *they* are bad in some way; when they are blind, they need not be. Blindness and other adversity is something George may or may not *deserve*. George's being deceptive or otherwise offensive is not. We morally object to people for their deceptions and other social offenses but pity them for blindness and other extreme adversities.

The bad in malicious pleasure lies in its anti-social character – its moral offensiveness. People are related to others offensively when they are maliciously pleased. When people feel malicious pleasure, *they* are bad for feeling so. If malicious pleasure is an unconditional good, it is so in being a benefit: It is good for sentient beings in the way wisdom and longevity are. The good and bad can coexist. There are two values here: the bad in the moral offensiveness and the good in the pleasure's self-benefiting character.

Malicious pleasure might be intrinsically bad in moral character. It could still be an intrinsic benefit to, and so intrinsic personal good for, someone experiencing it.

Suppose malicious pleasure is intrinsically bad in its offensiveness. Then malicious pleasure's intrinsic ethical character is mixed. The pleasure has both bad (moral) and good (personal benefit) intrinsic to it. The intrinsic bad might sometimes or always outweigh the intrinsic good. Hence, it would be a mistake to assume if pleasure is an unconditional intrinsic good, then, if we set aside the pleasure's effects, pleasure's introduction always constitutes a net increase in the amount of goodness, and the ratio of good to bad, in the world.[7]

If pleasure is an unconditional intrinsic good, it is so in being a benefit. (One (minor) reason people condemn malicious pleasure is they think this pleasure is a good that malicious people do not deserve.) We can consistently think (1) Malicious pleasure is intrinsically bad with respect to its moral offensiveness and (2) Every pleasure is an intrinsic, self-benefiting good.

To ponder only whether malicious pleasure is good or bad (*simpliciter*) is coarse. When we formulate the task so, we encourage mutually exclusive *simpliciter* judgments about the pleasure's ethical character. (Identifying respects in which malicious pleasure is good and bad is more sophisticated.) We ignore the distinction between an event's being bad in moral offensiveness and its being bad as an adversity. Evaluations of malicious pleasure have hitherto occurred on the crude plane of affirming or denying the pleasure is good (*simpliciter*).[8]

III. What is bad in feeling malicious pleasure differs from what is intrinsically good

The moral objection to malicious pleasure has different strains. What is bad by being morally offensive differs from what is an intrinsic good.

A. BEING MALICIOUSLY PLEASED IS A COMPOUND: THE WHOLE'S ETHICAL CHARACTER DIFFERS FROM A COMPONENT'S

To call pleasure *malicious* is not to assign it some unique, unanalyzable quality. Pleasure is malicious by having a particular cognitive cause. When Mel feels malicious pleasure over Vic's misfortunes, Mel feels *schadenfreude* and is *joyous, delighted* or *pleased* over Vic's misfortunes. These are emotions and so multi-component mental events.

These emotions – which some people call intentional states or propositional attitudes – have two components: pleasure and a thought or other purely cognitive state. *First*, a person who is pleased over *s*

thinks *s* is good in some way. People pleased over their looks think they look good. A person pleased over another's misery views the misery's occurrence as good. Being pleased gains its link to a proposition through its cognitive component. Newborn babies might experience pleasure. However, they lack the cognitive development necessary for regarding someone else's misfortune as good. This is why they do not feel malicious pleasure. *Second*, the person pleased over *s* experiences pleasure while pleased.

The cognitive element causes the pleasure. When Rachel is delighted or pleased over a grade, her thoughts of her good grade bring pleasure. That is, her thoughts cause that pleasure which is a component of her being delighted or pleased. Experiencing pleasure *while* thinking of the good grade is not a sufficient condition for being pleased about the grade. She could experience pleasure while having this thought and not be pleased about her grade. The pleasure might be a component of some other pleasurable emotion. It might be a component of her being delighted or pleased about something else. Or in feeling pleasure she may simply be feeling good without being pleased or delighted about anything. For her to be delighted or pleased about the grade, the thought of the good grade must cause that pleasure. Being maliciously pleased about another person's troubles has the same structure. B's thoughts of E's troubles must cause B pleasure if B is to be maliciously pleased over E's troubles.[9]

Is it strange to suppose pleasure is a component of being pleased? We ought not assume that since 'pleasure' and 'pleased' are spelled similarly, they mean or designate the same thing. Pleasure is a quality in experience. Being pleased is an emotion with an emotion's compound character.[10]

Suppose being maliciously pleased has two components. The parts need not inherit the whole's properties. Malicious pleasure's moral offensiveness is a property of the whole – the cognitive-pleasure compound. We are not entitled to infer from the whole's being bad and offensive that the pleasure component also is bad and offensive.

B. THE BAD THAT PEOPLE ASSIGN MALICIOUS PLEASURE LIES PARTLY IN CERTAIN ACTIONS

When condemning malicious pleasure, people often condemn enjoying, or taking pleasure in, another's misfortune. B's *taking pleasure in* E's humiliation is not the same thing as the *pleasure* B takes in it. Not every property of the former complex relation is a property of the latter event. (Not every property of stealing money is a property of money.) The former's being bad does not guarantee the latter's being so.

B's "taking pleasure in" E's troubles may connote *acting* in certain ways. Suppose, to maximize his pleasure, B repeatedly discusses E's problems and prolongs conversations about them. These *actions* are examples

of occurrences that seem bad in B's (repeatedly) *taking pleasure in* E's problems. Suppose instead, without seeking the pleasure or indulging in it, B feels pleasure only once. Suppose B quickly turns his thoughts to other matters and deliberately terminates the pleasure. B's feeling malicious pleasure seems less bad. Insofar as the bad that people assign malicious pleasure is a property of the malicious person's actions, it is not *ipso facto* a property of the pleasure at which these actions aim.

Conclusion

Thinking of malicious pleasure as bad (*simpliciter*), people deduce some pleasure is not good (*simpliciter*) and, from this, that pleasure's goodness does not support an exceptionless value-principle. Their thinking is understandable. When thinking so, they do not distinguish the good in a benefit from the good in virtuousness. Nor do they distinguish judgments of intrinsic goodness from good *simpliciter* judgments. Further, conflating the complex relation of someone's taking pleasure in something with the pleasure in the relation, they assume whatever property the relation has, the pleasure *ipso facto* has. Consequently, they do not notice that the complex relation might be bad without the pleasure in it being so. They do not notice that we might judge it immoral and bad (*simpliciter*) to feel malicious pleasure, and every pleasure might still be an intrinsic self-benefiting good.

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NOTES

[1] See my "Pleasure and Pain: Unconditional, Intrinsic Values," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 50 (1989), 255–276.

[2] Dancy, J. (2000). "The Particularist's Progress," in eds., B. Hooker and M. Little, *Moral Particularism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000), 139.

[3] "Epicurus to Menoeceus," in C. Bailey (ed.) *Epicurus: Extant Remains*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1926.

[4] Moore equates something's being "good in itself", or having "intrinsic value," with being something that "ought to exist for its own sake" (*Principia Ethica*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1903, p. *viii*).

[5] G. E. Moore's open question argument turns, in part, on good *simpliciter* judgments. Once we recognize that we may correctly judge an event to be bad (*simpliciter*) and the event might still be good intrinsically (or in another respect), we can identify certain errors associated with Moore's argument.

Moore endorses *the open question thesis*: For any natural property *n*, an object *o* might have *n* and *o*'s goodness would still be an open question. We can ask with "significance" whether an *o* that has *n* is good.

To think *o*'s goodness is an "open question" is akin to thinking: (1) For no natural property *n* that *o* might have does *n*'s presence fully determine *o*'s goodness and (2) "*o* has *n*" does not entail "*o* is good." Identifying the natural with the factual or real, people proceed to draw various conclusions from the open question thesis. These include: "No factual sentence entails a value sentence," "Value is distinct from fact," or "'Good' does not name a property."

Suppose we inject the distinction between good *simpliciter* judgments and judgments of particular respects in which *o* is good.

We might agree that no sentence that people use to assign *o* some natural property *n* entails *o* is good (*simpliciter*). Might a sentence that assigns *o* some property *n* entail *o* is good *in some respect*? Suppose pleasure-sentence *p* is "Mom is experiencing pleasure" and value-sentence *v* is "Mom is experiencing an intrinsic good." Might *p* entail *v*? Is *p* a fact statement that entails a value statement? We might admit "Mom is experiencing pleasure" does not entail the value-sentence "Mom is experiencing something good" (*simpliciter*). We might concede it is an open question whether or not someone who is experiencing pleasure is experiencing something good (*simpliciter*). It would not follow from this that the factual statement "Mom is experiencing pleasure" does not entail the value sentence "Mom is experiencing an intrinsic good." Nor would it follow that "Mom is experiencing an intrinsic good" is not itself a (wholly) factual statement or that we do not assign pleasure some property when we call it intrinsically "good".

[6] What is "morally offensive" is not necessarily immoral. Sometimes deception and other moral offenses are morally acceptable (e.g., when the lesser of two evils or a promoter of greater good). However, moral offenses are bad in a particular social respect even when not immoral. That breaking a promise or committing another moral offense is "*prima facie*" wrong (immoral) is a *consequence* of the action's being bad in its moral offensiveness.

[7] Christine Korsgaard assumes *happiness* is good – i.e., properly deemed *good simpliciter* – only when "the world is a better place" because it exists (*Creating the Kingdom of Ends*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996, p. 258). The world is not better for an undeserving person's happiness, Korsgaard thinks. His happiness is not good, she concludes.

Korsgaard rightly supposes people may feel happiness without the net good in the world increasing. However, we ought not conclude some happiness is not an intrinsic benefit to, and personal good for, those enjoying it.

Consider undeserved happiness again. What is bad, perhaps intrinsically, is the injustice. However, there is also benefit and good in the happiness – the *good* is what bad people do not deserve. (Bad people are also undeserving of long life, wealth and other good things.) In effect, Korsgaard supposes it is bad overall for people to benefit from good they do not deserve. There are two (interrelated) values here: the intrinsic good in the happiness and the bad – perhaps intrinsic – in the injustice.

[8] People routinely accept or reject good *simpliciter* judgments when they should identify respects in which a thing is good or bad. The evaluation of malicious pleasure is merely one domain where such crude thinking reigns. For instance:

1. Contrasting evaluative statements with descriptive ones, Richard Hare argues that descriptive statements do not entail evaluative statements. Philippa Foot objects to Hare's distinction. On one occasion in which Hare responds to Foot, he advances a grinning schoolboy tale to show the word "rude" need not imply adverse evaluation (*Moral Thinking*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 74–75). (Hare thinks the example shows that "rudeness" has a descriptive meaning that is separate from its evaluative meaning.) The schoolboy grins at what he concedes was "rude", namely, striking a boy who spat at him. Because the boy approves of what he admits was "rude" Hare thinks the schoolboy does

not evaluate this rudeness adversely or think of it as bad. Hare's reasoning here is too simple. The boy does not regard his action as bad (*simpliciter*). He does not disapprove of his rudeness or think he acted wrongly. The boy regards his action as justified and good overall. However, approving of this rudeness and evaluating it as good (*simpliciter*) is compatible with acknowledging that when we call an action "rude", we imply it is bad *in one respect* – its social offensiveness. Hare's example is compatible with the boy regarding "rude" as signifying something bad in its offensiveness. (The boy does regard his "rudeness" as bad in some way. What he calls "rude" is *hitting* and presumably intending to *hurt*, a child that spat at him. The boy approves of his action because he thereby justly punishes the child.)

2. Using *simpliciter* judgments, Brueckner and Fischer seem to suppose death is sometimes not bad ("Why is Death Bad?," *Philosophical Studies*, 50 (1986), pp. 213–221). They support this view, in effect, by contending that since death sometimes is the lesser of two evils, a person may be better off dead and we might deem his death good (*simpliciter*). However, this thinking implies that even if such death is not bad (*simpliciter*), it is, as many people would suppose, *an* evil – the lesser of two evils – and hence bad in some respect.

[9] This two component analysis of being pleased, in which I assign components a causal connection, I defend further in "Cognitive Pleasure and Distress," *Philosophical Studies*, 39 (1981), pp. 49–55. The analysis of pleasurable emotions I defend further in "Are emotions feelings?: A further look at hedonic theories of emotions," in *Consciousness and Emotion*, 31 (2002), pp. 21–33.

[10] For further explanation of the view that pleasure is a quality in experience see my "Intersubjective Properties by Which We Specify Pain, Pleasure, and Other Kinds of Mental States," *Philosophy*, 75 (2000), pp. 89–104.