

Discussions

PAIN AND MASOCHISM

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And Lise, as soon as Alyosha had gone, unlocked the door, opened it a little, put her finger in the crack, and slammed the door as hard as she could. Ten seconds later she released her hand, went slowly to her chair, sat down, and looked intently at her blackened, swollen finger and the blood that was oozing out from the nail. Her lips quivered. "I am a vile, vile, vile, despicable creature," she whispered.

"I want someone to marry me, tear me to pieces, betray me, and then desert me. I don't want to be happy."

(From Dostoevsky's, *The Brothers Karamazov*)

In this paper I discuss certain basic features of masochism. Lise, as Dostoevsky has portrayed his character in the above passages, intentionally and willfully inflicts pain on herself and appears to want to suffer rather than to be happy. I argue that it is possible genuinely to want to suffer and that people may, at times, really not want to be happy. Thus I counter the widely held view that it is a truism that happiness is wanted and that pain and suffering are unwanted. I try to explain the nature of the oddity or abnormality in seeking pain rather than pleasure and to understand why someone might desire or 'need' to suffer.

When you think of what pain feels like it seems one cannot help but dislike the sensation or wish to be rid of it, and this may be one reason why philosophers sometimes think that it is a necessary truth that pain is disliked or unwanted. Visualize, for instance, the sensation you feel when your dentist unexpectedly catches a raw nerve as he is drilling a tooth. We see scarlet. A sensation that feels like this we seem compelled to dislike or to want to be rid of. "How could someone like or seek a sensation like that one," one wonders, "It feels so awful!"

Similarly, when you consider what a pleasant experience is like it also seems to be more than an accident that people want rather than avoid it. Think of the pleasant experience of eating a juicy, delicious steak or the agreeable experience of luxuriating in a warm, relaxing bath when tired. Such experiences are *nice*; one feels fine. "How could someone dislike or shun experiences that feel like this?", one might wonder.

The normal compulsion, when in pain, to hate or to wish to be rid of the sensation some philosophers treat as *logical necessity*. They say that "part of what we mean by calling a sensation a 'pain' is that it is unwanted". On this view, the idea of 'wanting pain' becomes a contradiction in terms. But this view locates the normal compulsion to shun pain in the wrong place. Pain has a distinctive feel to it, a feel which differs from, for example, the feel of a non-painful itch or a sensation of warmth. That pain feels the way it does is responsible for our disliking the sensation; by feeling the way it does a sensation of pain provokes aversion to it. However, there can be no *logical necessity* of wishing to be rid of a particular sensation. The attitude had toward a thing is separable from the thing itself; whenever a person wishes to be rid of something it must be logically possible to have the same thing without wishing to be rid of it. So too for the sensations we call 'pains'; it must be logically possible to have any of these sensations without having an aversion to it or a desire to be rid of it.

If a philosopher maintains that the word 'pain' entails 'being unwanted' it only follows that *if* a sensation is not unwanted it cannot be a 'pain'. It does not follow that there are sensations which *in fact* dispose all people normally to wish to be rid of them or to dislike them. But if you think of the sensations we call 'pains' and the way they feel, it is not simply that we would not call them 'pains' if people did not want to be rid of them; these sensations feel awful and they normally compel us to dislike them. The perplexity in masochism is how the masochist can desire and seek *these sensations* — the sensations which we non-masochists normally feel compelled to dislike and shun. The puzzle in the idea of desiring pain is not located at the linguistic level, being a contradiction in terms, but presents an empirical oddity, that of wanting something which has the power normally to stimulate an aversion for it.

The puzzle in understanding how someone could want pain is in understanding *why* he should do so, i.e., what *reason* he might have for wanting something so bad. Desiring pain has the same oddity as desiring to be castrated or wanting to be torn to bits by lions. One wonders, "What reason could one have for wanting things so bad? What good could one see in them?" Though perplexing, there is obviously no self-contradiction in the ideas of these other desires. The oddity is one of *rationality*, it seems that one could have no reason or grounds for wanting to be eaten by lions and consequently that such a desire is irrational or perverted. But notice, if a desire is merely irrational or sick to have, it certainly is logically possible to have. And if this were the oddity in desiring pain, there would be no contradiction in terms in 'desiring pain'.

In a similar way, the puzzle in *not* wanting pleasure or happiness is in what reason one could have for not wanting something so good. It feels nice to be pleased and to enjoy oneself; why would someone not want such good experiences? The oddity in not wanting pleasure or happiness parallels the oddity in not wanting other good things such as health, sound judgment, or sanity. What reason could someone have for not wanting to be healthy or sane?

An action of a rational creature becomes intelligible when we see the good he

sees in the act. Masochists often view their pain as deserved punishment, and this is a clue to their thinking. For there is good in being punished when one deserves it. Parents punish their children and the state its citizens because they see good in just punishment. Thus, his viewing pain as part of something good -- a deserved punishment -- is a thread of rationality in the masochist.

A deserved punishment is a mixture containing both good and bad. There is good in getting what one deserves even if what one deserves is something bad. Obviously, it is at least sometimes desirable that the wicked be punished. Yet punishment entails the infliction of something bad. We cannot punish people by inflicting good things on them. People can be punished with fines, restrictions on freedom, pain and suffering, or death. What these things have in common which enables them to serve as punishments is their being bad. Thus a desire to inflict pain on oneself as punishment parallels a desire to be captured and jailed or a desire to kill oneself as punishment. A desire to inflict pain on oneself as punishment is no more a contradiction in terms than is a desire to kill oneself as punishment.

A desire to punish oneself has the same logic as a desire to punish someone else. In either case one desires something bad but does so thinking of it as a desirable, just punishment. Consider a man who has committed a moral crime. As a soldier, he got carried away by the vindictive spirit of his corps and fired upon and killed the children of an enemy soldier. At a later date, when at home with his own family, the man might come to appreciate the scale of his transgression. That *he* should come to think that he deserves punishment and consequently come to desire to suffer pain for punishment is no less intelligible than that *another person* would come to desire that he suffer pain as punishment. That the ex-soldier should come to desire to suffer pain as expiation of moral guilt is not only intelligible but is reasonable and perhaps desirable. That *he* should take satisfaction in being punished with pain is no odder than that someone else would take satisfaction in his being punished. Both do so because they think he deserves punishment.

Though he desires to suffer, this ex-soldier is too reasonable to be called 'masochistic'. Masochism entails some irrationality or abnormality. (It is uncomplimentary to call someone 'masochistic'.) The concept of masochism is like that of *sadism* in this respect. To desire and take satisfaction in another person's suffering pain is not sufficient for being 'sadistic'. One who would desire an Eichmann to be punished and take satisfaction in his suffering would not necessarily be 'sadistic' for doing so. Only if the victim in no way deserves punishment is this sadism. Indeed, a normal, honest mistake about another's culpability is not sufficient; one's judgement about the person's guilt must be fantastic or pathologically distorted before one is 'sadistic' for desiring and taking satisfaction in his punishment. Similarly, masochism is not merely desiring or taking satisfaction in one's own pain, but doing so when one does not deserve punishment. Again, the judgement of guilt must be wildly distorted before one is actually 'masochistic' in wanting and enjoying his own pain and punishment.

The same thinking that can lead someone to desire pain might lead him *not* to desire pleasure or happiness. We sometimes think that certain people do not deserve to have good things; we may do so when they have acted immorally. In such cases, we might desire that they *not* have good things such as wealth, happiness, or long life. As we sometimes think that *another* person does not deserve to be happy, people sometimes think that *they themselves* do not deserve to be happy. It was because she thinks of herself as 'wife' that Dostoevsky's Lise does not want to be happy. She thinks that she does not deserve happiness. As it is not a contradiction in terms that one not desire wealth or long life so it is not a contradiction in terms that one not desire happiness.

Philosophers who believe that pain is necessarily unwanted and that it is not possible to desire or like pain sometimes reason as follows: "The masochist suffers guilt feelings. Pain relieves the feeling of guilt and brings satisfaction. The masochist seeks or tolerates pain solely as a means to an end, namely, satisfaction and relief from guilt feelings. But though he seeks pain he does not want or like it. While suffering he hates and wants to be rid of the pain as much as anyone else does."

Of course people normally want to be rid of unpleasantness, and this is also true when the unpleasantness is that of feeling guilt. However, by admitting that a masochist may be spurred on to punish himself by the hope of relieving an unpleasant feeling it does not follow that he has no positive desire to punish himself but has only a desire to relieve his discomfort. It would be as natural to conclude that he does want to be punished and that relief from the unpleasant feeling is one of his reasons for doing so.

The satisfaction a person might foresee from punishing himself need have no greater role in motivation than would the satisfaction one might foresee from punishing someone else. The husband who shoots his wife's lover may be spurred on by his distress over the man's intimacies, and may expect satisfaction from seeing the man's potency bleeding out, but few philosophers would conclude from this that he has no positive wish to hurt this intruder but has only a desire for his own satisfaction. Rather, most philosophers would conclude that he does want to punish the man, and that perhaps his own satisfaction is one of his reasons for doing so. I see no reason for taking a different position on a person's punishing *himself*. From the fact that the masochist expects satisfaction from punishing himself we need not conclude that he does not desire the pain; we should conclude that he does desire it and that the satisfaction he expects is perhaps one of his reasons for doing so.

Admittedly, a Psychological Hedonist might hold that even when punishing another person, it really is only one's own pleasure, and not the other's punishment, which one wants. But few philosophers today accept Psychological Hedonism, and there is no more reason for insisting upon the hedonist account for someone inflicting pain on himself than for someone inflicting pain on someone else. People do not always gain pleasure from inflicting pain — either on others or on themselves. The jealous husband who feels pleased upon beating up his wife's lover

would not feel equally satisfied beating up a man off the street or a neighbor's dog instead. That he thinks the victim deserves punishment is not incidental. The act pleases him *just because* he thinks the man deserves punishment and he approves and desires the man's being punished. If he did not desire and approve it the punishment would not please him. Similarly, it is *just because* the masochist wants pain and punishment that it can please him. If he did not want and approve the pain, it would not please him.

That the masochist wants to lessen or be rid of the unpleasantness of guilt shows that he does not desire and seek *all* unpleasantness. However, there is *some* pain and unpleasantness which the masochist does want, namely, that which he deliberately inflicts. At the moment when Lise is slamming the door on her finger she is desiring *that pain*. Though there may be some pleasure and happiness which she does desire, namely, that which she feels upon punishing herself, there is also some pleasure and happiness which she does not desire. She thinks that she does not deserve happiness, and this is what leads her to say that she wants to be married, 'torn to pieces', betrayed, and deserted, and that she does not want to be happy. Though there is some satisfaction which she might desire, she is not at this time wanting her future to be generally happy. In Lise we have a counter-example to the claim that it is a truism that pleasure and happiness are wanted and pain and unhappiness unwanted.

Philosophers sometimes think of the masochist simply as a calculating hedonist, undergoing pain solely for the pleasure it brings. They think of the masochist as no more irrational than someone undergoing pain at the dentist's, where he too views the pain solely as a means to an end. As will be clear by now, this picture is oversimplified. Though there may be strains of reason in masochism, the concept of masochism *entails* irrationality and abnormality. You or I do not normally find pain satisfying: how is it that the masochist is able to find it satisfying? Pain can please someone only if he already has a special attitude toward it; only when someone has some prior 'need', desire, and approval of pain can it please him. The masochist's 'need' or desire is irrational. A peculiar outlook on pain is entailed by 'masochism'. If one had a good reason for wanting to suffer, he would *ipso facto* not be 'masochistic' in inflicting pain on himself. The masochist may desire pain through an obsession with personal wickedness, a persisting, unfounded guilt feeling. His lot is an irrational, unhappy one. Masochism is a perversion. Though there may be reason in this madness, in it there is also unreason.