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Liking That It Hurts: The Case of the Masochist and Second-Order Desire Accounts of Pain's Unpleasantness

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Abstract: Recent work on pain focuses on the question ‘what makes pains unpleasant’. Second-order desire views claim that the unpleasantness of pain consists in a second-order intrinsic desire that the *pain experience itself* cease or stop. This paper considers a significant objection to Second-order desire views by considering the case of the masochist. It is argued that various ways in which the Second-order desire view might try to account for the case of the masochist encounter problems. The conclusion is that until there is a convincing explanation of how Second-order desire views can handle masochistic psychology, theorists should look elsewhere for an account of pains unpleasantness.

Introduction

Pains, as experienced by normal subjects, are unpleasant – they hurt.¹ Recent work on pain focuses on the question ‘what makes pains unpleasant’, or better, for those pains that are unpleasant, in what their unpleasantness consists. Second-order desire views (SOD views hereafter) claim that the unpleasantness of pain consists in a second-order intrinsic desire that the *pain experience itself* cease or stop.² This view principally contrasts with two *first-order* views. In the first instance, SOD views contrast with first-order desire accounts, whereby pain’s unpleasantness consists in a first-order intrinsic desire that the *object of the experience* cease or stop (say that some bodily state or disturbance, which the experience represents, should immediately cease).³ SOD views also contrast with Evaluativism, according to which pain experiences represent the relevant bodily state or

disturbance as *bad-for-you*. It is their having this evaluative content that makes them unpleasant, rather than the presence of any conative attitude, whether directed at the intentional object of the pain experience or the experience itself.⁴ There are, further to this, various alternative accounts of pain's unpleasantness. For example, certain kinds of functionalist views seek to explain pain's unpleasantness (at least partly) in terms of its causal role.⁵ And finally, Imperativist views – according to which pains have imperative content in the form of action-commands – explain pain's unpleasantness by appeal to that imperativist content.⁶

The critical discussion of SOD views has primarily focused on whether it provides a compelling response to a Euthyphro dilemma. *Prima facie*, SOD views struggle to capture the causal intuition motivating the following statement: we want our pains to stop because they are unpleasant, such that their unpleasantness comes first, and our desire that they stop is arguably a response to that.⁷ While this objection raises a challenge to SOD views, this paper surveys a different objection by considering the case of the masochist. The first section of the paper frames SOD views in more detail. The second discusses masochistic psychology and explains why it undermines SOD views of pain's unpleasantness, the third considers responses from SOD views and shows why they are unsuccessful.

1. Second-Order Desire Views

SOD views account for the unpleasantness of pain experiences in terms of a second-order intrinsic desire that the pain *experience itself* cease or stop, where the pain experience could be a (first-order) representation of bodily damage or disturbance. To capture the unpleasantness of paradigmatic pains, we would, therefore, need to understand them as involving second-order conative intentionality. Also, note the caveat 'intrinsic'. Extrinsic desires are desires for objects (or states of affairs) not for their own sake but for their

propensity to secure something else one desires. For example, if a subject has only an extrinsic desire for tax rises on the wealthy, then they do not desire that for its own sake, but, say, for the propensity of such tax rises to alleviate wealth inequality. Contrastingly, an intrinsic desire for such tax rises desires them for their own sake, as something desirable in and of itself, as we might put it, and so regardless of any instrumental consequences of the relevant state of affairs obtaining. The claim of the SOD view is, therefore, that subjects desire not to have pain experiences, or want them to (immediately) cease, *per se*, so for their own sake, that is regardless of their propensity to bring about other states of affairs they may want not to obtain (e.g., putative bad consequences of painful experiences). So, it is the *subjective desire-frustration* attendant to having a pain experience one intrinsically desires not to have, or wants to immediately cease, that on this view constitutes pain's unpleasantness.

Consider how the views plays out in the following example. Say I have just stubbed my toe on the corner of the bed, having badly damaged the toe nail, and I am undergoing an unpleasant pain. On the SOD view, the unpleasantness of the pain experience I am undergoing is to be explained in terms of the *subjective desire-frustration* attendant to having an experience, in this case the sensory experience resultant on having stubbed my toe on the corner of the bed, that I *intrinsically* desire not to have, or want to immediately cease.

Let us also note that SOD views need not be committed to an implausible *propositionalism* about unpleasant pain experiences. Many philosophers think of desires as conceptually structured propositional attitudes, and it is implausible that desires in that sense are constitutive of paradigmatic unpleasant pains. For example, it is plausible that non-human animals and human infants undergo unpleasant pains but do not possess the cognitive sophistication to entertain conceptually structured propositional attitudes. However, if desires in that sense were a requirement on pain's unpleasantness then SOD views either have to give up the claim that non-human animals and human infants have

unpleasant pains, or attribute them a cognitive sophistication beyond their ken. The better route is to appeal to a *conative (desire-like) attitude*. In what follows, we can continue to talk in terms of desires, but we should keep in mind that such talk need not refer to conceptually structured propositional attitudes, but a simpler or more basic kind of conative attitude. Let us now consider the *case of the masochist* and the problems this creates for SOD views.

2. The Case of the Masochist

Whatever else is true of the psychology of masochists, in specific (usually) sexual contexts they seek out certain kinds of pains and, within those contexts, are fairly described as lacking *some* kind of desire for the pain experience to cease (as we shall see the precise character of the desires in play is contestable). Context caveats are essential since masochists do not seek out unpleasant pains *per se*.⁸ In this section I want to be clear that I am considering what we might call a ‘thin conception of masochism’ whose defining feature is *some* desire for the continuation of the pain experience, exemplified most obviously in the classical case of sexual masochism (I won’t comment on whether the analysis extends to activities like extreme sports, eating hot food, watching horror movies etc.).⁹

Let’s start by sketching the relevant aspect of the ‘perverse’ psychology of the kind of masochist that will occupy us here. Part of the purported perversity of the masochist, and their relation to the sadist (who typically inflicts the pain), is a desire for the continuation of an experience (namely, pain) which for psychological reasons needs to be *phenomenally unpleasant*. This is because if the pain inflicted on the masochist by the sadist (or by themselves) did not have phenomenal unpleasantness ‘built-in’ it could not support their pursuit of a kind of perversity. Reflecting this, the sadist would get no joy inflicting pains on pain asymbolics for whom such experiences are not unpleasant; sadists

want to inflict, and masochists want to be the recipients of, pains that are unpleasant (at least to some extent) – they in some sense want *pains that hurt*.

This is borne out in the following considerations. If one were to ask a masochist ‘why do you like it [the inflicted pain]’, they would not respond ‘because it doesn’t hurt’ or ‘it is actually quite pleasant’. Instead, they are likely to respond ‘I like it because it hurts’ or ‘I like that it hurts’ – call this the *masochist’s mantra*. Unless we have strong reasons to suspect insincerity, we should take the *masochist’s mantra* at face value, although as we shall see, it requires further clarification. Further to this, the masochist would surely be indifferent to pains which did not hurt (that were not unpleasant), and they might ask the sadist to dial up the pain until it did. As Colin Klein puts it, in discussing masochistic psychology, ‘people actually seek out the painful experience as such, and often seem to think that it would be diminished without the pain. This is most obvious in the case of SEXUAL MASOCHISM. Some people pay sex workers to whip them; this is a specialized service, and so costs more than simply paying for sex would’.¹⁰ These considerations show that SOD views cannot explain such cases by claiming that the masochist lacks the relevant unpleasant-constituting intrinsic second-order desire, but this is fine because they enjoy pain, where this is understood as claiming that their pains are not unpleasant for them.

From this analysis, we can formulate the following premises.

- (1) It is an essential part of the perversity of masochistic psychology that masochists desire the continuation of an experience which is phenomenally unpleasant.¹¹
- (2) If (1) is true, then masochistic pain experience needs to be sufficiently similar to that of normal subjects *qua* phenomenal unpleasantness to satisfy the perverse psychology of enjoying pain.

We can supplement (1) and (2) with additional premises, which generates an argument against SOD views.

- (3) The masochist lacks a second-order desire directed at the pain experience, namely that it should cease.
 - (4) If (3) is true, the pain experience of the masochist *cannot* be unpleasant according to SOD views – since what constitutes the unpleasantness of pains on that view is a second-order desire that the pain experience cease.
 - (5) However, if 1 and 2, and 3 and 4, are true, we have inconsistent sets. The pain experience needs to be unpleasant for our psychological characterization of masochism to go through (1 and 2), but the relevant unpleasantness-constituting second-order desire is absent (3 and 4).
- (C) So, the SOD analysis of pain’s unpleasantness is false.

3. Responses from SOD views

How might SOD views respond? Let me note a first response from the SOD theorists the prospects for which are arguably poor. It may be claimed we should just posit that masochists undergo pains that are both pleasant and unpleasant in different respects, such that (on the SOD view) they have conflicting conative attitudes to the relevant different aspects of pain experiences. The SOD analysis would be as follows: they simultaneously have *both* an intrinsic desire that the pain experience cease (which accounts for the phenomenal unpleasantness) and an intrinsic desire that the pain experience continue (which accounts for the phenomenal pleasantness). However, can a

pain experience, specifically, be *simultaneously* phenomenally pleasant and unpleasant? Even if we think this is a possibility insofar as the relevant different desires are directed as *different aspects* of the experience,¹² a further problem is we run up against (1), which told us that it is an essential part of the *perversity* of masochistic psychology that masochists desire the continuation of an experience which is phenomenally unpleasant. However, masochists would, on this picture, be perfectly rational in intrinsically desiring the continuation some relevant part of experience (a desire which constitutes its being phenomenally pleasant) and intrinsically desiring the cessation some *other* relevant part of the experience (a desire which constitutes its being phenomenally unpleasant). Put otherwise; this analysis turns masochistic psychology into an everyday case of *conflicting desire*, where it is rational to desire X under aspect Y, and so for A-reasons, and desire not-X, under Z-aspect, and so for B-reasons. But surely – so the thought goes – we credit masochistic psychology with being more ‘perverse’ or ‘irrational’ than this implies.¹³ Finally, arguably a further problem with this response to the above argument is that a ‘second-order desire for the *pain* experience to continue, which as such constitutes its phenomenal pleasantness’ is self-contradictory on the SOD analysis insofar as it would no longer count as a *pain*: an intrinsic desire for an experience to continue is what, on SOD analyses, makes the relevant experience *phenomenally pleasant*, and we surely lose our grip on the sense of what we are talking about if we admit of *phenomenally pleasant* pains, even *phenomenally pleasant* parts of pains. Arguably, we would not then be able talk of ‘masochist pains’, but rather of a proprietary experience, enjoyed by masochists, which is both phenomenally pleasant and unpleasant. But then (2) is false: masochistic pain experience would *not be* sufficiently similar to that of normal subjects *qua* phenomenal unpleasantness to satisfy the perverse psychology of enjoying pain. So, given these problems I don’t think the above response is the best route for the SOD view to take.

Here is a more promising (though I argue ultimately unsuccessful) response to the argument of section 2, drawing on the distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic desires. The second-order desire that the masochist has when they claim to ‘enjoy pain’ is not the appropriate second-order desire that explains the negative character of pain, and neither does it contradict it. In wanting unpleasant pains, the masochist wants pains that in a different respect they also do not want. They have a *higher-order* extrinsic desire to be in a situation where they have a pain experience that is the target of an intrinsic desire that the experience stop (the latter being the appropriate second-order desire that explains the negative character of pain). In this sense, we can explain the perversity of masochistic psychology in terms of their *extrinsically wanting* an unpleasant experience, and this is no counter-example to SOD views.

In terms of our argument, SOD views could accept an amended version of (1), keeping (2) as it is, where (1*) would read ‘it is an essential part of the perversity of masochistic psychology that masochists have an extrinsic desire for the continuation of an experience which needs to be phenomenally unpleasant’. However, SOD views would reject (3) and (4). On their view, the masochist does not lack an intrinsic desire directed at the pain experience, namely that it should cease – in fact, they (putatively) share with normal subjects the possession of that intrinsic desire. What, however, the masochist possesses, that normal subjects do not, is an extrinsic desire that the unpleasant pain experience should continue. As such, to repeat, their possession of this extrinsic desire has no bearing on the supposed unpleasant-constituting second-order intrinsic desire they also have, which is directed at the pain experience itself.

Importantly, this response clarifies what would be a successful counter-example to SOD views. What is required is a case where a *subject intrinsically desires the continuation of an unpleasant experience*. If SOD views of pain’s unpleasantness are correct, then such a case should be psychologically impossible. In what follows I show we have good reason to

think such a case is found in a proper description of at least some cases of masochistic psychology.

We can first say more about the relevant extrinsic desire posited above by SOD views. In this case, the masochists higher-order extrinsic desire is for the continuation of the unpleasant pain experience (where that is understood along SOD lines). They, therefore, seek that state of affairs not for its own sake, but for the sake of securing something else they desire. We should ask, however, what instrumental effects of the continuation of unpleasant pain experience are relevant. Perhaps an appeal could be made to the gratification of the sadist who inflicts the pain. Alternatively, we might appeal to a cognitive enjoyment attendant to not succumbing to that immediate ‘message’ from their body that ‘what is going on’ (the pain experience) needs to immediately cease. What they extrinsically desire would, therefore, be a kind of deferred higher-order gratification. However, regardless of whether any such instrumental considerations are an essential part of masochistic psychology – and it is arguably possible to imagine cases in which they are absent – there are considerations which show that at least some masochists can be described as intrinsically desiring the continuation of an unpleasant experience.

Remember, the *masochist's mantra* that they *like that it hurts, or like it because it hurts*. This mantra can't easily be made sense of – or at least can't be given a face-value reading – on the view according to which the difference between masochistic and non-masochistic psychology *qua* conative attitudes to pain is best explained in terms of the former having that higher-order extrinsic desire for the continuation of an unpleasant pain experience, whereas normal subjects lack it. This is because *prima facie* such statements suggest that the desire for the continuation of unpleasant pain is not merely a matter of having some such extrinsic desire, understood to mean that unpleasant pains, for masochists, are *exclusively* ‘suffered through’ for the sake of further ends (as means to further desired ends). Instead, the mantra of *liking that it hurts* suggests that for certain masochists at least,

the hurting – the unpleasant pain experience – is at least partly desired as an end in itself (perhaps along with the relevant higher-order extrinsic desires). In other words, on one face-value reading of liking that it hurts, the buck stops with the hurting, rather than anything for which it is suffered.¹⁴

The above analysis is reflected in the following considerations. SOD views of masochistic psychology arguably turn those who extrinsically desire the continuation of unpleasant pains into would-be-masochists. Consider the following case. As I sit in the dentist's chair, the drill hits the nerve ending of my root canal, and as a result, I undergo agonizing pain. Nevertheless, I am prepared to suffer through it, and extrinsically desire to be in that state, insofar as I desire a state of affairs, my dental health, for the sake of which I am willing to undergo unpleasant pain. However, I do not like that it hurts under any reasonable description. Nonetheless, my psychology is accurately characterized as involving a higher-order extrinsic desire to be in a situation where I have a pain experience that is the target of an intrinsic desire that the experience stop. Now, it runs afoul of common-sense intuitions about the psychological differences between non-masochists who suffer through their pains (as necessary evils) and masochists, who sincerely claim to like that it hurts, to have them both be explained by structurally similar mental economies, involving similar extrinsic desires. This is what the response we are considering from SOD views results in, and in doing so, it undercuts the perversity of masochistic psychology in making it structurally similar to that of individuals who willingly suffer through unpleasant pains for instrumental reasons.

The SOD theorist might respond by highlighting that they are not necessarily committed to the claim that the extrinsic desire for the continuation of an unpleasant pain experience is *all there is* to masochist psychology. Perhaps what additionally makes masochistic psychology 'perverse' has something to do with the atypicality of the relevant desires, for example, desires to be submissive, or to feel humiliation. If so, then arguably

the dental case considered above fails to qualify as a case of masochism because it fails to satisfy these other essential components for masochism or masochist psychology. This is fair response, although the SOD theorist would then need to specify what it takes these essential components to be, and indeed whether an appeal to a higher-order extrinsic desire is necessary once they are in play. Remember though, the challenge for the SOD theorist as considered here is to explain the sense in which masochists *like that it hurts*, and in some sense, desire the continuation of the pain experience; and it is in that context that appeal was made to higher-order extrinsic desire as a fair candidate to be what *principally* explains masochistic psychology.

We can develop the current line of thought further by highlighting the contrast between the rationality of non-masochistic psychology vs the irrationality of masochistic psychology *qua* conative attitudes towards pain experiences. There is strictly speaking nothing irrational or ‘perverse’ in extrinsically desiring to be in unpleasant pain, as should be evident from the dentist example above. If, however, masochistic psychology was modelled after these kinds of cases it would, likewise, hardly be irrational or perverse. Of course, we might contest whether the instrumental reasons for which masochists suffer through their pains (on such a view), whatever precisely they might be, are normative reasons, that is the kind of reasons for which one *should* suffer through pains. Presumably, we would be tempted to think that dental health is such a normative reason, and that satisfying sadists is not. However, such issues seem downstream, or at least somewhat removed, from that immediate response we have to the *masochist’s mantra*. In being told by the masochist that they ‘like that it hurts’ we are likely to think they have fallen prey to a more basic form of perversity or irrationality than merely having, for whatever reason, ended up with a somewhat atypical set of higher-order extrinsic desires towards pain experiences.¹⁵

If these points are persuasive, then we might opt for an alternative explanation of the *masochist's mantra* which does not appeal to an extrinsic desire (or at least not principally). What arguably more neatly explains the relevant psychology (and psychological difference) is that at least some masochists have an intrinsic desire for the continuation of an unpleasant experience – at least some masochists desire to be in unpleasant pain for its own sake. However, such an explanation of masochistic psychology, as a purportedly psychologically real phenomenon, is fatal to the SOD view since it forces us to look elsewhere for an account of pain's unpleasantness.

Let me finally note a potential option of last resort. It might be claimed that masochistic psychology is best explained by positing a *third-order* intrinsic desire directed at my second-order desire. Masochists would intrinsically desire (i.e., for its own sake) the continuation of a second-order intrinsic desire that the pain experience should stop. Masochists would have conative-attitudes towards their conative attitudes towards experiences. One problem with this kind of view would be the level of conative complexity it attributes to masochistic subjects, whose masochistic psychology is explained at two *intentional steps* away from sensory component of pain experience, it is *not* to be explained by way of desire towards a specific bodily object or state of affairs (first order desire), *nor* by way of desire towards an experience of <a specific bodily object or state of affairs> (second order desire), but in terms of a desire towards a [desire towards an experience of <a specific bodily object or state of affairs>]. On this analysis, the relevant *liking* in 'liking that it hurts' would be an intrinsic desire for the continuation of an intrinsic desire for the cessation of a pain experience (put otherwise, masochists would not really *like that it hurts*, but would *like that they don't like that it hurts*). At this level of remove from experience itself, we end up with a picture of masochistic psychology that is cognitively complex, and insofar as we associate masochism with forms of sexual

and bodily activity this seems too cognitive a reading (the relevant ‘liking’ phenomenology would be cognitive phenomenology, as an attitude towards an attitude).

While these are complex issues, and I do not claim to have settled the matter decisively here, the case of masochistic psychology poses significant problems for SOD views. So, until we have a convincing explanation about how to handle such cases on SOD views we should look elsewhere for an account of pains unpleasantness.

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Notes

¹ The ‘normal’ caveat is sensitive to experiential states reported as pains by pain asymbolics, which lack, or have severely reduced, unpleasantness – crudely put, asymbolics’ pains do not hurt (see Grahek 2007 and Bain 2014, p.305-20 for discussion).

² See Armstrong 1962; Brady 2015; *forthcoming*; Heathwood 2007: 23-44. Aspects of this view are found in Tye 1995, p. 111-6 and 1997, p. 332-3, although he has since changed his mind (see Tye 2005, p.99-120).

³ See Aydede 2014, p. 119-33; Jacobson 2018, p. 1-27.

⁴ See Tye 2005, p. 107; Tye and Cutter 2011, p. 91; Helm 2002, p. 22; Bain: 2017a, p. 464 and 2013, p. 87.

⁵ See Aydede and Fulkerson 2019, p. 27-59.

⁶ See Martinez 2011; Klein 2015; cf. Bain 2017a, p. 462-490 for criticism.

⁷ See Bain 2013, p. 80-81 and Brady 2015, p. 410-3 for discussion.

⁸ See Stoller 1991.

⁹ See Klein 2014, p. 41-55 for discussion of a wider range of cases.

¹⁰ Klein 2014, p. 44.

¹¹ Clark 2005, p.197n11, suggests something similar. From this, it also follows that for SOD views the masochist's psychology cannot be characterized in terms of just having an intrinsic desire that their experience of pain continue. Since, given the SOD view, and given that characterization of the masochist's psychology, the masochist's pain experience *would not be unpleasant*.

¹² One might here combine SOD views and Klein's (2014) view on masochist pleasure: the pleasant quality of the pain experience would be cashed out as an intrinsic desire directed at the 'the penumbral quality' of pains where the latter is a second-order property of the first-order quality of painfulness.

¹³ Klein 2014, p. 45 notes a related worry with these kinds of accounts: 'In general, it can't be sufficient for masochistic pleasure for a painful experience to be embedded in a pleasant experience (even necessarily or constitutively). That sort of embedding is relatively common. Most of our pleasures are admixed with some pains, and we often wouldn't trade those token experiences for other similar ones. But masochistic pleasures themselves are relatively rare, more rare than such scenarios.'

¹⁴ Klein (2014, p. 44) comes close to this point, and the *masochist's mantra*, when he writes that 'masochistic pleasures are pleasant in virtue of the pain, not merely in spite of it'.

¹⁵ To bolster the intuition: is a non-masochist who gets 'painful' massages to help alleviate back pain ever likely to say "I like it because it hurts"? Or are they rather more likely to say "It hurts, but it's good for me" "It hurts at the time, but feels better afterwards", "I suffer through it because it is good for my back", suggesting they *extrinsically* like or desire the pain, in contrast to 'liking that it hurts', which I have suggested points us more squarely in the direction of *intrinsically* liking the pain.

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