

# The Penumbra Theory of Masochistic Pleasure

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**Abstract** Being whipped, getting a deep-tissue massage, eating hot chili peppers, running marathons, and getting tattooed are all painful. Sometimes they are also pleasant—or so many people claim. Masochistic pleasure consists in finding such experiences pleasant in addition to, and because of, the pain. Masochistic pleasure presents a philosophical puzzle. Pains hurt, they feel bad, and are aversive. Pleasures do the opposite. Thus many assume that the idea of a pleasant pain is downright unintelligible. I disagree. I claim that cases of pleasant pains are more common than many philosophers suppose, and that they have no essential connection to either sex or psychopathology. I review several attempts to account for masochism that preserve the intuition that nothing can be both pleasant and painful at once. These account for some, but not all, cases of masochism. The stubborn remainder, I argue, are sensations that are genuinely pleasant and painful at once. I give an account of how that might be, focusing on boundary-pushing aspects of masochistic pleasure that have been largely overlooked in the literature. I show how, properly understood, pain and pleasure can coexist—and also why it is very rare for them to actually do so.

## 1 Masochistic Pleasures

### 1.1 The Cases

Most pains are simply unpleasant. Most pleasant experiences aren't painful. The neat division sometimes breaks down, though. Some people have painful experiences that they nevertheless find pleasant, and find pleasant in part *because* the experience involves a certain kind of pain. Call these *masochistic pleasures*.

Masochistic pleasures come in a variety of forms, and range over several different categories of mental state. The paradigmatic ones involve bodily pains. Others involve emotional states. In his wonderful discussion of anger in the *Rhetoric*, Aristotle defines

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it as “. . . an impulse, accompanied by pain, to conspicuous revenge for a conspicuous slight. . .” (*Rhetoric* 1378a31). Yet he also notes that Anger is also “attended by a certain pleasure” (1378b1). Why? Because when you dwell on anger, you also dwell on the revenge that you will get, and that’s pretty great to think about. That is why anger is “sweeter by far than the honeycomb dripping with sweetness, and spreads through the hearts of men.” Anger has a similar structure, I think, to sensory masochistic pleasures: we find an emotion that is painful, but by dwelling on it one gets a certain kind of pleasure as well. And in his excellent paper “Horror and Hedonic Ambivalence,” Matt Strohl (continuing a theme from Hume) notes that many people like gruesome horror movies in part *because* they shock, scare, disgust, and horrify [Strohl, 2012].

Here is a (non-exhaustive) typology of masochistic pleasures:

LOOSE TOOTH Wiggling a loose tooth (getting a deep-tissue massage, pressing on a bruise, stroking a sunburn. . .)

AGGRESSIVE VICTUALS Eating a plate of hot chilies (drinking high-proof whiskey. . .)

HARDCORE SPORTS Running a marathon (powerlifting. . .)

BODY MODIFICATION Getting a tattoo (piercing. . .)

CLASSICAL MASOCHISM Being whipped (beaten, trampled, . . .) in a sexual context.

SLAP & TICKLE MASOCHISM Spanking (hair-pulling, biting, scratching. . .) during sex.

ASEXUAL MASOCHISM Being whipped (beaten, trampled, . . .) in a *non*-sexual context.

OBSESSIVE ANGER Pleasantly dwelling on one’s anger (jealousy, . . .)

AESTHETIC AMBIVALENCE Taking pleasure in a scary (gory, tragic. . .) works of art.

This list is only a first pass, and includes some cases that I will later distinguish. You might balk at lumping all of these together; part of my job will be to convince you that they are different species of the same phenomenon. That said, I take it that the list is a useful first pass. In each case, we find people engaged in an activity that they sincerely claim is painful, and yet they also claim to find it pleasant. Further, there is good reason to think both avowals are true. The activity itself is unquestionably painful for people who *don’t* find it pleasant. That’s easy enough to confirm. Yet people don’t *just* claim to find that painful feeling pleasant—they also pursue it. That is usually good evidence that someone is being sincere about finding something pleasant. So we have good evidence that the masochistic pleasures are real.

Masochistic pleasures present several puzzles. They are at best rare: most sensations are either pleasant or painful (or neither). Few are both. So the unusual nature of masochistic pleasures makes them worthy of attention. Further, one might think that this rarity is not just a matter of chance but a deep philosophical fact. On many theories, pleasantness and painfulness positively exclude one another. Pleasures are good; we like them. Pains are bad; we dislike them. The particular theses vary, but many theories assume that some such pair is true and so that pleasantness and painfulness are by their very nature fundamentally opposed. Yet there are the masochistic pleasures. What do they show?<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The problem is also pressing for me for a more particular reason. I defend a theory of pain known as imperativism. On it pains are imperatives: they have content, but that content is a *command* rather than a representation. So the pain of a broken ankle is a command, with the content (very roughly) “Protect your ankle by keeping weight off of it!” I actually think many sensations are imperative. Most bodily sensations that promote behavioral homeostasis fall in this category: hunger is a command to eat, itches commands to scratch, and so on [Klein, 2007]. There is a superficial problem here: masochistic pleasures seem to involve motivation *not* to protect yourself from the painful thing you’re doing—in fact, you seem to be motivated to continue. I don’t think this is a deep problem. The masochist being whipped is still motivated

## 1.2 Motivating the Problem

Many authors have argued that there is no *real* problem of masochistic pleasures. I want to canvass a few arguments along those lines, and show why they are inadequate. That will also sharpen up the problem, and clarify the parameters of an acceptable solution. Note that many of these debunking explanations do account for *some* putative cases of masochistic pleasures. My claim is that they don't capture all of them.

If what's pleasant and what's painful are wholly distinct states, we don't have a real case of masochistic pleasure. Call these *debunking* explanations. Debunking explanations are most common with SEXUAL MASOCHISM: the line goes, crudely, what's painful is the whipping, what's pleasant is the sex, and there is no mystery in either case. However, a debunking explanation can take a variety of forms. Sometimes pain is merely *endured* for the sake of some pleasant thing. When Mucius Scaevola thrust his hand in the flame to intimidate the Etruscans, he felt pain. He put up with that pain for the sake of glory, which was something that he found pleasant. What he did wasn't pleasant: in fact, his demonstration was effective precisely *because* he was willing to do something so awful.<sup>2</sup> On a milder note I suspect that some—but not all—gym-goers and tattoo-acquirers merely put up with pain for the sake of something else that they desire.

Similarly, pain can be *used* to create some other, pleasant effect in virtue of some of its physiological properties. Some painful things release endorphins, and endorphins make you feel mildly euphoric. That's a pleasant sensation—one, however, that's distinct from the pains that caused it. There is also a nonspecific quantity of 'arousal' that seems to be partly transferrable between sensations. In a well-known study by Dutton and Aron, for example, subjects crossing a high rickety bridge were more likely to show evidence of sexual attraction to a female experimenter than were subjects crossing a low, stable bridge nearby. One explanation for this effect is that the arousal from fear is partly transferrable over to sexual desire.<sup>3</sup> Some apparent masochistic pleasures in ordinary sex life can probably be put down to this phenomenon.

Each of these debunking explanations captures a few of our cases. Many remain. LOOSE TOOTH-style cases in particular don't seem to be accounted for: there, the pain seems to be precisely what is sought. Further, in cases where pain is merely endured or used the subject is usually quite open to getting the goal without the pain. Whereas in cases of masochistic pleasures, 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. In general, I doubt any theory that posits two wholly distinct objects is going to handle most of our cases. That's because masochistic pleasures are pleasant *in virtue of* the

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in virtue of the pain to protect himself, though there might be other facts that prevent him from *acting* on that motivation (including the fact that he takes pleasure in the pain of being whipped). But there *is* a deep problem in the vicinity: roughly, it is unclear on the imperative account what to say about a broad class of sensations that are *painful*, but that can't be assimilated to the protective function of bodily pain. Masochistic pleasure is as good a place as any to sort these out.

<sup>2</sup> The story is recounted in Book 2 of Livy's *History of Rome*.

<sup>3</sup> See [Dutton and Aron, 1974]. The authors link the explanation of this effect to [Schachter and Singer, 1962]; I think Barrett's constructivist approach would produce a similar result [Barrett, 2006].

pain, not merely *in spite of it*. The connection between pain and pleasure appears to be tighter, and that's precisely what generates the problem.

A second category of explanations suggest that pleasure and pain qualify two different states of affairs that are not wholly distinct. Call these *contextual* explanations. In each case, one appeals to a larger context in which the pain is embedded, and argues that what is pleasant is the larger context. One might claim, for example, that the pain is a necessary *constituent* of a context that is pleasant. The marathon runner feels pain. Feeling pain is a necessary part of running a marathon, and he finds running a marathon pleasant. Contexts in this sense are simply facts about the world. It is no surprise that contexts might have a compositional structure, and so that a pleasant context might be partially constituted by a painful one. Masochistic pleasures, this line goes, just are cases where that has occurred .

Unlike debunking accounts, the contextual account has a story about why the marathon runner doesn't just take a cab: the thing he finds pleasant is partially *constituted* by something he finds painful, and so the pain can't just be subtracted out. However, this simple contextualist story doesn't seem promising. LOOSE TOOTH-style cases don't seem to involve any further end. I often eat hot chilies on my own, just because I like the burn. ASEXUAL MASOCHISM appears to exist more or less for its own sake.<sup>4</sup> Contextual solutions also overgeneralize absent further constraints. I might like watching a movie at my favorite arty theatre even though the seats are uncomfortable. Painful seats are part of the grungy aesthetic, so I wouldn't want them gone. There I have a pleasant experience that has a painful experience as an ineliminable constituent, but I'm not feeling a masochistic pleasure. Masochistic pleasure demands not just that pain be a part of the larger context, but actually part of the *reason why* the larger context is pleasant.

Fred Feldman suggests a more abstract contextual strategy, arguing that what the masochist finds pleasant is just the fact that they are feeling a painful sensation ([Feldman, 2004] 90ff). *Why* they find this pleasant is left open by Feldman. But I take it that this is a kind of contextualist explanation: what is pleasant for the masochist is *the fact that they feel some sensation to be painful*. That fact is necessarily constituted by, but distinct from, the facts that make the sensation painful.

I have sympathy for Feldman's account, and it is superficially similar to the one I will ultimately propose. However, I think Feldman's solution still overgeneralizes. I might awake from an operation and feel pleased that my leg hurts—the other option was amputation, say, so if I feel pain I must still have a leg. But that is not to feel a masochistic pleasure. *Contra* Feldman, being pleased *that* I am having a painful sensation is not the same thing as taking pleasure *in* its painfulness. 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. An adequate theory should show both how masochistic pleasures can occur, and also why they don't occur more often. Doing so will in turn go some way to explaining the (incorrect) philosophical intuition that pleasure and pain exclude one another.

<sup>4</sup> Of course, one can always hypothesize a larger context: one might claim that the overarching goal in the case of loose teeth is the pleasure of adult teeth, or the end of pain, or whatever. Bearn correctly notes that these jury-rigged contexts would massively overgeneralize ([Bearn, 2013] 179).

That said, I think contextual accounts are on the right track. Whereas they claim that what's pleasant is some composite *state of the world*, I will argue that it is a composite *sensation*.<sup>5</sup> Only in such cases, I claim, is painfulness itself *felt as* pleasant, rather than merely being a part of some pleasing context.

### 1.3 The Plan

The goal of what follows will be to give an account of masochistic pleasures. Doing so requires answering two questions. First, one might ask *how* masochistic pleasures are possible. That is, one might ask for a philosophical story about pleasures and pains that accounts for masochistic pleasures. That might be a story that makes pleasures and pains compatible, or it might be a debunking explanation showing that the apparent incompatibility is misconceived. Second, one might ask just *what* is pleasant about the masochistic pleasures. This is an exercise in philosophically sensitive description. There is the class of masochistic pleasures. The goal is to say something about what they have in common and what differentiates them from other pleasures. That property, whatever it is, will be shared only at a relatively abstract level of description.

Most philosophers writing on masochistic pleasures have (understandably) focused on the how-question. I propose to begin with the what-question first. For one, it is an interesting question in its own right. For another, most answers to the how-question presuppose an answer to the what-question, and quite often the wrong answer. Sorting out the what-question will thus constrain acceptable answers to the how-question, and that in turn will be some advance towards an adequate theory of pleasures and pains. After telling a story about the what-question, I'll then step back and give an abstract characterization of masochistic pleasures that partly answers the how-question. I'll conclude with some general reflections about masochistic pleasure and its role in theorizing.

Before I begin, I want to make three important caveats.

First, I'm not interested in *masochism*. Talking about *masochism* or *masochists* makes it sound like the important distinction is between *people*: that is, between folks who like pain and folks who don't. I think that is unhelpful, for a number of reasons. Most importantly, I think it is false: many people feel masochistic pleasure at least occasionally. Most of us have had a pleasantly painful deep tissue massage, or felt the thrill of water that's just shy of unbearably hot or cold. Conversely, even people who self-identify as masochists don't like all kinds of pain—typically they like only very specific sorts of pain in very specific sorts of circumstances [Stoller, 1991]. So what masochists like is *particular* pains, not pain as such. Further, focus on 'masochists' quickly becomes a debate about who counts as a 'true' masochist. That debate is typically over ethics or sexual identity, rather than the philosophy of mind problem with which I'm concerned. In what follows I'll occasionally use the term 'masochist'—but this should be understood as shorthand for 'person who self-identifies as a sexual masochist.' That is a flexible category, but it does let me interface more easily with the literature on sexual masochism. Some, but not all, masochists in this sense feel masochistic pleasures—a nontrivial proportion engage in their practice for other reasons.

<sup>5</sup> On the notion of composite sensations, see also [Strohl, 2012]. I have qualms about Strohl's Aristotelian theory of pleasure and pain; briefly, I think there are numerous pleasures that don't arise from the optimal activation of a particular capacity. That said, I think the overall structure of his account is similar to mine, and very appealing.

Second, and along the same lines, I'm going to assume that most people have felt at least some of masochistic pleasures at some point in their lives. The first category on the list seems to be widely attested: when I give talks on pain I often get questions about the childhood pleasures of wiggling loose teeth and the adult pleasures of the deep-tissue massage. If masochistic pleasures are in fact widespread, then we ought to avoid explanations that treat them as manifestations of a pathology. Along related lines, there is no reason to think that the masochistic pleasures are especially associated with sex.<sup>6</sup> LOOSE TOOTH, AGGRESSIVE VICTUALS, and HARDCORE SPORTS certainly don't seem sexual in nature. Further, some self-identified asexuals enjoy various forms of traditional masochistic practices like whipping and spanking.<sup>7</sup>

Third and finally, I have used the masculine pronoun as the generic throughout. This is a deliberate choice. Among the many flaws of the literature on sexual masochism is the persistent assumption that women are essentially masochistic, or that masochism is rare among males. These assumptions have no basis in fact.<sup>8</sup> So I have preferred the choice of pronoun that doesn't inadvertently reinforce such stereotypes.

With those in mind, let's turn to the masochistic pleasures. What is pleasant about them?

## 2 Step One: The Penumbra Theory

### 2.1 Motivation

Here's the rough idea: each masochistic pleasure involves some sensation that is painful. What is pleasant is *the painfulness itself*. Since painfulness is rarely pleasant, we need an explanation of what is special about these cases. I think the answer lies in a particular features of token painful experiences.

As a warm-up consider the related phenomenon of *relief*. If you've been in severe pain for a while and it changes to a more tolerable level, you feel relieved. What explains your relief? Facts about your pain: that it has *subsided*. Relief comes, roughly, when you judge your pain is diminishing in intensity and is likely to keep doing so. This relies on a complex judgment that incorporates feelings about the pain's current intensity, memories about its past intensity, and beliefs about its likely future intensity.<sup>9</sup> You obviously don't feel relief in response to *all* pains. That's hardly a mystery. Not all pains have the right combination of features, and only those that do give rise to a feeling of relief.

I suggest that a similar story can be told for masochistic pleasures. What is found pleasant is a particular *quality* of the unpleasant sensations involved: that is, some feature of the sensation itself that distinguishes masochistic pleasures from the others. The goal of this section will be to spell out that quality.

<sup>6</sup> Absent some implausibly strong Freudianism which claims that more or less everything is infused with sexual meaning. But even if you like that sort of story, masochistic pleasures need not be *especially* associated with sex, at least any more than the pleasures of cooking or model train building.

<sup>7</sup> For both asexuality in general and discussions of asexual participation in traditional SM activities, see <http://www.asexuality.org/>.

<sup>8</sup> The latter is demonstrably false. Studies regularly show a higher rate of both masochistic fantasy and practice among men. See for example [Baumeister, 1989] p4ff.

<sup>9</sup> For a useful discussion of these factors, as well as for some practical application, see [Redelmeier et al., 2003].

## 2.2 Edges

For the strategy to work, I need some quality that might be plausibly felt as pleasant, and one that is rare enough that many instances of unpleasant sensations don't involve it. I have a candidate that I think is largely overlooked in philosophical accounts of masochistic pleasures, though it is quite common in first-personal accounts of sexual masochism.

To begin, consider LOOSE TOOTH cases. Wiggling a loose tooth is painful. It is not *so* painful, however. It could be worse. And if it got bad enough, you'd stop. Similarly with pressing bruises, stretching muscles, and so on. Further, the painfulness you feel in such cases isn't at some arbitrary level: typically, it is right on the edge of what you can bear.

That is why one finds a certain *fascination* at work in these cases. People don't push a loose tooth once and then stop. They keep returning, pushing right to the edge of what they can bear, and then backing off, sometimes going over, and in general making exploratory sallies right around the borderline where the sensation becomes too much. The repetition is not just because the sensation is pleasant (not all pleasant sensations produce this fascination). Chalking this up to mere pathological compulsion isn't plausible. And I don't think, *contra* Deleuze, that it has something to do with repetition itself [Deleuze, 1991]. Rather, I think the fascination is a product of the more general process of finding the edge of bearability.

That same structure—flirting around the edge of something that is nearly too much to bear—comes out in other masochistic pleasures as well. In AGGRESSIVE VICTUALS, the pleasant sorts of 'burn' are those that are intense but not quite too intense. Mere whiskey doesn't do it, nor merely spicy food—it has to be the high-proof or Sichuan stuff, respectively. Similarly so with HARDCORE SPORTS. I think there is a reason why you get reports of masochistic pleasure from marathon runners rather than, say, pickup basketball players. Most pain felt during exercise is merely painful; when there is pleasure in the pain it comes from really pushing your limits.

Finally, there is certainly this component in a lot of sexual masochism. Masochists frequently discuss the process of 'finding their edge' and 'pushing their limits.' Narratives of masochism talk about pain pushed so that they can hardly bear it, or of going just over the edge and pulling back over and over. In a popular manual on BDSM, the authors actually give instructions for how to appreciate masochistic pleasure if you're unfamiliar with it.

Find a way to give yourself a stinging or thudding sensation, one that doesn't damage your body. We want to focus on sensation, not injury. . . . Deliver each stroke at your Resilient Edge of Resistance, right at the place where the pain is enough to make you gasp, but not so intense that you withdraw from it completely. ([Taormino, 2012] p496).

Here, the point is quite clear: masochistic pleasure is found right on the edge of what you can take.

Indeed, there is often an explicit connection drawn between masochism and other edgy sorts of endeavors. Some sexual masochists draw a connection between enduring pain in sports contexts and sexual masochism. In her controversial memoir, ballet dancer and critic Toni Bentley says of the masochistic pleasure she takes in anal sex that

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It answers the call of my physical masochism. It re-creates the physical extremism of dancing, the discipline, the striving for perfection. It is my being in extremis. ([Bentley, 2006] 144)

Here, we have a direct link between sexual masochism and the sorts of edge-pushing discipline one finds in other bodily pursuits. Many authors have noted that masochists appear to get pleasure humiliation as well as bodily pain [Baumeister, 1989]. Humiliation is unpleasant, and like all unpleasant sensations it comes in degrees; I suspect the process of humiliating a masochist involves similarly finding that edge where humiliation is just shy of unbearable. Finally, discussions of sexual masochism often stress the importance of conversations beforehand talking about the masochists' limits, what they'd like to do, and so forth. This conversation plays an crucial role in establishing consent. But I suspect it also does something else: it lets the top know where those limits are, precisely because playing around them is part of the point.

I think this structure also handles the emotional varieties of masochistic pleasure. Jealous brooding over the whereabouts of an ex-lover has a similar quality to wiggling a loose tooth. Robert Hass' wonderful poem "Faint Music" details the jealous musings of a desperate man left by his lover. After laying out his intricate, painful scene the narrator envisions of his ex with a new lover, Hass says "And he, he would play that scene// once only, once and a half. . ." — an admission obviously false, as he has clearly run through this many times, and will again—suggesting a similar dwelling on pain. To return to Aristotle, worrying oneself over a slight and the rage it provokes has a similar structure: the combined feeling is one of being pushed away from one's current state (caused by the slight) and towards revenge (as a solution). Too much either way would be either demoralizing or energizing—it is only on that edge that one keeps going back to the slight and worrying it.

In sum, what appears to be common to, and probably distinctive of, cases of masochistic pleasure as such is this process of pushing a painful feeling just quite to the limits of unendurability. Call this the *penumbral* theory of masochism. Masochistic pleasure is possible in cases where pains are in the shadowy border just shy of being too much to bear. So we can elaborate the structure of masochistic pleasures a bit further: the masochist is in pain (or some other negative experience). Pain is painful. That pain is almost, but not quite, too much to bear. Having a pain that is almost, but not quite too much to bear is, under the right circumstances, pleasant. Hence the masochist finds one and the same thing—a pain—both painful and pleasant. He finds it pleasant and painful for different *reasons*: painful because it is a pain, pleasant because it is a pain with the right combination of qualities.

### 2.3 The Penumbral theory

I suggest that it is this feature—the penumbral quality—of pains that is found pleasant in cases of masochistic pleasure. I'll call a 'penumbral sensation' any token sensation (or other mental state) that is resting on that edge of unendurability.

Now, it would be nice for my account if all instances of flirting around the edge of unendurability were pleasant. That's not the case. I might, for example, soldier on at a grim historical museum, doling out the horrors just enough to advance my education.



I might even be quite aware that I'm on the edge of what I can take. This would be simply unpleasant, despite being near the edge of bearability.<sup>10</sup>

So there is a little more explaining to do about *why* and *when* some penumbral sensation is pleasant. The penumbral theory says that it is the awareness of being on the edge of unbearable that is itself pleasant. *That* aspect is tracked by pleasantness. It is found pleasant for some particular reason. That reason may not be accessible to the person who feels masochistic pleasure, but I think we can reconstruct several possibilities from those who are more reflective. Note that I am a pluralist about these reasons: there are many possibilities for *why* someone finds penumbral sensations pleasant. That said, I think the available reasons divide into a few broad (and non-exclusive) categories.

First, one can find being on a borderline pleasant because it is *novel* and novelty has a certain pleasure to it. This may be partly what is going on with children and loose teeth.<sup>11</sup> Children have to learn is to control their reactions to pain; finding the edge of unbearable might be pleasant precisely because it is a surprising and novel discovery. That novelty may wear off for most of us, though maybe not all. Many authors have remarked on the sheer variety and inventiveness of masochistic sexual practices. That suggests that some of the pleasure involved there may be traced back to a similar appreciation of novelty: keeping someone on the edge of bearability might be pleasant because it is done in a *new way* rather than the tired old ones.

Second, and I think probably commonly, there is a pleasure that comes from exercising self-control. That comes out clearly in the Bentley quote, and I think in many of the sports cases as well. By *deliberately* pushing up to the edge of bearability, one is also exercising the control necessary to stay on that edge. Your capacity for self-control in the particular case probably has to be something that you value about yourself. If you do, it is not surprising that you might take pleasure in exercising such control by being on that edge. It also shows why you need to be close to the edge for it to be pleasant. If the pain was too little, control wouldn't be necessary; if it was too much, control would be overwhelmed.<sup>12</sup>

Third, in the case of sexual masochism (both classic and slap-and-tickle sorts), I think that penumbral sensations can be pleasant for a variety of reasons. A lot of erotic life lies just on the edge of being swept away by uncontrollable feelings. So it's not a terrible surprise that standing on the edge of such a feeling (even a painful one) can be sexy. Further, penumbral sensations can be pleasant because they stand as unique signifiers of trust and intimacy. You are around the edge of what you can bear, and someone is making it so, and you trust them to keep it thus and no more. In refusing to pull back, in staying right on that edge, you're having a sensation that is born of a combination of desire (in the sexual sense, not the philosopher sense) and deep trust. Again, when you put it this way, it's not surprising that penumbral sensations can end up erotic.

I think the second and third reasons often combine together. Lovers often prolong their pleasure, holding off on getting to the good bits. That results in a certain amount

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<sup>10</sup> Not necessarily: I might, like Leontius, find some grim fascination in the corpses. But that is surely not necessary, and I take it that such a trip might be just unpleasant.

<sup>11</sup> Compare in this regard Hare's remark on children and giddiness, quoted in section 3.

<sup>12</sup> Note that there is also a well-known effect whereby self-control over the source and duration of painful stimuli diminishes felt intensity of pain [Thompson, 1981, Vancleef and Peters, 2011]. That is a distinct phenomenon, though one that (I suspect) interacts in complex ways with masochistic pleasures of this sort.

of pain from temporarily frustrated desire, but that sort of pain has a sweetness to it. The mixture of self-control and trust is, again unsurprisingly, quite pleasurable. Of course, some cases of sexual masochism may emphasize one over the other. I suspect, however, that what seem like pathological manifestations of sexual masochism do not involve a pathology of *sex* so much as a pathologically exaggerated sense of self-control or submission.<sup>13</sup>

Fourth, and finally, in some of these cases pushing your own boundaries helps you grow and change, and that feeling of growth and change is what is perceived as pleasant. Each time you replay a scene in your mind, one you can't control externally, you're pushed to control internally. And perhaps that is precisely the space where important sorts of narrative work go on. By reflecting on things at the edge of bearability, you slowly learn how to bear them. So what is pleasant there is the feeling of growing beyond patterns that you're trapped in: you're finding out that a slight or a loss that seemed unendurable is perhaps bearable after all.<sup>14</sup>

## 2.4 Contextualism *redux*

It is worth saying something about how my account differs from (and is preferable to) a contextualist theory. The contextualist, recall, said that what was pleasant was an overall context in which a painful experience was a constituent. The contextualist might appeal to the reasons I just cited to characterize what's pleasant about the overall context. What's pleasant, they might claim, is not the penumbral sensation but the overall context in which it occurs. That context is constituted by the reasons to which I just appealed.

In response, I suggest that this contextualist solution runs together the *object* of pleasure with the *reason why* we find that object pleasant. These ought to be kept distinct. I have a statue of a camel that I find particularly pleasing. There are many reasons why: its realistically defiant pose, the aesthetic harmony of the *sancai* glazing, and so on. Yet *what* I find pleasing is simply the statue itself. The point is not merely that I can appraise my statue without these reasons coming to mind (though that is also important). Rather, to say I find the reasons themselves pleasant is to over-intellectualize my experience. What I like is the statue, not my reasons. So too with masochistic pleasures. What is pleasant about wiggling a loose tooth is not novelty. It is the penumbral sensation itself, which is found pleasant *because* it is novel.

Because the penumbral theory separates the object of pleasure and the reasons for pleasure, it succeeds where contextualism faltered. On the one hand, we saw that contextualism had difficulty coming up with an appropriate larger context in cases like LOOSE TOOTH. The penumbral theory faces no such difficulty: it is penumbral sensations which are pleasant, not some larger context. These are always present in cases of masochistic pleasure, even when they don't constitute some further pleasing situation. Conversely, contextualism overgeneralized: there are situations constituted by painful

<sup>13</sup> Note that the DSM 5 no longer recognizes "atypical sexual interests" as pathological; to be diagnosed with a paraphilic disorder you must either feel "personal distress" about your desires or else desire things that are morally and legally problematic [American Psychiatric Association, 2013].

<sup>14</sup> See also Mollena Williams' contributions to [Taormino, 2012], which discusses this effect in the context of sexual masochism.

experiences and which we find pleasant, but that aren't instances of masochistic pleasure. The penumbral theory avoids this. Merely finding a larger context pleasant is not sufficient for masochistic pleasure. Masochistic pleasure requires that you find the penumbral sensation *itself* pleasant. That is not assured, even if the sensation is an essential component of a larger context.<sup>15</sup>

### 3 Step Two: The Structural Account

The Penumbral Account is meant to answer the what-question about masochistic pleasures. Suppose you're convinced. Then we can abstract away from the account a bit to say something about the how-question as well. Doing so will also add to the defense of the Penumbral Account, for those who aren't quite convinced yet.

Abstracted away to a structural core, the thesis is as follows. Masochistic pleasure occurs when:

1. There is a first-order state (or states) such as a bodily pain, which is
2. Felt as *painful*, and that quality of painfulness is further
3. Felt as *pleasant*.

To make this more concrete, suppose someone takes pleasure in being spanked. The current account says that there will be three distinct features that jointly characterize the experience. There is a first-order sensory state, the bodily pain, that arises from the spanking itself. That sensory state is *painful*. It hurts. That quality of painfulness is pleasant. The distinctive contribution of the penumbral account is to explain just when and why painfulness can be pleasant. As I've argued, it depends on a particular feature of the painfulness—namely, its penumbral quality—that is found pleasant for one of several reasons.

On this version of the story, what is pleasant is the painfulness of the first-order sensation, rather than the first-order sensation itself. I think this is preferable to a story on which both qualify the first-order negative state. It allows us to distinguish a related but distinct phenomena, what we might call *bittersweet pleasures*. Bittersweet pleasures involve situations that are mostly pleasant, but that very pleasure can be the cause of a kind of pain. I might, for example, feel pleasure watching my child graduate high school—but with that, a certain kind of pain because I know that this very pleasure will fade and diminish when he moves away from home. Masochistic pleasures involve a primary base of painfulness, with a certain attenuated pleasure on top; bittersweet pleasures involve the reverse. If pleasantness and painfulness both qualified the first-order sensation, masochistic and bittersweet pleasures would be indistinguishable, but they seem to be phenomenologically distinct.<sup>16</sup>

Masochistic pleasures both draw you on (because they're pleasant) and push you away (because they're unpleasant). Pushing you away and pulling you towards are both distinct causal roles. But now we can see why there is nothing problematic in principle about both going on at once. The causal relationships in virtue of which something is painful and in virtue of which it is pleasant can be exemplified in the very same composite sensation. There is no more a problem here, as far as the causal story goes, than there is in a single physical object both pulling you and pushing you at the

<sup>15</sup> Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for encouraging me to clarify this point.

<sup>16</sup> Thanks to Dave Chalmers and Jon Simon for pressing me on this point.

same time. In most cases (as with physical causation) one expects that the pleasant and painful will be such for *different reasons*. That is, the pushing and the pulling depend on different aspects of the sensation, and so obtain for distinct reasons. That is precisely what is going on in the case of masochistic pleasures.

The structural account does rely on a distinction between *pains*, which are bodily sensations, from *painfulness*, a quality shared by many different mental states. I think that is a distinction we ought to make. Bodily pains, I'll call them, are the sensations that are associated with threats to the physical integrity of the body—damage, potential damage, the need for recuperation, and so on.

In addition to pain, I claim, there is a distinct feeling of *painfulness*. Many sensations can be painful—they can *hurt*, if you like. Something can be painfully bright or painfully loud. Many sensations become too painful if intense enough—pressure, stretching, heat and cold (considered both as tactile sensations and the distinct sensations associated with core temperature), and so on. Other interoceptive bodily sensations can be painful too: you can be so hungry or tired that it hurts. Finally there are emotional pains: the pains of grief and heartbreak. In Aristotle's discussion of anger, 'pain' is a translation of the Greek *lupē*. As Cooper notes, *lupē* is applied both to ordinary bodily pains and painful emotional states (in both Aristotle and in non-philosophical Greek); it has a special connection to the anguish of grief in poetic contexts ([Cooper, 1996] 245). Painful emotions, I suspect, are the most telling case for the distinction between pain and painfulness: they have nothing to do with bodily pains, but share some obvious quality with them.

My claim is that there is a felt quality in common to each of these, and it is not the same felt quality as bodily pain. Of course, bodily pains are painful, and paradigmatically so: that's where the feeling gets its name, because the most common painful sensation by far is bodily pain. As RM Hare notes (in a slightly different context), that leads to a systematic ambiguity: we sometimes use 'pain' for bodily pain, sometimes for that shared quality [Hare, 1964]. If you're concerned about word choice, you can exchange painfulness for *hurt*: one can be so angry that it hurts, so hungry that it hurts, etc. Further, Hare claims—and I think this is right—that pains aren't *necessarily* painful.<sup>17</sup> As he puts it:

There are, in fact, small degrees of pain which are by no means disliked by everybody. Most people could draw the point of a needle rather gently across their skin (as in acupuncture) and say truthfully that they could distinctly feel pain, but that they did not dislike it. Some might say that they would rather be without it than with it; but that would apply to a great many sensations about which no philosopher, to my knowledge, takes the line that some do with pain. Most people would rather be without a feeling of giddiness (though children often induce it in themselves out of interest); but nobody says that no sense can be given to the sentence 'I feel giddy, but do not dislike it.' ([Hare, 1964] 97)

I think this is right. Many minor pains aren't really painful. The pains that precede unproblematic postural adjustment, for example, are recognizably pains but they don't *hurt*. They motivate you, that motivation proceeds without a hitch, and that further quality is either absent or severely diminished.

<sup>17</sup> Hare is directly addressing the question of whether one necessarily *dislikes* pain, but I read him as tracking the same distinction I want to make.

There is a similar story to be told about the pleasant. Many different things are pleasant. Conan found it pleasant to crush his enemies, to see them driven before him, and to hear the lamentations of their women. That pleasure qualifies three very different states—two distinct sensory modalities, and one more intellectual appreciation of the world. Of course, what is pleasant depends partly on context and what you value. For us non-barbarians, different things are pleasant: a hot bath, a kiss, a beautiful painting, or hard intellectual work. In the case of pleasure, I suspect we don't really have a word (as we do with pain) to mark a pure bodily sensation that is commonly pleasant. I think pleasures are too diverse and idiosyncratic for any particular one to get the honorific (though the slang expression 'orgasmic' is applied rather widely to very pleasurable sensations, and that might be a rough parallel).

Another way to put the same point is that there is some *reason*, in particular cases, why particular lower-order states are felt as pleasant or painful. The account I've given is neutral on what those reasons might be—whether they involve desire-satisfaction, for example, or judgment-as-good, or whatever. The appeal to reasons makes pleasantness and painfulness context-dependent, which seems true. As Helm notes, the very same touch can be pleasant or painful depending on what else is going on [Helm, 2002].

Summing up, here's the proposal: pleasantness and painfulness are feelings. They are feelings that take as their objects a wide variety of different mental states. Painfulness and pleasantness are therefore *higher-order* mental states. Further, as higher-order mental states, they seem to track some facts about the lower-order states that they attach to. I assume there is no deep mystery as to why bodily pains are felt as painful, so steps one and two of the structural story will be handled relatively easily. The penumbral account comes in at step 3: it explains why painfulness *of a certain kind* can be felt as pleasant. With that, we have a story about masochistic pleasures.

#### 4 Conclusion: Lessons about Pleasure and Pain

Masochistic pleasures seem odd because it is hard to imagine how one and the same sensation could be painful and pleasant. By separating out sensations (even pain) from qualities of painfulness and pleasantness, however, we find that there is nothing in the structure of either of those qualities that excludes the other. There are good reasons why they rarely coexist, of course, but it is not impossible. I suggested that the place where we often find them together is in the shadowy, penumbral area where a painful sensation is nearly unbearable. With the right sorts of motivations, however, one can find being on that edge pleasant. Masochistic pleasure is not philosophically perplexing; in the case of sexual masochism, it may not even be surprising.<sup>18</sup>

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