

Pleasure and pain essay sample

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1. Introduction of pleasure theories of Epicurus, Fechner, and Freud
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 - Fechner - pleasure exists because some unpleasant tension is removed
1. Freud - pleasure principle - reduction of tension, but also an increase in tension - death drive
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References

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Pleasure and Pain

According to Sigmund Freud, people tend to seek pleasure and avoid pain. This is the main idea behind his pleasure principle; however, it was not a new idea at the time. Freud adopted his pleasure principle from the 1848 writings of Gustav Fechner, in which he described his conception of the Lustprinzip (pleasure principle) (Mautner 1998). Even Fechner's theories of psychological hedonism were based on the much older theories of the Greek philosopher Epicurus. Epicurus (341-270 B. C.) believed that " we must exercise ourselves in the things which bring happiness, since, if that be present, we have everything, and, if that be absent, all our actions are directed towards attaining it" (Cook 1996). In other words, freedom from pain and mental distress is the primary motivation behind everything humans do.

For Epicurus, the ultimate pleasure could only be attained by the removal of all pain. He realized, however, that this was impractical because the things which would bring pleasure to some people (murder, theft, etc.) would not bring pleasure to others, and as he put it, “ No pleasure is a bad thing in itself, but the things which produce certain pleasures entail disturbances many times greater than the pleasures themselves” (Cook 1996, Principal Doctrines).

In this respect, then, the displeasure that a victim of a crime would experience would greatly outweigh the pleasure of the perpetrator of the crime. For some, the societal bounds in which this pleasure is stifled are not excessive, and Epicurus argues that since this is the case, the desire to commit a crime must not be necessary for the removal of pain. In his own words, “ All desires that do not lead to pain when they remain unsatisfied are unnecessary, but the desire is easily got rid of, when the thing desired is difficult to obtain or the desires seem likely to produce harm” (Cook 1996, Principal Doctrines).

Throughout Epicurus’ writings, he stresses that pain is not permanent:

Continuous bodily pain does not last long; instead, pain, if extreme, is present a very short time, and even that degree of pain which slightly exceeds bodily pleasure does not last for many days at once. Diseases of long duration allow an excess of bodily pleasure over pain (Cook 1996, Principal Doctrines).

It is important to note that in Epicurus’ view, “ nothing we have to fear is eternal” (Cook 1996, Principal Doctrines). Not even death is to be feared

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because “ death is nothing to us; for that which has been dissolved into its elements experiences no sensations, and that which has no sensation is nothing to us” (Cook 1996, Principal Doctrines).

Happiness is everything, and when a person is no longer able to experience happiness, there is nothing. Pleasure can be experienced right up until death, though, because “ even when circumstances make death imminent, the mind does not lack enjoyment of the best life” (Cook 1996, Principal Doctrines).

This quote mirrors the thoughts of the Old Testament Israelites almost 400 years before Epicurus was even born, “ let us eat and drink; for tomorrow we shall die” (Isaiah 22: 13, Thomas 1988, KJV), which shows the truth of another Old Testament verse, Ecclesiastes 1: 9, “ What has been will be again, what has been done will be done again; there is nothing new under the sun” (Thomas 1988, KJV). Certainly, Gustav Fechner’s conception of pleasure was not completely new, although the German physiologist was able to study it more scientifically than was Epicurus and his followers.

Fechner extends the thoughts of the Epicureans, and proposes that our actions are determined by the pleasure or displeasure procured by the thought of an action, and that the pleasure or displeasure may lie in the unconscious, as much as in the conscious (Clark 2005). According to Fechner, the seeking of pleasure was a result of a mental disequilibrium, or tension. In order to bring the body back to a normal condition, the tension must be decreased, and pleasure must be increased.

This was known as the constancy principle, or Konstanzprinzip (Clark 2005). Fechner's brand of biophysically oriented psychology was well accepted at that time (in the early to mid-1850s), but it is all but forgotten today, as the disciplines of psychology and biology become more separated (Geissler, Link, and Townsend 1992). His theories of the pleasure principle and the constancy principle live on, however, in the work and writings of one of psychology's best known researcher, Sigmund Freud.

Freud picks up where Fechner leaves off. He, just as Fechner did, describes the pleasure principle as an avoidance of the unpleasant. Similar to Fechner, displeasure is associated with tension, and pleasure with the *reduction* of tension to a happy equilibrium, or state of constancy. According to Freud, the pleasure principle is constrained by the reality principle, *Realitätsprinzip*, which controls the satisfaction of desires in relation to what is socially acceptable. In his later writings, Freud focused on how pleasure may be gained by an *increase* in tension (Clark 2005). This is in direct contrast to the ideas of both Epicurus and Fechner.

In his essay "Beyond the Pleasure Principle" (1961), Freud suggests an extreme way to reduce tension in his conception of the death instinct, or Todestriebe. The idea here is that death will bring an individual to a state of no stimulation at all; in effect, returning him/her to his/her original, unagitated state. This is in complete agreement with the thoughts of Epicurus, as quoted above.

Death is the ultimate release of tension; therefore, it is the ultimate pleasure. Inherent in this thought is the notion of control. Most people do not

get to choose the moment of their death, so death represents a total loss of control. In this way, pleasure is gained by losing control. Perhaps this is why so many people are driven to experiment with sadomasochism, which, according to Apostolides (1999):

involves a highly unbalanced power relationship established through role-playing, bondage, and/or the infliction of pain. The essential component is not the pain or bondage itself, but rather the knowledge that one person has complete control over the other, deciding what that person will hear, do, taste, touch, smell and feel.

Over ten percent of the American population has experimented with sadomasochism (S&M) in one form or another, and it is said to be most popular among educated men and women of middle or high socioeconomic status (Apostolides 1999). Until the 1980s, people who practiced S&M were considered to be suffering from a mental illness (Apostolides 1999). This was the view espoused by Freud (Apostolides 1999). In today's scientific thinking, S&M is seen as a normal, healthy way for individuals to express their sexuality (Apostolides 1999). S&M " offers a release of sexual and emotional energy that some people cannot get from traditional sex" (Apostolides 1999). This idea of tension release fits in well with the pleasure principle, as described by both Fechner and Freud.

Freud said that people become masochistic in order to regulate their desire to sexually dominate someone else. This is a result of the death instinct being turned toward the external world (Gardner 2001). Because of society's views of sex, this person may feel guilt over their desire to dominate, and

this feeling is replaced by a desire to sexually submit to another (Apostolides 1999). Freud also described the desire for S&M as being a function of a man's desire to assume the non-traditional role as the passive sex partner. Thus, the sexual desire is mediated by the reality principle.

Contemporary theorists have also noted the cultural and social influences on S&M, but they differ from Freud's views because they do not acknowledge S&M as a pathology. Instead, it is thought to be a way to escape from the pressures of modern society. Roy Baumeister, a professor of psychology at Case Western Reserve University is quoted as saying that "masochism is a set of techniques for helping people temporarily lose their normal identity" (Apostolides 1999). This, too, fits in with Freud's concept of the pleasure principle. The pressures of living in the modern world can be forgotten and relieved for a little while through S&M practices (Apostolides 1999).

An important distinction is made in this article between healthy S&M, which is performed by two consenting adults, and the truly pathological sexual sadism. Sexual sadism is "the derivation of pleasure from either inflicting pain or completely controlling an unwilling person" (Apostolides 1999). Sadly, this sexual aberration is not explored further in this article, and it would be of interest to discover whether the aggressor in this case is relieving some internal tensions of his/her own by inflicting this pain on another person. Inflicting severe pain on another person without their consent is obviously wrong, so, too, is inflicting pain on oneself, although even these actions can be explained through a Freudian pleasure principle perspective.

Many people who self-inflict injuries often do so because they want to feel more alive, real, and in control (Gardner 2001). It is estimated that about one-eighth of the adolescents and young adults living in the United States have harmed themselves in some way, whether by cutting, burning, or beating (Gardner 2001). Why would young people choose to harm themselves in this way.

Gardner (2001) links this behavior to Freud's concept of the death instinct. She quotes another researcher, Segal, as saying that the desire to self-harm is "a drive 'to annihilate the need, to annihilate the perceiving experiencing self, as well as anything that is perceived'" (Gardner 2001). In this sense, the tensions caused by the desires of the adolescent may become so intense and overwhelming that the pressure has to be released somehow, and self-harm is seen as an acceptable choice.

The activity of self-harming may become ritualized, and this "neurotic ceremonial," as Freud calls it, aids in the anxiety-releasing process (Gardner 2001). Consider one case study described by Gardner:

Mary kept her razors in a special wooden box, wrapped in a piece of velvet cloth. The box was kept under her bed. When her mother found out about the cutting, she made Mary hand over the razors. Mary bought some more and hid the box under a loose floorboard in her bedroom. Even when Mary stopped cutting she felt it helped her to know that her secret supply was still safe. Before cutting herself Mary laid out her razors on the cloth, and would choose one for that occasion. She would sometimes play certain music while she made her choice. After the cutting Mary followed a routine with cleaning

up the blood and tending to the cuts, before putting on plasters, covering up her arms again, and cleaning and hiding the razor back in its special place. She said that just opening the box made her feel calmer (2001).

As Freud would say, the need for the ritual originates from the individual's childhood (Gardner 2001). It is performed as a means of avoiding punishment and guilt - things that would cause displeasure (Gardner 2001). The self-harming adolescent feels a sense of control over his/her environment by using the harmful instrument in an organized, pre-planned way. This is why many victims of physical and sexual abuse inflict self-harm. The control over their own bodies has been taken away from them, and they must try to do something to regain that control (Gardner 2001). In relieving the tension that is created by the loss of control, the adolescent feels a great deal of pleasure, at least in the way Fechner and Freud describe it.

It is not surprising that pleasure is something which is sought after by every human being living on the planet; however, it is surprising the pleasure is sought through pain by some individuals. The sadomasochists gain pleasure by inflicting pain on others, and having others inflict pain on them, while the self-harming individuals gain pleasure by inflicting pain on themselves.

The first group feels pleasure by losing control of themselves and the situation, while the second group feels pleasure by gaining a perception of control over their circumstances. The actions of both of these groups can be explained by the Freudian concepts of the pleasure principle and the death instinct, and it is possible that they both have subconscious, archetypal

origins, since these practices of domination, sacrifice, and absolution of guilt have been performed throughout the entirety of human existence.

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