The Paradox of Painful Art

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Introduction

Is there a fundamental difference between the kinds of emotional responses we seek from art and those we seek from life? Many of the most popular genres of narrative art are designed to elicit negative emotions: emotions that are experienced as painful or involving some degree of pain, which we generally avoid in our daily lives. Melodramas make us cry. Tragedies bring forth pity and fear. Conspiratorial thrillers arouse feelings of hopelessness and dread, and devotional religious art can make the believer weep in sorrow. Not only do audiences know what these artworks are supposed to do, they seek them out in pursuit of *prima facie* painful reactions.

Traditionally, the question of why people seek out such experiences of painful art has been presented as the paradox of tragedy, and recently Noël Carroll has spun off a related problem known as the "paradox of horror." Both the paradox of tragedy and the paradox of horror arise as soon as we ask the question, Why do people seek out or desire to see horror films or watch tragedies? More specifically, we might ask, Why do people want to be scared by a movie or feel pity for a character when they avoid situations in real life that arouse the same emotions? An adequate solution to either problem will most likely require genre-specific considerations. However, the paradoxes of tragedy and horror are not simply questions about why people desire to see works in these genres: a question is not by itself a paradox. As they are typically stated, the two paradoxes ask how it is possible for audiences to feel pleasure while watching a horror movie or a tragedy.[1]

I have chosen not to present the problem as a matter of pleasure, since doing so would beg a fundamental question—whether horror or tragedies

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actually do provide pleasurable experiences. Instead, I reframe the debate: rather than asking about tragedy or horror in particular, I broaden the scope to include all art whose primary purpose is to arouse negative emotions. Unsurprisingly, the overwhelming majority of such cases are works in narrative genres that do not require happy endings. My concern is not to answer the question of why people choose to see a horror movie rather than a melodrama, but, instead, to ask why would they choose either. Perhaps an answer cannot be given at this level of generality. My primary goal in this article is to introduce the problem and to assess whether any of the existing accounts of the paradox of tragedy provide a solution to the paradox of painful art.

If we do not assume that people derive pleasure from tragedy or that pleasure must be the sole motive for art experiences, the paradox of tragedy can be given a more general form, which I will call the "paradox of painful art." The paradox of painful art can be stated as follows:

1. People do not seek out situations that arouse painful emotions.
2. People have painful emotions in response to some art.
3. People seek out art that they know will arouse painful emotions.

In the process of looking for resolutions to this paradox, I examine theories designed to solve more particular problems, primarily those that try to explain the appeal of a particular genre. I do this for two reasons. First, if a theory cannot explain the appeal of a genre, then the theory cannot be generalized and can be put aside. Second, by looking at the local theories of painful art, we can gain an understanding of the plurality of factors that may be at work. I attempt to establish a basic assumption that there is something similar going on in many different genres and forms of art that needs to be accounted for. I hope that this will pave the way for localized theories that explain the particular appeal of a single genre.

Any satisfactory account of the paradox of painful art will have to answer three interrelated questions—the hedonic, difference, and motivational questions.

1. *The Hedonic Question:* Do people seek out painful art in order to derive more pleasure than pain from the experience?
2. *The Difference Question:* Why do people seek apparently painful experiences more often in response to art than in real life?
3. *The Motivational Question:* Why do people desire painful art experiences if they find them painful?

Most solutions to the paradox of tragedy assume that the answer to the hedonic question is "yes." From there, theorists attempt to account for the source of this pleasure, a pleasure assumed to be had from representations of events from which we do not derive pleasure in real life. I argue that this

assumption is suspect: the motive for seeking out devotional religious art, melodrama, tragedy, and some horror is not clearly to find pleasure.

The second question that a solution to the paradox of painful art must address is whether there is a radical difference between the kinds of things we seek representations of and the kinds of things we seek out in our daily lives. I argue that although there is a difference in proportion, the same kinds of experiences are sought in life as in art. The motivational question asks why people want to experience painful art, if it is indeed painful. I do not attempt to provide a complete answer to this question, since it would require accounting for the full swath of human motivation; instead, I offer a partial answer in explanation of the proportional difference between the kinds of experiences we seek in art and in life. After assessing the merits of several leading solutions to the paradox, I sketch a general explanation that can account for a wide array of the art experiences in question.

Painful Art

In "Poetry and the Classics," the preface to his volume *Poems*, Matthew Arnold explains his decision to omit the poem on Empedocles's suicide from the collection. He argues that there are situations in which

> no poetical enjoyment can be derived. They are those in which the suffering finds no vent in action; in which a continuous state of mental distress is prolonged, unrelieved by incident, hope, or resistance; in which there is everything to be endured, nothing to be done. In such situations there is inevitably something morbid, in the description of them something monotonous. When they occur in actual life, they are painful, not tragic; the representation of them in poetry is painful also. To this class of situation, poetically faulty as it appears to me, that of Empedocles, as I have endeavored to represent him, belongs.[2]

Although one may agree with Arnold that painfulness is an aesthetic flaw, one cannot deny that audiences appear to seek out painful art and that many artists attempt to create artworks that are nothing short of painful. In fact, the breadth of painful emotional experiences to which audiences willingly submit themselves is staggering. For example, recently the religious bio-film *The Passion of the Christ* (Mel Gibson, 2004), designed specifically to disgust and outrage viewers, became a box-office success. This is not an isolated case. A tremendous amount of religious-themed art in the Western tradition seeks to provoke painful emotional reactions via the depictions of the suffering of Christ and the martyrdom of saints.[3] Documentaries of injustice, war photography, and Holocaust memorials are principally designed to revivify audience diligence against injustice by arousing anger, fear, loathing, dread, disgust, and pity. Melodramas, or "weepies," have

become an extremely popular genre of fiction in the last century. An exemplary melodrama, *Plenty* (Fred Schepisi, 1985), ends with a flashback scene, where on a good day in her youth the main character projects forward, saying that "There will be days and days like this." But after two hours of watching the heroine go insane from boredom in a stultifying marriage, the audience knows better. For viewers susceptible to having their heart-strings pulled by a frequently visible hand, melodramas can elicit visceral sorrow. Likewise, the horror genre primarily attempts to arouse a combination of two aversive responses, fear and disgust, yet many people routinely attend horror moves where such responses are almost guaranteed. Conspiratorial fictions such as *The Parallax View* (Alan Pakula, 1974) often leave audiences without clear explanations of the events other than that the world is a malevolent and corrupt place, where almost anyone could become an expendable tool of powerful interests. Melancholy music can often arouse remorse at past wrongs or missed opportunities and painfully felt nostalgia, where listeners come to desire to return to previous times and suffer from the realization that this desire can never be satisfied.

By focusing on tragedy, theorists have failed to grasp how pervasive painful reactions are in our art experiences. I will argue that our willingness to experience pain in response to fiction can illuminate crucial features of our motivational structure.

Pleasure

There are two major types of answers to the question of why we desire painful art. The first family of theories argues that the answer is pleasure. The second type holds that the answer is something other than pleasure, although just what the "other" is, is rarely specified. Among the pleasure theorists there are two major lines of thought. The first denies that there is significant pain, either because it is converted to pleasure[4] or because it never reaches a certain threshold because it is controlled[5] in art experiences. The second argues that the pain is compensated for by either a self-congratulatory meta-response,[6] intellectual pleasure,[7] or the dispelling of worries.[8]

Pleasure theorists take as their basic assumption that there is a fundamental dis-similarity between the kinds of events we are willing to encounter via representations and those that we welcome in our daily lives. This group of theories is divided according to whether the responses had in reaction to putatively painful art are actually painful; however, the theories in this category are united in assuming that the reason people seek out painful art is to feel pleasure. Although most pleasure theorists are committed to a hedonic theory of motivation, they need not be; instead, they can simply take it as a useful methodological assumption that the simplest account of why someone wants to experience an artwork would be to show that it affords pleasure. The major variants of pleasure theory can be divided into

two groups: those that argue that there is no significant pain involved in our experiences of putatively painful art, and those that argue that there is a significant amount of pain but that pain is converted or compensated for.[9]

No Significant Pain

The first class of pleasure theories attempts to resolve the paradox of painful art by denying that our experiences of such artworks are actually painful.[10] If successful, this strategy completely dissolves the paradox and the related problems. If artworks are not painful, then we have a clear explanation for why people are eager to see representations of events that they would avoid in their daily lives. If there is no pain involved, then the motivational question—why it is that audiences are willing to endure painful reactions to artworks—can be dismissed. As we shall see there are significant problems facing this line of response. The chief difficulty is that it fails to account for firsthand phenomenological reports of experiences of art as painful.

Better You than Me Theory. Although the Stoics did not offer a solution to the paradox of painful art, they briefly confronted a related issue that deserves some attention.[11] They attempted to explain our curious fascination with the suffering of others, which may have some applicability to our desire to view representations of suffering characters. For instance, one of the obvious drawbacks of living in a commuter city is the inevitable traffic jams that result from rubbernecking—drivers slowing down to get a good look at an accident, hoping to catch a glimpse of a gruesome scene. The Stoics explained such a reaction as involving a feeling that is described as "better you than me." On this account, we are frequently fascinated by the suffering of others because it makes us aware of our comparative good fortune.

I doubt that such "glad it's not me" reactions fully describe these kinds of responses to random accidents—responses that often might be better summarized as "glad it's you." Nevertheless, in either form of this reaction, such emotional detachment is rare in our encounters with art. Rather than feeling lucky in response to fictions, we often have pity for characters and are outraged at their mistreatment. On the face of it, these responses involve pain, and, therefore, the Stoic account fails to apply to painful art.

Conversion Theory. There are two variants of the conversion theory. The first position holds that painful emotions had in response to art are converted into pleasure through some more prominent emotion. The second variant holds that the entire experience feels pleasurable in retrospect, and, as such, the pain felt is more or less forgotten. As we shall see, the second position starts to veer off into the compensation theory. The first position is more popular, but the mechanism behind the conversion of pain into pleasure is often claimed to be utterly mysterious.

In "Of Tragedy" David Hume attempts to resolve the paradox of tragedy by a conversion theory. He bases his argument on the assumption that

audiences do feel pleasure in response to tragedy. Hume argues that "the same object of distress, which pleases in a tragedy, were it really set before us, would give the most unfeigned uneasiness."[12] Working with this assumption, he attempts to account for the possibility of feeling pleasure from what appear to be distressful emotions had in response to art. Hume's solution to the paradox is that the unpleasant emotions are "converted" or "transformed" into pleasure by the eloquence of a narrative. He thinks that the "predominant emotion," beauty, alters the nature of the painful responses, such that the overall response becomes one of pleasure.

Hume fails to give a satisfying account of this process of conversion, and his view has been rightly criticized for leaving the basis of his explanation a mystery. At root, however, Hume's explanation is not altogether implausible. Any complex experience will be made up of disparate parts. In many experiences, especially those had from well-crafted narrative structures, there will be certain aspects that bring coherence and unification. Unifying elements are often what come to typify an experience for us, giving us a shorthand to reflect on overall more complicated phenomena. Feelings of beauty derived from narrative eloquence are often the predominant, unifying elements of art experiences, whereas such feelings are typically absent from real life experiences. Hence, the experience of a tragedy may be overall one of pleasure for reasons not available to nonart experiences of tragic events.

As we shall see, this explanation is very close to a compensation theory, except that in the conversion account, the overall experience is treated as a complex whole without clearly discernible parts. The absence of a clear mechanism of conversion is not the primary weakness of Hume's theory, as most have supposed; rather, the theory does not mesh with how we describe our own art experiences. The central problem with the conversion theory, as I have presented it, is that it does not describe the way we typify our experiences of painful art. Reviewers and ordinary viewers often describe works as utterly depressing or heart-wrenching. The distinguishing, or unifying element, is often not a beautifully crafted narrative but rather the overall emotional affect, which is frequently painful. If the overall experience of an artwork is best described as painful, then the conversion theory is not applicable to that work. Since there seem to be plenty of heart wrenching, depressing, disgusting, terrifying, and dread-inspiring artworks, the conversion theory cannot serve as a general solution to the paradox of painful art.

Control Theory. Control theories attempt to answer the question of why it is that we seek out negative emotions from fiction when we avoid them in real life. John Morreall argues that fictional experiences are far less painful than those had in real life because in regards to fictions our powers of control are far greater than in real life. Specifically, our control over fictions

comes from our choosing whether or not to have these responses and our ability to walk away if we cannot take it anymore.

Recent experiments on pain thresholds support this conjecture. When subjects are able to say when the pressure on their finger should stop, they can take far more pressure and pain than if the experimenter does not give them the option. Subjects also report feeling greater amounts of pain when they are unable to control the experiment. Likewise, we might argue that our experiences of art are less painful since we can usually control whether or not they happen or when they should stop. We can decide to leave a theater or put down a book whenever it gets to be too much to handle, and we are aware that we possess this power.

Robert Yanal criticizes control theories, arguing that according to the control account, if a spectator is trapped in a theatre then the fiction should seem more painful. However, this clearly is not the case.[13] Perhaps such a result would be absurd, but it does not damage the control theory. If the subject is strapped to a chair with their eyelids pried open, like Alex in *A Clockwork Orange,* he might feel more pain than a normal viewer, as the control theory predicts. Being trapped in a theatre does not mean spectators are unable to stop watching a movie, except in bizarre circumstances that would probably be extremely distressing.

Imagine taking a roller coaster ride at an amusement park. After the train pulls into the docking station, it immediately begins again, without letting anyone off. Over the loud speaker, you hear that something is wrong and the operators cannot stop the ride, or, even worse, you discover that the ride has been taken over by a gang of sadists who say that they will release the passengers "as soon as we feel like it and not a moment sooner." After hearing such news, it is hard to image that the ride would remain very fun for much longer.

In *Man, Play, and Games* Roger Callois[14] argues, convincingly, that play must be voluntary; that is, one must be able to step out of the game whenever one wishes, or the activity will cease to be playful. Similarly, an effective horror motif is the doll that comes to life or the ventriloquist dummy that gains control of its puppeteer. Such examples are instances of games that will not stop. In so far as experiencing a fiction is analogous to play, the control theory suggests that the control we have over our fictional engagements makes them less painful, or at least that if we lose control the nature of the experience may become far more painful.

Although the control theorist offers a partial explanation for why we are willing to experience emotional responses to art that we shun in real life, she does not have a plausible answer for why we want to experience such emotions at all. Our experiences of negative emotions in response to fictional events may be less painful or more tolerable because we have some degree of control over their occurrence, but this does not mean that they are not

painful at all. Although the subjects in the finger pressing experiments have a higher tolerance for pain when they are in control, they still feel pain.[15]

This problem is further amplified if we consider that our emotional responses to fictions are not completely controllable. Although we decide to see a movie and can walk out of the theatre whenever we wish, we cannot just decide to end our depression when we walk out of a melodrama, or to not feel tense and nervous after watching a horror movie. If we feel any pain at all, then the question of why we desire such experiences, why we seek out painful art, is still open. The control theory can supplement a further account, but it cannot answer the motivational question on its own.

Compensated Pain

Unlike conversion theories, compensation theories acknowledge that we do experience pain in response to art. Most compensation theories offer particular accounts of why we choose to see a work in a particular genre when we know that it will arouse negative emotions. All compensation theories are of this structure: artworks in genre X provide compensatory pleasures Y that outweigh any pain they cause. That is, compensatory explanations argue that the best answer to the question "Why do we see works of genre X?" is that such works provide certain compensatory pleasures that audiences expect to be greater than any feelings of pain.

The central problem for compensatory theories is that they must provide a non-question-begging reason for us to think that the pleasures had from works of a particular genre outweigh the pain. Noël Carroll, for instance, offers a compensatory theory of our desire to experience horror fictions. He argues that people seek out horror fictions for cognitive pleasures derived from thinking about how one may confront a monster. Similarly, most compensatory theories assume a hedonic theory of motivation and then try to point out which pleasure must be doing the work.

The hedonic assumption is not altogether unwarranted. It is reasonable to grant the compensation theorist the bootstrapping assumption that there is probably more pleasure involved than pain so that they may engage in a search for the pleasure involved. Then, if the compensatory theorist can give us a convincing account of the kind of pleasure involved—pleasure that is sufficient to offset the pain—the initial assumption is justified. To justify the hedonic assumption, we need a largely convincing story of how the pleasure could outweigh the pain. In comedy any negative emotions we may feel are often offset by other pleasures.[16] The situation is not so clear when we look at melancholy music, melodrama, tragedy, or any of the other types of painful art.

The extreme ambiguity that plagues any comparison of pleasures and pains aggravates the problem for compensation theories. It is especially difficult to get a clear understanding of what it means for a pleasure to outweigh a pain in these contexts. Consider the case of horror: How many intellectual

exploratory units does it take to equal a unit of fear or disgust? The compensatory theorist might argue that they are not committed to the notion that viewers make such calculations consciously. An unconscious hedonic calculation could take place based on our previous experiences with the genre. Further, the compensatory theorist need not be committed to the idea that we are always correct in our assessments; for the most part, however, the past experiences would have to be more pleasurable than painful, else audiences would gradually be turned off by the genre. Of course, meeting the burden of proof for the compensation theorists requires showing that audiences do report overall pleasurable experiences in genres and artworks to which they return. In the case of painful art, I doubt that this burden can be met. We will return to this problem when discussing general criticisms of the hedonic solutions to the paradox.

Meta-response: Self-satisfaction. Susan Feagin offers a compensatory solution to the paradox of tragedy. She argues that people want to experience tragedy because they take pleasure in the experience, or more exactly, they take pleasure in the reactions they have to such fictions. The pleasure is in the meta-response—the response we have to our direct responses to the fiction. The particular meta-response that we find pleasurable is something of a self-congratulatory feeling—we are glad that we are the kind of person that can feel pity at the suffering of others. Feagin's analysis should be considered a species of the family of compensatory theories because she holds that the pleasure had from our meta-responses compensates for any pain felt. Feagin's compensatory theory fails to provide a solution to the paradox of painful art since, at best, it is only applicable to an extremely limited set of artworks.

Feagin's analysis is designed to handle fictions that are akin to tragedy; however, unsurprisingly, it does not cover horror cases such as the film *Cure* (Kiyoshi Kurosawa, 1997), where pity is not a major component of the response. *Cure* is not sadistic, and it does arouse some pity, but this is not the predominant emotions evoked; rather, horror and dread are more apt. In addition, installation works such as Paul McCarthy's *Bossy Burger* do not arouse pity but rather pure visceral disgust. Nevertheless, since the suffering of others is found in most of the painful art forms we are discussing, if Feagin is right then much of the problem will be solved.

However, Feagin's analysis is far from an adequate explanation of the appeal of pity-arousing fiction in particular. The meta-response she describes is extremely uncommon. Although they are the most effective tools for arousing compassionate responses, vicious, malevolent, and indifferent characters seldom prompt an awareness of one's own kinder, gentler nature. As such, I am hesitant to attribute the prideful meta-response to others, or even myself, except in very rare cases where an artwork is able to highlight the contrast between our pity and the callousness of others in the audience.

For example, *In the Company of Men* (Neil LaBute, 1997) is designed in such a way that the audience will be polarized from the beginning. In the film the antagonist, Chad, devises a plot to devastate a lonely deaf woman by inexplicably abandoning her after leading her on for a couple of months. Throughout the film, Chad periodically tells sexist jokes and frequently humiliates subordinates. Those who refuse to laugh at Chad's sexist jokes will sit in fear of the rest of the audience for the duration of the picture. Seemingly, those laughing are in danger of gradually being sucked into a sympathetic complicity with the evil Chad, whereas the rest of us may feel glad that we are the kind of people that can feel pity for the butt of Chad's cruel practical joke. *In the Company of Men* is brilliant for setting callous audience reactions in relief, thereby prompting such meta-responses as Feagin discusses.[17] However, the ingenuity of this film is that it figures out a way to use humor to make the reactions of others salient. The film would not be worth mentioning if it were not for the fact that the meta-responses it engenders are uncommon. As such, atypical meta-responses cannot account for why we generally want to see tragedies, much less other painful art.

Although it highlights prized examples of painful art, Feagin's theory seems to gain support from only a very limited pool of artworks and a small number of communal viewing experiences. Otherwise it has no phenomenological support and cannot serve as a general explanation for even the limited domain of tragedy. As such, the meta-response theory has a very limited application to the paradox of painful art.

A-Hedonic Accounts

Recently there have been a few criticisms directed at the major solutions to the paradox of tragedy because they assume a hedonic theory of motivation. In response to Carroll, Alex Neil[18] argues that assuming pleasure as the motivating factor behind audience desires to see horror films may be correct, but a simple hedonism cannot account for the appeal of tragedy. Similarly, Aaron Ridley[19] argues that the paradox is a nonstarter since it wrongly assumes that people derive pleasure from tragedy and that pleasure is all they are seeking. However, he fails to offer a theory of the appeal of tragedy, focusing more on the philosophical relevance of tragedy via an explication of Williams's and Nussbaum's writings on the genre.[20]

By presenting the breadth of painful genres of art, I tried to establish a basic problem for hedonic accounts. If many of our art experiences seem to be mostly painful, then the burden of proof shifts to the hedonists to establish their fundamental assumption that we seek such experiences for pleasure. The hedonist may reply to this line of objection by arguing that what viewers seek from art can diverge from what they actually get and that my examples focus on the exception cases. If this were true, and viewers were only after pleasure from art, then we would have to explain a tremendous amount of

our art-going activity as involving a high degree of false optimism. Viewers often know fairly well what to expect from a genre, and it is becoming rare that someone will read a popular book, read a literary work, or a see movie without knowing something about it. Almost every movie-goer has access to reviews that reveal how we should expect to feel when we leave a movie. In addition, people repeatedly return to the same artworks even after they have what are best described as painful experiences. Not only do viewers claim to have painful experiences, but many artists seek to induce painful experiences. For instance, Bergman claims that he finds some of his own movies terribly depressing, just as he intended. Religious artists for millennia have been portraying martyrdom and the suffering of Christ to partially encourage feelings of sadness. Most recently, Mel Gibson expressed that his goal in *The Passion of the Christ* was to make the viewer feel pain—to vividly portray Christ's suffering in such a way as to sicken the viewer with sorrow and resentment. As such, there is little reason to grant the pleasure theorist the initial assumption that the reason we seek painful art must be to derive pleasure.

None of the a-hedonic solutions to the paradox of painful art presents a compelling explanation of the appeal of tragedy; rather, they merely suggest that something other than pleasure must be involved. In evaluating these solutions, I intend to assess the claim that pleasure theories cannot account for the appeal of painful art. However, since the a-hedonic theories are critically underdeveloped, I will spend comparatively little time assessing their merits before moving on to sketching what a possible solution might look like.

Power

There are two variants of the power theory of painful art. First, one may argue that the reason we seek out painful art is to be made aware of our capacity to endure such painful responses. This explanation may account for the reasons some seek out graphic horror fictions—to see how much they can take and brag about it to their friends. However, this adolescent, macho explanation is rightfully dismissed by Carroll for being incomprehensive. It cannot even account for the appeal of the particular genre of horror, since often we see horror films to be scared ourselves, not to overcome fear.

Another power solution to the paradox is offered by Amy Price, who defends a view she attributes to Nietzsche.[21] She argues that we find joy in knowing that the suffering endured is within the realm of human possibility. Recognizing that humans can endure great suffering and still embrace life and go on gives us satisfaction. Such an explanation may account for our feelings of reverence for fictional heroes, but it fails to account for why we want to see fictions of a more fatalistic bent. As it stands, Price's account is not applicable beyond a particular form of tragedy. Perhaps more can be

said in favor of power theories of painful art, but as it stands no adequate solution has been advanced.

Pessimism

Although Schopenhauer offers an account of the value of painful art, like most theorists who offer a-hedonic solutions to the paradox he does not directly address the question of why we desire to experience such works.[22] In Schopenhauer's writings on the value of art, he fails to consider the significance of our desire to experience tragedies and other painful genres of art to the basic motivational assumptions that ground his pessimism. The principal way Schopenhauer argues for the inevitability of suffering, and the conclusion that our situation is undesirable, is via the "Desire as Lacking" argument. It goes something like this:

1. All lacking is painful.
2. Desiring is experienced as a lacking.
3. Since most of our desires cannot be permanently satiated, they will keep coming back even if temporarily satisfied.
4. We typically have more desires than we can satisfy at once.
5. Hence, we will typically be desiring, that is, in pain, suffering.
6. Since suffering is undesirable, our situation is undesirable.

Worse still, Schopenhauer argues, even if we manage to quell some of our pangs, most likely we will just be bored, since satisfactions are rarely as sweet as we expect.

In his general theory of pessimism, Schopenhauer presents two general avenues through which one may escape the pendulum of boredom and suffering. The first escape is through ascetic denial, but this opportunity is available to only a few disciplined ascetics. As such, it cannot be widely recommended as a practical solution. The second route of escape is through the distancing achieved by aesthetic experience.

Rather than answering the motivational question, Schopenhauer praises tragedy for helping us to realize that the result of the life of desire is suffering, but this does not get us closer to an explanation of why we desire to see tragedies. Perhaps one could construct a Schopenhauerean account of our willing painful art experiences, but he has little to say about such desires. The benefit of seeing tragedies might lie in a secondary, instrumental effect, that is, encouraging a recognition that life is suffering and hence a renunciation of the life of desire. I doubt such an account can explain the ordinary motivations of viewers, since I have never heard a single person report this as a reason for wanting to experience a depressing artwork. Instead, the desire to enhance melancholia, for instance, presents a fundamental problem for Schopenhauer's theory of motivation. If we welcome suffering in response to art—that is, if we will suffering itself—then suffering can serve

as a kind of satisfaction.[23] This may either support his theory of the inevitability of suffering or it may raise doubts about the undesirability of suffering that is fundamental to Schopenhauer's pessimism. Either way, although he provides a somewhat intellectualist account of the value of tragedy, Schopenhauer neglects to account for our desire for painful art; most other a-hedonic theories suffer from the same flaw.

Rich Experience Theory

One of the first theories Hume dismisses in "Of Tragedy" is Dubos's "Relief from Boredom" explanation. As Hume summarizes, Dubos's position is the theory that "no matter what the passion is: Let it be disagreeable, afflicting, melancholy, disordered; it is still better than that insipid languor, which arises from perfect tranquility and repose."[24] Clearly, this view is untenable since we seldom are willing to experience just anything to relieve ourselves of boredom. Nevertheless, Hume provides little in the way of a refutation of this view other than arguing that since we do feel pleasure from tragedies and we do not when confronted with similar events in our daily lives, Dubos has failed to account for the dissimilarity.

As presented by Hume, Dubos's explanation is incomplete, but not for the reasons Hume gives. Although Dubos does not explain the dissimilarity between the kinds of events we seek representations of and the kind of events we seek in real life, his account is significant in suggesting that we do desire painful emotions. Rather than countering this suggestion, Hume begs the question against Dubos, assuming that our response to tragedy and other painful art is predominantly one of pleasure. Indeed, almost all subsequent commentators have made the same mistake. Part of the problem is due to a mixing of moral and motivational questions. The paradox of tragedy is driven by a need to provide a moral justification for the derivation of pleasure from the misfortune of the characters. This quest for moral justification has overshadowed the motivational question, leading commentators to assume that the pleasure we derive from tragedy must be the most significant motivational factor since it is the most significant moral factor.

If we do not let the prominence of the role of pleasure in the moral question blind us to the full range of our reactions to painful art, something similar to Dubos's explanation becomes more attractive. If one briefly reflects on the phenomenology of painful art experiences and notices how common such experiences are, it becomes plausible that viewers desire painful emotional responses. In 1998 *Saturday Night Live* featured a skit along the lines of the following: A family sits down to dinner around a large table. A boy at the end of the table takes a sip of milk from his glass and spits it out, saying "Ugh! This is rotten." The person to his left replies, "Let me try," and has the same response. This is repeated until everyone at the table has confirmed firsthand how bad the sour milk tastes. The skit is funny not because it shows

a particularly stupid family that would not take someone's word about the state of a glass of milk and thereby avoid a disgusting experience, but for exposing our desire for firsthand, experiential knowledge of the world. If Dubos is right—if people do desire painful emotional responses—we also require answers to the motivational question and difference question.

Dubos's "Relief from Boredom" explanation gives us an answer to the motivational question—why we might seek out such experiences—but it does not account for why we usually choose to have them in response to art. I suspect that the answer to the first question—why we desire such experiences at all—is more complicated than simply the relief from boredom, and it may be easier to get at an explanation via the second question. I propose that the reason we usually seek out these experiences from art rather than real life is prudence and sometimes cowardice. Art provides a certain degree of safety not present in situations that arouse extreme distress, disgust, anger, fear, horror, misery, paranoia, and a host of other responses. Simply put, most of these reactions cannot be had in real life without incurring significant risks to ourselves and our loved ones, risks that we typically do not take because they far outweigh the rewards.

A painful art experience is largely more desirable and easier to have than the painful emotional life experience. Also, as the control theory suggests, since we can usually control when such experiences take place and often have the power to walk away when they get to be too much, the pain involved usually does not pass a certain toleration threshold. The safety garnered from our powers of control over art experiences also allows for some reflection on the experiences themselves, which can provide certain cognitive pleasures as we learn about our emotional capacities. Further, our ability to endure certain emotional extremes can provide enjoyment from feelings of power that result from a certain kind of self-overcoming and from the awareness of our own capacities. For many of us, our richest aesthetic experiences come from encounters with painful art since one is seldom as fully engaged intellectually, perceptually, and affectively as when experiencing painful emotional responses to art. Few, if any, pleasurable experiences match the intensity of our reactions to painful art. Hence, it is not hard to see why, as Alan Goldman suggests, "our involvement in such experiences is its own reward."[25] All in all, the reasons why we desire painful experiences are multifaceted and complex, but why we would rather have them in response to art rather than real life is clear.

One might be tempted to classify the rich experience theory as a revisionary explanation using Jerrold Levinson's classificatory schema. He describes revisionary explanations as those in defense of a position that holds the following: "neither negative emotions, nor the feelings they include, are intrinsically unpleasant or undesirable, and thus there is nothing odd about appreciating art that induces such emotions or feelings."[26] As should

be apparent at this point, this position is much too broadly defined. What is crucial to note is that this category would contain two radically different theories on my classificatory scheme since it is a far different thing to find something "undesirable" than it is to find it "unpleasant." Indeed, this is the very issue that divides the hedonic and a-hedonic solutions to the paradox of painful art. The rich experience theory argues that one may desire certain kinds of experiences, including those of painful emotional responses, which are unpleasant. That is, we can find experiences both unpleasant and perfectly desirable.

The only revisionary account Levinson offers as an example is that of Kendall Walton, who is slightly uncomfortable with calling our reactions to putatively painful art "pleasant." Walton argues that

> What is clearly disagreeable, what we regret, are the things we are sorrowful about—the loss of opportunity, the death of a friend—not the feeling or experience of sorrow. . . . there is nothing in the notion of sorrow or grief to make it surprising that the opposite is sometimes true, that we sometimes seek and enjoy the experience of real sorrow. Much of Hume's paradox evaporates without help from the fact that it is only fictional that the appreciator feels real sorrow.[27]

Ignoring the problematic suggestion that we only fictionally feel sorrow, Walton's solution to the paradox has similarities to the "rich experience" explanation, but the differences are acute. Most importantly, I am avoiding the term "enjoy" since in common usage it is ambiguous as to whether it means to find something pleasurable or to find desirable. For example, Matthew Arnold uses it in the former sense when he argues that

> it is not enough that the poet should add to the knowledge of men, it is required of him also that he should add to their happiness. . . . a poetical work is not justified when it has been shown to be an accurate, and therefore interesting representation; it has to be shown also that it is a representation from which men can derive enjoyment.[28]

Arnold does not seem to have a more complicated notion of happiness as "well-being" or enjoyment as desirable; instead, he explicitly contrasts the enjoyable with the painful.

Although Walton is uncomfortable with using the term "pleasure," appending its usage with parenthetical quotes—"pleasure (if that is the right word)"—his additional comments suggest that he denies the painfulness of painful emotions had in response to art. If this is the case, then the rich experience theory is in stark disagreement with Walton's account, since my explanation holds that we do feel sorrow *about* such things as the loss of opportunity for fictional characters. As in real life, we feel genuine pain in response to the suffering of beloved characters due to fictional injustice, fictional worlds inhospitable to love and liberty, and fictional brutal-

ity; nevertheless, we find these experiences desirable enough that we are willing to pay for art in order to have them.[29]

Conclusion

The rich experience theory does not answer any one specific question, such as why people go to horror rather than comedy or melodrama films, but it does show that the traditional framing of the paradox of tragedy begs the question. The problem is not in explaining how we take pleasure in a painful fiction since this assumes that the reason we desire such fictions is because they are pleasurable, which is exactly what is at issue. Perhaps, in many cases, we do desire painful fictions for other pleasures, but this does not mean that there is anything that needs to be compensated for. We should not assume that people only desire what brings pleasure. By reframing the question, I introduced a new problem, that I call the "paradox of painful art."

Throughout this article I have argued that all of the various solutions to the paradox of tragedy fail to provide a solution to the paradox of painful art. Not only do all the hedonic and a-hedonic theories that I considered fail to account for painful art in general, but we have some reason to think that they all fail to answer the basic motivational question for even a single genre.

My solution to the paradox is somewhat basic, but it combines the insights of the critics of the hedonic account and the compelling aspects of the control theory. I argue that the motive for seeking out painful art is complex, but what we desire from such art is to have experiences on the cheap—not life experience on the cheap, as one theory puts it, but experiences of strong emotional reactions. Art safely provides us the opportunity to have rich emotional experiences that are either impossible or far too risky to have in our daily lives. We can feel fear without risking our lives, pity without seeing our loved ones suffer, thrills without risking going to jail, and a variety of other experiences that usually come with unwelcome pitfalls. Outside of art, it is almost impossible to have many of these kinds of experiences without completely wrecking our lives—murdering our loved ones, destroying our relationships, being sent to jail, or suffering fatal injuries.

NOTES

I would like to thank the anonymous reviewers for this journal for their excellent comments and suggestions.

1. The paradox of tragedy is often presented as a moral problem: How is it that we appropriately take pleasure at the suffering of others in tragedies but not in real life?

2. Matthew Arnold, "Poetry and the Classics." Published as "Preface" to *Poems* (dated Fox How, Ambleside, October 1, 1853). It was reprinted in *Irish Essays* (1882).
3. Motives for seeking out painful religious art may be radically different from most other genres. For example, one may see a duty to experience certain religious works or to frequent places of worship that display painful artworks prominently.
4. David Hume, "Of Tragedy," in *Essays Moral, Political, and Literary* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1985).
5. John Morreall, "Enjoying Negative Emotions in Fictions," *Philosophy and Literature* 9, no. 1 (1985): 95-103. See also Marcia Eaton, "A Strange Kind of Sadness," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 41, no. 1 (Autumn 1982): 51-63.
6. Susan Feagin, "The Pleasures of Tragedy," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 20, no. 1, (January 1983): 95-110; and "Monsters, Disgust and Fascination," *Philosophical Studies* 65 (1992): 75-84.
7. Noël Carroll, *The Philosophy of Horror, or, Paradoxes of the Heart* (New York: Routledge, 1990).
8. To avoid a long digression on the *Poetics* I have chosen to omit any consideration of theories of catharsis. Since the concept has two nearly opposite meanings (purgation and purification), and the mechanism behind either is equally ambiguous, it would be difficult to do the literature justice in this context. It should not be too difficult to see where the various theories of catharsis fall in my categorization of solutions to the paradox of painful art. For instance, purgation theories are compensatory, since they generally hold that we have less of some painful emotion after experiencing some other (allopathic) or the same (homeopathic) painful emotion in response to art.
9. Although we cover the same theories, my classificatory scheme differs significantly from that offered by Jerrold Levinson in his excellent essay "Emotion in Response to Art: A Survey of the Terrain." Levinson divides the theories into five groups: compensatory, conversionary, organicist, revisionary, and deflationary explanations. By focusing on the motivational question, I split the various theories into two large groups: hedonic and a-hedonic. See Jerrold Levinson "Emotion in Response to Art: A Survey of the Terrain," in *Emotion and the Arts*, ed. Mette Hjort and Sue Laver (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 20-36.
10. Marcia Eaton, "Aesthetic Pleasure and Pain," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 31, no. 4 (Summer 1973): 481-85.
11. Lucretius, *The Hellenistic Philosophers*, vol. 1, trans. A. Long and D. N. Sedley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 120.
12. David Hume, "Of Tragedy," 218.
13. Robert Yanal, "The Paradox of Tragedy," in *The Paradoxes of Emotion and Fiction* (Philadelphia: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999), 143-57.
14. Roger Caillois, *Man, Play, and Games*, trans. Meyer Barash (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2001). Caillois argues that play must be free (or voluntary), separate, uncertain, unproductive, governed by rules, and involve make-believe.
15. It is also important to note that although we often seek out painful art, there are also things that many people do not want to see—images they find so distressing they will look away. For many viewers, films such as Takashi Miike's *Audition* (1999), where a sadistic woman saws the limbs off a semi-sedated man with razor wire, are painful enough to be unwatchable.
16. The only negative emotion felt in response to comedy that would be difficult to provide a convincing pleasure offset is embarrassment. There are two types of embarrassment in comedy: embarrassment that serves as a comeuppance and embarrassment that occurs for a liked character. The latter type of embarrassment is one of the most effective devices for garnering audience sympathies and is curiously almost solely found in the genre of teen comedy.

17. For more on the use of humor in LaBute's film, see my article "The Joke Is the Thing: 'In the Company of Men' and the Ethics of Humor," *Film and Philosophy* 11 (January 2007): 49-67.
18. Alex Neil, "On a Paradox of the Heart," *Philosophical Studies* 65 (1992): 53-65.
19. Aaron Ridley, "Tragedy," *The Oxford Handbook of Aesthetics*, ed. Jerrold Levinson (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).
20. See Martha Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), and Bernard Williams, *Shame and Necessity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).
21. Amy Price, "Nietzsche and the Paradox of Tragedy," *British Journal of Aesthetics* (October 1998): 4.
22. Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Well and Representation*, vols 1 and 2, trans. E. F. J. Payne (Dover: Dover Publications, 1969).
23. Teenage angst, which inevitably leads those afflicted to seek out the maudlin and overwhelmingly depressing, may be a fatal counterexample to Schopenhauer's assumption that pain is experienced as undesirable.
24. Paraphrased by Hume in "Of Tragedy," 217.
25. Alan H. Goldman, *Aesthetic Value* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1995), 63. Goldman explicitly avoids tying his notion of aesthetic experience to pleasure. Following along the lines of Dewey, he adopts a view of aesthetic experience that involves a thorough exercise of our various capacities. Dewey's description of aesthetic experiences as involving "doings and sufferings" is well equipped to incorporate our experiences of painful art.
26. Levinson, "Survey of the Terrain," 30.
27. Kendall Walton, *Mimesis as Make-Believe* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990), 257-58.
28. Arnold, "Poetry and the Classics," 5.
29. Walton, *Mimesis*, 256.