The Psychology of Pleasure

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Pleasure, for man, is not a luxury, but a profound psychological need.

Pleasure (in the widest sense of the term) is a metaphysical concomitant of life, the reward and consequence of successful action—just as pain is the insignia of failure, destruction, death.

Through the state of enjoyment, man experiences the value of life, the sense that life is worth living, worth struggling to maintain. In order to live, man must act to achieve values. Pleasure or enjoyment is at once an emotional payment for successful action and an incentive to continue acting.

Further, because of the metaphysical meaning of pleasure to man, the state of enjoyment gives him a direct experience of his own efficacy, of his competence to deal with the facts of reality, to achieve his values, to live. Implicitly contained in the experience of pleasure is the feeling: "I am in control of my existence"—just as implicitly contained in the experience of pain is the feeling: "I am helpless." As pleasure emotionally entails a sense of efficacy, so pain emotionally entails a sense of impotence.

Thus, in letting man experience, in his own person, the sense that life is a value and that he is a value, pleasure serves as the emotional fuel of man's existence.

Just as the pleasure-pain mechanism of man's body works as a barometer of health or injury, so the pleasure-pain mechanism of his consciousness works on the same principle, acting as a barometer of what is for him or against him, what is beneficial to his life or inimical. But man is a being of volitional consciousness, he has no innate ideas, no automatic or infallible knowledge of what his survival depends on. He must choose the values that are to guide his actions and set his goals. His emotional mechanism will work according to the kind of values he chooses. It is his values that determine what a man feels to be for him or against him; it is his values that determine what a man seeks for pleasure.

If a man makes an error in his choice of values, his emotional mechanism will not correct him: it has no will of its own. If a man's values are such that he desires things which, in fact and in reality, lead to his destruction, his emotional mechanism will not save him, but will, instead, urge him on toward destruction: he will have set it in reverse, against himself and against the facts of reality, against his own life. Man's emotional mechanism is like an electronic computer: man has the power to program it, but no power to change its nature—so that if he sets the wrong programming, he will not be able to escape the fact that the most self-destructive desires will have, for him, the emotional intensity and urgency of lifesaving actions. He has, of course, the power to change the programming—but only by changing his values.

A man's basic values reflect his conscious or subconscious view of himself and of existence. They are the expression of (a) the degree and nature of his self-esteem or lack of it, and (b) the extent to which he regards the universe as open to his understanding and action or closed—i.e., the extent to which he holds a benevolent or

malevolent view of existence. Thus, the things which a man seeks for pleasure or enjoyment are profoundly revealing psychologically; they are the index of his character and soul. (By "soul," I mean: a man's consciousness and his basic motivating values.)

There are, broadly, five (interconnected) areas that allow man to experience the enjoyment of life: productive work, human relationships, recreation, art, sex.

Productive work is the most fundamental of these: through his work man gains his basic sense of control over existence—his sense of efficacy—which is the necessary foundation of the ability to enjoy any other value. The man whose life lacks direction or purpose, the man who has no creative goal, necessarily feels helpless and out of control; the man who feels helpless and out of control, feels inadequate to and unfit for existence; and the man who feels unfit for existence is incapable of enjoying it.

One of the hallmarks of a man of self-esteem, who regards the universe as open to his effort, is the profound pleasure he experiences in the productive work of his mind; his enjoyment of life is fed by his unceasing concern to grow in knowledge and ability—to think, to achieve, to move forward, to meet new challenges and overcome them—to earn the pride of a constantly expanding efficacy.

A different kind of soul is revealed by the man who, predominantly, takes pleasure in working only at the routine and familiar, who is inclined to enjoy working in a semi-daze, who sees happiness in freedom from challenge or struggle or effort: the soul of a man profoundly deficient in self-esteem, to whom the universe appears as unknowable and vaguely threatening, the man whose central motivating impulse is a longing for safety, not the safety that is won by efficacy, but the safety of a world in which efficacy is not demanded.

Still a different kind of soul is revealed by the man who finds it inconceivable that work—any form of work—can be enjoyable, who regards the effort of earning a living as a necessary evil, who dreams only of the pleasures that begin when the workday ends, the pleasure of drowning his brain in alcohol or television or billiards or women, the pleasure of not being conscious: the soul of a man with scarcely a shred of self-esteem, who never expected the universe to be comprehensible and takes his lethargic dread of it for granted, and whose only form of relief and only notion of enjoyment is the dim flicker of undemanding sensations.

Still another kind of soul is revealed by the man who takes pleasure, not in achievement, but in destruction, whose action is aimed, not at attaining efficacy, but at ruling those who have attained it: the soul of a man so abjectly lacking in self-value, and so overwhelmed by terror of existence, that his sole form of self-fulfillment is to unleash his resentment and hatred against those who do not share his state, those who are able to live—as if, by destroying the confident, the strong and the healthy, he could convert impotence into efficacy.

A rational, self-confident man is motivated by a love of values and by a desire to achieve them. A neurotic is motivated by fear and by a desire to escape it. This difference in motivation is reflected, not only in the things each type of man will seek for pleasure, but in the nature of the pleasure they will experience.

The emotional quality of the pleasure experienced by the four men described above, for instance, is not the same. The quality of any pleasure depends on the mental processes that give rise to and attend it, and on the nature of the values involved. The pleasure of using one's consciousness properly, and the "pleasure" of being unconscious, are not the same—just as the pleasure of achieving real values, of gaining an authentic sense of efficacy, and the "pleasure" of temporarily diminishing one's sense of fear and helplessness, are not the same. The man of

self-esteem experiences the pure, unadulterated enjoyment of using his faculties properly and of achieving actual values in reality—a pleasure of which the other three men can have no inkling, just as he has no inkling of the dim, murky state which they call "pleasure."

This same principle applies to all forms of enjoyment. Thus, in the realm of human relationships, a different form of pleasure is experienced, a different sort of motivation is involved, and a different kind of character is revealed, by the man who seeks for enjoyment the company of human beings of intelligence, integrity and self-esteem, who share his exacting standards—and by the man who is able to enjoy himself only with human beings who have no standards whatever and with whom, therefore, he feels free to be himself—or by the man who finds pleasure only in the company of people he despises, to whom he can compare himself favorably—or by the man who finds pleasure only among people he can deceive and manipulate, from whom he derives the lowest neurotic substitute for a sense of genuine efficacy: a sense of power.

For the rational, psychologically healthy man, the desire for pleasure is the desire to celebrate his control over reality. For the neurotic, the desire for pleasure is the desire to escape from reality.

Now consider the sphere of recreation. For instance, a party. A rational man enjoys a party as an emotional reward for achievement, and he can enjoy it only if in fact it involves activities that are enjoyable, such as seeing people whom he likes, meeting new people whom he finds interesting, engaging in conversations in which something worth saying and hearing is being said and heard. But a neurotic can "enjoy" a party for reasons unrelated to the real activities taking place; he may hate or despise or fear all the people present, he may act like a noisy fool and feel secretly ashamed of it—but he will feel that he is enjoying it all, because people are emitting the vibrations of approval, or because it is a social distinction to have been invited to this party, or because other people appear to be gay, or because the party has spared him, for the length of an evening, the terror of being alone.

The "pleasure" of being drunk is obviously the pleasure of escaping from the responsibility of consciousness. And so are the kind of social gatherings, held for no other purpose than the expression of hysterical chaos, where the guests wander around in an alcoholic stupor, prattling noisily and senselessly, and enjoying the illusion of a universe where one is not burdened with purpose, logic, reality or awareness.

Observe, in this connection, the modern "beatniks"—for instance, their manner of dancing. What one sees is not smiles of authentic enjoyment, but the vacant, staring eyes, the jerky, disorganized movements of what looks like decentralized bodies, all working very hard—with a kind of flat-footed hysteria—at projecting an air of the purposeless, the senseless, the mindless. This is the "pleasure" of unconsciousness.

Or consider the quieter kind of "pleasures" that fill many people's lives: family picnics, ladies' parties or "coffee klatches," charity bazaars, vegetative kinds of vacation—all of them occasions of quiet boredom for all concerned, in which the boredom is the value. Boredom, to such people, means safety, the known, the usual, the routine—the absence of the new, the exciting, the unfamiliar, the demanding.

What is a demanding pleasure? A pleasure that demands the use of one's mind; not in the sense of problem solving, but in the sense of exercising discrimination, judgment, awareness.

One of the cardinal pleasures of life is offered to man by works of art. Art, at its highest potential, as the projection of things "as they might be and ought to be," can provide man with an invaluable emotional fuel. But, again, the kind of art works one responds to, depends on one's deepest values and premises.

A man can seek the projection of the heroic, the intelligent, the efficacious, the dramatic, the purposeful, the stylized, the ingenious, the challenging; he can seek the pleasure of admiration, of looking up to great values. Or he can seek the satisfaction of contemplating gossip-column variants of the folks next door, with nothing demanded of him, neither in thought nor in value standards; he can feel himself pleasantly warmed by projections of the known and familiar, seeking to feel a little less of "a stranger and afraid in a world [he] never made." Or his soul can vibrate affirmatively to projections of horror and human degradation, he can feel gratified by the thought that he's not as bad as the dope-addicted dwarf or the crippled lesbian he's reading about; he can relish an art which tells him that man is evil, that reality is unknowable, that existence is unendurable, that no one can help anything, that his secret terror is normal.

Art projects an implicit view of existence—and it is one's own view of existence that determines the art one will respond to. The soul of the man whose favorite play is Cyrano de Bergerac is radically different from the soul of the man whose favorite play is Waiting for Godot.

Of the various pleasures that man can offer himself, the greatest is pride—the pleasure he takes in his own achievements and in the creation of his own character. The pleasure he takes in the character and achievements of another human being is that of admiration. The highest expression of the most intense union of these two responses—pride and admiration—is romantic love. Its celebration is sex.

It is in this sphere above all—in a man's romantic-sexual responses—that his view of himself and of existence stands eloquently revealed. A man falls in love with and sexually desires the person who reflects his own deepest values.

There are two crucial respects in which a man's romantic-sexual responses are psychologically revealing: in his choice of partner—and in the meaning, to him, of the sexual act.

A man of self-esteem, a man in love with himself and with life, feels an intense need to find human beings he can admire—to find a spiritual equal whom he can love. The quality that will attract him most is self-esteem—self-esteem and an unclouded sense of the value of existence. To such a man, sex is an act of celebration, its meaning is a tribute to himself and to the woman he has chosen, the ultimate form of experiencing concretely and in his own person the value and joy of being alive.

The need for such an experience is inherent in man's nature. But if a man lacks the self-esteem to earn it, he attempts to fake it—and he chooses his partner (subconsciously) by the standard of her ability to help him fake it, to give him the illusion of a self-value he does not possess and of a happiness he does not feel.

Thus, if a man is attracted to a woman of intelligence, confidence and strength, if he is attracted to a heroine, he reveals one kind of soul; if, instead, he is attracted to an irresponsible, helpless scatterbrain, whose weakness enables him to feel masculine, he reveals another kind of soul; if he is attracted to a frightened slut, whose lack of judgment and standards allows him to feel free of reproach, he reveals another kind of soul.

The same principle, of course, applies to a woman's romantic-sexual choices.

The sexual act has a different meaning for the person whose desire is fed by pride and admiration, to whom the pleasurable self-experience it affords is an end in itself—and for the person who seeks in sex the proof of

masculinity (or femininity), or the amelioration of despair, or a defense against anxiety, or an escape from boredom.

Paradoxically, it is the so-called pleasure-chasers—the men who seemingly live for nothing but the sensation of the moment, who are concerned only with having "a good time"—who are psychologically incapable of enjoying pleasure as an end in itself. The neurotic pleasure-chaser imagines that, by going through the motions of a celebration, he will be able to make himself feel that he has something to celebrate.

One of the hallmarks of the man who lacks self-esteem—and the real punishment for his moral and psychological default—is the fact that all his pleasures are pleasures of escape from the two pursuers whom he has betrayed and from whom there is no escape: reality and his own mind.

Since the function of pleasure is to afford man a sense of his own efficacy, the neurotic is caught in a deadly conflict: he is compelled, by his nature as man, to feel a desperate need for pleasure, as a confirmation and expression of his control over reality—but he can find pleasure only in an escape from reality. That is the reason why his pleasures do not work, why they bring him, not a sense of pride, fulfillment, inspiration, but a sense of guilt, frustration, hopelessness, shame. The effect of pleasure on a man of self-esteem is that of a reward and a confirmation. The effect of pleasure on a man who lacks self-esteem is that of a threat—the threat of anxiety, the shaking of the precarious foundation of his pseudo-self-value, the sharpening of the ever-present fear that the structure will collapse and he will find himself face to face with a stern, absolute, unknown and unforgiving reality.

One of the commonest complaints of patients who seek psychotherapy, is that nothing has the power to give them pleasure, that authentic enjoyment seems impossible to them. This is the inevitable dead end of the policy of pleasure-as-escape.

To preserve an unclouded capacity for the enjoyment of life, is an unusual moral and psychological achievement. Contrary to popular belief, it is the prerogative, not of mindlessness, but of an unremitting devotion to the act of perceiving reality, and of a scrupulous intellectual integrity. It is the reward of self-esteem.