

A Philosophical and Rhetorical Theory of BDSM

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In this paper I try to explain in what sense one can be said to enjoy pain and also sexualize the experience. This illuminates the core of the set of activities called BDSM (bondage, discipline, sadism, masochism) and S/M (sadomasochism). In any organized, socially defined, and consensual S/M play the (submissive) bottom desires some higher cognitive goals; to reach them he or she needs experienced pain. The pain is here a kind of hardship condition that is needed for reaching the desired goal, or sexualized pleasure. I compare this situation with that of heroic action where the agent aims at glory via some conquered hardship conditions. In these examples the needed hardship conditions are desirable only in a conditional sense. The life of the (dominant) top can be analysed in similar terms. The top's condition is ambiguous: she needs to serve the bottom although she is supposed to be the sadist who hurts the bottom; these two goals may be mutually incompatible. My solution is to say that the top wants to hurt the bottom but, to be successful, she needs to serve the bottom. Next, I discuss the sexual nature of BDSM and conclude that not all of its forms are sexual in nature. Finally, I show how such linguistic tropes as metaphor and metonymy can be used to further analyse the main points of this paper.

Keywords: BDSM, S/M, sadism, masochism, sex, pain, pleasure

Modern sexuality is a diverse and often controversial field of which BDSM is a perfect example: “Bondage and discipline (B/D), dominance and submission (D/S), and sadism and masochism (S/M), also known as BDSM/kink, is becoming an increasingly popular topic in both mainstream media and people’s sexual lives” (Pillai–Friedman, Pollitt, and Castaldo, 2015, p. 196).¹ Some people seek physical pain as sexual stimulation in consensual sadomasochistic play or perhaps they seek sexual stimulation via pain — the situation can be described in many ways.

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¹A useful Terms Dictionary can be found at <http://www.differentequals.com/glossary.html> (accessed 11.13.15).

Medically, sexually loaded pain preference is called *algolagnia*, or the love of pain. Passive *algolagnia* means sexual pleasure resulting from felt pain. Such a term implies that one could indeed find pain pleasurable. Active *algolagnia* means pleasure derived from inflicting pain. Then there is pleasure derived from witnessing, as a spectator, the pain of others. Obviously, the three types of pleasure are categorically different. I am here interested, for analytical and logical reasons mainly, what happens when a bottom says she enjoys a painful play thus finding her role and situation in some typical way a pleasurable and rewarding experience. Can she say she enjoys pain or that there is pleasure in pain? Such a report may look unconvincing because to say “Pain means pleasure,” “Pain gives me pleasure,” or “I love painful positions,” sounds so dubious.² Such phrases look elliptical or in some other way not literally true. I will explain how to understand a rational person who enjoys and therefore searches for painful situations and degrading interpersonal exchanges freely and rationally, or for a good reason. (A person is rational in a descriptive sense when she can offer reasons for her plans, actions, and projects.)

Such an explanation requires a hard look at the psychological structures and rhetorical strategies of desire, which I try to provide. The discursive context of S/M is logically so complex no wonder one may claim a bottom desires pain: he says, after a hard whipping session, that he enjoyed it so much, it was delightful, it gave him much pleasure, he felt empowered, he loves it, and he wants to do it again. So, how may the following quotation be read? It sounds rather trivial to say, “Pleasure’ was associated with extremely intense sensations” (Faccio, Casini, and Cipoletta, 2014, p. 752). The authors seem to mean that pleasure was associated with extremely intense pain, which is not a trivial point: pain itself is not the main thing; the pain must be excruciatingly strong. To the intended audiences (those the players talk to) all this sounds plausible, which may not be true of their non-intended audiences (outsiders). We can then ask, what exactly does the bottom enjoy and why, and then what are the key features of her situation she finds so desirable? The top’s typical position and motivation must be addressed as well.

Hardship Conditions, Contingent and Necessary

Let me take an example, heroic desire, which we can then apply to the case of consensual S/M play. The essence of heroic desire is glory; in other words, its goal

²See *The Story of O* by Pauline Réage (1954/1998). Miss O willingly suffers from torture, humiliation, slavery, and general objectification; yet, she certainly does not derive any pleasure from them. Her motive is an unconditionally submissive drive she herself calls love. The title of the work is an allusion to Georges Bataille’s *The Story of the Eye* (1928/2001) where the heroes play with egg shaped objects including testicles, eyeballs, etc. Miss O’s name, the letter O, is such an object; moreover, it signifies an empty hole and is the symbol of void and nothingness. Miss O is, therefore, a virtual nobody. Bataille’s heroes are potent and unadulterated sadists in the spirit of M. de Sade.

is personal glory. Heroes are glorified, glory is a *prima facie* intrinsically desirable personal characteristic, and as such it is the goal of heroic desire (MacIntyre, 1981, Ch. 10). In order to achieve glory, one must first suffer from some serious hardship conditions, which one conquers in a certain well-understood, heroic manner. In this sense, I say a hero needs the hardship conditions because without them he cannot be a hero. I say he needs the hardship conditions because he cannot desire them as such: they are not intrinsically desirable states of affairs. However, I am certainly not saying that no needed states of affairs can be intrinsically desirable. I desire to have a nice picnic and therefore I need companions. Companionship is indeed *prima facie* intrinsically desirable, even if we do not always desire companions. In this example we do not desire companionship intrinsically, though. Anyway, the hardship conditions that are relevant to heroic desires must be somehow exceptional, generally undesirable, and intense enough to be more or less impossible and unbearable; it is exactly these aspects that make them so relevant here. A hero will overcome the hardships and that is one of the reasons why she is a hero and deserves her glory. Without them heroism lacks its typical grandeur and sublimity.

The relationship between a heroic desire and the relevant need is not instrumental but is as if logically constitutive: to be a hero logically entails the needed type of states of affairs. We may also say they are required. If I want ice-cream I also need money to buy some, but here money is needed in an instrumental sense. However, it is not required — because I may steal the ice-cream; hence, money is not necessary — a particular instrument never is. When a person says “I want to be a hero,” on the other hand, the goal and content of the *de dicto* desire is <being a hero>, but what is the relevant *de re* desired goal in this case?³ Obviously, the person desires *de re* a goal that (necessarily) includes the fact that he suffers from some serious hardship conditions. He cannot be a hero without the relevant suffering and that is why he also must suffer — because this is a constituent part of the goal of his *de re* desire. He desires something that logically entails his personal suffering. And he realizes that he cannot be a hero independently of these hardship conditions; therefore, he would not like to avoid them or even to diminish their force however terrifying they might be. (Some heroes of science and learning were burnt alive; like Giordano Bruno who could have avoided it.) Of course, he does not like the hardship conditions as such, or intrinsically, but now he realizes that he needs them and thus also wants those at least in this peculiarly restricted *de re* sense. In this rather non-standard manner, he must suffer and he is willing to suffer. However, when he ponders his *de dicto* desire to be a hero he may well regret the fact that he must suffer so much, but this indicates a non-heroic episode in his otherwise heroic saga. He may be afraid. His desirability

³I use *de dicto* to refer to what an agent thinks of his desire and *de re* to refer to what he actually gets; see also Airaksinen (2016). I use chevrons to designate the content or intentional object of desire.

attributions are ambiguous in this sense. As I already said, this does not mean he would desire the hardship conditions independently of his heroic desire, which is a kind of master desire here — some philosophers argue he could have done so (Stocker, 1979). All this applies to the mysteries of S/M play and its apparent attributions of pleasure to painful acts and demeaning situations.

Hardship conditions are either contingent or necessary, in the following sense. One consistently tries to minimize or avoid contingent hardship conditions altogether. The relevant necessary conditions one may not want to minimize because one needs them; in this sense they are instrumentally desirable. It is also possible that one does not want to eliminate them because they are unavoidable. We are here concerned with necessary hardship conditions which one needs in order to play the game properly — such games exist as the case of heroism shows. Contingent hardship conditions are common: *de re* desires tend to generate them endlessly simply because the world is hard and cruel and one's life is a struggle; they may be unavoidable, because of some causal factors, and then the only thing one can do is to try to minimize their effects. If you want to box you must accept the fact that your opponent will hurt you, but you do not box in order to get hurt. You try to minimize the pain, or you may even dream of not getting hurt at all.

S/M players cannot say the same as they need their pain and even aim to maximize it to the very point where a safety word is used. The games they play, especially edgework or edge plays, may be genuinely dangerous, even deadly — some people want it that way (Newmahr, 2011, pp. 147–148). They may say, the more intense the pain, and in many cases also the danger, the better the pleasure and enjoyment: when pain increases so does pleasure until the pain is too overwhelming to tolerate any longer and it is time to stop. It looks like pain and pleasure are indeed firmly connected as they vary and increase in unison. Pain and pleasure may even feel mutually undistinguishable; they feel like one mixed sensation. However, pleasure always tracks pain and not the other way round; so, it is tempting to say pain produces pleasure or even that pain itself is pleasant. Here pain comes first: it sounds dubious to claim that pain tracks pleasure in the sense that pleasure brings about pain; it may happen but when pain arrives pleasure vanishes. Ice cream is first pleasant but too much feels bad, and pleasure vanishes accordingly. Sometimes too much pleasure turns into pain and pleasure then disappears. Therefore, as it can be said, pain may bring about pleasure but not the other way round. We do not aim at pleasure just to feel pain but we may aim at pain in order to feel pleasure. It is then possible to see why a person may report pain as pleasure, or that she or he enjoys the pain: the two sensations are as if internally connected and ordered so that pain comes first. Hence, it does not make sense for a bottom to say that she desires pleasure but yet she hopes she could get it with lesser pain or with no pain at all. The relevant necessary hardship conditions are such that their existence creates a strong and obvious illusion — it is an illusion — to the effect that they

and the corresponding goals of *de dicto* desire are somehow in line: a player wants pleasure and this is how she gets it — via strong pain. It is, alas, logically impossible to enjoy pain qua pain.

What then is the master goal the bottom desires in S/M play? The prima facie goal is fatally ambiguous as the bottom may say equally well either “Whip me, give me pleasure” or “Whip me, hurt me.” Hence, the question is, how to dissolve such an ambiguity? The first step for an adequate answer is to notice that we must seek for goals other than such simple sensations as pleasure and pain, that is, complex cognitive goals whose arrival explains the fact that one wants pain in the first hand. Actually, I will suggest that heroism and S/M bottoming are analogous cases. Hence, we can apply here what was said above.

A relevant higher order goal of S/M play, as reported by participants, may be something like <intimate excitement, social admiration, self-respect, heroic posturing, glorious and exceptional endurance, losing oneself>. This is to say that pleasure no longer is a simple sensory (sexual, pseudo-sexual, or asexual) experience, at the same level with sensory pain. Of course, there also is pain that is more cognitive and even reasoned, like the pain of the memory of the lost love of one’s life or the pain of moral regret. In S/M such pain can be found in slavery, humiliation, and punishment plays. Now, even if we ad hoc considered simple physical pain as a mere bodily sensation we need not think of pleasure in these same terms. We may not put much weight on sensory pleasure as such but we certainly emphasize sensory pain, as the former is so fleeting and the latter is so cruel. Pleasure comes and goes, especially in sex, but pain can be intolerable. Thus, pain is a so much stronger sensation than pleasure that it tends to dominate our reasoning, planning, and action when it occurs, or we avoid it as if automatically. There is no upper bound of felt pain, until you lose consciousness or die of a pain shock. Pleasure is in this perspective a timid feeling, even considering the pleasure of sexual orgasm; some opiate-induced pleasures may of course be very strong. However, pleasure cannot kill like pain can via pain shock and cardiac arrest. Pleasure seeking may also kill but that is a different thing: it is a long process. Hence, quite rationally, we are reluctant to suffer strong sensory pain if the main compensation is sensory pleasure — pain dominates in these cases. If we willingly suffer pain, the reasons to do so are seldom based on expected feelings of sensory pleasure. We normally emphasize those non-sensory and complex cognitive, hedonistic, or non-hedonistic reasons that are genuinely important to us: we know that our highest and most complex pleasures are pleasures only in a figurative sense. Nevertheless, S/M is permeated with simple hedonistic language, which may sound misleading.

It is indeed easy to go astray here: we say simple pain produces simple pleasure, and here we go wrong. In S/M we see a situation in which simple pain is connected to complex and cognitive types of higher pleasures like delight and reasons for action based on them. Notice that in humiliation plays, the pain is complex

and cognitive. If I am displayed naked in harsh light and in a compromising pose to an unsympathetic audience, the pain is indeed pain but it is unlike simple sensory pain. Hence, in S/M, the pain is simple or complex but the pleasure is always complex and cognitive in nature. I will argue that the pleasure accompanying simple or complex pain is always complex and cognitive, and this also applies to S/M and other BDSM related activities.

Here is a non-hedonistic example. Think of a religious (say Dominican) flagellant and his necessary hardship conditions. It was a common practice among the true believers to punish and discipline themselves by whipping oneself until blood flows. This can be done publicly or privately. Here the goal is penitence and the purification of the soul; to achieve this, pain is needed along with endurance and free commitment to the practice in question. We can then say that here the goal and content of *de dicto* desire is <penitence> so that only the *de re* goal entails strong pain: what the person wants is penitence but this goal is, *de re*, necessarily associated with the physical pain. Therefore, he needs the pain and pain is what he gets before his goal may become accessible to him. The person may well wish that he could do penitence painlessly but this is implausible: nothing else works. In other words, pain is needed as the constituent part of the desire as it is that kind of a goal, that is, like the passion of the Christ. The fact is, there is no relevant penitence without self-inflicted pain and even personal injury. What about the act of whipping? One can produce pain by many other methods as well; so, whipping is in this sense optional: one's goal of *de dicto* desire requires pain, which is a sign of penitence, and one then selects whipping as the specific method to produce pain. On the other hand, the need for whipping is, as we can say, fixed through a narrative whose key point is that Jesus was flogged. Because his life is my model, so I must accept the use of this same method to cause pain; or, flogging is then the key pain-producing method (Westermarck, 1939/2013, Ch. IX).

The S/M bottom needs her pain in order to achieve her goals that can be described in terms of pleasure or satisfaction, or something like them; exactly how, it may be difficult to say. That does not matter as long as we keep in mind that we are now discussing mental states that are complex and cognitive as well as positive and desirable. After all, the pleasure in question derives from a source of satisfaction that is something like <intimate excitement> or <heroic posturing>. The point is that simple pain is part of a complicated mental process that in the end satisfies one's desires, or achieves certain complex cognitive goals. Only such goals make the pain play understandable. Therefore, the crucial point is the interplay between needs and desires in this context. Analytically speaking, these two concepts must not be confused or conflated because then the paradoxical algolagnic maxim "pain is pleasant" returns, but as a *contradictio ad adjecto* it indicates an unacceptable paradox. Pain, as such, cannot be desirable, although it may be needed when one realizes a desired goal, which must be something that is intrinsically desirable.

Desirability, Internal and External

Let us consider an example from the BDSM world: cosmetic amputations of, say, some fingers, allegedly make one look more attractive to an audience. Such an activity is not a strong candidate for exemplifying some *prima facie* desirable goals. Most people would say they are not desirable at all, or they are unmanageable as *desiderata*, and also think that they have good reasons to say so. Nevertheless, such desires are real in the sense that people do freely engage in such actions (Estes, 2016). As we have seen, why they do so, or what their relevant reasons are, needs a careful explanation; just like in the case of pain, we cannot say some people just desire cosmetic amputations. I have used above the standard term “intrinsically desirable” and also “*prima facie* intrinsically desirable” where “intrinsically” indicates no reference to needs or instrumentality. Intrinsic desires are, therefore, unqualified desires. The *prima facie* qualification means that a goal is commonly understandable as desirable. Therefore, it is a condition of easy recognition and acceptance. Next, theories of desirability can be divided into internalist and externalist theories again in a rather standard manner: roughly speaking, if and only if the desirability of a goal must be defined, at least partly but also definitely, in terms of the desiring person’s own attributes, do we have an externalist theory; otherwise we have an internalist theory. There is a good reason for using such simple, heuristic definitions. Of course, I could have said that no personal attributes are needed when a theory of desirability is internal, otherwise it is external. However, the first version is simple and revealing, as I will show.

Let me start from the externalist theories of desirability. Their problem is that too many different personal goals become desirable since the only way we can decide whether something is desirable or not is to find out whether someone freely desires it, or it is his desire based on what this person is like. Whatever features the alleged goal may have, the deciding factor is, anyway, that someone is such that he wants it, or finds its reception personally satisfying for some personal reason. Pain, humiliation, and amputations are desirable because people are such that they actually desire them. You cannot desire a goal if it is not desirable; although some desirable goals are such that you personally never desire them or cannot desire them. People can give their reasons for wanting strange looking goals, reasons that are ultimately based on their own personal attributes. For instance, I want a cosmetic amputation because it is my considered belief that I am such a person who cherishes amputations, deserves them, and benefits from them and hence accepts cosmetic amputations. As an amputee I feel I am beautiful, empowered, and perhaps in some counterintuitive sense a more complete human being. One may remark, of course, that such things are not *prima facie* desirable — like pleasure, glory, and respect are. Here the *prima facie* clause indicates that it is somehow easy or at least common to desire glory and respect, unlike with pain, humiliation, and amputations. That is to say, the *prima facie*

clause is a highly suspicious addition to our relevant philosophical vocabulary. It may well be an interesting term to empirical psychologists but not to philosophers, argues the externalist. I may recognize that cosmetic amputations are not *prima facie* desirable but as an externalist I cannot put much weight on that point; I cannot see how something like near consensus on this matter could change my idea of desirability, however idiosyncratic. I may share beliefs on many potential goals but not on this one.

Externalist theories look too open ended. Take as an example the well-known view that the psychological basis of desirability is *reward* when reward means an earned and deserved personal benefit (Schroeder, 2004, pp. 67ff). We can suppose here, for the argument's sake, that reward refers to a positive, subjective mental state of being rewarded; this is not necessary, of course. So, a person wants a goal only if what it promises is subjectively rewarding to her. A reward qua personal reward depends on what kind of person you are. Also, I aim at personal glory because glory — if I am perceived as glorious — is rewarding to me as such. To be successful is obviously rewarding to me and so I desire success. I may desire humiliation, if it is rewarding — and it may be so — either from my own idiosyncratic viewpoint or from my perceived social perspective. The same can be said of pain: sometimes pain is rewarding, but still not desirable; think of our dedicated flagellant. However, what is rewarding depends on the person, her attributes, and her present situation, and the same can be said of the desirability of a goal of desire — which indeed sounds like an ad hoc solution to our problem concerning the nature of desire and desirability. The last but not the least problem is that the externalist theories make too many strange, wicked, and disgusting goals intrinsically desirable — they are just not *prima facie* desirable. As I have shown above, we must say that some goals of desire are indeed internally implausible as *de dicto* goals and make sense only as needs, or instrumental or constituent elements of *de re* goals. A person may not *de dicto* desire pain although it might be part of his *de re* desired goal; or, as we should say, he must have it in order to achieve his *de dicto* goal. Externalist theories threaten to void this view. In many cases what we need in order to achieve our goals is not desired at all; we may even agree that it is not desirable as such. I cannot see how a supporter of the externalist theories of desirability can support this view. Human agents can desire anything.

Therefore, we need internalist theories. Here desirability does not depend on the person but on the perceived properties of the goal of desire itself. This allows us to say that some goals are not in fact desirable, even when they are needed or desired. Tortured bodies may be and may have been desirable in some cultures in some periods, but not today. There are strong normative, evaluative arguments to show that tortured bodies are not desirable. I take this to be obvious. Some men find coercion a desirable sexual strategy but, one may say, mistakenly. They misconstrue the difference between desire and desirability; actually, they say they desire what is undesirable, which is a grave error. If we accept the maxim “You

cannot desire what is undesirable,” we must say that the rapist does not desire what he thinks he desires. Indeed, some desires have goals that are not desirable in a rational perspective: no plausible reasons support actions towards those goals. Such cases may look like (rational) desire-based actions in the third person *oratio obliqua* perspective but they are not.

All this indicates that we need an internalist, or realist, theory of desirability if we want to do justice to the logic of desire. This allows us to distinguish adequately between those *de dicto/de re* cases where the suggested *de dicto* goal is in some sense implausible, improbable, or even impossible and hence must be rejected. We do not want to give such goals a chance to be looked at as something desirable as such. They can then be replaced by a more realistic *de dicto* goal candidate, like <heroism>, and the rejected goal moved over to the *de re* world where it is either an instrumental or a constituent component in the set of conditions and properties that form the relevant *de re* goal.

In other words, let us reject certain suggested and attempted goals, which is only possible if we lean on an internalist theory of desirability. We say a person errs about her own goals so that she just says and thinks that she desires her impossible goal. In actual fact she erroneously believes she desires *de dicto* something that is at most a component of her *de re* desire. These components can thus be classified as needs, as I said above — some needs are such that they do not make sense as *de dicto* goals. Hence, we can drop the terms like “intrinsically desirable,” “instrumentally desirable,” and “prima facie desirable” from our dictionary. It is indeed the case that people often talk loosely and ambiguously; we get used to such idioms although we should not accept them as fully informative. People may say they enjoyed pain when they mean they enjoyed something altogether different, as we saw above. They should have said they needed the pain so much and in this sense they enjoyed or actually appreciated receiving it. They needed the pain to achieve a goal that we all, with good reasons, can understand as desirable *de dicto*, such as heroism or exceptional endurance under serious hardship conditions. Such goals are cognitively complex and their descriptions open ended, just like narratives about what is good in suffering always are.

A person is expected to tell a long and complex argument if he ever hopes to make his unintended, perhaps hostile, audience agree on the fact that his goals, of which pain and humiliation are a significant part, are desirable in some internalist sense. Just to say — seriously — “I want to be humiliated” suggests that the person is crazy, which is not to say that he in principle could not tell a convincing description about his beliefs, needs, and desires and their true, genuinely desirable *de dicto* goals, in which case the person is not mentally challenged. He says he needs to suffer and thus conquer some hardship conditions, otherwise he cannot reach his master goal like <finding the ultimate limits of human endurance> or <rejecting all limits>, which indeed are understandable goals. They represent and exemplify values that as such make a goal desirable, values that are non-personal

and universalizable, even if not desired by everyone. We can understand this kind of desirability without a reference to someone's personal attributes. Of course, when we ask who would actually desire them, we need to discuss the psychology of personal attributes, but this is another matter.

The World According to the Top

Suppose a top plans to both recognize and serve the bottom. In this case his *de dicto* goal is <I serve you>, which is an intrinsically desirable goal. <Serving> is prima facie a good goal. Notice how paradoxical this discussion about the top serving the bottom now becomes: a true, dominant, edge-playing top does not want to serve anyone; obviously, this is what a dominant hero would like to think. If the top wanted to serve, he no longer is a top; hence, for him <servicing> is an unavailable goal of desire. It is only something he needs to do, perhaps a kind of hardship condition for him. It is what we can call a locally undesirable goal. If the top tends to desire it, he is in trouble and he knows it, hopefully. If a top genuinely serves the bottom both parties are just play-acting. It is then of course true that in cooperative S/M play, both the top and the bottom can reach their goals and satisfy their desires but that is a result of some kind of make-believe pre-established harmony. The top pretends to be in control and the bottom pretends to be at the mercy of the top. The top acts so that they both will be satisfied in the end, which is really an inconsistent role and goal.

A good explanation of S/M-related desires may require that a similar explanation that can handle the motives of being a bottom can also handle those of being a top. Suppose a top whips a bottom and by doing so satisfies her personal desire; what is the true story of the top's desire and its satisfaction in this context? If you say, elliptically, that the bottom enjoys pain, what does the top enjoy then? Obviously he enjoys causing pain or providing pain — a notice that these two expressions conversationally imply different things. A legal executioner, when he flogs a person, is not providing pain in the sense of making pain available to him; he is causing pain. However, a top provides pain to the bottom in an S/M play, so both the top and the bottom seemingly desire the same thing, pain. If so, what is the top supposed to get out of this co-operation as he personally cannot feel any pain? Why is he doing it? What is his reward, understood according to some internalist theory of desirability?

We can now ask, is the top really a sadist or is he just play-acting? If he provides pain to his bottom he serves her: hence, he cannot be a sadist who is not supposed to recognize his victim. Yet, S/M players report that tops are sadistic types and that they enjoy their relevant opportunities (Newmahr, 2011, pp. 78, 109). This is what motivates them. Hence, a top must be a sadist in order to be a true top, so his *de dicto* desire is, for instance, <I torture her>. However, he also needs to serve his current bottom and, hence, his relevant *de re* desire includes his goal to

recognize and serve the bottom, without which the idea of consensual S/M play cannot be realized. So, his *de re* goal includes a component that is soft and pleasing and as such contrary to his *de dicto* desired sadistic goals — this is a hardship condition. I have already argued that there is nothing that is impossible in such a case. It is possible and actually quite common. The top gets pleasure out of the situation, sadistic pleasure, that is, which is not sensory in nature but instead a higher-order belief based on cognitive pleasure or delight. He enjoys the situation and its embedded goal that he finds desirable in the internalist sense; his goal may be <the sense of unlimited power>. To achieve this, he needs to serve the bottom: he can control and dominate the bottom only as long as he also serves her. He does not want to serve but he needs to do it. Or, alternatively, he wants to serve and then he is merely play-acting as a top. Anyway, the top's situation tends to be and to remain ambiguous: we can always ask, is he serving or hurting the bottom. The need to recognize and serve is strictly incompatible with the sadistic goals of desire, such as <torture>. Is it really plausible to say that needs and desires can be related in this way? If you want to torture, you may need to pretend that you recognize and serve, but this is not enough, it is dishonest. This shows how deeply ambiguous the top's position is in consensual S/M play.

Think of the Marquis de Sade's fiction and its stupefying account of non-consensual sadism (Sade, 1795/1966). His heroes, we may call them so, flog their helpless victims with obvious pleasure and satisfaction, never recognizing their humanity. However, flogging someone is hard and heartless work and as such is a dubious candidate for being a desirable goal. A public executioner does not want to flog the prisoner; he wants his salary, and that is why he needs to whip a person. In the same way, what does a Sadeian sadist, a true sadist, desire and what does he need to do? If the suggested *de dicto* goal is <I hurt you>, it is another misnomer, another assumed but improbable or even undesirable goal of desire. To hurt somebody, is not a desirable goal in itself, if understood in an internalist sense. It is simply something a sadist must, or needs, to do if he is going to be a true sadist. It is another need. Perhaps the proper goal is a sense of mastery or superiority and unlimited power, a kind of omnipotence that follows from being able to hurt a person who is apparently powerless to stop being hurt. Perhaps <omnipotence> is the *de dicto* goal that characterizes non-consensual Sadeian contexts whereas <ability, influence, control, and dominance> are important in consensual contexts. Dominance as a desired goal can be (externally) rewarding to certain personality types as it provides them with glory, both in their own eyes and others' as well. The relevant hardship conditions are there, too: finding a victim, manipulating her, and facing the consequences. All these may prove to be costly and treacherous achievements as they imply their own typical calamities. You do not want to face your victims' wrath.

My suggested solution to the top's motivational problem is as follows. The misleadingly expressed goal of a top's desire in consensual play is either to <hurt the bottom> or <give the bottom what she wants>, when the first one is not desirable

as such and the second goes against the definition of a top's role. Hence, we need to find the true *de dicto* goal and relegate the ideas of hurting and serving the bottom to the realm of *de re* goals and their complex causal world of facts, methods, and needs. The top needs to hurt the bottom, and at the same time recognize and serve her, otherwise he is not a good top. His complex cognitive goal is then <to be a good top> that entails <respect, influence, dominance, and glory>; all these are desirable goals in standard social contexts and they entail some complex, cognitive pleasures. Perhaps we can say that the top's raw animal excitement and arousal depend on his needs; but his justified satisfaction depends on his complex, cognitive goals. In this way, both hurting and serving are mere needs so that the desired goal is an internally desirable complex and cognitive idea. To be a top is a heroic position because of its inherent hardship conditions. A good top rises above all those contradictions in his search for personal power and social respect.

Sex and the City of Pain

It is tempting to call all S/M a sexual activity. What else could it be? S/M is sexualized because then we can easily understand why the relevant desires are directed towards pleasure as a simple bodily sensation, that is, sexual arousal and orgasm. Some evidence suggests that we can and should question such ideas. When we discuss sex and sexuality in its paradigmatic form, which is called vanilla or non-kinky sex in the BDSM context, the reasons for having sex are twofold, based both on simple sensory pleasure and complex cognitive factors. In addition to these there is, of course, unreasoned sexual drive, or what we may call lust and heat, which is based on hormonal factors and primal urge to copulate, fortified by strong social pressure — but then no desire may exist. These aspects of sexuality are strictly and explicitly regulated and sanctioned in social life (Berkowitz, 2012). Instead of discussing this, let us concentrate on the reasons for having sex. My impression is that people all too often say that the reason is pleasure in the simple sense that one wants sex because it, at least occasionally, feels so good. It seems sexual pleasure is grossly over-advertised. It may feel good but its more or less hidden goals are such as <to show one's manliness and social success based on it>, <proving one's physical attractiveness>, or <asserting one's will and scoring>. Often such reasons apply even to those cases where the role of simple pleasure is negligent. This is to say that activity can be defined as sexual even if the reasons for action are primarily cognitive reasons; the activity need not be based on something as obvious as sensory sexual pleasure. Of course the pleasure derived from the direct genital stimulation is a special and distinctive feeling and its halo extends all the way to various forms of skin contact and even to thoughts of being touched in that special way. I do not try to define the concept of sexuality here; what is sex is more dependent on our linguistic conventions than on the subject

matter itself (Soble, 1996, Ch. 1). The only thing I need to do is to remind the reader of the fact that sexual acts are also, or perhaps mainly, motivated by complex cognitive reasons. What does all this mean in the case of BDSM and S/M?

I want to argue that we can construct a continuum of cases starting from fully sexual to a-sexual to non-sexual. In other words, it seems clear that some forms of S/M are undoubtedly sexual in nature and again some other cases certainly are not. Let us start from the sexual end of the continuum. Some adult couples find references to sadism and submissiveness an excellent method of enhancing their sexual energies and guaranteeing ever stronger orgasms in what otherwise is called in standard S/M language vanilla sex. Mild sadism can be used with success, if the agents know what they are doing. Sex, for many people, is adrenalin driven business that benefits from mild to moderate forcefulness, mild pain, sense of danger, and mutual struggle. It is not uncommon that, say, the wife complains about her husband's unceasing and hence boring tenderness during their love-making, but even then their domesticated S/M play is fully sexualized. Notice that in the Marquis de Sade's stories sadism is always fully sexualized (Sade, 1795/1966, and Airaksinen, 1995). The main point is that the heroes prefer non-consensual, forced submissiveness that is to them irresistibly tempting as it first promises the highest possible degree of sexual arousal and then successful copulation. The goal is always sex, without it violence is meaningless. Moreover, violence and pain do not differentiate between a man and a woman or young and old; hence, it denies all such categorical limitations and in this sense it is excitingly liberating. Sade creates here a fantastic parody of rational thought and language that inverts all the descriptions of pain and pleasure as well as the motives based on them. Ultimately, hedonism does not make sense any more. (A curious reader can find the full story in Sade's educational parody *Philosophy in the Bedroom*; see Sade, 1795/1966, pp. 264–265). Prudential calculations tell you that this way is not the right way; yet here, torture is necessary before sex and after sex the victim ideally dies. In this dark, grossly exaggerated view, one can distinguish most of the sexualized elements of S/M, of course at the semi-symbolic level of it. Clearly, the narratives of masochism and sadism are sexualized in full. This does not mean they remain so at the other end of the continuum of relevant cases. Their variety is larger than that of sexual methods and preferences.

The minimally sexual end of the continuum can be found for instance in the dominatrix business (Smith and Cox, 1983). A man visits a professional dominatrix who whips him hard, kicks him around, and vilifies him in every possible way. Moreover, the bottom is paying a steep fee to receive all these nasty experiences of true hardship, but without sexual intercourse. Suppose no skin contact is made, genitals are not touched, and the dominatrix's outfit is not kinky or in any way sexually suggestive. The variety of treatments and the possibilities are endless. Here is a quite subtle true story: a man is whipped hard by a dominatrix; he pleads at the end of the session, "Did you ever whip anyone this hard before?" The top

replies: “You know, really this was nothing at all.” The bottom’s well-earned reward is thus denied in the end, which is painful. The result is disappointment and frustration. There is nothing that even hints at sexuality in this little story, yet it clearly belongs to the world of S/M. What is then the goal of this submissive person? The S/M play now resembles a rather unconventional psychotherapy session whose goal may well be <relief from nervous tension and shady, torturing moral guilt>, which entails metaphorically the metaphysical redemption of the bottom’s soul. It is a rite of purification, just like the religious practice of self-flagellation that normally defies sexualisation.

Notice that such cases can be sexualized, too. The dominatrix may wear sexually suggestive outfits and reveal her breasts and genitals to the bottom. The bottom’s sexual parts are mentioned or touched in various ways and finally some arousing, direct skin contact can be made or even straight copulation may occur. These cases move gradually along the continuum towards a fully sexualized endpoint. Of course sex with a dominatrix and prostitute always remains somehow ambiguous as the partners do not share the same goals; they both desire different things. This detail may of course be bypassed as irrelevant but, anyway, a shade of ambiguity concerning the nature of the sexual encounter remains. A relevant claim that illustrates such ambiguity may be common among Scandinavian feminists, namely, rape is not a sexual act; it is only violence. Another, more extremist and even paradoxical view is that vaginal penetration is always rape and thus cannot be sex.⁴ In this way, sex and violence start looking mutually ambiguous: sex and coercive power belong together. This entails that the woman always is victimized and, hence, she may want to avoid sexual encounters and the offender seeks power and domination rather than sexual gratification: “Pleasure [...] does not have to be specifically sexual, rather it may stem from power” (Faccio, Casini, and Cipoletta, 2014, p. 753). Obviously, power-derived pleasures must be cognitive-emotional, not physical. In such cases one might speak of delight and delightful experience rather than pleasure. The point may well be, the rapist *de re* needs to simulate a sex act but his desire is otherwise devoid of sexual content: its *de dicto* goal is asexual. We cannot go deeper into this theoretical idea.

It is possible to imagine S/M plays without sexuality if they are fully gratifying as, say, therapy or punishment, or as exotic and exiting entertainment. You can then sexualize these contexts in various ways and in various degrees, if you want to do that and find a good reason to do so, but it is not necessary. Many wildly stimulating, dangerous, and exciting actions are available; some you may sexualize, some you do not. If you drive 300 km/h along a Deutsche Autobahn with your Nissan GT-R, you do not sexualize the experience. Could you do so? I do not think so; it is wild but it is not sex. Of course many have tried. In this way I

⁴See for instance <https://witchwind.wordpress.com/2013/12/15/piv-is-always-rape-ok/> (accessed 12.12.16).

can sexualize just about everything, but too much is too much. It is not advisable to sexualize all aspects of S/M either. As G. E. Moore's well known quotation from Bishop Butler puts it: "Everything is what it is and not another thing." If I enjoy being thoroughly trashed and humiliated by an obnoxious woman, it need not be sex. All the way down towards the copulating pair of consenting adults the cases get less and less ambiguous until we must call them sexually loaded. As I have shown, we can understand much of the S/M activity without invoking any sexual references. In fact, if you want to have good sex *simpliciter*, you better look elsewhere. If your *de dicto* desire for sex picks out a *de re* goal whose elements contain severe pain and suffering, you after all may not be interested. If you consent or even seek for those elements of a *de re* desire, you need some good non-sexual reasons for doing so. As I have already shown, such reasons are readily available.

I need to distinguish between S/M, first, in everyday day life as a rather extreme method of petting and mutual sexual stimulation and, second, as "serious leisure" in the BDSM world. In addition to these we have a paid dominatrix and her services to the bottom. In all these, pain, punishment, humiliation, and some form of enslavement play their roles. Think again about the services of a dominatrix: the bottom pays a fee to be maltreated more or less severely and often without an obvious sexual element. Here it is easy to say that the bottom pays to receive, say, pain and humiliation. Accordingly, it is natural to say that the bottom desires pain and humiliation. If one wants to go deeper into this mystery one can say the bottom desires punishment. Next, one asks, why punishment? The answer may well be, as I have suggested below, that the bottom needs punishment as a therapeutic measure. Then one asks for what reason. The answer may well be spiritual purification and guilt reduction, or some other metaphor. The questioning should stop here; there is not much else to say. The bottom feels dirty and wants to be cleansed. He needs the pain and he gets it accordingly as a part of his *de re* desire. This also holds of such BDSM practices as slavery and punishment, both of which can be sexualised. The slave becomes a sex-slave and punishment prepares one to sexual acts. All this ultimately depends on how we want to talk about it, which then depends on our social-linguistic conventions. In a religiously motivated culture where all sex is sinful, the horror of sex makes us overtly sensitive to ascriptions of sexuality to all kinds of acts and practices so that we will see sex everywhere. Sin harasses the whole cultural scene by lurking practically everywhere. By cultivating and exploiting such forbidden pleasures BDSM becomes a nicely subversive field.

Metonymies of Desire

It is time to study the ways we speak about S/M in its various forms, or its rhetorical aspects. It seems obvious to me that the discourse concerning S/M tends to be overly simplistic, rudimentary, and sometimes not so well informed. It is

also “essentially contested”: the participants, their intended and non-intended audiences may not speak the same descriptive and normative language. For instance, are BDSM and S/M to be banned as perverted desires or promoted as exciting sexual games? Somehow it has been difficult to develop any sufficiently sophisticated linguistic tool to discuss such a peculiar world at the outer fringes of sexuality. Perhaps this has contributed to its common stigma as a perversion, paraphilia, and paraphilic disorder (Reirsöl and Kleid, 2006; also Khan, 2015, and Wright, 2010). If you enjoy being caned and claim that to be your idea of good sex, no wonder such a stigma applies to you; moreover, if the notion of perversion sounds too moralistic to use, your desires can always be medically classified as paraphilias or paraphilic disorders. Let me try to develop the idea of the language of S/M a little further.

Here I can use rhetorical tropes to describe psychological structure (Burke, 1962, Appendix D). I can do so because in this context the border between psychology and its language is so fuzzy. We cannot directly observe mental states, people are not quite sure what they desire or oppose, nor can we know what the relevant reasons for action actually are, so we must talk about them and describe them by using the resources of our everyday language. We talk about them and try to form a picture of them by these limited means. This is sometimes called folk-psychology. However, when we speak in a milieu that is half cognitive and half emotive we necessarily use rich and complicated rhetorical devices, which are then camouflaged as simple facts and truths. The simplest of such simple truths is the idea that pain is pleasure and then we somehow sexualize the context.

The language of S/M is often metaphoric, like “I feel dirty and need to be cleansed.” Here the twin metaphor moves us from the original, vaguely sexual and erotic realm of discourse to that of hygiene or even to the mundane world of housekeeping. This is what a metaphor does: it moves the discourse across borders into a new possible world and its appropriate imagery loaded with new meaning. This happens often at the very last stage of a string of verbal descriptions concerning the initial problem of pain as pleasure. After the last metaphor there is nothing to say — as if there were no place to go. Such a metaphor is a conclusive show stopper; that is why it is used. At the same time, it is a platitude masked as a deep truth. In actual fact the metaphor is nothing but a mark of surrender when other discursive devices fail us.

A much more important point is that all desires are metonymic in nature. According to Jacques Lacan, “Desire is always ‘the desire for something else’ [...], since it is impossible to desire what one already has. The object of desire is continually deferred, which is why desire is a *metonymy*” (Evans, 1996, p. 38). This also explains the lack of transparency of the relevant first-person *oratio obliqua* contexts and testimonials. Desire, or to be exact, desire language, is metonymic at two different levels. First, rather trivially, a man says “I want to be a stud” (metaphor) and then “but I need God’s help” (metonym). Here we have a metonym at

two levels; first, because there are literally thousands of different gods available, but the utterer wants, say, Jahaveh. The word “god” is then used metonymically because “God” and “Jahaveh” refer to the same thing so that they can be used, rhetorically, as alternatives. Notice that “I” and “stud” have different referents. This is rather trivial, though. Second, “help” is used metonymically in “God’s help” because only people can help others; literally speaking, it does not make sense to call God a “helper.” “God’s help” is another trope. You may say “I need my partner’s help,” then the partner and the God play the same game, so to speak, but gods can only help you in a metonymical sense. When we discuss God’s help we are in fact discussing some emerging positive facts that we then identify with God’s help. Instead of saying “positive things happened” we say “God provided his help.” These sentences refer to the same set of events and effects. Such ideas are not new; as Thomas Hobbes wrote, “Furthermore, concerning attributes of happiness, those are unworthy of God which signify sorrow (unless they be taken not for any passion, but, by a metonymy, for the effect)” [1642/1998, Ch. 15, para 14)].

However, all desires are metonymic in two different structural or formal ways. When I say I want my partner’s help, the relevant *de dicto* object <friend’s help> is correlated with the *de re* object <some person actually helping me>, and this reveals a metonymic relationship between the two objects. There is no desire without the mentioned two interrelated objects, which means a necessary metonymic relationship between them, as follows:

De dicto: I want that X is q, or I want <X is q>.

De re: I want X that is q', or I want <q'>.

It is easy to see that q and q' are not identical; this is simply because *de dicto* I want that X is q but what I get, *de re*, is q' that should be something like q, although it cannot be identical with q. The reason is that real objects are different from those we think about; or, in other words, my thought is an idealization that hard reality never fully replicates. However, the goals are metonymic simply because by naming one goal that I want I signify both of them. Normally we do not bother to distinguish between q and q' as we can verify by asking an agent whether her desire was satisfied. Often people think it was, which is possible only if you do not bother to distinguish between the corresponding *de dicto* and *de re* goals.

In fact, when I say I need something in order to get or achieve something I want, the need and the goal of desire are related metonymically. When a bottom says “I desire pain, please hurt me” it indeed looks as if the bottom desired pain and pain as such was his desired goal. As I have explained above, this may not be the case. In fact, he ultimately wants something else, like <the bliss of courage and stamina> or even <the joy of metaphysical metamorphosis>, which are obviously and unproblematically desirable things. However, here the metonymic structure of desire becomes again visible: <pain> is replaced by <bliss of courage and

stamina> or by some equivalent expression, however different its present phrasing would be, like <metaphysical metamorphosis>. This, as we can see, implies a metonymic structure. All desires have a similar structure, for instance, “I need a taxi,” that gives us the intermediate goal <taxi>, because I want to get home, which gives us <getting home>: finding a taxi and getting home metonymically change their places, as follows:

Need₁: I need X to achieve desired goal Y.

Need₂: I need Y to achieve desired goal Z, when master desire Z is expressed in terms of a metaphor.

Example: I need a taxi to get home, so obviously I want to get home. I need to get home because I want the bliss of being at home, which is a metaphor; as such it also is a conversation stopper in the sense that we do not know what we could or should say next. Here X and Y form a metonymic pair because they both relate to the same overall desire, the bliss of being at home, or Z.

In S/M, one can say “I need a good trashing” (X) because I want to experience something blissful (Y) just now. Desires work in this way: they always replace what you say you want with something else that at the same time explains what you want (X and Y). People may not feel like explaining or they do not want anybody to know why they desire something and hence they are content with the simplest possible report of their desire. Someone says “I want ice cream” when he could have said “I really want to belong to this lovely group and that is why I want to get ice cream like you do” (social reasons) or “I want to relive my best childhood memories of the time I spent with my darling dad” (sentimental nostalgic reasons). In this example, the mentioned object <ice cream> masks either <to belong to this group> or <to entertain lovely memories>. Too much is too much: we want to keep our conative and emotive landscape tidy, as it seems, and hence we prefer simple goal descriptions. We also avoid going too deep into our personal motives. In S/M, the players’ reasons work in the same simple way. All the cognitive complexities are masked by the simple metonymic uses of “I want pleasure/pain.” It does not matter whether you say “I want pain” or “I want pleasure” as both are equally needed for achieving the master desire’s goal, say, <being heroic>, when the term “heroic” invites a metaphoric reading.

The metonymies of desire get interesting when one notices that not only the phrasing of desire utilizes metonymies but the very structure of desire is metonymic as well in a way that cannot be changed or avoided. It is not a contingent feature of desire; in actual fact, the meaning of the goal of *de dicto* desire always vanishes into the thicket of stratified metonymies. This is to say that desire is unsatisfiable because in the end the person may not know what she wanted. It is easy to see how this happens in S/M. Also notice that the top at the same time serves and hurts the bottom; hence, these two descriptions are related metonymically

in the context of the play in question. “I hurt him” and “I serve him” indicate the same master desire whose goal is <pleasure> as a metaphor; one can then ask, a metaphor of what and hear no answer. Metaphors tend to be like that.

What is so special and also characteristic about S/M is the appearance of certain paradiastolic and deeply ironic metonymies of pain/pleasure dialectics. The bottom may equally well say “Hurt me, give me pain” or “Love me, give me pleasure,” as if “pain” and “pleasure” were equivalent, mutually freely exchangeable terms, which they certainly are not. It is a paradiastole, or substituting a word for its obvious opposite, just like in some forms of irony. The difference between paradiastole and irony is this: a paradiastole joins the opposites without any hidden information and presupposed thoughts. When you say, by trying to do good you bring about bad results, this may well be how it is. However, when you say, “Lada is a good car,” you hide the true facts and presuppose that your listener is able to read your mind; what you wanted to say was “Lada is a bad car.” These two tropes are closely related but irony implies mocking, unlike the serious paradiastole. Yet, both share a metonymic structure as tropes.

“A Russian Lada is indeed a good car” is a falsehood but because of its irony also eminently useable and revealing to utter. You should have said “Lada is a bad car” but instead you chose to play with a paradiastole, in this case because of your ironic intentions. In the same way, the top has truly trashed her bottom, the bottom says “It felt so good” and now it is a non-ironic paradiastole as a special form of metonymy — but only in an S/M context. The bad treatment is now said to lead to good results. If the victim is punished, the above statement is nothing but cruel irony, especially the public executioner’s “Didn’t that feel good, you want more?” We can say, as I now suggest, that the language of S/M is always metonymic, uses paradiastole of good and bad, but may do so without irony. It may sound ironic, but only if it is in third person *oratio obliqua*, as in “How funny, I think she enjoyed it” when someone is actually hurt and suffers accordingly, and everybody knows that this is the case. The utterance can then be taken to be ironic. For an insider, however, such obvious irony vanishes and the dialectics of pain/pleasure substitutability looks like a basic fact.

This metonymic ambiguity may explain another ambiguity, namely, the slippery slope of the deep suspicion that so quickly leads to the condemnation of BDSM in morality, religion, law, and psychiatry. Amazement turns into full condemnation and dictates firm restraining institutional counter action. Social power wielders as non-intended audiences are captivated by the ironies of BDSM play and then trapped by another ambiguity, that is, between tolerance based on the ideas of privacy and free choice and condemnation based on what looks like gratuitous violence and indecent, immoral, and socially unacceptable sexual perversion. The consequences have too often been legal punishment and less than voluntary medical treatment as the ironies of BDSM have exceeded the scope of what is normally expected of authoritative comprehension (White, 2006).

The context of BDSM is challenging and must look ironic from the non-intended audience's point of view. I suggest that this special feature, the free metonymic use of pain/pleasure and serve/hurt ascriptions that as such signify paradiastolic pairs of opposites, characterizes and in some sense even defines the S/M language and, therefore, also the relevant S/M plays. Any context in which such a substitution is plausible, without irony, is a good candidate for being a sadomasochistic one. Next, think of fetishism: S/M is a type of fetishism because in fetishism what is prima facie undesirable becomes an object of desire; this happens in S/M play and thus S/M seems to be a special form of fetishism. The objects of fetishist desire are, in a sense, of a wrong type. High heel shoes become an erotic object just like whipping becomes a sexually loaded reward. Indeed, the only relevant field that can be compared with S/M is fetishism. A man gets aroused by women's high-heel shoes, in which case the footwear metonymically changes into an object of love and makes a shoe an ambiguous object of desire: a shoe is a shoe but it is also so much more. We may not know how and why it happens but we know it does. However, in this case, a shoe is not a bad thing, it is a neutral entity — this is what is different. In other words, in S/M we play with paradiastolic tropes unlike in fetishism: pain and pleasure are opposites unlike women's garments and sexual arousal. In kinky sex, if drawing blood excites a person, we discover a novel ambiguity that locates us between S/M and fetishism. If we think of blood as somehow a neutral object — like a garment — we are discussing fetishism proper; if blood is scary and nauseating, we are discussing a submissive, self-humiliation related, or a masturbatory S/M practice. However, we can say that S/M and the larger part of BDSM are both fetishist: a person loves — via a typical metonymy — what as such is unlovable, or a fetish. Whether one loves the feel of the whip or the pain of whipping is not that important.

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