Roy F. Baumeister

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Preface

Several years ago, while gathering material for another project, I decided to check the literature on masochism to see whether that paradoxical behavior might be illuminated by the theory I was working on. It wasn't, but the literature on masochism confronted me with several challenges that kept my interest. It was obvious that psychology's theories of masochism had been made obsolete by recent data that contradicted many basic assumptions—such as the ideas that most masochists were mentally ill or that masochism derives from sadism. Indeed, it seemed that empirical researchers had realized the inadequacy of the old theories but had been slow to find better ones, so that collection of data had proceeded (slowly) in an atheoretical vacuum. In short, a new theory was overdue.

What intrigued me the most was that the evidence about masochism seemed to contradict many of the most common and fundamental assumptions in the psychology of self, an area in which I had done much of my past work. In particular, masochists apparently seek to relinquish control and esteem, whereas most research shows that people generally seek to increase their control and esteem.

I began to wonder how this seeming contradiction between masochism and the psychology of self could be resolved. Soon I suspected that it could not be resolved at all, for it was not a "seeming" contradiction but rather the key to the essential nature of masochism—the denial of self. This suspicion was greatly enhanced when I began to examine the historical and cultural evidence about masochism and found that its distribution corresponded closely to some patterns I had found in a previous work on the problematic construction of individual identity.

Masochism thus emerged as an escapist response to the problematic nature of selfhood.

It was also obvious that many very different things were lumped together under the heterogeneous and controversial rubric of masochism. To make any progress, I felt it necessary to narrow the focus to the original and prototypical form of masochism: sexual masochism. The term *masochism* was originally coined to refer to a pattern of sexual behavior, but it later began to be used to refer to a variety of nonsexual behaviors. The description of nonsexual behaviors as masochistic is based on argument by analogy, and yet analogies cannot be made effectively if the core phenomenon is misunderstood. Accordingly, this book focuses on understanding sexual masochism, and nonsexual analogs are postponed to the final chapters.

Although the notion of escape from self has dominated my thinking about masochism, I gradually came to recognize a second element. Masochism does not only take the self apart but also, to some extent, puts together a new set of meanings in place of the deconstructed one. The construction of new meanings may hold the major appeal for some masochists, whereas for others the removal of meaning is the primary attraction.

This book explains my work on masochism. The escape from self hypothesis is emphasized, and the construction of meaning hypothesis is also covered. Given my background in empirical research, I felt it necessary not only to propose theories but to examine all possible sources of evidence about them. This book integrates past research evidence, current findings, cross-cultural and historical comparisons, and some original data on the masochistic imagination as evidenced in anonymous scripts of fantasies and favorite experiences written by a large sample of masochists (and some of their partners).

The book's style and presentation are a product of the attempt to reach several different audiences. I am a research psychologist myself, and one primary audience is my professional colleagues, especially those interested in self and identity, in paradoxical behavior patterns, and in the construction of meaning. I hoped to have something to offer to researchers and counselors concerned with human sexuality, for masochism has been one of the biggest puzzles in that area. Clinical psychologists have struggled for decades with various aspects of masochism (defined in various ways), and I hoped that my elucidation of the core phenomena of masochism would be useful to them. Students in each of these areas should also find the book accessible.

Finally, this book may offer some reassurance and self-insight to actual masochists. Past psychological works have generally taken a dismal or alarmist view of the masochist, probably unfairly, and this work represents an effort to understand masochism on the basis of common principles in the behavior of normal people.

I was initially attracted to the study of masochism because it seemed to be the ultimate in paradoxical, incomprehensible, and bizarre behavior. It was utterly foreign to me, resembling nothing in the results of laboratory research studies I read nor anything in my personal experience (indeed, I had never met a masochist). I could form neither an intellectual nor an intuitive hypothesis of its appeal, and I recall how astonished I was at the research results of the 1970s and 1980s indicating that most masochists were apparently normal, healthy, capable, and successful individuals. Gradually, over several years, I came to see that masochism has very systematic resemblances to many other behavior patterns that have been found among normal people, and as a result I was able to furnish this account of the psychology of masochism. I suspect it will be many years before we know why people come to choose masochism rather than other activities that might produce similar results, but the similarity itself places masochism in an intelligible context.

Psychology has debated for decades whether it is preferable to work as a detached, uninvolved observer, with pretensions of scientific objectivity, or rather as a highly involved participant who can benefit from firsthand knowledge, experience, and intuition. Probably both sides have some merit. In masochism, the difference is quite apparent. Explanations of masochism written by masochists run the risk of being superficial, self-serving rationalizations for one's own deviant behavior, prone to place undue emphasis on intuition and personal experience at the expense of rigorous examination of data. And explanations written by nonmasochists run the risk of being completely out of touch with reality, especially given the difficulty of obtaining reliable, objective data about masochism.

For better or worse, my own stance is that of the uninvolved observer. If good psychological work requires firsthand knowledge and intuitive understanding of the phenomena, then this book is highly suspect, for it has neither. Indeed, there were times when I was acutely aware of groping in the dark to construct a theory about a mysterious, elusive, and paradoxical phenomenon. On the other hand, my lack of involvement has the benefit of being able to approach the available evidence in a relatively fresh, unbiased fashion, armed with recent conceptual and empirical advances in social and personality psychology.

So I can assert with some confidence that this work offers an integration of the available evidence about masochism with psychology's current, broad knowledge about human behavior. The force of this book's conclusions solely depends on the fit of theory to data (although the data include many firsthand reports and accounts of masochistic experiences written by masochists), and not on the authority of personal experience or the privileged position of intuition and familiarity. To be sure, as I

worked on this project I met a handful of masochists who after hearing me speak came up to tell me that my work corresponded well to their own intuitions, insights, and experiences. But of course it is impossible to know whether there were other masochists at the same lectures who simply shook their heads, shrugged, and walked away after finding my work off the mark.

This book, then, offers my best attempt to draw together the available evidence about masochism and offer a theoretical account of it. The evidence itself is often flawed or incomplete, but there is enough of it (and enough variety in sources) that one can have reasonable confidence when it converges. Put another way, I found that the different types of evidence about masochism have different flaws but they all point to the same conclusions. The conclusions themselves are therefore not a product of one type of bias or flaw in the evidence.

In closing, I wish to thank the numerous colleagues, students, editors, reviewers, and others who helped with this project by discussing my theories and evidence, reading parts of the manuscript, and challenging the ideas and interpretations.

Roy F. Baumeister

Chapter One

Why Is Masochism Interesting?

Masochism is one of psychology's greatest puzzles. Masochistic actions and pleasures fly in the face of common sense. Sexual masochists desire physical pain, bodily restraint, and humiliating or embarrassing treatment. They want their sexual partners to tie them up, blindfold them, and spank or whip them. They ask to be insulted, displayed naked to strangers, kept on leashes like animals, or dressed in humiliating costumes. They desire to be forced to kiss their partner's feet, to be subjected to various rules such as never looking their partner in the eye, and to other indignities.

Not only do they desire such things, but they apparently derive great satisfaction and even sexual pleasure from them. For most people, pain or embarrassment brings an instant end to sexual pleasure, yet for masochists these things stimulate it. For some masochists, these activities become almost indispensable to sexual enjoyment.

How could someone enjoy pain? Pain is the opposite of pleasure. Unpleasantness is the very essence of the sensation of pain. Yet masochists desire pain.

One way of understanding masochism has been the simple assumption that these people are mentally ill. In Western society, there is a long tradition of dismissing things that seem to make no sense as being produced by irrational forces. Some have argued that mental illness has replaced demons as an omnibus explanation for deviant behavior. The attitude behind these labels is, "We don't need to understand these things, for they are incomprehensible." Masochists and other deviants are simply exempted from all principles of normal human psychology, as if one should not even expect them to make sense.

This book attempts to make sense of masochism. It assumes that the behavior of these people is comprehensible—that in fact it conforms to many of the patterns and processes that guide the behavior of normal individuals in our culture. Whenever possible, we attempt to avoid explaining masochistic behavior as insane. It is not necessary to regard masochists as mentally ill in order to understand them.

Indeed, as we see here, there is increasing evidence that the majority of masochists are not mentally ill. They appear to be normal, capable individuals who are typical members of society in all respects except for their sexual tastes.

Most past theories about masochism have been based on clinical observations. The view offered in this book should be regarded not as a rival view but as a complementary view. There is little doubt but that some mentally ill people engage in masochism, and clinical observations and theories are the best way to go about understanding the dynamics involved in those cases. But if the majority of masochists are *not* mentally ill, it is necessary to develop some ways of understanding masochism on the basis of what is known about the behavior of normal, healthy individuals. The clinically based theories of masochism are presumably quite sound and accurate in explaining the appeal of these activities to mentally ill persons, but it may be wrong to assume that the appeal to healthy individuals is the same.

Masochism is worthy of study and explanation because on the surface it contradicts much of what we know about human behavior. Getting pleasure from pain is only the most obvious paradox of masochism. Let us take a closer look at some of the reasons to be interested in the psychology of masochism.

DEFINITION

Before proceeding further, it is necessary to furnish a definition of masochism. Psychology has furnished various definitions of masochism, and many psychologists have used the term without giving a definition of it, so one can easily become entangled just trying to decide what is masochism and what is not.

The term *masochism* was coined by the noted early sex researcher Krafft-Ebing. He used the term to refer to an unusual and deviant pattern of sexual activity involving pain and submission. Krafft-Ebing named the phenomenon after Leopold von Sacher-Masoch, a 19th century Austrian novelist whose writings portrayed men humiliated and tormented by beautiful women. Sacher-Masoch's interest in these activities apparently extended beyond his literary work; he seems to have spent much of his adult life trying to get women to dominate him, in-

cluding having them whip him and having them betray him by having sex with other men (Cleugh, 1951).

Krafft-Ebing defined *masochism* as "the wish to suffer pain and be subjected to force" (1983, p. 27). He said that the masochist "in sexual feeling and thought is controlled by the idea of being completely and unconditionally subjected to the will of a person of the opposite sex; of being treated by this person as by a master, humiliated and abused" (p. 28). For a first attempt at definition, this was not far off the mark. To update his definition, it is necessary to change his stipulation that the master be of the opposite sex, for there is evidence that some people like to be dominated by members of their own sex.

The problem of defining masochism became much more complex with Freud. Krafft-Ebing had specifically defined masochism as a form of sexual behavior, but Freud began to use it to refer to nonsexual behaviors as well. Since Freud's time, many psychologists have often used the term to refer to nonsexual behavior patterns, based on their presumed resemblance to sexual masochism (see Glick & Meyers, 1988; Panken, 1983, for excellent reviews of recent Freudian treatments).

The danger in describing nonsexual behavior patterns as "masochistic" is that at present it is almost impossible to say what is a false analogy and what is apt. Without a solid understanding of the original form of masochism—sexual masochism—one cannot generalize to other patterns. For example, if one assumes that masochism is essentially the wish for injury, then one might label all self-destructive behaviors as masochistic. If one assumes that masochists desire intense sensations, then one might label all other sensation-seeking behavior as masochistic. If one sees submission to another person as the essence of masochism, then all submission to authority can be called masochistic. And so forth.

In simple terms, one cannot decide what *resembles* sexual masochism until one understands what sexual masochism is. Labeling nonsexual behaviors as masochistic is argument by analogy, and analogies cannot be constructed until the core phenomenon is understood. Accordingly, this book postpones discussion of nonsexual masochism until the nature of sexual masochism has been carefully examined. The important task is to understand the original, prototypical form of masochism, which is a pattern of sexual behavior.

To get started, therefore, it is only necessary to provide a working definition for *sexual masochism.* Krafft-Ebing's definition, suitably amended to include homosexual masochism, seems sufficient. To be more precise, one might define *sexual masochism* as a syndrome that associates sexual pleasure with one or more of the following three features: receiving pain; relinquishing control through bondage, rules, commands, or other means; and embarrassment or humiliation. Thus, not all masochistic sexuality involves pain, for example (Reik, 1941/1957), but at

least one of the three features is necessary in order to label some sexual activity as masochism. Sex with any of these three features is masochistic; sex without any of them is not masochistic.

PREVALENCE

How common is masochism today? It is difficult to give a reliable estimate. Survey evidence is far from reliable, for many people may do such things but refuse to admit them to interviewers. One commonly quoted statistic comes from Kinsey's research. He asked people whether they ever experienced sexual arousal in response to stories or depictions of sadomasochistic activities. Kinsey and his colleagues found that 22% of American men and 12% of American women admitted such arousal (Kinsey, Pomeroy, Martin, & Gebhard, 1953).

The proportion of people who admit actually engaging in sadomasochism (S&M) is no doubt much smaller than the proportion admitting to fantasies. A handful of such surveys was reviewed in the early 1970s by Greene and Greene (1974). In one survey of American university students, whipping or spanking before sex was reported by about 5% of the females and 8% of the males. The highest figure was obtained in an international survey: 33% of English women reported having had such an experience (Greene & Greene, 1974, p. 42). At the low end, the frequencies approach zero. Again, however, one must be a bit skeptical of all such numbers, because many people may be reluctant to admit having participated in sadomasochistic sex. The number of people who report such activities is undoubtedly smaller than the number of people who do them. And the different rates found for different groups may reflect different willingness to admit such activities rather than different experiences.

Probably the most plausible guess is that 5%–10% of the population has engaged in masochistic activity for sexual enjoyment. Probably two or three times that many have enjoyed S&M stories or fantasies, and probably only 1% or 2% has actually done such things on any sort of regular basis. Still, each 1% of the American population represents between 2 and 3 million people, so small percentages quickly translate into large crowds. It is also important to note that many people probably have masochistic desires but never act on them, either because they are ashamed of their desires (cf. Cowan, 1982), because they cannot find a willing partner (cf. Spengler, 1977), or because they are afraid or shy (cf. Scott, 1983). In short, it is clear that most modern individuals do not show any inclination toward sexual masochism, but there is a fair-sized minority who have such interest or desires occasionally and a small group who actually engage in masochistic sex.

There is good evidence that many masochists are held back by fear, inner conflict, and other factors from acting out their fantasies. Prostitutes who advertise that they will dominate their clients have a large problem with no-shows. These professional dominatrices report that 80%–95% of the appointments they make with new (first-time) customers are broken (Scott, 1983). Typically, the client makes the appointment by telephone but simply never shows up. Apparently, many would-be masochists turn cowardly at the last minute, at least when dealing with a professional dominatrix. This suggests that many people have masochistic interests and desires but are reluctant to act them out. Thus, again, desires may be far more widespread than actual experiences.

The focus of this book is accordingly on the issue of masochistic desires and interests. Only a very small proportion of the population is regularly, actively engaged in masochism as a way of life or a hobby. A substantially larger group would like to engage in such activities, and even more have some interest in them. In any case, it seems clear that even the broadest definitions of masochism pertain to only a minority of the population. There is no basis for assuming that masochism is a part of the psychological makeup of everyone, or even of everyone in some broad category (such as women).

SELF

One major source of interest in masochism is the light it may shed on the psychology of self. Indeed, this is what led to my own interest in masochism, because much of my past research had been devoted to studying the self—and masochism posed a serious challenge to the psychology of self. Masochism apparently contradicts several of the most general principles about the nature of the self. Either psychology's views of the self are wrong, or else some way must be found to understand the relationship between those views and masochism.

Modern psychology has been extremely interested in the nature of the self, in recent decades. It has devoted considerable attention to studying the self and theorizing about the self (e.g., Baumeister, 1982, 1986, 1987; Carver & Scheier, 1981; Greenwald, 1980; Higgins, 1986; Markus & Wurf, 1987; Schlenker, 1985; Swann, 1987; Yardley & Honess, 1987). There is so much information and theory about the self that it has been impossible to generate a comprehensive, satisfactory theory of the self. There is not even general agreement about the multiple, overlapping terms that sometimes mean the same thing as *self* and sometimes have more specialized meanings—terms such as *ego, identity, proprium.*

Despite this lack of a general theory of self, there are several broad

principles that most theorists would agree about. Here are three generalizations about the self that fit what is currently known and would probably be acceptable to most psychologists:

First, selves are developed for a good reason, namely to help the person reach the natural, primary goals of achieving happiness and avoiding pain. In a word, selves are useful. They help the person organize experience and guide action toward these basic goals.

Second, the self develops a strong orientation toward control. The self seeks to control its environment, which means to achieve a good fit between itself and its world. Control can take the form of changing the world to fit the self's demands, or of changing the self to fit the world's demands (Rothbaum, Weisz, & Snyder, 1982). The quest for objective control of the world begins with curiosity, that is, the self's quest for information about the environment. The self tries to learn how to manipulate its surroundings, often as a means of getting what it wants.

But even without a clear idea of what it wants, the self exhibits simple curiosity and other signs of the desire for control. In addition to the quest for *objective* control, the self seeks a *subjective* sense of being in control, that is, efficacy (e.g., Bandura, 1977). The self seeks to believe itself in control even when it is not. People tend to overestimate how much control they have, at least until something goes wrong (then, the self begins to deny responsibility). The self is prone to illusions of control, which are false beliefs of having control (Langer, 1975; also Alloy & Abramson, 1979). Deprived of control, the self immediately begins to fight back (e.g., Brehm, 1966). The self wants freedom, choice and multiple options.

Third, the self is strongly oriented toward maximizing esteem. There are many forms of this motive. People desire self-esteem, that is, they want to think well of themselves. They also desire public esteem, that is, they want other people to think well of them, to respect and to admire them. People want to preserve their esteem from loss, and so they react strongly to any threat to their esteem. They also desire to increase their esteem when they can.

These three basic principles about the self underlie most of the self's activities. Countless research studies have demonstrated them in innumerable contexts. People want to be happy and to avoid pain and suffering. They seek to maintain and increase their control over themselves and their surroundings. And they desire to maintain and increase their prestige, respect, and esteem.

Viewed from the perspective of these three principles about the self, masochism is a startling paradox. Masochism contradicts these broad, fundamental features of the self. The self is developed to avoid pain, but masochists seek pain. The self strives for control, but masochists seek

to relinquish control. The self aims to maximize its esteem, but masochists deliberately seek out humiliation.

On the surface, then, masochism poses a severe challenge to psychology's knowledge about the self. No theory of masochism can be complete without explaining how masochism can run counter to the most basic facts about the self. Resolving this paradox will tell us a great deal about the essential nature of masochism.

GENDER

Another source of interest in masochism concerns its relation to gender. This relation has been a source of confusion and controversy. Freud associated masochism with femininity. He saw the women of his day as passive and submissive, and he concluded that passivity and submissiveness are feminine traits. These same traits are apparent in the behavior of masochists. He concluded that women are by nature masochistic.

Many of Freud's followers sustained this view of feminine masochism. Some noted that the woman's role in courtship is often passive and submissive, for the initiative is left to the man. Others suggested that woman's experience of sexual intercourse is masochistic, starting with the physical injury upon loss of virginity. Many other broad features of women's behavior were made to fit into this theory that women are masochistic (e.g., Deutsch, 1944).

Other theorists were far less certain that masochism was vitally linked to femininity. Theodor Reik debated the matter with himself and finally decided that women are not masochistic. In fact, he concluded that men are more masochistic than women, although he was not entirely consistent.

Feminists were outraged by the view that women are masochistic. They accused the Freudians of trying to blame women for their own inferior status, and they angrily contended that the theory of women's masochism could be used to justify the oppression and exploitation of women. Feminists sought to correct the many social injustices that victimize women, from wife-beating to salary discrimination. They feared that these injustices would be allowed to persist if people accepted the view that women desired to be victims because of their innate masochism.

The debate is far from over. Recent work has argued forcefully that most of the evidence for women's masochism is misleading and misinterpreted (see Caplan, 1984). For example, some have called women masochistic for being prostitutes or for remaining with abusive husbands,

for these patterns seem like voluntary ways of bringing pain and suffering to the self. Yet prostitutes and abused wives are often simply making the best of a poor set of choices. They do not get pleasure from their suffering.

On the other hand, other theorists continue to spin out the theory of feminine masochism. One recent book reaffirmed masochism as a central feature of the psychology of women, using everything from menstrual cramps to social shyness as evidence for it (Shainess, 1984). Other recent papers have argued that women deliberately engage in self-defeating behaviors of many sorts, such as fearing and rejecting success at work (Horner, 1972).

The debate currently stands as follows. The more traditional members of the psychoanalytic community still believe that women are masochistic, although an increasing number of them are defecting from this view. There is substantial evidence that many men are masochistic, and the theories of feminine masochism struggle to accommodate this fact. For example, some of them simply say that masochistic men are feminine. Most psychologists are reluctant to label women in general as *masochistic*, partly because the term has acquired a very negative connotation. But many researchers still see aspects of women's behavior as carrying elements of masochism.

Part of the problem is that we do not have a good understanding of masochism, so the debate is carried on amid multiple, conflicting definitions. What does it mean to say that all women are inherently masochistic? Certainly not all women engage in masochistic sex, and the vast majority would immediately deny that they desire or enjoy pain. Does it mean that all women secretly or "unconsciously" wish that their husbands would spank them, as a prelude to sex? That they would spank them, not as a prelude to sex? Does it mean that women are passive? That they are self-destructive? That they submit to authority willingly? That they deliberately sabotage their own chances for success or happiness?

The relation between gender and masochism is complex, but it cannot be addressed until a clearer understanding of masochism has been achieved.

PATHOLOGY AND MORALITY

How should masochism be regarded? To many people, especially throughout the general public, masochism is proof of sexual perversion or mental illness, or both. For example, the anonymous author of *The Sensuous Woman,* a best-selling popular sex manual, encouraged her readers to explore all forms of sex play they could imagine—*except* masochism, and

in fact she advised getting rid of any sexual partner with sadomasochistic inclinations. Popular advice columnists in the print media have periodically expressed similar views. All in all, the prevailing opinions of influential people condemn masochism (see Greene & Greene, 1974, for review of these views; also Cowan, 1982).

Many psychologists share this negative view of masochism, although many others dispute it. There is currently a great deal of controversy as to whether masochism should be listed as a form of mental illness. This controversy concerns masochism in social behavior, for *sexual* masochism is already classified as a sexual disorder. According to the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual* (3rd ed.) of the American Psychiatric Association, anyone who engages regularly in masochistic sex is mentally ill by definition. But the attempt to include "masochistic personality disorder" as another form of mental illness met with severe protest and resistance (Franklin, 1987).

There is a long tradition of regarding masochism as the activity of mentally sick individuals. Freud (1938) described masochism as a perversion. His follower, Wilhelm Stekel (1929/1953), linked masochism to cannibalism, criminality, vampirism, mass murder, necrophilia, epilepsy, pederasty, and more. He actually said that all masochists are murderers, and in a temporary lapse of therapeutic fervor he described their company as the "kingdom of Hell" (p. 409). Boss's (1949) treatment was equally negative and sensationalistic. Reik (1941/1957) said that all neurotics are masochists (pp. 368-372). In short, clinical perspectives have regarded masochists as seriously disturbed.

Recent empirical studies have furnished a surprisingly different picture. Researchers portray masochists as remarkably normal people, at least when not indulging their sexual tastes. Thus, the anthropologist Gini Graham Scott (1983) described participants in the female-domination clubs on the West Coast as "better educated and from higher income and occupational brackets than the average American" (p. 6). Andreas Spengler (1977) surveyed practicing sadomasochists in Germany and likewise found them to be upper class, successful individuals.

A famous study of the "sexual profile of men in power" found, to the researchers' extreme surprise, a high quantity of masochistic sexual activity among successful politicians, judges, and other important and influential men. Prostitutes catering to such clients administered more sexual domination than any other sexual service or act. It appears that U.S. Congressmen and successful executives are more likely to be masochists than are high school dropouts or blue-collar workers.

The masochists who are found in psychotherapy are likely to be the least well adjusted, simply by the fact that they are in therapy. Even so, some clinical observers have found masochists to be relatively normal and well adjusted. Lyn Cowan (1982) described her masochistic

therapy patients as "successful by social standards: professionally, sexually, emotionally, culturally, in marriage or out. They are frequently individuals of admirable inner strength of character, possessed of strong 'coping egos' and with an ethical sense of individual responsibility" (p. 31). Even Stekel (1929/1953) admitted that many masochists appeared to be "ideal whole men" (p. 51).

There is no way to integrate all these views. Masochists cannot be warped individuals with sick, twisted minds akin to mass murderers and necrophiliacs, if they are also strong, responsible, successful individuals with a strong moral sense.

To address this problem, it is first necessary to narrow the focus to sexual masochism. Some psychologists have used the term *masochistic* to refer to a wide range of behaviors having nothing to do with sex, but (as already explained) this tendency merely introduces a hopeless mass of confusion unless one is quite certain how to understand the core phenomena of masochism, which involve specifically sexual masochism. With sexual masochism, the question can then be phrased this way: Are masochists dangerous perverts and lunatics, or not?

Therapy patients do not make a good group on which to base such an answer. People in psychotherapy often have some form of mental illness. Therefore, it makes most sense to use the empirical studies of masochists in general. Among these, it appears that most masochists are not dangerous perverts or mentally ill individuals. They appear to be normal people, apart from their deviant sexual tastes. In fact, they appear to be a little above average in many respects.

One might make the analogy to homosexuality. For a long period, homosexuality was regarded as a form of mental illness. Observations of therapy patients supported this view, for many homosexuals in therapy were indeed ill. But more recent views have acknowledged that the majority of homosexuals are not mentally ill, something that could hardly be learned by focusing on therapy patients. Although there are undoubtedly some homosexuals among the mentally ill, homosexuality itself is not a form of mental illness. Moreover, it may be misleading to take what is known about mentally ill homosexuals and generalize to all homosexuals. The same could be said about masochism. Although masochism may appeal to certain groups of mentally ill individuals, it is likely that the appeal to normal individuals is different. This book suggests ways of understanding masochism without invoking theories of mental illness. This is not to suggest that the clinical theories are wrong, for they may be entirely correct in explaining masochistic dynamics among the mentally ill. Rather, this book offers ways of understanding masochism when it is not part of mental illness.

Next, we turn to the question of the masochistic sex itself. Is there something wrong with engaging in such activities? Obviously, there is

no neutral position from which to answer this question, and one might ask the same question about any other sexual activity.

Our modern American culture tends toward sexual tolerance. The standard liberal view is that anything done between consenting adults is acceptable, at least if no one is hurt and no one's rights are abridged. In this view, masochism is borderline. It does occur between consenting adults, but the masochist does get hurt. Are people allowed to be hurt if they desire to be? Again, this depends on cultural attitudes. Many feel that the society should have laws to prevent people from doing things that might harm themselves, such as gambling or taking drugs. Others feel that people have a right to do what they want as long as they do not endanger anyone else.

Again, though, these are culturally relative views. Our Victorian predecessors had a more narrow and severe view of appropriate sexuality. To them, if you enjoyed masochistic sex (or many other forms of sex), you were sick as well as immoral. This view is equally viable. The definition of sexual morality and perversity is to some extent arbitrary, and each society sets its own boundaries.

Definitions of illness are likewise somewhat relative and variable, and masochism is once again in the gray area: It can be defined as healthy or sick, depending on prevailing attitudes. One refreshingly sensible view was proposed by Freud, who said that one should refer to *perversion* only if some activity (other than sexual intercourse) becomes absolutely indispensable to sexual pleasure. In other words, if you can only enjoy sex under some unusual conditions—such as oral sex, or watching others make love, or touching underwear—then you are perverted. But if you can sometimes enjoy sex without those activities, then they are not perversions. Applied to masochism, this means that someone would be a masochistic pervert if he or she were only able to enjoy sex in connection with being dominated. But if the person enjoys normal sexual intercourse and merely uses masochism to provide variety or novel excitement on an occasional basis, the person should not be labeled *sick* or *perverted.*

If masochists are normal individuals apart from their sexuality, then they must be held responsible for their actions and preferences, which raises some moral questions. Is there something immoral about masochism apart from its sexual pleasure? One group of feminists have argued strongly that the answer is yes, although other feminists have disagreed. The feminist critique of sadomasochism is based on the view that masochistic sex involves an implicit endorsement of interpersonal violence, oppression, and exploitation. Sadomasochism, in this view, expresses a subtle vote of approval of Nazi brutality, wife-beating, the Spanish Inquisition, genocide, and other objectionable practices (Linden, 1982).

How much do private sex acts invoke public political meanings, and what effects do these have? This is a difficult set of issues. Masochism is indeed loaded with symbolism, but few masochists seem to have any sense of making political statements by their sexuality. From the present perspective, the feminist critique is mistaken because masochism rejects any relation to political realities in the outside world—in fact, masochism is an attempt to remove awareness of the world altogether.

THINGS ARE NOT WHAT THEY SEEM

One reason for psychology's difficulty with masochism is that everything about masochism seems misleading. Masochism involves more fiction and illusion than nearly any other pattern of human behavior. Nothing about it is quite what it seems. As a result, observers and theorists have been repeatedly misled. If you take masochism at face value, you will probably miss some vital features about it.

A first illusion in masochism concerns the pattern of control. On the surface, the dominant partner is in control. The masochist appears helpless, often being tied up and blindfolded. All initiative, all decisions, are left up to the dominant partner, while the masochist merely obeys and submits. Yet often it is the masochist's wishes and desires that determine the course of the interaction. The script that is enacted is often written by the masochist. Indeed, prostitutes complain about the inordinate particularity of some masochistic clients. For example, some men desire to be verbally humiliated with a precise series of insults. If the prostitute deviates at all from her lines, even just forgetting a word or two, the men get upset and insist that she start over.

There are other ways in which the interaction is controlled by the masochist. Dominants sometimes imply that they are basically catering to their masochistic partners (e.g., Califia, 1983). They have to monitor the masochist's responses carefully and closely in order to ascertain exactly how much pain to administer, for too little makes for an unsatisfying experience, and too much ruins everything.

The very entry into S&M is often initiated by the masochist. In many couples, one partner wants to submit sexually but the other is reluctant to dominate, so the masochist has to convince the other to engage in these activities (Scott, 1983). Sacher-Masoch, the man for whom masochism is named, followed that pattern in his own life, constantly urging his reluctant lady friends to take the dominant role with him (Cleugh, 1951). The reverse pattern, in which one person desires to take the dominant role but the partner is reluctant to submit, is apparently quite uncommon.

In short, the masochist's lack of control may be more apparent than real. The masochist is in control in some ways, or is at least an equal partner in the decisions (e.g., Greene & Greene, 1974). It is a commonplace observation by participants in S&M that the masochist is "really" in control.

On the other hand, one must not be entirely convinced by such statements either. It would be misleading to suggest that masochistic submission is a means of exerting control. The masochist exerts control in order to provide him or herself with a satisfying experience of loss of control. Masochists desire to be helpless and vulnerable, and they exert their initiative to get themselves into that position.

Thus, the dynamics of control in masochistic sex are not what they seem. Another illusion in masochism concerns pain. Masochists desire pain and submit to it willingly. Does this mean that they enjoy the pain? Masochists often suggest that pain becomes pleasant in some way, but their remarks are suspect. Some masochists note that pain becomes pleasant in fantasy but they are surprised that in reality the sensation remains unpleasant (e.g., "J", 1982). One couple I interviewed suggested that the pain becomes pleasant, but when I asked them how this happened they quickly added that the sensation of pain remains painful and unpleasant. The pain is tolerable and there is something about it that appeals to the masochist, but it is simply not true that pain turns into pleasure.

It is important to note that the pain in masochistic sex games rarely reaches intense levels, by all accounts. People who engage in S&M speak of watching for the masochist's limits and ceasing when the pain starts to become really unpleasant. Masochists desire pain in small, very carefully measured doses. They may even help control the amount of pain. Some couples use "safe words," a pre-set verbal signal that the masochist can use to tell the dominant partner to stop inflicting pain.

Nor is it true that masochists simply enjoy pain in general. Masochists dislike many forms of pain as much as anyone. In one case, a masochistic woman had a strong dislike of going to the dentist because she found the treatments painful. Her boyfriend suggested that she try to enjoy the pain as a masochistic experience. Her efforts were unsuccessful, however, and she continued to loathe dental work, even though she continued to enjoy masochistic sex (Weinberg, Williams, & Moser, 1984). Masochists only enjoy pain in certain contexts.

Pain has a natural, biological function, which is to warn of injury and thereby enable the individual to prevent damage to the body. Loss of pain sensitivity, which might seem appealing, tends in fact to put the person in serious danger. For example, leprosy tends to reduce the body's sensitivity to pain, especially in the fingers and toes. As a result, the leper may fail to react if one of these digits is being crushed under a