To Will One's Own Pain: Masochism, Bad Faith, and Freedom

"Perhaps prosperity isn't the only thing that man loves? Perhaps he likes suffering just as much? [...] Sometimes man loves suffering intensely, passionately — and that's a fact." So declared the narrator of *Notes from Underground*[1]. With extraordinary psychological acuity, the great Russian author tirelessly interrogates his readers on questions of suffering, free will, and love throughout all his works. Indeed, Freud writes in "The Economic Problem of Masochism" that the temptation to perform "sinful actions [...] expiated by the reproaches of the sadistic conscience" is "exemplified in so many Russian character-types"[2]. But the question still remains: what has happened to those who will their own suffering? The Underground Man is tortured by his obsession with a frightful freedom, but his anguish is primarily intellectual and self-asserting. What, then, is the relationship between freedom and the choice to suffer? Is chosen suffering a form of masochism, and if so, what does that tell us about its relationship to freedom?

We will see that not all chosen suffering is masochism in the Freudian sense. Masochism, according to Freud, is not necessarily deliberately chosen — as in the unconscious sense of guilt driving moral masochism — and when it is chosen, it usually takes a form that involves an intersubjective relationship, manifesting as a flight from freedom into objecthood before another's gaze. Chosen suffering, on the other hand, does not always correspond to this structure. The anguished suffering that attends the assertion of freedom resembles masochism only at the surface level of description and is better understood as categorically different.

In Freud's theory of masochism, the seeking of unpleasurable experiences is a libidinal end with the self as its object; the Other, external or internalised, is a necessary agent in producing it. The primary form of masochism, erotogenic masochism, leads to derivative forms of feminine and moral masochism. Erotogenic masochism is that portion of "the destroying instinct" libidinally bound inside the organism and not transposed outwards to the external world, where it would become the destructive instinct, the will to power, or sadism proper[3]. Feminine masochism is understood to be entirely based on this primary masochism, the pleasure in pain, and takes the form of a fantasy of passivity, independent of the subject's gender. In every case the masochist *seeks* suffering to a certain degree; at first glance, they seem to play an active role in facilitating their own pain, constructing the scenes of fantasy and soliciting specific treatment. They are not someone in misery who wishes to be done with it, and sometimes may even harbour forces that "struggle against his recovery and refuse to surrender his state of illness"[4]. However, we cannot say that the will, in arranging its own apparent defeat, has acted freely or in good faith. Sartre's analysis of bad faith proves useful here because masochism, in its performed and volitional dimensions, involves a consciousness that deceives itself about the nature of its own choice.

In *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre describes that to act in good faith is fully assuming one's freedom — to *be* instead of to o*nly believe and to deny that belief*. Bad faith, by contrast, "flees from being into 'not believing what one believes'"[5]. The belief that masochism tries to flee is precisely the recognition that freedom is absolute and that no nature, no necessity, no Other's judgement can serve as

[1] Dostoevsky, Fyodor. *Notes from Underground.* Translated by Ronald Wilks. Penguin Classics, 2009. p31
[2] Freud, Sigmund. "The Economic Problem of Masochism." In *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. XIX. London: Hogarth Press, 1961. p169
[3] Ibid, p164
[4] Ibid, p166
[5] Sartre, Jean-Paul. *Being and Nothingness*. Translated by Sarah Richmond. Atria Books, 2021.

the ultimate ground of one's being. Erotogenic masochism has "the self as its object"[6], and the masochist, in this existentialist reading, aims to make oneself into a thing, to shed the anxiety of being a consciousness that must perpetually choose itself. The attitude of masochism is to first be relieved of the "trouble of making myself exist" — that is, of determining myself — and to hand this task to the Other, whose freedom can serve as the foundation of my being as being-for-the-Other. It is the attempt to become an object for another's consciousness, to escape the burden of radical freedom by being constituted entirely by the Other's gaze[7].

In this sense, the failure of masochism is clear: insofar as the subject wills their own objectivity, they are fleeing what they are; because they are a transcendence, they can *choose* to position themselves as a being to be transcended through their own act of transcendence. The greater the contradiction, the more it reveals itself: the choice is so particular as it aims to annihilate what makes it possible in the first place — one's subjectivity. The more actively the masochist seeks to negate their freedom, the more irreversibly they exercise it and undermine their endeavour. Their transcendence has never been truly annihilated because it has founded its own being — this supposed negation. Mascoshism manifested in "real-life performances" and the "carrying-out of the phantasies in play" is the performance of powerlessness presupposing the agency it purports to dissolve[8]. Further, the project achieves a double failure when the masochist instrumentalises the very person whose gaze was supposed to constitute them. The one who delivers pain upon the masochist's request is treated as a means, and in so doing the masochist "ends up by treating the other as an object and transcending her toward her own objectivity"[9]. Not only does the masochist fail to grasp their own objectivity, they find, instead, the objectivity of the other.

Nevertheless, Freud identifies a third form of masochism that apparently assumes a more impersonal form. He observes a sense of guilt in the manifest content of masochistic phantasies, in which "the subject assumes that he has committed some crime [...] which is to be expiated by all these painful and tormenting procedures"[10]. From this sense of guilt, moral masochism can be derived. Freud implies that while erotogenic and feminine masochism rely more heavily on a specific loved person acting as the one issuing commands and punishment, moral masochism is not restricted to any interpersonal bond — "it may even be caused by impersonal powers or by circumstances"[11]. Then, does moral masochism escape the intersubjective structure altogether?

One may argue that it does not. The superego in moral masochism is not a truly impersonal force. Guilt in Freud is bound to the formation of morality and the Oedipus Complex: the function of conscience is "an expression of a tension between the ego and the super-ego", where the ego feels it "has not come up to the demands made by its ideal, the super-ego"[12]. The superego forms through the introjection of parental authority during the resolution of the Oedipus complex; the child internalises the prohibiting parent as an internal agency that continues to demand and punish. The unconscious sense of guilt or need

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[6] Freud, Sigmund. "The Economic Problem of Masochism." In *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. XIX. London: Hogarth Press, 1961. p164
[7] Sartre, Jean-Paul. *Being and Nothingness*. Translated by Sarah Richmond. Atria Books, 2021.
[8] Freud, Sigmund. "The Economic Problem of Masochism." In *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. XIX. London: Hogarth Press, 1961. p162
[9] Sartre, Jean-Paul. *Being and Nothingness*. Translated by Sarah Richmond. Atria Books, 2021.
[10] Freud, Sigmund. "The Economic Problem of Masochism." In *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. XIX. London: Hogarth Press, 1961. p162
[11] Ibid, p165
[12] Ibid, p167

for punishment in moral masochism thus originates from an internalised Other. Freud speaks of those who attribute the "guidance of the world" to Destiny, God, or Nature unconsciously cast these forces in the role of a parental couple and "believe themselves linked to them by libidinal ties". These impersonal forces are parental authority in disguise that chastises the "sinful" actions that masochism is tempted to perform[13]. The impersonal, in other words, is always already the personal in disguise. Even when moral masochism appears to address itself to impersonal powers, the self is again surrendered to the disposal of some Other that will constitute its being, thus denying its own radical freedom.

A difficult point in applying the concept of bad faith to masochism is the treatment of the unconscious. Moral masochism is characterised as driven by a largely unconscious sense of guilt, and the psychoanalytic framework also raises the question of what degree of agency can be attributed to the ego, or whether it is appropriate to identify the ego with the self in whose name a judgement of bad faith would be passed. For Sartre, bad faith necessarily implies "the unity of a single consciousness"[14]. There is no separate censor, no truly divided psychic agency; rather, when the will is in bad faith, the same consciousness that deceives is the one deceived. The distinction is limited to the difference between the unreflected and the reflective consciousness. The fundamental, unreflected consciousness chooses the "true ends" that the reflective consciousness refuses to acknowledge. Not only is it not opposed to the unreflected consciousness, its motives depend on the perspective of the fundamental consciousness. It is from this ground of unified consciousness that we can pass judgement of bad faith on masochism, since the subject is not ignorant of what it flees. Then, the "unconscious" sense of guilt in moral masochism would be less a sign of genuine unknowing than of a consciousness that refuses to look at what it nonetheless knows.

However, if primal masochism always remains as the residuum of the death instinct after its outward transposition[15], is it truly impossible to reconcile this with the embrace of radical freedom? Perhaps it is more useful to recognise that these are distinct projects rather than excessively trying to establish a connection between the two. Freud aims to construct a framework to illustrate how the psyche develops and its mechanisms for interacting with the world. What Sartre seeks to establish is an existential attitude and the conditions and demands of freedom as a way of inhabiting one's existence. Whether or not primary masochism exists as a drive would be, for the existentialist, a matter of facticity, a given condition among others of one's thrownness into the world, like one's body or one's past. It does not change the fact that we are thrown into existence, nor the necessity of our having to choose ourselves in relation to what is already given. In other words, suffering may be chosen, but not at the expense of my freedom as a subjectivity.

The question, then, becomes whether suffering necessarily repeats the bad faith structure of masochism, when it is genuinely chosen. Freedom shares another quite different link with suffering in that it is often not described as pleasant. As Berdyaev observes of Dostoevsky's vision, freedom is horrible and tragic; what it offers is burden and suffering[16]. But the Underground Man, arguably one of the "Russian character-types" Freud invokes, does not suffer in the moral masochist's mode. This is where chosen suffering can diverge from masochism: the anguished *consequence* of freedom is only similar in

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[13] Freud, Sigmund. "The Economic Problem of Masochism." In *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. XIX. London: Hogarth Press, 1961. p168

[14] Sartre, Jean-Paul. *Being and Nothingness*. Translated by Sarah Richmond. Atria Books, 2021.

[15] Freud, Sigmund. "The Economic Problem of Masochism." In *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. XIX. London: Hogarth Press, 1961. p164

[16] Berdyaev, Nicolas. *Dostoievsky: an Interpretation.* Translated by Haiying Geng. Guangxi Normal University Press, 2020. p59

its very surface description but is better understood as categorically different. It is not chosen *for* itself but *despite* itself, for the sake of something that cannot be surrendered. When the Underground Man declared he would rather suffer, it cannot be only explained by a desire for pain as such or guilt in search of punishment. *Notes from Underground* was written in direct polemic against Chernyshevsky's utilitarian utopianism, the Crystal Palace of rational determinism in which human behaviour would be calculated, predicted, and optimised. The Underground Man perceives the embracing of pain as a conscious resistance to rationality, even benevolent rationality, to demonstrate that human beings are not piano keys in a rational system, that and consciousness, wilful and perverse, is "infinitely superior to twice two is four" and cannot be fully reduced to enlightenment calculus[17].

Therefore, what is qualitatively different in these "Russian character-types" from other masochistic phantasies is that, in one suffering is the end that offers relief from the burden of being a subject, and the other the necessary consequence of freedom. Yet it is undeniable that sometimes these two come together and form a self-indulgent, exalted suffering. We may ask, what happens when the anguished cost of insisting on self will is seen as a sign of freedom and thus becomes the sought content? When the Underground Man begins not merely to suffer, but to display his suffering, to luxuriate in it as proof of his refusal and wear it as the sign of his exceptional consciousness — the pain shifts from being a consequence of freedom to a confirmation of it. When suffering becomes a signal of meaning and value and is then sought for that reason, it risks becoming sought for its own sake; at this point the structure directs inward, self-absorbed, and begins to resemble moral masochism again. The ideology of one's own freedom becomes an internalised authority before which one performs, and the performance of suffering serves to reassure the self of its own radical authenticity. This is, in some way, falling back once more into bad faith, in a flight into the image of oneself as free.

In short, forms of chosen suffering may share the surface symptom of a subject seeking or accepting pain, but they can arise from distinct structures and logics. In his extended analysis of masochism in *Coldness and Cruelty*, Deleuze argues against treating sadism and masochism as complementary variants of a single "sadomasochistic entity", as Freud's framework tends to do[18]. Similarly, we should remain attentive to the multitude within the concept denoted by the word *masochism* and the different shades of meaning it takes on. Masochistic practices or phantasies do create a situation that is in conflict with our freedom, while pain can also be chosen in the service of projects not entirely accounted for by masochism in Freudian terms. The Underground Man's existential anguish is not solely explained by recourse to the mechanisms of masochism or an interpretation of rebellion as an economy and his perversity a death drive; it is equally a tragic wrestling with the problems of human dignity and degradation — themes no less prominent in masochism and equally worthy of examination.

[17] Dostoevsky, Fyodor. *Notes from Underground.* Translated by Ronald Wilks. Penguin Classics, 2009. p32
[18] Deleuze, Gilles. *Coldness and Cruelty*. Translated by Jean McNeil. New York: Zone Books, 1991.

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