

interpretation

A JOURNAL OF POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

January 1982

Volume 10 Number 1

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Pleasure, Power, and Immortality

JOSEPH J. CARPINO

The primary function of pleasure—and its ultimate appeal—consists in its role as a “way of being.” Pleasure gives us something to think about, absorbing the mind in those great swells and little twitchings of the nervous system which pleasure *is*. “Eating is better than thinking,” as the saying goes. But eating—tasting, chewing, swallowing, and that sublime distendedness which constitutes “nirvana” for a proper trencherman—eating and its parts are all no less than forms of consciousness and thus, for conscious things, are existential modes. The mind rushes to the place where pleasure has irrupted and it hovers there, pupils dilated, basking in the flood of sensation, filling like a sponge with delight until it can hardly be distinguished from what is pleasing it. To be pleased is to be at one with the pleasant. To know is in some way to be the known, and to taste is to know.

Pleasure, in short, is a mode of conscious existence, and as such, as a kind of being, it is desirable. That’s what people like about it. It reassures them: if one is being pleased, one surely exists. And besides, what else is there to *want* but being?

The only thing that comes anywhere near pleasure in this regard is pain. No one wants simply not to be. “Wanting” requires an object, grammatically, so we may fairly assume that whenever people say they want to cease to be, what they really mean is that they want no longer to suffer. And that’s understandable. But it is not a desire not to be. Indeed, the only form of sensate consciousness which comes even close to nonbeing, the total or near-total absence of stimuli, a sort of sensory emptiness, is one which people avoid with a passion, preferring even pain to such a free-floating sensationlessness. Children, for example, will sometimes risk a spanking to avoid being ignored. Pain is bad, but nonbeing is worse, and nobody wants it.

Of course pleasure has its limitations. It is essentially passive, a putting of one’s self *in the way* of whatever causes the pleasant excitation of the nerve endings. And it’s quite private: the same cause can please more than one individual (and people can even inflict pleasure on one another), but we really do not enjoy pleasure together—as we might, for example, enjoy a good conversation *with* someone.

Pleasure has the “spatial” limitation, therefore, of one’s body, in addition to the traditionally-noted temporal limitation of one’s lifetime. (The fragility of the “apparatus” and the problem of diminishing returns are other limitations, to be sure, but they are by comparison quite secondary, even accidental, and with careful planning and some luck, they may be overcome.) Thus, for all the reassurance it provides, pleasure is inherently a doubly-limited “mode of being,” and there are those for whom it is simply too confining.

Unsatisfied by the circumscribed modalities of pleasure, some, more energetic types, demand another, "larger," existence. These few reach out and put their hands upon the world, bending it, twisting it, crushing and sometimes even molding it, forcing from the things surrounding them a grudging but real admission: "Thou art (as we submit)." And that's reassuring.

The exercise of power—the imposition of one's will upon the bodies of others—is also a "way of being." To have one's commands summarily obeyed is a joy all its own and very comforting. (Cringing is also nice to see, but it's a bit theatrical.) The obedient behavior itself, *there*, outside the confines of one's skin, is an extension of one, as one's intentions are realized in the actions of those who obey one's commands.

In general, any intentional modification of the world is a way of being, of existing, in that world. The bully exists in and is reassured by the fear of his victims. The bashful wallflower, sitting in the corner bending beer cans with his bare hands while his smoother fellows dance with the girls, is reassuring himself of his own existence, nothing less (and little more!). There are levels, then, to the exercise of power, corresponding to the quality and extent of the changes effected by it.

At perhaps the lowest level, power is exercised only destructively, as when natural and artificial forms are merely *negated*. Half the fun of ordinary vandalism lies in its sheer destructiveness, and for the original Vandals that was about all there was to it, indignant observers having been destroyed as well. Creativity on the other hand, the *making* of things, constitutes the exercise of power on a higher level and is more rewarding, but it usually requires some prior talent.

To see one's own efforts embodied in a new reality, be it an artifact or an organization, which had never been there before, is to get a return on expenditure like none other. To look at what one has made is to *see* one's own thoughts. To be obeyed is to be confronted with one's own will, and that is *really* to exist, an eminently desirable "way of being." (Ownership of things is a kind of surrogate for this modality and popularly preferred in its place.)

No one wants not to have power. Those who say they don't want power are either being less than candid or are using the words as a kind of shorthand for not wanting the pain and discomfort that the gaining of power often entails. The exercise of political power, for example, is a cold and lonely business (or so we are told), and it takes work, a great deal of work, to achieve it. So too with other powers: they're all hard, even painful, to get and to exercise.

The opposites to the exercise of power are more complex and "dynamic" than the simple static negativities of pain and senselessness in the case of pleasure. Direct *opposition* to power, an attempt to cancel its exercise, requires power itself, and to fail here is to be destroyed utterly; but the attempt can be made, because to oppose power and win is to exercise power anew. The *absence* of power, on the other hand, weakness, can never be chosen; as a lack of being it is always imposed, at best "pregiven."

But *obedience*, more or less voluntary submission to power, is an opposite which is complementary to power and even a component of its exercise, on certain levels. Entailing as it does a kind of complicity, ready obedience has its compensations: better to be a yes-man or a “gofer” than a complete nonentity in the boardrooms and bistros of power. (We speak not of children here, but of grown men.) *Disobedience*, on the other hand, is inherently unstable and must decay into obedience . . . or explode!

There are, of course, limitations to the exercise of power. In principle there is no “spatial” limit to power; it is *as* an extension beyond the confines of one’s body, and in theory the whole world might be brought under one’s domination. But there is still the temporal limitation: no one exercises power after he’s dead. School bullies seem to disappear after graduation and every tyranny ends in death. Creative and destructive powers cease alike when the body breathes no more. (A legal will requires the authority of government, or at least the cooperation of friends, to be effective, and so is a much more complicated thing than the simple imposition, here and now, of my commands.)

Most men get very little chance in life to exercise power in any proper sense. Lost in the thorns and cares of every day they settle for a little comfort and never get organized enough for power-seeking even to become an option. The gaining of power is a struggle. Exercising it entails the risk of defeat and there is no joy at all in that. And besides, there is always death: however grand the monument, the graves beneath are all the same. For most men, therefore, death is not an end to power but a sort of rest—a limit to pleasure, to be sure, but an end of misery as well. For some, however, death is not at all a limit but a challenge.

Why do rich men get up in the morning? Why don’t they all sleep late? There are few pleasures to equal that of sleeping late, and almost none that can compensate for the pain of returning to consciousness, so what can it be that wakens them? Rich men get up in the morning and then even *work*, some of them, because they prefer the exercise of power to the pleasures of indolence. And for most of them that’s all there is to it.

But among the rich and powerful there are a few, a very few, who are not satisfied with a grudging daily mere obedience from other men. Ambitious to a fault (or doubly insecure) they want *more*, more than a sullen reflection of their wills, more than a mute and lifeless echo in the fear and actions of those who obey them. They want, these few, to be wanted, to have their being *willed* by other men. And, inconvenienced rather than blocked by what we have called the “temporal limitation to the exercise of power,” they seek some way to *be* beyond the grave itself. They want, these few, to have their being willed by other men both now and *after* they are dead.

Death defines the temporal. One’s death is one’s limit in time. But it is not the limit of human desire for being. There have been many men who have wanted to exist beyond their deaths. Most of them have accommodated this

desire by a belief in immortality, personal subsistence after death, or by putting their hopes and expectations in their children. But there have been others who have not been satisfied by such natural remedies and who have preferred to drive a nail or two of their own into the flux by seeking fame. And what is called glory is the network of pitons, as it were, that some ambitious men leave after them upon the mountainside of time.

Fame, we are told, is a fleeting thing. Where are the men, Marcus Aurelius¹ asks repeatedly, who flattered Caesar Augustus? But fleeting is precisely what fame is meant *not* to be! Fame is meant to *last*, to remain in time beyond the evanescent workings of power itself.

But what is fame, and how does it exist? It exists, first of all, in the minds and wills of others. To be famous is to be *as* the intentions of others; it is to be *in* their rejoicing that we exist or have existed.

Like pleasure, fame is somewhat passive and not directly under our control. By our glorious actions we place ourselves *in the way* of people's wants and needs and then we wait for their reactions, for their smiles, their clapping, their standing ovations and for their inclusion of us in their history books. But like the exercise of power, fame is something more than pleasure; it is a larger and can be a longer being than the mere bodily. A great confectioner "exists" each time his efforts are enjoyed—or recalled—at dessert, or whenever people gather for a sweet.

Of course there are levels to fame, and it has its opposites. Infamy is the opposite to fame which can be chosen, and it sometimes is chosen, because the other opposite to fame—what we may call social and historical irrelevance—is sometimes much too hard to bear for impatient ambition; we have our "famous" assassins and, on another level, ordinary exhibitionists. To be hated or despised is better than never to have been noticed at all—or so it can seem to some myopic visionaries.

Fame—and glory, its grander mode—can be achieved in only one way: by pleasing or benefitting people. And the size of the fame, its spatial and temporal magnitude, will be a function of the quality and extent of the pleasure or benefit conferred . . . if all goes well, for there are no guarantees here, and there can be slip-ups. There have been a few famous pure enjoyers, *bons vivants* and the like, but these are quasi-mythical figures, even archetypes, for us to cluck over while swapping stories. By and large, fame is the result of power used effectively, which is to say, power employed in some real or perceived alleviation of human misery. (Of course if the benefits are *merely* apparent, the fame will be proportionately insubstantial.)

Thus the levels of fame, from ordinary pleasure-givers (or even extraordinary; there have been famous flatterers) to riverboat pilots and novelists, who transport us from this to some other place and time. Most famous of all are the

1. Roman emperor and diarist, 121 to 180 A.D.

clothiers and architects and statesmen, who help to make more orderly and bearable the lives we have to live out in the here and now.

But among the *glorious*—and this the ancients noticed along ago—are the founders and “instaurators,” the inventors of new orders, the creators, in fine, of new worlds in which to live. Most obvious among these are the builders of cities and states, the Lawgivers and the Liberators. These are the men who “live in the hearts of their countrymen” the longest of all.

Of course there are others, founders of other kinds of cities and givers of other kinds of power. A god had to be invented for the taming of fire, and had any one man discovered the wheel he would be almost as famous.² Even now, countless scientists labor namelessly to make life more convenient for us—all to the self-effacing glory of Science.

The poets and the philosophers are also among these “others,” founders of new cities of the mind, creators and discoverers of new words with which to think and feel. At one level there are the literary spritzers and tumblers and the ordinary teachers who do it for their students and for larger audiences, and at a higher level there are Shakespeare and Socrates and others, who do it for almost all the world. The rewards for these latter are not so immediate. In fact, the temporal dimension of their fame has so outdistanced the spatial that we almost tend to think of them as natural phenomena rather than as once living, striving, human *users* of powers and abilities which they had to develop in themselves, carefully and painstakingly.

If fame and glory can be achieved only by pleasing or benefitting people, two things emerge clearly. The first is that some sort of ability, some *power* and not a mere talent or philanthropic intention, must be exercised in order to achieve it. “A man of good will with no power might as well be a man of bad will.” But few powers are just *given* us, as if by nature. The ability to mix ingredients, to organize people, to put words together meaningfully—all of these are powers, and they must first be *developed* before they can be used at all, and *that* will often require the foregoing of pleasure! (This, that pleasures might have to be postponed, is the case even for the “ordinary” gaining and using of power.)

Then, once developed, such powers must be *used properly*, or glory-seeking ambition will be thwarted. And that is the second remarkable thing about the matter. For to use power improperly, be it wickedly or even clumsily, as Machiavelli noted, is to achieve “imperio” at best, but never glory. Ambition is no sin, in this world, and it is surely not a crime for men who would rule others. The sin is faint-heartedness, a willingness to settle for anything less than glory itself, and the crime is carelessness, imprudence in the use of power.

2. In our own time, the inventor of the light bulb and the phonograph, by which we have been given power over space and time themselves, has been immortalized by the construction, in his name, of an exit on the New Jersey Turnpike.

In order for power to beget fame it must be used properly, and “properly” means here, simply, “to the benefit of others.” If others are not benefitted—which is to say, at the very least relieved of pain and at the best provided with some power they in turn can use—then fame will not follow and even admiration will be offered only grudgingly. As a matter of fact, if it becomes apparent that the beneficial use of power was only for the *sake* of being glorified, then the fame will dissolve like smoke into a bitter memory.

Thus the precariousness of fame. But within it, like a seed that’s rooted in a crack, there is the power of desire itself to cleave the rock of human misery. For fame can live and grow only by bettering the condition of man, by improving the lot of those who give it in return, with “glory” as the final crown, in time.

Desire is for being, as we say. And a small desire is for a little parcel of being: thus mere pleasure, caressing and filling out one’s body at the most. A little more desire moves outside this skin we’re in and acts upon the world around us: thus power and the exercise of it, on and in the bodies of others. But when desire becomes unlimited it will be satisfied only in and by the hearts and wills and memories of generations yet unborn: thus glory and the immortality it brings.

As a way of being, therefore, this glory is the greatest to be striven for and the most desirable. But it cannot be chosen directly or enjoyed immediately. Fame and glory can be achieved only by an effort which initially ignores and operationally suspends the primal concern of desire itself—the being of one’s self—by attending to and effectively fulfilling the wants and needs of *others*, all in the hope of an eventual transfiguration in their “love.” A risky undertaking at the very best, but worth a try, for some.

The really intriguing thing about it all is this, that whether glory is in fact achieved or not, the results of striving for it—in the long run and in human terms—are the same: some benefit to men. And the effort, curiously enough, is in almost perfect congruence with what moralists and others have been telling us for years!³ It’s as though it had been planned.

3. Cf. James 1: 27.