

The Language of Pain: A Philosophical Study of BDSM

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Timo Airaksinen¹

Abstract

This philosophical article attempts to promote the recognition of the social world of BDSM in philosophical and tropological perspective. BDSM, and especially sadomasochism, is difficult to understand in its own, characteristic motivational perspective because such negative experiences as, say, pain and humiliation, indicate aversion rather than attraction. To cause pain to others is typically condemned. To cosset pain and suffering is said to be perverse. My main point is we that can better understand BDSM via its typical language and rhetoric, especially by paying attention to the key role of linguistic metonymy when we discuss the riddles of pain and pleasure. Also, this article discusses the various ways of talking about and potentially condemning BDSM by calling it a perversion or a paraphilic disorder. I conclude that, within some reasonable limits, BDSM is not vulnerable to the standard forms of criticism.

Keywords

BDSM, S/M, tropology, pain, pleasure, motivation

Introduction

Although psychological and sociological issues are mainly outside the scope of this philosophical and tropological essay,¹ the enigmas of BDSM are still begging for explanation. BDSM refers to (often organized) activities such as bondage, domination, discipline, submission, and sadomasochism.² BDSM is what can be called a sexual diversion, “serious leisure,” and sometimes even a lifestyle.³ It is often practiced in clubs and other social venues where the performers and their audiences can enjoy the show. Of course, BDSM also takes place privately. It is important to distinguish between BDSM proper, BDSM-inspired sexual foreplay, everyday sadism and masochism, and commercial pornography: BDSM is a social activity, which is to say the participants share a common view of its definition, rules, and values.

I start by asking what BDSM is and what it is not. Let us pay attention to the dialectical interplay between what is intrinsically desirable and undesirable, like pleasure and pain. I discuss the motivation of and the relevant reasons for BDSM activities, given the enigma of how pain, humiliation, and bondage can be so desirable. The standard view is that the explanation is related to sexual and erotic pleasure, but BDSM enthusiasts may also have deeper personal, cognitive reasons for doing what they are doing. This leads us smoothly to the next question, which concerns paraphilia, paraphilic disorder, and perversion. I argue that these terms are problematic and should be used with great caution, if at all.

The key philosophical point is this: In the BDSM field, many of our normal definitions of terms such as violence, sex, pain, and enjoyment either lose their conventional meaning or become alien, ambiguous, controversial, or essentially contested. This challenges anyone who wants to study this field, a trial that we should not underestimate. It is important to distinguish between two perspectives: Insiders and outsiders tend to consider BDSM activities in different light. The outsiders, even when they are knowledgeable, sympathetic, and impartial, may fail to understand the desires, practices, and values of the insiders, that is, the practitioners and their intended audiences. Such a failure is particularly disturbing in the case of power wielders like religious, medical, and legal authorities. BDSM is indeed a subversive field and as such it resists attempts of domination and control, even at the conceptual level. It is subversive because, among other strange things, it refuses to respect the accepted standard definitions of pain and pleasure, or *jouissance*.⁴ A BDSM aficionado’s ideas of a delightful activity can be difficult to follow (Largier, 2007).

¹University of Helsinki, Finland

Corresponding Author:

Timo Airaksinen, Professor, Department Social Philosophy and Moral, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Helsinki, PL 24 (Unionink. 40A), FI-00014, Finland.

Email: timo.airaksinen@helsinki.fi



Tropological Delineations

Here is an instructive description of BDSM and particularly of sadomasochism or S/M that focuses on “[t]he sexual organization of social risk, for one of S/M’s characteristics is the erotizing of scenes, symbols, contexts, and contradictions which society does not typically recognize as ‘erotic.’” BDSM is about playing risky games understood as sex between two seemingly unequal partners. Also, BDSM can be seen as “radical sex” that is “our ‘exploration of eros and the liberation of erotic potential from Puritan ethics.’”⁵ This looks like a reference to fetishism: one finds or makes nonerotic goals of desire erotic; this is the kind of fetishism we may call functional because its objects are actions and practices. Often we associate fetishism with things like women’s high-heeled shoes; this can be called material fetishism, when a fetish is a *prima facie* nonsexual thing loaded with sexual meaning. In other words, the erotic and the nonerotic switch their places under the umbrella of hazard jointly shared by a top and a bottom. The top dominates the bottom and brings about, say, pain and humiliation for both of them to enjoy.

Next, I will derive a novel key characterization of BDSM, which is, as it is easy to see, closely related to the standard one mentioned above. The main point (of S/M) is that the characterizations of erotic/pleasure and nonerotic/pain change places; in other words, they exemplify reversible pairs. Hence, in a BDSM context pain and pleasure are related metonymically.⁶ Kenneth Burke writes, “we might extend the [metonymic] pattern to include such reversible pairs as disease-cure, hero-villain, active-passive [and] we should ‘ironically’ note the function of the disease in ‘perfecting’ the cure, or the function of the cure in ‘perpetuating the influences of the disease’” (Burke, 1969, p. 512). Pain-pleasure is indeed one of such metonymic pairs: the direct function of pain is now to maximize pleasure, which in the S/M context seems to be a positive bodily sensation and in the case of disciplinary or humiliating activity a mental pleasure. Now we can freely alternate “pain” and “pleasure,” as in “Whip me, give me pain” and “Whip me, give me pleasure.” “Pain” and “pleasure” both refer to one self-identical thing, namely, what I want from this social exchange. No doubt, the rhetorical context characterized by its metonymies.

Of course, in most narrative fields the relationship of pain and pleasure is far from metonymical, like torture in legal and punitive contexts and hurt in many medical procedures. When we discuss serious pain close to that of torture, and not some pain-like playful little titillations, this makes the BDSM context a special one: It is a context in which serious pain and rich pleasure are indeed related metonymically in cooperative setting. To make the case stronger, also consensual cooperation between the top and the bottom shows its metonymic features: When you are hurt by an agent, this seems like a paradigmatic case of conflict; yet in BDSM it is all

consensual and hence cooperative. Such a double metonymy strongly characterizes the unique world of BDSM. In the language of BDSM, pain and pleasure as well as conflict and cooperation freely switch places.

If it does not happen in other contexts, this type of metonymy indeed identifies BDSM, and more specifically S/M. I think this is so: The relevant double metonymy is unique to BDSM, but this of course depends on various factors I cannot discuss here. Metonymy, when that is used as a characterization of BDSM, reveals its paradoxical, revolutionary, and truly subversive nature: Any social context where conflict and cooperation are related metonymically and X and Y also are situated metonymically, when X is something intrinsically undesirable and Y is its antonym, is an instance of BDSM. X and Y are intended bodily or mental sensations resulting from certain typical social exchange-like activities. This applies to everyday masochism, too. If I am begging for punishment and maltreatment, say, in domestic life, I desire it, which makes me a masochist. If I enjoy punishing my children and derive pleasure from it, I am a sadist; I derive pleasure from actions that are not enjoyable as such, or desirable from the point of view of one’s audiences.⁷ The difference to BDSM is that an everyday sadistic exchange is never cooperative. Of course, such a usage of the terms “sadism” and “masochism” may sound odd and perhaps dated today. We may reject the idea of sadistic and masochistic personality types, but it is difficult to reject the use of those terms altogether.

Here is an illustration: The top cuts his bottom’s skin with a sharp blade making him bleed. This activity combines the horror of free flowing blood, the perceived hazard of being cut as mental pain, and being wounded as physical pain. Next, the bottom reports delight as well as strong pleasurable feelings and sensations. In this case, delight and pleasure are substituted for horror, mental pain, and physical suffering, although the bottom can also report unadulterated pain. Hence, the pain-pleasure pair is freely reversible, just as both Plate and Burke (above) say they should be; this is what a metonymic relation means in this definitional context. Burke’s additional point about irony comes in as follows: In an everyday context, when I am hurt and someone asks if I am hurt, I can answer—ironically—by saying “What a pleasure this is, don’t you see!” To maximize your pleasure by letting someone hurt you indeed contains an analogous ironic aspect, at least if seen from an outsider’s perspective. Indeed, in an S/M context, irony is clearly visible to outsiders but perhaps not always to the participants themselves. The same can be said of experienced horror and joy: the dedicated audiences of horror films are masochists because they enjoy horror. They often seem to realize this anomaly, or their perception of their own strange sensibilities, which, due to its irony, makes the whole experience even more enjoyable to them. Of course, in such a context the ironic aspect is so strong that the audience may laugh—and they do. Interestingly enough, horror and laughter in such a context

come close to being interchangeable. Sometimes this tendency is so strong that the whole show becomes ridiculous. Notice how irony and metonymy overlap here: What is ironic, that is to laugh at horror, starts looking as an instance of metonymy where laughter and horror become interchangeable. Metonymy and irony always are closely connected.

Do the desires of BDSM have their metaphoric meaning, too? The joy of BDSM also is in its metaphors. What is then the metaphoric message of urinating or defecating on a bottom? Such activities beg for metaphoric reading because a metaphor changes the considered context into another one that is only remotely connected to the original and by doing so creates a set of secondary meanings: “Men are nothing but pigs” moves the discourse across the limits of fine social etiquette and the hard facts of the human sciences into that of animal husbandry and its real-life smells and sounds. Newmahr (2011, p. 184) says the key metaphor of BDSM is that of life and death.⁸

Newmahr may well be right; however, the tropological themes in BDSM can be developed further than that. For instance, anal fisting belongs to BDSM, or we can situate it as a practice in the repertoire of BDSM (Hale, 1997; Weinberg, Williams, & Moser, 1984). The idea sounds radical, painful, and dangerous, or impossibly repulsive from the point of view of its nonintended audiences. Yet anal sex constitutes an entire genre of pornography, or the hard core of it, but anal fisting goes one step further along with vaginal fisting. The more demanding idea and practice of anal fisting rests also on a cooperative metonym, on the symbolism of two persons understood as one, connected in a way that cannot be cracked. Why is this different from heterosexual penis–vagina penetration as a kind of bond between two persons? It is different because in many ways it is so much more demanding, just like other BDSM activities. Extraordinary deeds create extraordinary effects. Vanilla sex may make no impression on a couple, unlike such extreme experiences as anal fisting. Just the knowledge that so many people strictly disapprove of it may be decisive. Therefore, we see here a special dialectical interplay between individuality and unity. Yet there must be more to it. If so, what is the relevant metaphor? The mythology of anal unification crosses the limits of its original medical anatomical context in which the main allusion is to stretching of the dry and tight anus instead of the fluid and flexible vagina. Again, irony emerges along with desire and its metonymies: the fluid flex (pleasure) under a fist is substituted for the anus as paradigmatically dry tight thing (pain). Tightness and flexibility now belong to the same context as ironic opposites. Next, our mental representations vacillate between what is real and anatomic, tight anus, and the key metaphoric ideal, an unbreakable bond between two persons. Here we can see an alternative metaphor to Newmahr’s life and death, namely that of an unbreakable bond. Of course, we also can view anal fisting in terms of life and death: Vagina is for giving life and anus for extracting dead waste. This is almost too obvious, though.

Here the idea of a bond is indeed a new metaphor built on the top of an ironically applied metonymy. There is no bonding in the original descriptive context, but now it all, with its perfect plausibility, depends on the secondary meaning of bonding as something highly commendable and hence ethically valuable and as such desirable. Such a bond is a pledge with a deep and complex narrative (secondary) meaning ranging from commitment to love.⁹ At the same time, one may feel that such a narrative must be false and definitely refuse to recognize how and why one could freely substitute “fluid, pleasant flex under a fist” for “dry, painful tightness.” Thus, one misses the awareness—and avoids the danger—of the key metaphor of an unbreakable social bond. All this must sound subversive, perhaps even repulsive. The metaphor must then be denied as it is simply too dangerous to bear. It may look like sheer madness and perversity that must be seen as (medically) pathological and (legally) suspect activity. Again, to distinguish between a view from inside and outside is crucial: Outsiders may be able to see the rhetorical construction of the key metaphor and assent to its basic validity but the participants live it. Without such a metaphor, say, anal fisting functions like sheer violence, when it in reality is full of meaning. BDSM activities may not be about raw animal pleasures.

Here is then my amended characterization of BDSM: By BDSM we mean (more or less openly) sexualized social activities where a pair of mental predicates like pleasure and pain can be freely substituted one for the other (metonymy), these predicates being mutually incompatible in their standard contexts (irony), and they are charged with shared meaning (narrative) based on metaphorical shifts of their fields of discourse. All this takes place in a cooperative context that can and normally is called a conflict situation, which is another source of metonymy here. To illustrate my conceptual strategy, let me compare it briefly with that of dealing with death. Death can be understood in two ways, metaphorically and metonymically; Gerald Doherty writes as follows: “[Death] is either an asymbolic, non-transcendental event, the last arbitrary sequence of events that precede it, or it is profoundly symbolic, concentrating all the life events into a single constellation of meanings, and from that totalizing perspective, irradiating them with a fresh light and value” (Doherty, 1999, pp. 56-57). As Doherty also recognizes, life/death pair itself has its typical metaphoric structure: A metaphor, as if across a bridge, crosses the limits of two separate fields of discourse, and this is exactly what happens when one dies. One moves from the realm of the living to a new, mysterious, and meaning-laden realm of the dead. However, this idea is valid only if one’s idea of death is already understood metaphorically in the first place, in the sense explained by Doherty. It follows that death is a metaphor at two different levels. To say the central metaphor of BDSM is life/death is to refer to such tropological developments and their rich stocks of secondary meanings.

Here we see the two opposites, life/death and pleasure/pain, constantly meeting and departing at the symbolic level.¹⁰ Hence, the metonymic aspects of S/M focus on the interplay of two bodily feelings and sensations, pain and pleasure, whereas at the metaphoric level we look across borders and find, say, a player reporting experience of purification, discovery of one's true self, or her seamless unification with another person, her top or bottom—seeing “fresh light and value” in the world beyond this one. One may indeed mention the symbolisms of life and death within BDSM, like Newmahr says; they are the key metaphors. For its nonintended audiences BDSM may well mean the open gates of hell and the abyss of damnation; perhaps this is so for a true edge player as well, but then their background narratives are radically different.

The Riddles of Motivation

The field of BDSM is large and fantastically varied. Its borders are fuzzy and much of it is hidden and secretive, or made to look like pornography. The field is enclosed in abjuration, moralism, misinformation, and myth. For philosophical argument's sake, let us simplify the field as follows: a BDSM participant (bottom) enjoys pain, punishment, humiliation, and bondage; according to the definition of BDSM above, the participants successfully transmute them into pleasure, respect, and even liberty—This looks like some miraculous psychological alchemy. However, if the participants, especially the bottoms, do not find their desire for pain, humiliation, and bondage somehow rewarding, they would not consent to playing these roles (Schroeder, 2004). It is not possible to say “I enjoy pain” and to mean it literally: Pain is not an object that can be enjoyed as such. Yet the logic of the play here presupposes the mental pain/pleasure transmutation in question, no doubt about it. But how is it possible? Pain as such cannot be pleasure. It is logically inconsistent to maintain pain to be pleasurable. (We discuss now the logic of some psychological concepts, not their rhetorical usage like we did above.) This problem makes BDSM, and especially S/M, a supremely interesting case from the point of view of psychological hedonism in philosophy, which is a topic as old as philosophy itself (See Wolfsdorf, 2013).

The standard view of pain is that it is a distressing, paradigmatically disagreeable bodily sensation, and a highly motivating mental state. Moreover, it is logically inconsistent to say something like this: I feel exactly the same pain as yesterday, but now it does not feel so bad. In the same way, it is inconsistent to maintain that I still have the same pain but, say, that my medication makes it easier to tolerate. In other words, I cannot doubt that I am in pain (Hacker, 2016).¹¹ If I tolerate pain better the pain is now less severe. Pain is pain, a raw sensation, and that is all; yet an S/M bottom may say he enjoys it when whipped hard with a singletail. The pain can be close to intolerable and he may exhibit all its relevant

behavioral pain symptoms but he says he somehow enjoys it. Does he really enjoy pain? How is this to be understood? Does it mean that he did not experience severe pain, for instance, because he was so highly stimulated by the activity in question? Sometimes positive excitement, mind control, or, say, sexual arousal works like a painkiller: “Campanella [. . .] could so abstract his attention from any sufferings of his body, that he was able to endure the rack itself without much pain [. . .]” (E. Burke, 1757/2015, pp. 53, 106).

Someone may then ask, can excitement also explain why one enjoys pain? Perhaps you can talk about the delight the situation brings about instead of physical pleasure? How to explain the excitement as a kind of delight then? Certainly it is not the case that excitement creates an altered bodily state where the pain itself becomes enjoyable—one cannot enjoy pain as such. Hence, the bottom feels the pain but also somehow enjoys both the situation where it is delivered and his relation to the top. For instance, a love bite hurts but because it is a love bite it is also enjoyable: it says she loves me. In this example, pain, or pain-and-love, is pleasant because of its relation to love. However, it is impossible that pain would be enjoyable as such; pain is not its own reward.

We know that certain somatic perceptions are a mixture of pain and pleasure, as reported for instance by marathon runners. Such mental states are mixed pleasures. Hence, in S/M pain plays the bottom may at the same time feel pain and report enjoyment or delight as interconnected and mutually synchronized feelings. It is possible that the bottom feels two separate sensations, physical pain and pleasure, but the pleasure is so strong that the pain can be (to some extent) neglected. In this case, pain is not pleasure but pain and pleasure arrive as if side by side both having their own causal genesis. Pain and pleasure in S/M are, as I see it, two different and separate sensations that emerge and vary together in such a synchronized manner that it is natural to conflate them in personal reports. Just like the love bite really hurts and it feels good but it is the bite that hurts and feels good, we should not say the pain feels good when the bite feels good. In the same way, whipping may feel good and delightful even if we refrain from saying that the associated pain feels good. It is crucial to ask what exactly feels good and what is delightful.

Let me illustrate the explanations given above by means of two rather disturbing semi-pornographic examples of BDSM play performed in front of an audience and shown on the Internet. Two naked, good-looking young women are tied together from their left wrists by a rope two feet long. Both have a singletail whip in their right hand. They lash each other tit-for-tat as hard as they can. They tremble, grimace, scream, cry, and weep showing all the bodily symptoms of real pain, which clearly is extreme. Each lash leaves a bright red mark on the skin. They go on for a long time. A second example: This is a competition to determine who lasts longer. Two naked young women (bottoms) lie down on a platform on the belly; we can see their faces but nothing else. We hear

the whip and the blow. The women are clearly scared of what will happen to them. Behind them stands a whipper (top) with a heavy singletail whip. He lashes them one after the other and commands them to count the strokes aloud. We see that the pain is absolutely overwhelming, like torture, and the women really agonize. One surrenders, they both stand up, and the top comes to the front and congratulates them—very sternly, devoid of any sympathy at all, and then walks away. The audience applauds. Here we have a case of pure and real pain and pain behavior with no hint of enjoyment, pleasure, sex, or eroticism. These women are afraid, not visibly eager, and certainly did not show any signs of enjoyment at all. At the same time, they do not look like being coerced to do what they do.¹² I must admit that coercion looks like the most plausible explanation here.

Pain and suffering may indeed have their sacred and cathartic quality. Religious asceticism tends to recommend them. Religiously meaningful torture like self-flagellation has its rich and lasting heritage, extending from the Egyptian cult of Isis to the Dominican order (See McCabe, 2007). It is clear that in these cases pain is accompanied by one's own, deep sense of reward and feeling of satisfaction, which is motivating. Again, pain is not its own reward, although the reward is not possible without the self-inflicted pain; this is what the flagellant believes. He certainly is no hedonist. Hence, BDSM is not necessarily about sensory enjoyment as such. It is deeply related to higher cognitive and emotional functions. According to this view, when you freely suffer humiliation and bondage and risk your health, you will emerge from that situation as a renewed person.¹³ At its best, it is a life-altering, other-worldly experience that is as rare as it is personal, a truly remarkable achievement. In this way, we can argue against the hedonistic model of BDSM and in favor of a cognitive model.¹⁴ Analogously, we may mention disgusting pleasures: A person feels deep pleasure when he has reason to feel bad about the pleasure in question. This is a common experience but no one would say that the pleasure itself is disgusting—pleasure is pleasure and the reasons for being disgusting are another thing. One simply feels pleasure that is accompanied with disgust; this is to say, there are no disgusting pleasure, only reasons for thinking that some pleasures are disgusting and then the relevant negative feelings will follow. Many people enjoy pornography in such a conflicted way.

These reflections apply primarily to the bottom; perhaps they also apply to the top, but in her case the key term must be power.¹⁵ We know that wielding power is often stimulating and enjoyable, sometimes ecstatically so. When we notice that the top in his sadistic role is not able to enjoy any direct sensory pleasure, we conclude that he works hard for some rewarding and satisfying beliefs and ideas of personal and social supremacy and power. Here we must keep in mind that tops and bottoms may switch their roles and hence utilize all the opportunities inherent in BDSM. There is another consideration that deserves to be mentioned: It is undeniable

that people are strangely fond of witnessing other persons' pain, suffering, and death—in these days mainly but not solely in fictional terms. Somehow this stimulates and fascinates us no end, as our contemporary popular culture so amply proves (Bok, 1998). We want to see it and so it must somehow be rewarding. Violence and its victims are in the core of popular entertainment, war and mayhem sell well, and the raped and tortured body in its various forms is viewed with the superbly enjoyable mixture of horror and enthrallment. Can this psychological fact explain the top's sadistic motivation? Perhaps it can. Perhaps this interest in violence and pain also is connected to power: When I view another person's pain it empowers me, as if the victim were suffering in my hands. Yet as a spectator, I am not responsible, I am innocent, I cannot be blamed for the other person's suffering; so I am free to enjoy it as if I were supremely powerful, so powerful that no moral norms may touch me. This is what the top achieves, too.

Let me next address very briefly humiliation. For many BDSM participants, humiliation seems to be a form of respect. This again sounds paradoxical but can be tentatively explained as follows. In their mutual social situation, tops and bottoms are engaging in a relationship where they feel for each other and share their mutual respect and intimacy; in other words, they freely cooperate, which entails respect regardless of what they happen to do. The top is supposed to care for her bottoms; hence, she would not serve that evil trinity, or pain, humiliation, and bondage, raw to her bottoms. They all know what humiliation entails in everyday life but in BDSM play the top is supposed to respect her bottom and she shows it by humiliating him—This may well be the point of the activity. We just need to understand respect in a special way, when it depends on humiliation. My argument is as follows: Suppose the top respects the bottom. Next, the top humiliates her. The top shows his respect by means of humiliating her; it does not do to say, the top shows his respect along with humiliating her. Again we meet a metonymical relation between humiliation and respect, as my key characterization of BDSM requires: humiliation and respect mean the same thing. When we move over from tropological consideration to psychological mechanisms, we may then suggest that humiliation and respect are related instrumentally, that is, humiliation brings about or creates the sense of respect. Anyway, “humiliation” and “respect” are freely substitutable terms in this context.

Appendix: The Tropes of Perversity

Many sexual activities used to be called perversions as if they were pathologically symptomatic and, as such, marks of near insanity.¹⁶ BDSM has been classified together with pedophilia, zoophilia, coprofilia, and so on, so offensive is its image to many. For instance, the scatological fetish, or playing with human excrement, may be difficult to accept as nice and normal.¹⁷ Is BDSM a perversion? Is it a paraphilia? Is it a

paraphilic disorder? The best answer may well be no; it is kinky and perhaps weird, but these two terms are not necessarily condemnatory; their tropology may be ironic and multidimensionally suggestive, they may be socially rebellious, and even creatively playful. We may also call BDSM minority sex because minority is a relational or nonessential term—the situation may change when social conventions and customs change, like in the case of gay sex in many liberal cultures of today. However, calling BDSM perverse or paraphilic sex and a paraphilic disorder assigns it a nonrelational or essentially negative, yet unique characterization. An argument against such a rhetorical strategy exists: It is ad hoc. If you want to censure or condemn a type of desire, need, or action, you do not want to use a term that is tailor-made for this special purpose only; it can be called negative labeling, which as such is an ad hoc strategy without any explanatory weight. This strategy has Biblical roots: To call a desire a sin is to label it as something against the religious canon; the next step is to metonymically relate “sin” to “immorality”; and a sectarian condemnation turns into a universalizable moral judgment. In this way, sin becomes applicable to everyday social life achieving in the process an extra-religious moralistic meaning that also seems to justify its use. Sin extends its halo into the fields of morality and the law. This happens to perversion and, to a lesser degree, to paraphilia as well.

It is customary to describe the sexual activity in question in common negative terms, which make disapproval not prejudiced but objective and comprehensible. One must avoid labeling or using any special categorical terms in an ad hoc manner, terms that work in a given context only—For instance, call BDSM sick, immoral, or perhaps sinful and you make it one of the numerous activities condemned by the medical community, concerned citizens, and the Christian church. Call it ugly, disgusting, criminal, and insane, so that you will be understood correctly. You also need to specify the reasons for your condemnation because no bad thing can be bad in its own unique sense and in its own special way, like the perverse or paraphilic activities allegedly are.

When you use the term *perverse*, you use a term which condemns some desires and actions within the very broad field of sexuality and eroticism. However, this is the only use it has, which indicates labeling. Such a usage is also, tropologically speaking, fetishist. The word works as a linguistic and rhetorical talisman, a magic word that is made to do one job only: to put a negative label on something that is already disliked. This is because “perversion” has no independent meaning base. As a talisman and fetish it does not: We create a new use of the word, or a new word, that has no independent meaning base, no previous use or history. This is what a fetish does; it works as if in a vacuum, its emerging effect being a kind of miracle. In the end, the irony of this all is that BDSM is a type of sexual fetishism, which condemns it as a perversion, which in itself is a fetishist trope. Hence, to speak of perversions is perverted, which is nothing but criticism’s suicide.

Perversion talk is a linguistic performative that, as a fetish, convinces and condemns without a reason or a ground. Perhaps the general nonsexual meaning of “perversion” is something like self-violation or incomprehensibly violating one’s own self or essential interests? A meaning like that can be coined but a glance at a thesaurus shows that “perversion” fails to have proper synonyms; the best I can find is “distortion.” BDSM would then be distorted sex, but along with such a trope we certainly approach the fuzzy realms of metaphor. If “perversion” means a “hopelessly twisted affair” it does not say much about sex, or sex tends to be hopelessly twisted in all its forms anyway. Or think of a man frequently visiting female prostitutes; what can be more simple, not twisted at all, and the same time so unacceptable, even perverted? If he must pay before he gets aroused, what is so twisted about that?¹⁸

I suppose “paraphilia” and “paraphilic disorder” fare a little better in this respect, but then they are technical medical terms that should be carefully unpacked in order to see what they hide. Why coin such terms? Why not use statistical terms such as “rare” or “uncommon”? Even “strange” and “abnormal” might do. The question is, even if we prioritize vanilla sex, or sex that is or simulates human reproductive activity, what is the reason for condemning all the other forms of sexual pleasure? Why provide them with a common characterization after all? No good answer exists. It has been suggested, of course, that paraphilic disorders are painful in the long run and thus the sufferers tend to seek for help. They are in this sense like diseases. This may well be so but different people react differently to different activities. Some individuals flourish, some suffer, so that it is difficult to say anything informative about an activity like BDSM itself. The best rule of thumb is, if BDSM-related desire brings about intolerable pain and suffering to the agent, the agent needs psychotherapy or medical help. However, even in this case one might want to resist the temptation of calling BDSM the problem. The relevant, in this case harmful, activities need not be condemned in a broader context. The paraphilic disorder is this person’s own individual problem. In fact, it is his own problem like any other problems he or she may have. We may call it a BDSM generated problem; say, deep anxiety and depression, just like we call a broken leg a fall-related bone problem. Both must be treated as they bring about intolerable suffering.

The definitions of perversion provided by the members of its nonintended audiences tend to be philosophically weak and objectionable. I give here only two examples, a classic psychoanalytical definition by Sigmund Freud and another famous philosophical one by Thomas Nagel. There are other definitions but these two are, as far as I can see, quite representative and certainly influential. Nagel argues as follows (Freud, 1977). He writes, “[sex] involves a desire that one’s partner be aroused by the recognition of one’s desire that he or she be aroused.” This is obviously too wide a requirement, as Nagel recognizes, too. I wonder

why he bothers to introduce such a point. You and your partner may have mutually different sources and causes of arousal and yet your sex is certainly not perverted nonsex because of that. He then continues, “The concept of perversion implies that a normal sexual development has been turned aside by distorting influences.” We discussed this above. Perhaps Nagel means something like a childhood trauma of seeing one’s parents during their passionate sex act, which the child then interprets as deadly violence that threatens her own future security. His conclusion is, “if humans will tend to develop some version of reciprocal interpersonal sexual awareness unless prevented, then cases of blockage can be called unnatural or perverted.” Is BDSM perverted by Nagel’s standards? One thing is certain, however: BDSM can also be a mutually agreeable, freely chosen, and fully rewarding, mutually communicative sexual experience, as reported by the participants themselves. Under Nagel’s criteria, BDSM is not a perversion. Even worse, we have no idea of the natural or spontaneous development of human sexuality because early education is always socially controlled and even coercive. We have no idea what kind of sexuality *Homo sapiens* would develop in the wild; I suppose it would be wild, much like the edge play version of BDSM. The truth is that indigenous and aboriginal cultures employ wildly different sexual mores and practices (Berndt & Berndt, 1999, Cf. VI; Herdt, 1987, pp. 234ff). The Christian norms are not universal, that much is clear. What is nearly universal is the multidimensional anxiety brought about by sex and sexuality in its nonintended audiences.

Sigmund Freud first notices that obviously healthy people may make certain strange additions to their otherwise normal, vanilla sex-centered sexual repertoire. Unlike Nagel, he maintains that many sexual perverts are normal, except that their sexual life is abnormal, and, hence, sexual perversions do not require a pathological etiology or signify anything like mental illness. In other words, there are mentally healthy perverts, which again seems to indicate that “perversion” is predicated on desires, activities, and practices, not on persons. Finally, he says that many sexual desires and practices are “so far removed from the normal in their content that we cannot avoid pronouncing them ‘pathological.’” This is to say that some practices, not people, are sick and so, derivatively, they make people sick. They should carry a label Do Not Try! Fetishism, including some aspects of BDSM, certainly belongs to this category almost by definition: a fetishist attaches sexual value to nonsexual things and actions, which, consequently, are “so far removed from normal.” We again notice the dubious emphasis on nonstatistical and pseudonormative reference to something called normal. This is the central trope in this conservative context whose key purpose is to put a lid on the life and language of some activities that are too shameful to mention, given one’s normal linguistic sensibilities.

Freud’s definition contains a preliminary point and two parts. First, perversions metonymically replace normal

(vanilla) sex. Then the first part of the definition: perversions entail a “sexual instinct [. . .] overriding the resistance or shame, disgust, horror, and pain”; and the second part: “perversion has the characteristic of exclusiveness and fixation.” Especially the second part should justify the epithet “perverse” as a pathological symptom (Nagel, 1979, p. 49). Perversions are endlessly repetitive and fully rigid and in this sense inhuman or machine like—when “machine” becomes the carefully hidden key metaphor here. Only machines are fully rigid. This is interesting even if it does not really apply to BDSM, as it is easy to verify. The members of BDSM community can be and are fully flexible with their desires, say, a top and a bottom may change their roles. Nevertheless, active BDSM community members are able to deal with “shame, disgust, horror, and pain”—this is the name of their game. What Freud is afraid of they desire, which is another source of irony in this context. Also, a person may show, in vanilla sex, a strong fixation to the partner’s genitals—obviously Freud does not mean this. Notice that the first part of the definition applies to many people who are starting their sex lives; it is not always easy to perform a complete fellatio (“give head”) or cunnilingus (“eat pussy”) and enjoy it. Adding to this list to make it more convincing. But you do not become perverted when you get used to it. Freud’s and Nagel’s definitions are conservative and perhaps logically dubious. Their main purpose is to justify the desire for vanilla sex by making its alternatives look bad to the nonintended audiences of sex play. However, as I said above, no narrative about the genesis of a practice can make the practice itself intrinsically undesirable; that is, evil and disgusting. Lovely things may grow out of filth—This is the foundation of the oriental worship of the white lotus flower.

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Notes

1. Tropology in rhetoric studies the use of tropes or figurative language.
2. A useful Terms Dictionary can be found at <http://www.differentequals.com/glossary.html>. “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, & Castaldo, 2015).
3. “Serious leisure” is a useful term first introduced by Stebbins (1982).
4. “‘Pleasure’ was associated with extremely intense sensations,” Faccio, Casini, and Cipoletta (2014, p. 752)
5. A. McClintock and B. Thomson, quoted by Plante (2006, pp. 61-62). It is questionable whether all the forms of BDSM

are sexual or erotic, for instance, activities that focus on slavery and punishment, as Yolanda Estes says. A masochist who longs for humiliation in the hands of a paid dominatrix because of his deep guilt feelings may not seek sex but some kind of psychotherapy. To call BDSM a sexual field, without qualifications, is mere gloss. It is of course impossible to give a definition of sex or eroticism. They are typically cluster concepts (no necessary conditions of being a sexual content can be found unlike sufficient conditions). When one calls, say, an activity “sexual” one is displaying a contextual marker around which one can then delineate his discursive intentions.

6. Metonymy is a rhetorical trope that makes two related terms interchangeable, for instance, because they refer to a container and contained. In this case, I say “I drank one bottle” when I could have said “I drank one beer.” You say, “King William won the battle of Hastings” when you could have said “The King’s armies won the battle.” In the case of BDSM, a product of an activity is sometimes substituted for the activity itself. We say that the “pleasurable sensation” (product) is interchangeable with “the painful flogging” (activity) (see <http://examples.yourdictionary.com/examples-of-metonymy.html>; accessed 29/3/2016).
7. See for example Sartre (1943/1994, pp. 394ff). About the ultimate failure of sadism, see pp. 405-406.
8. Newmahr’s (2011) *Playing on the Edge: Sadomasochism, Risk and Intimacy* is an admirable book that gives a good idea of the insider’s perspective on BDSM.
9. On narrativity and narrative meaning, see Genette (1980, pp. 25-26).
10. On death and sex, see Bataille (2001); also Scarry (1985).
11. It is logically speaking nonsense to say something like “I doubt I am in pain” when one shows all the pain symptoms.
12. Newmahr (2011) emphasizes intimacy as the true reward, see p. 186: “SM is about creating intimacy through social interaction.” Yolanda Estes (2016) seems to agree; see her “BDSM: My Apology” (Estes, 2016).
13. On professional dominas, see Smith and Cox (1983).
14. The cognitive model emphasizes the participants’ beliefs about the activity. These beliefs motivate and justify the activity. A participant reports, “I love to play because I want to see what is deep within each of us” (Newmahr, 2011, p. 173). To play is to explore, which has little to do with direct sensual stimulation like bodily pleasure or even with sex.
15. “Pleasure [. . .] does not have to be specifically sexual, rather it may stem from power” (Faccio et al., 2014, p. 753). Power-derived pleasures must be cognitive-emotional, not physical.
16. For the state of the medical debate on this, see Wright (2010) and Khan (2015).
17. Scatology is an essential if nauseating part of Sade’s (1904/1966) idea of “simple pleasure”; see the early days and weeks of the *120 Days of Sodom*.
18. The paradox of perversion is this: If perversion is sick sex, or deviant sex, one may desire it exactly because of this—the more sick and deviant the better. Perversion as the new normal deprives perverts of their desire and pleasure (see Dollimore, 2001, pp. 89ff).

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Author Biography

Timo Airaksinen has been a full professor of philosophy at Uni Helsinki since 1981. He has published widely on the Marquis de Sade, H. P. Lovecraft, coercion and authority, Hobbes, and Berkeley, among other topics. These days, he is mainly interested in the various aspects of desire, especially its relation to happiness. His best known books are *The Philosophy of the Marquis de Sade* (Routledge, 1995) and *Ethics of Coercion and Authority* (Pittsburgh Uni Press, 1988). He has written 50 books and 350 papers. He has traveled widely on all continents.