

Masochism In Terms of Adlerian Psychology¹

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Moral masochism is one of the basic problems to be resolved in modern life. If we are to protect ourselves against slavery similar to Communism, Fascism, Nazism—or against obliteration by bombs, we must move rapidly out of all vestiges of the master-slave relationships existent in our thinking since the days of Old-Egypt. Sado-masochism is the coin of slavery. We must remember that the master is as much enslaved as the slave and neither is free. In an Age of Power, our survival as individuals or as groups depends on being free men.

To free an individual or a group from masochism, we must understand it properly. Freud regarded it as an instinctive drive toward gratification through suffering. Adler's interpretation indicates a practical way of combating any kind of masochism whether it is moral or physical, individual or national in character. From the Adlerian viewpoint, masochism is a "specially chosen approach to the solution of confronting life problems." The individual escapes the full measure of self reliance that he should have as an adult and solves his problems by leaning on others rather than by independent, self reliant activity.

In contrast to Adler, others tend to regard masochism as a Thing-in-itself rather than as a Means-to-an-end. Freud regarded masochism as a part of the Death Instinct when it was directed against the self, and as sadism if directed against others. Horney saw it more as a kind of anxiety—a response to the feeling of loneliness in a hostile world. For Eric Fromm it was a mechanism of escape from the feeling of isolation—a striving to avoid unbearable powerlessness. The individual seeks someone to lean on when he can no longer bear the tension of standing alone. He may try to submerge his "self" in a cause, religion, family, class, or similar power-groups. Wilhelm Reich views masochism as a search for pleasure; and the pain endured is only a by-product, rather than a primary aim. Theodor Reik says masochism stems from a phantasy under the pressure of the fear of punishment—anxiety turned against the Ego. He states the elements are phantasy, suspense factor, demonstrative features, provocative fac-

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tor, flight forward. The person seeks punishment and anxiety by fleeing toward it. He experiences beforehand, or gets in advance, expiation and license to indulge in the original gratification. Edmund Bergler sees it as a struggle between the Ego and Super Ego. It is a dramatic demonstration to "convince Super Ego of good intentions."

Adler asked, "For what purpose—or toward what goal does a person move?" He viewed sado-masochism as a means to an end. It is only a manifestation of the Superiority-Inferiority Complex which he placed at the center of his explanation of psychodynamics. He saw such manifestations as mistaken ways of striving for power or dominance. They are mistaken ways because they are not self reliant but depend on suppression or exploitation of others to achieve the feeling of security. *The feeling of security is a by-product of being self reliant and productive.* Those who lean or exploit can never truly feel secure. They must anxiously clutch at others to sustain themselves. Only the self reliant feel able to sustain themselves when confronted by outside problems.

What situations lead an individual toward this attitude of defeat that inclines him to hang on to others to solve his problems? For the most part, it is the parents, anxious, non-courageous parents, who exaggerate the dangers to be encountered in the outside world. They would be ashamed to see their child become more courageous than themselves. This leads them to thwart the natural spontaneity and curiosity of a developing child. They intimidate the child and convince him that he cannot succeed in the world that has defeated them! Because the child is small and weak, he is convinced he must submit to any and all shows of force from others.

This thwarting and frustration gives rise to an impotent inner rage that is as intense as the degree of thwarting. The child feels guilty and endangered at any show of independence, so he vacillates between rebellion and submission. He dares not go forward toward self reliance and independence.

In addition to physical ugliness, ridicule and early illness, a very important factor leading to sado-masochism is the jealous competition which is a part of our culture where every man is supposed to "get ahead" of the other. If a man is beaten down on his job by the boss, he feels the need of a murderous revenge. On the job he accepts the attack masochistically. Then he goes home and fights with (oppresses) his wife. Or, lacking the courage to exhaust his rage against her, he reserves it for the first person who will submit to his abuse. This is

all a far cry from Freud's idea of sexual etiology. It is clearly the same sado-masochistic device for expressing impotence and a lack of self reliance.

Some of the manifestations of masochism which can be recognized in action are the marked and exaggerated sensitivity and response to authority figures, outside powers, institutions, public opinion, and a belief in their magic powers. Lacking self reliance and the willingness to take any chances, the individual says, "I cannot." He cannot even "will" to try lest he be defeated and held solely responsible for his acts. He pictures life much as his parents pictured it to him, as "overwhelming" and beyond his power to master or control. He openly belittles himself and heaps self-accusations on himself. (But up his sleeve he says, "Do not expect anything of me. You others who are so big and strong must carry my burdens for me.") Often he damages himself by accidents or compulsively tortures himself with seemingly meaningless rites and rituals. He may not be able to answer questions on examinations though he knows the answers very well. Often he may antagonize those closest to him on whom he depends, and then plead that he did not intend to enrage them in this way. He labels his dog-like, millstone-around-the-neck behavior toward others as deep love or loyalty. He uses his feeling of inadequacy as complete justification for his lack of self reliant productivity and charges his sufferings to unchangeable circumstances.

Adler asked "What attractive profits lie in masochism that influence the person to hang on to what seems a painful way of life?" The hidden profit lies in the escape from adult self reliance into the protected-feeling a child gets from his baby sitter when mother and dad are gone. He is not expected to act independently and assume consequences of such actions. His feeling of prestige cannot be damaged by failures! No mistake is his mistake. He is a "man without authority" and therefore is always blameless. Were he self reliant, on the other hand, he would have to consider himself the author of his mistakes as well as of his successes.

The real gist of sado-masochism lies in its power to exploit and use others in a perennially infantile way just as the child uses the mother for comfort and security. The individual is able to go through life from infancy to senility without achieving responsible maturity! An added advantage in sado-masochism is the satisfaction of feelings of jealous competition when we can get the mighty lords of creation to stop long enough to dry our tears. The "infant" in us has his

revenge when we can subordinate the mighty to our service—if only for a moment.

This leads us directly to the question of what is the right therapy for the disease? According to Adler our therapy must be implicit in our diagnosis. In short, if we have seen accurately, we can mirror to the mistaken person his ways of departing from matter-of-factness. We must mirror to him the way in which he exploits, tyrannizes, leans, and manipulates those around him rather than to be a help in an independent way. We must encourage him to do things the best he knows how without leaning on others. As he finds he can act independently and succeed in small matters, he will be encouraged to stand on his own ideas in larger ways. Soon he will not feel the need to turn to anyone in a dependent, leaning, sado-masochistic way; in short, he will write the story of his life over his own signature and allow life to judge it good or bad.

The following case history shows how leaning, dependent individuals often set up a symbiotic relationship with other leaning, dependent individuals so that they, mutually, can escape the need to mature to a more complete and self-reliant way of solving the problems of sex, association and work. Living in a symbiosis, they can use each other as an excuse to avoid matter-of-fact contributions. Each can blame the other for his own failure to unfold his potentialities.

Both were only children. The man was of European Catholic parentage and the woman was Dutch American Protestant. She was a capable worker, well educated and older than he. He assumed the more openly domineering aspects of behavior. He tried to oppress her by dictating as to how she should clean the house, wash dishes and other trivia which were none of his business. She retaliated masochistically by breaking dishes “accidentally,” burning food, forgetting things, hating housekeeping, and similar irritating forms of sabotage. When his bossiness was thus thwarted, he would beat her. Then she would go to a hotel for the night—only to return again. When she was gone and he had no one to oppress, he would sleep on the table or couch and drink heavily. He got into accidents. She placed him in a mental hospital when he was in a defeated period. He used this as a further excuse to beat and humiliate her. Being jealous of her better education, he called both her and her parents snobs. As a form of retaliation, he went through a law course. To retaliate against him, she took a course in education—but failed. He got raises, she did not. None of these things (though potentially useful in themselves) were

of much value. They were not undertaken as a means toward greater productivity, but only as a means of spiting the other.

With the semblance of what might be useful study, we see only the symbiosis of sado-masochistic persistent infantilism. Neither is working for himself in an independent way. They use their educational gains as weapons to increase the jealous competition for personal recognition. It would be silly to imagine that they did this to gain increased sexual pleasure. The basic lack of self reliance is completely exposed in one fact: The moment one walks out on the other, neither is able to go it alone for more than a few weeks or months. Neither can stand alone, live with anyone else, or live constructively with the other.

How does this effect our total safety and our drift toward some type of totalitarian control? An Old Aesop fable gives us the answer. The frogs in the pond fell to fighting among themselves so badly that they prayed to Zeus to send a "king to organize and control them. Zeus sent a stork. They were eaten of course—as we shall be unless each of us is trained to become more self reliant and independent!