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Scientific Contribution

Nursing Schadenfreude: The culpability of emotional construction

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Abstract. The purpose of this paper is to examine the concept of *Schadenfreude* – the pleasure felt at another's misfortune – and to argue that feeling it in the course of health care work, as elsewhere, is evidence of a deficient character. In order to show that *Schadenfreude* is an objectionable emotion in health care work, I first offer some conceptual remarks about emotions generally and their differential treatment in Kantian and Aristotelian thought. Second, I argue that an appreciation of the rationality of the emotions is crucial to our self-understanding as persons in general and nurses in particular. Third, I present a critique of Portmann's (2000, *When Bad Things Happen to Other People*. London: Routledge) defence of *Schadenfreude* with examples from both nursing and medical scenarios. Specifically, I show how his exculpation of the emotion in terms of low self-esteem and a commitment to justice are not compelling. I argue that we are active in the construction of our emotional experiences of *Schadenfreude*, how we may indeed 'nurse' the emotion, and thus become culpable for them in ethical terms.

Key words: ethics, emotions, health care, *Schadenfreude*

Introduction

Doctors, nurses, and other health care professionals are typically held responsible for their acts and omissions in terms of their treatment of patients. I wish to extend considerations of culpability to their emotional experiences and to explore the potential deficiency of their character in experiencing pleasure at the suffering of a colleague or patient. Philosophers of nursing, for example, in so far as they have expressed an interest in the emotions, have tended to focus on issues pertaining to caring orientations of health care work as a vocation or a moral practice (Scott, 2000; Paley, 2002) or indeed the more receptive Aristotelian provenance of the emotions in ethics more generally (Whelton, 2002). This deficit might be thought surprising since expressions of arrogance, anger, and anxiety are as frequently experienced and witnessed in hospital staffrooms as they are in Intensive Care Units or Accident and Emergency Departments. The heterogeneous manifestations of the emotions, however, make them difficult conceptually to pin down. Compare the disdain of the older consultant for a newly qualified nurse who had failed to diagnose their patient's confusion as an instance of pyrexia, or the guilt of the palliative care nurse in relation to their first 'dying' patient, with those of the humiliated newly qualified nurse who fails dismally to dress a wound. Complex emotional constructions may belie overt behavioural similarities and blind us to significant differential in the inner life of the subject and his or her emotions. Like teachers, most health care professionals are skilled actors, capable of managing ways to present their character as they see fit in their daily professional dramas (Hochschild, 1983; Hunter, 2001). These examples of everyday emotions in health care contexts are a warning against simple classifications of the inner and outer aspects of emotional experiences. Nevertheless, in recent years there has been a rebirth of interest in the philosophy of the emotions from the Psychoanalytically inspired writings of Richard Wollheim (1999) to the neo-Stoical work of Martha Nussbaum (2001). Besides these authors, the growth of emotion scholarship in moral philosophy in particular may be tracked back to the conflux of virtue ethics (e.g. Rorty, 1988; Blum, 1994) and feminist ethics (e.g. Tronto, 1993; Baier, 1994; Mackinnon, 1999) where emotion-laden concepts such as care, trust, belonging, and so on have been given serious analytical attention.

The purpose of this essay is to scrutinize an aspect of the more mundane, though still pernicious, human relations in nursing and health-care practice. I examine the concept of *Schadenfreude* – the pleasure felt at another's misfortune – and argue that one's feeling it is both culpable and, at the very least, undesirable. I attempt to show that *Schadenfreude* is a morally objectionable emotion, and one that can be curbed as well as it is cultivated. I first offer some conceptual remarks about emotions generally and their differential treatment in philosophical discussions particularly in Aristotle and Kant. Second, I argue for undesirability of *Schadenfreude* in the character of the one who feels the emotion (the *Schadenfroh(e)*) and their relations to those who suffer. I criticize Portmann's argument for a mollifying of our attitudes towards *schadenfrohe* based on his sanitised redefinition *Schadenfreude*.[1] Specifically, I show how his defence of the emotion's genesis in low self-esteem and a commitment to justice is not compelling and suggest that the one's feeling *Schadenfreude* is itself evidence of undesirable character.

Ir/Rationality and the emotions: Kantian and Aristotelian possibilities

That the emotions are themselves irrational is a view that has a long philosophical history. The anti-emotion tradition goes back to Plato who writes in the Republic (1955: 440a) of "reason and its civil war with desire". In this tradition rationality prosecutes the emotions. Our rational nature ought to override the emotions, which ought not to be allowed to cloud judgement, offer promiscuous grounds for partiality, nor misdirect our disciplined attention to the pursuit of rationally defensible goals by rationally justifiable means. This conception of the emotions remained dominant in philosophy and religion into modernity where Kant gave it what has taken traditionally to be a certain notorious prominence. As part of an evaluation of the moral emotions Wollheim referred to Kant's position as being a "singularly bleached moral psychology". Kant is traditionally attributed with denying the rationality of the emotions and therefore derogating their value, which are said to be conceived of as obstacles to rational moral action (Williams, 1973). More recently, however, scholars have been at pains both to look for similarities in the ethical writings of Aristotle and Kant (Engstrom and Whiting, 1998) and to give a more generous evaluation of Kant, particularly in relation to his writings in the *Metaphysical Principles of Virtue* and *Anthropology from a pragmatic point of view* (Baron, 1995; Sherman, 1997), as well as applying those insights specifically in the philosophy of nursing (Paley, 2002).

The widespread, though less favourable, Kantian interpretation is summarised by Montada (1993: 295) thus: (i) that emotions are transitory and capricious; (ii) that conduct issuing from emotions is therefore unreliable and unprincipled, even irrational; (iii) that the moral perception of right and wrong entails abstraction from our emotions; (iv) that emotions are passively experienced and we are not responsible for them; and (v) being attached to particular persons and not universal principles they are partial and therefore not belonging to the moral realm.

I will comment here partly in defence of Kant's position. I draw out some counterpoints to Montada's characterisation in respect of the relations between passivity and responsibility in our emotional experiences often held to be part of the Kantian position. Depicting the difficulties which attend to the passivity of, and responsibility for, emotional experiences may help us to understand better the ethical import of emotions generally, but specifically here in relation to human suffering or misfortune, and the experience of *Schadenfreude*.

Baldly put, Montada asserts that under a Kantian description we experience emotions passively and that, therefore, we are not responsible for them. This position, though not wholly wrong, lacks precision. Specifically, it is based on an inaccurate reading of Kant since it fails to recognise that, as a response to Hume and others, Kant distinguished between affects or emotions on the one hand, and passions, on the other in his Metaphysical Principles of Virtue. A point about nomenclature is necessary here. Kant refers both to "Affekt" and "Leidenschaften". In the Mary Gregor translation "Affekt" is affect whereas in the Ellington translation it is referred to as "emotion".[2] Thus if we use the term emotion – in some recognisably modern sense - we may both (i) obscure the distinction; or worse (ii) take his more negative stance to *passions* and apply it inappropriately to what we call emotions. In the Gregor translation Kant says:

> *Affects* and *passions* are essentially different from each other. Affects belong to *feeling* insofar as, preceding reflection, it makes this impossible or more difficult. Hence an affect is called *precipitate* or *rash* (*animus praeceps*), and reason says, through the concept of virtue, that one should *get hold of* oneself. (...) Accordingly a propensity to an affect (e.g., *anger*) does not enter into kinship with vice

> so readily as does a passion. A *passion* is a sensible desire that has become a lasting inclination (e.g., *hatred*, as opposed to anger). The calm with which one gives oneself up to it permits reflection and allows the mind to form principles upon it and so, if inclination lights upon something contrary to the law, to brood upon it, to get it rooted deeply, and so to take up what is evil (as something premeditated) into its maxim. And the evil is then *properly* evil, that is, a true *vice*. (1991: 208)

To give a fairer reading to Kant, especially in respect of our emotional responses to human suffering or misfortune we must bear this distinction in mind. One important aspect of this distinction for Kant's understanding the emotions (in this case elicited by the suffering of others) is that in passions a "lasting inclination" is formed and that this entails choice and judgement which in turn carry the agent's experience into the realm of responsibility. I shall comment further on this point in the section on the culpability of Schadenfreude below. A second point pertains to the passivity of the experience and is brought out nicely by Baron when commenting on a section from *Anthropology from a pragmatic point of view*:

> Kant's distinction between sensitivity and sentimentality is further evidence that in his view we play a significant role as agents in determining how we respond affectively. "Sensitivity is a *power* and *strength* by which we grant or refuse permission for the state of pleasure or displeasure to enter our mind, so that it implies a choice". By contrast "sentimentality is a weakness by which we can be affected, even against our will, by sympathy for another's plight" (Kant, 1974: 236). Clearly, then, we are not always passive with respect to our emotions and feelings: sensitivity does not involve such passivity. (Baron, 1995: 196)

Sherman too offers a useful summary of Kant's point here: that his intention is to "repudiate sentimentalism, not sentiment" (1997: 153). So, let us first allow that Montada's position is Kantian, rather than Kant's. Secondly, and more substantively, despite Baron's protest at the lack of agency ascribed to Kantian emotion, our passivity in the experience of sentimentality entails a lack of responsibility. But, with Kant's distinction above in mind, we should say that the point refers to emotions as affects (i.e. sentimentality) – rather than passions (i.e. sensitivity). And this is important in his consideration of the cultivation of sympathy as a duty. One point that Baron takes from all this, and one that I am in *sympathy* with (if you will excuse the pun) is that we should not use feelings and emotions as objects to excuse our moral responsibility. And this, I contend, is often what happens when people say that the experience of an emotion like *Schadenfreude* is felt by someone in relation to a suffering other. But the experience of emotions like *Schadenfreude* need not be considered like what might be termed "immediate natural responses" such as a knee-jerk or anxiety at the onset of a sharp pain. Consider a doctor who refuses pain relief on the grounds that they do not believe the level of pain reported by the patient is either accurate or authentic. On reflection the physician wonders whether their mistrust and hostility to the patient is, for the purposes of example, driven by their guilt-ridden recollection of giving a questionably high dose of morphine to an aged cancer sufferer, which had the double effect of easing pain and easing the patient from their existence. Attendant nurses challenge the efficacy of the physician's view and in particular their perceived lack of evidence for it. In such cases they are likely to say that the physician's judgement was 'clouded by emotion.' Thinking carefully through such scenarios requires a consideration of the relations between cognition and the relevant emotions at play.

All cognitive theorists of emotion have argued that simply characterising emotions as subjective feelings – as biological theorists do – ignores two important aspects; first, that emotions entail judgements and secondly that they are to a considerable degree influenced by space and time. One important part of this strategy is to argue that feelings and modes which are not in some way suffused with some cognition are not emotions proper (Taylor, 1985), and the very fact of our making linguistic choices signifies this. Early analyses of emotions, inspired by Wittgenstein's anti-essentialism in conceptual analysis, conceived of emotions-talk as illustrating the family resemblances idea: there is neither an essence nor unifying set of properties to them. Some are voluntary some involuntary, some passive yet others are active. Likewise, their intensity, though typically greater than felt moods, can vary too; compare a punch in anger in the playground, to the studied resentment of a colleague's unjustifiable promotion where one may stew for days, weeks, even years in one's own acidic feelings, memories and thoughts. Even allowing for their biological bases, we must agree with Rorty (1988: 1) that, "the emotions do not form a natural kind". Sometimes the emotions are felt in anticipation of

action; at other times they succeed it. Sometimes they are directly motivational, at other times they are not. Moreover, certain emotions like panic are experienced as self-referring while other emotions such as humiliation or shame have a very significant interpersonal role in preserving boundaries of conduct by reinforcing norms of the acceptable and unacceptable. Emotions like guilt, remorse, regret, and shame all have a negative power that we typically seek to avoid or to work off.

The emotions can be allowed a much more positive role in our identification of what matters to us in both fleeting and more considered ways. While it is easy to recall instances when emotions have got in the way of good judgement, or indeed been obstacles to right action, we can also think of examples where our emotionally-driven responses of, say, compassion or mercy are salient. To conceive of the emotions more generously opens a conceptual space in which we can consider more broadly the roles they play in our lives beyond exculpation and the denial of responsibility. To elicit the ethical import of the emotion of *Schadenfreude* (or any of its close cousins in the emotional field – envy, spite, resentment, to name a few[3]) we must accept that the feeling is imbued with a judgement or an interpretation of their situation.

Aristotle's writings are typically taken to afford a more generous interpretation of the emotions in the good life than Kant's, though as I hoped to illustrate above, perhaps too much has been made of the contrast. Aristotelian commentators note how the emotions record and convey our values in a manner that is constitutive of ethically defensible and desirable living (Sherman, 1989). Of course they can only perform these functions when attuned habitually to (wise) judgement. His account of emotions is not, however, encumbered, by the top-down Kantian approach where the absolute value of the moral law and the autonomous will "shape and regulate the emotions" (Sherman, 1997: 157). Precisely what form the judgement takes is highly disputed in the literature on the philosophy of emotions. Few cognitive theorists would deny that the desires, motivations and feelings we experience involve a sense of our situation. The strongest account of the cognitive element is found in what Griffiths (1997) labels the "propositional attitude school".[4] Griffiths argues that in its strongest form, in Solomon's early writings, the emotion simply is a judgement about ourselves and the world. Other accounts (e.g. Roberts (1988) and Armon-Jones (1991) have shied away from the propositional reductionism that can be attributed to Solomon and others. What is at issue among them is the extent to which language captures the construal. Charles Taylor's writings have tended toward the propositionalisabilty of emotions whereas Roberts's (1988), and Armon-Jones's (1991) accounts lean toward a less linguistic "construal" of events. Nevertheless, it is sufficient for my purposes here, to note that in both cases language and the construal are internally related to the experienced emotion.[5] When we construe or judge a given situation as sad, happy, insignificant or exhilarating we are ascribing what Taylor terms an "import" (1985: 48) that depicts a feature of our experience, which is important or at least a matter of non-indifference to us. The emotional concepts that characterize these imports such as "compassionate", "guilty", "merciful", can have sense only in a world where there are beings that could experience, use and interpret them. It should be clear, then, that they are not the free-floating feelings that anti-cognitivists have caricatured. Our awareness of these imports and their potential conflicts is central to our reflexive nature.

I hope the above is sufficient to warn against the naïve "irrational feeling" model of emotion. I have also suggested how the cognitive element of emotion renders intelligible our evaluations of good lives. It is worth developing this idea a little, also connecting it more closely to the idea of virtuous and vicious character. What is required now is to interrogate the specific emotion of *Schadenfreude* and to consider the extent to which the occurrence of the emotion in a nurse might make it a reason for us to think of them as lacking virtue or exhibiting vice.

What is *Schadenfreude*?

The experience of feeling pleasure in another's misfortune is likely to be a universal rather than a culturally specific emotion. Precisely why is it that, in modern times, only the Germans are castigated for having a designated word (or as is quite often the case in German, two words joined together) for it is something of an imponderable.[6] Quite literally the word means "harmjoy". Given that much comedy turns on our pleasure at watching the character(s) make fools of themselves – Mr Bean being the obvious example – we might ask whether there are two concepts of *Schadenfreude*: a morally

righteous and morally repugnant conception of *Schadenfreude*?

Consider the following scenario. A palliative carer has attended dutifully to a cancer-ridden patient for intermittent admissions for symptom control over the past 6 months. His condition is deteriorating and he has been an inpatient for the last month. The man has no known relatives. Despite providing daily care for some months, the nurse has never seen a visitor at his bedside. She thinks to herself that this is not a surprise since he is not so much ill-tempered as ill-mannered. He grunts and gestures for tasks to be done for him; he never says 'please' nor 'thank you'; he is irritable in the extreme if what he wants is not delivered instantaneously; he insists on his television preferences in the public room (irrespective of other's desires); he regularly shouts abusively at staff and inpatients. He is a thoroughly objectionable human being. The nurse originally looked upon him compassionately, imagining his suffering as the root cause of his behaviour. Over time this waned somewhat but she attempted to tolerate his vices by maintaining an awareness of his enduring pains. Now she comes to the stage of despising the man. She does not so much wish him dead, well, not yet, but where she once regretted having to tender to his needs and wants, she now detests it. Though kept to herself, each journey to and from his bedside is filled with thoughts of anger and resentment and the time and care he greedily assumes of, and consumes from, others. When he finally dies, the nurse internalises the moment with more than satisfaction. Her emotions are a compound of feelings; that his suffering and dying were just desert; that more deserving human beings will now be attended to; that scarce resources will better be utilised; and that the days will be less unpleasant with his passing. Ought we really to think any worse of the nurse who felt pleasure at his ongoing harms and subsequent death?

Part of a reasoned response to, and evaluation of, this type of scenario must always be particularised: it must always take into account the relations between the sufferer and the judger. Another part of our response or evaluation should concern the normative codes that structure their relations. Are the *Schadenfrohe* deserving of their harm? Of course, again, for this question to make sense, we must reject the anti-cognitivist picture of the emotions. To appreciate their sense and value is already to be committed to their part-cognitive dimension; their rationality. More specifically, we need to be able to distinguish when *what seems to be Schadenfreude* is an emotional corollary of justice – if indeed this is the case – and where it is really envy or resentment in disguise. In the latter cases of course, the experience of the emotion is not spontaneous or episodic. On the contrary, we cultivate it; sometimes cherish it; it curdles over time, and if not attended to, depletes our moral resources. This is why I have sketched the non-episodic account of *Schadenfreude* in the example above. We can only attend to this task of recognition and (re)appropriation if, as Neu (2002) notes, we are able to discriminate among the sources of our emotions and thereby to understand and evaluate ourselves more judiciously. The experience of *Schadenfreude* is clearly not born of a sense of justice when the emotion becomes active and turns into a malicious glee. This is the point made specifically by Kant about the experience passion being turned into a lasting inclination. Indeed he writes specifically of *Schadenfreude* (translated as "malice" in both the Ellington and Gregor editions) in this regard:

> Malice, which is directly contrary to sympathy, is also not foreign to human nature; when it goes as far as promoting evil or wickedness itself, then as a special kind of malice it reveals a hatred of mankind, and appears in all its horrors. (Kant: 460, Ellington, 1994: 124–125)

This malicious glee is not, according to Portmann, *Schadenfreude* proper despite the widespread understanding of it under such a description. What the matter hangs on, so to speak, is the idea of whether the harm is deserved or undeserved, and whether indeed one can take an attitude of detached impartiality towards the suffering wrongdoer.

If we wish to appraise the character of the one who feels Schadenfreude, the *Schadenfroh*, we need in part to determine the extent to which, when judging the pleasure felt at another's misfortune, they are active or passive in the generation of the emotion. This pertains to the Kantian point regarding the passivity of the self in relation to the emotions and the possibility this brings for the evasion of moral responsibility. To intend that another be harmed is part of an active strategy. Portmann argues that the pleasure, which is consequent upon this, is not *Schadenfreude* proper but rather a malicious glee. We can imagine the less corrosive side of this emotion as April Fool's day prank. By contrast, setting our junior colleagues (whom we dislike or despise) tasks in which they will publicly fail is another matter altogether.

Experiencing *Schadenfreude* here is predicated on an active construction of the humiliation felt by the victim. The experience of *Schadenfreude* in these cases is not a random act unassociated with prior events and evaluations. Here our appraisal of the pleasure felt must take into account the complex of desire and sensation in the connivance of the harm that befell the incompetent colleague. Portmann argues that *Schadenfruede* proper requires the re-drawing of the emotion away from that particular range of experience and meaning. As part of his recognition of the passivity of *Schadenfreude*, Portmann goes on to offer a richly suggestive analogy between sympathy and *Schadenfreude* – both come uninvited or not at all. He argues that just as manufactured sympathy is no sympathy at all, so in experiencing *Schadenfreude* we experience a pleasure *that* they are harmed without a prior desire for them to be harmed. Portmann might have some grounds to appeal to the authority of Kant for such a view, when he remarked: "Of malice, the sweetest kind, which seems to have the greatest right -indeed even obligation (as the desire for justice) to aim at the harm of others without even looking to one's own advantage, is the desire for revenge" (Kant, 1993: 460: 125). When set against our earlier account of emotions being necessarily part constituted by a cognitive element (a construal) this looks odd: 'what sort of construal is going on then?' we may well ask. Is it necessarily true that *Schadenfreude* visit us uninvited as a guest might? Portmann (2000: 27–28) in his defence says:

> In speaking of the passivity of *Schadenfreude* I do not mean to imply that we are victims of our emotions in the sense that emotions seem to toss us about like ships in a storm. I do not claim that either malicious glee is beyond our control; indeed because we are not purely passive in the fact of feelings and emotions, our efforts to manage our emotions sometimes succeed. Alternatively, we can rationalise our enjoyment of the suffering of another; we can tell ourselves that we take pleasure in the fact that another suffers (as opposed to pleasure in the actual suffering) and that this pleasure results from the love of justice. Such mental dodges attest to the rationality of *Schadenfreude*, as well as to our responsibility for it.

The passivity of all affects (under their Kantian description) should not move us to conclude the absence of culpability of the self who experiences *Schadenfreude* understood as an emotion in the modern sense, or as a passionate vice in Kant's. And Portmann is surely right not to give into the temptation in his defence of *Schadenfreude*. But the key to his position is his use of the word "rationalisation". For that is exactly what I will argue below, his position is. That an ethically defensible sense of *Schadenfreude* exists where one can love a sinner while hating the sin – to follow St Augustine – and take pleasure in justice being served is precisely that: a rationalisation. Can we hate the sin but love the sinner?; love the over-ambitious colleague but hate the awry ambition? I will argue that this, in the context of stratified and hierarchically structured activities that are written into the fabric of all institutions (hospitals, universities, bureaucracies of all kinds), is no more than a rationalisation and that its genesis is typically envy and not a love of justice or low self-esteem as Portmann argues.

The 'nursing' of *Schadenfreude*

Articulating the genesis of *Schadenfreude*, precisely why the *Schadenfrohe* feels pleasure at another's misfortune, should open the door to an evaluation of the ethical status of the emotion and the character of the *Schadenfrohe*.[7] Portmann argues that *Schadenfreude* may be born of: (i) low self-esteem; (ii) loyalty and commitments to justice; (iii) the comical; and (iv) malice. Given present purposes I shall confine myself to discussion of the first and second categories. While Portmann maintains that the first three are still liable to be appraised in the guilt and blame we apportion to the *Schadenfrohe*, the latter is always to be condemned. My position, which I merely assert at this point, is that the third and fourth categories are not philosophically interesting. It seems uncontentious to claim that the third sense he offers is not properly thought of as *Schadenfreude*[8] since it relates to instances of embarrassment rather than harm. Equally, it would be more than difficult to erect a justification for the fourth sense, which is indisputably despicable. Where a doctor or nurse simply revelled maliciously in the harm that was visited on a patient it seems clear that we would think less of her or him as a human being, not simply less of them as a health care professional.

Let us first consider then, the idea that low self-esteem might give birth to feelings of *Schadenfreude* that are ethically excusable. Understanding the emotion in the particularity of its context is crucial for an appropriate evaluation of the person

who experiences *Schadenfreude* (or any other emotion for that matter). The precise identity of the other sufferer and their relation to the *Schadenfroh* is a crucial variable. Now Portmann asserts that "Familiarity with a sufferer is neither a necessary nor sufficient condition of *Schadenfreude*."(2000: 33). But this seems strained. Imagine one observes a complete stranger in the bed of a hospital ward one has no attachment to or knowledge of, as they suffer grievously. Could any circumstantial or evidential facts elicit *Schadenfreude* here? Some familiarity with, or knowledge of, the other, and some judgement or construal of the sufferer has to generate the feeling of the pleasure that is operant in *Schadenfreude* proper.

More specifically Portmann goes on to assert that "Self-esteem does not blind us to interpersonal differences; rather, it prevents us from concluding that the superiority of one person signifies the worthlessness or inherent defect in another" (2000: 33). It seems clear to me here that he is talking about self-respect, which is not exclusive – the possession of self-respect by one, does not entail its exclusion in another. Where, however, our sense of our value in relation to others is set in a competitive structure it seems that self-esteem is characteristically exclusive.[9] Imagine two colleagues who are both good nurses in all technical respects, though one is seen as officious and efficient and the other more patient, always ready to take extra time with those whom they perceive need it. The latter nurse fails in her promotion attempt and is looked over in favour of our efficient nurse. The sensitive/inefficient nurse resents her colleague and believes she has been wrongly overlooked and that the promotion ought rightfully to be hers. It is important to note that the objects of envy are characteristically positional goods. Now the distinction is crucial for Portmann since the *Schadenfreude* born of low self-esteem is of a deficient sense of self; it is a weakness of character. He takes this to entail its ethical excusability. Yet he takes his cue here from Rawls' (1972: 534–540) remarks on envy and in doing so conflates self-esteem with self-respect[10]: "When envy is a reaction to the loss of self-respect in circumstances where it would be unreasonable to expect someone to feel differently, I shall say it is excusable". (Portmann, 2000: 34)

Now where resentment is felt as an affront to one's dignity,[11] the feeling of anger is justified. He says it reflects a healthy self-esteem, but again the value of his remarks trading again on the disvalue of being disrespected not merely having one's self-esteem lowered. While self-respect has a categorical status (one either has it or not), self-esteem derives and is measured from our evaluations of ourselves in social structures according to a good or range of goods or abilities.[12] He concludes:

> To the extent that a feeling of inferiority seems to invite celebration of other's woes, condemning a *Schadenfroh* person is a bit like blaming him or her for dissatisfaction with an unjust social framework. (Portmann, 2000: 35)

Now it is clear that if we feel pleasure when someone has, for example, strongly humiliated another (where the limit case is torture) then Rawls' exculpation might be reasonable. Though even here one can think of role-models such as Nelson Mandela who (in public at least) never portrayed bitterness towards his captors. We might, however, think that paradigm cases of *Schadenfreude* were those like our promoted/overlooked nurse, pitted against each other in some antagonistic way. Imagine then that the efficient nurse is duly promoted and displays her insensitivity to colleagues and patients alike in such a disastrous way that they are called before the Board and given a formal warning and demoted. Why should the caring nurse's experience of envy and her subsequent *Schadenfreude* at her demotion worry us? Surely everyone would experience this *naturally* so to speak. Part of why I think this emotion is problematic, is for the manifestation of envy that drives the *Schadenfroh*. Both Solomon (2001) and Herzog (2001) get much closer to the relationship between envy and *Schadenfreude* than Portmann. Envy is a corrosive emotion resulting from a failure properly to estimate one's self-worth.[13] We might conclude that *Schadenfreude* harms no-one but the *Schadenfrohe* themselves. Let them stew in their own bitter juices we might think. Harm them nonetheless it does. In developing our attitudes to these emotions (which are dependent on self-evaluation) we might see envy as emulation gone bad. For emulation is, on the face of it a good thing, and in virtue theory in particular it is the wise person (in Aristotle, the *phronimos*) whom we seek to model our choices and character upon. In envy, however, our admiration goes awry, the negativity overtakes what benefits could be had from emulation. If we are to believe the Catholic tradition, then envy first leads to sadness, then to gossip, then to *Schadenfreude*, then to hatred (Herzog, 2001). If indeed this is so, then although the lack of self-esteem that can give birth to

Schadenfreude may not be as vicious as resentment, or spite or malicious glee, it is nevertheless something we should be on our toes to avoid and/or acknowledge on our path to making ourselves better persons in general and better health care professionals in particular.

So it is often the case, and it is by no means ethically excusable, that the *Schadenfreude* born of low esteem masks a more or less bitter envy not because one has been robbed of one's self-respect but rather one has suffered a blow to one's self-esteem that one simply cannot handle. Moreover, when we think of envy it is important to observe those whom we characteristically feel it in relation to and the objects (from material goods, to appearances and talents) that we acquaint them with. Like *Schadenfreude*, it is felt paradigmatically – but not exclusively – in relation to those in whom we have antagonistic relations.

That we can reflect on the antecedents to our emotions is one clue as to how we may think about working upon our emotions and perceptions of others and selves, in order to go about educating ourselves in that respect. They do not *all* visit us as uninvited guests might. This is why I have indicated that one can "nurse", cradle, or cultivate an emotional disposition towards another. One can, like greed or envy, feed the habit of viewing a patient or a colleague in a mealy mouthed or mean spirited manner. Moreover, fair and empathetic perceptions of self and others are surely part of what we call a good health care professional. And I want to emphasise that it is only a virtue-theoretical position that attempts to take this feature of our experience seriously; but there is good reason for thinking that both Kant and Aristotle might give us a footing here, even if the latter is less equivocal.[14] For to act well is not merely to do so for the right reasons, to the right extent, at the right time and so on, but also to feel these reasons and responses while so construing and responding. Having rejected Portmann's first defence of *Schadenfreude* I will consider his second, rather stronger account for excusability: a loyalty to justice.

The sense which most of us may feel both familiar and warranted is in the *Schadenfreude* felt by those who believe that another has violated an expectation or obligation and suffers in relation to their transgression. (How many times have you heard a nurse say about a bullying consultant or a particularly obnoxious patient: "I am glad they got their comeuppance" or "what goes around comes around"?) In such a vein Portmann writes:

> There is an important difference between enjoying *that* someone suffers and enjoying actual suffering. The former case must be held apart from *Schadenfreude*, for the attendant pleasure is not properly in seeing someone suffer but in the hope that someone will learn a valuable lesson in having suffered. Thus we take pleasure not in the suffering of another, but in the hope that he or she will correct a mistake. (2000: 48)

The pleasure felt at seeing justice done, he argues, must not be confused with a pleasure *that* a given person is actually suffering themselves. But it seems to me that "pleasure" is not the right concept here. To take pleasure in suffering is too active, too destructive of human sympathy to be evidence of a love of justice. Anger, as Aristotle noted, is an appropriate response to injustice. How it is registered, how accounted for, and how exacted – these are further questions. I am merely arguing that pleasure felt at another's suffering is itself not desirable, even where the suffering is experienced by a wrongdoer. I think the more appropriate model may be a legal one. What one seeks through the courts is often described as satisfaction. I want my transgressor to be adjudged wrong in public and admonished. A more appropriate emotional response then will be a less hedonistic or egoistic one; not cold, impartial, empathy-lacking justice, and certainly not an active, hand-rubbing, glee. It strikes me that the proper emotional response to justice being served, and subsequent harm befalling the wrongdoer is captured by the concept of "satisfaction".[15] Such is the feeling that ought to characterise our hypothetical nurse's emotional response. This concept denotes emotional neutrality and a certain passivity that is entirely absent in the positive and corrosive *Schadenfreude*.

Of course this distinction regarding our rejoicing in the seeing of justice done betokens wider considerations of the role of human suffering in our lives. The position here is in debt to St. Augustine in *Summa Theologiae*: love the sinner, hate the sin is the exhortation. But Portmann's gloss seems unreal. "We take pleasure in hoping they will correct the mistake" (2000: 156) he says. Well this *may* be the emotion felt by the zealous reformer but the attitude of the *Schadenfrohe* seems not of this kind. What is missing here is any reference to sympathy – note *not* empathy – with the sufferer. Empathy need not always have a moral source. Sadism is predicated on empathy: I feel with you your pain; and I wallow in it. It is clear that in the very worst cases, *Schaden-*

freude may well slide into a sadistic experience. On a lesser scale, the resentful nurse may well have empathy with her colleague in their suffering; it is precisely that which fuels the felt pleasure.

I have tried to show that Portmann's defences for *Schadenfreude* are unacceptable. In the first instance his conflation of self-respect and self-esteem undercut his defence of the emotion. Secondly, the idea that low self–esteem and a commitment to justice might drive our pleasure at another's suffering are at odds with any basic notion of human sympathy which will be at the core of all moralities.

Concluding remarks

Insofar as doctors and nurses are widely held up as role models, exemplars of virtue, then what they feel as much as what they think or do is informative of our character. The emotions we experience and often construct track our evaluations of others, our construals of their worth or lack thereof. It seems more felicitous to link *Schadenfreude* with a lack of compassion or sympathy for a patient or colleague. Moreover, it seems more credible to connect the experience with such a deficiency of character, a failure to connect with their humanity, as opposed to a deficiency in one's self-esteem. It is clear that our evaluations of those who typically feel *Schadenfreude* in the face of suffering ought to alter accordingly with the severity of the sufferer and the greatness of their deficiencies in conduct and character. What seems clear however is that the trick of loving the sinner but hating the sin is a perception that will not find a home in the capriciousness of human character (however much we believe in divine justice and the cheering of the angels in heaven at such a sight). Better that we recognise the nature of the occurrence and reflect on our own motivations in relation to the sufferer, before we revel too much in the baseness of others and, by contrast, our own righteousness.

Our dispositions towards others are antecedent to our emotional responses. We do not feel *Schadenfreude de novo*. For us to feel it we will have been active in the construal of character-evaluation of the sufferer. Of course one cannot hope to develop in health care professionals – no less than judges of police officers, so detached a consideration of human interests. A pure impartiality, where we are solely one among many in our moral calculations or judgements, the kind of which is enshrined in utilitarian and deontological persuasion seems to offend the dictum that moral theorising must be psychologically credible (Flanagan, 1991). Yet the active pleasure at another's misfortune goes beyond the asymmetry of self and other. *Schadenfreude* passes beyond the excusable and into the realm of culpable, indeed vicious, emotion.[16]

Notes

1. On this point specifically, I am in sympathy with a similarly negative evaluation of Portmann's re-alleged definition, which is developed in Kristjan Kristjansson's excellent and more broadly focused survey of attitudes towards misfortune in others (Kristjansson, 2003). I have developed a similar account specifically in relation to Schadenfreude found in the envy of sportsmen and women in McNamee (2003).
2. This is the case of the 1991 translation of the *Metaphysics of Morals*. In a footnote 91n, p. 292) to this very point, however, she notes that in the earlier 1974 translation "affect" had been preferred to the earlier translation as "agitation" where as "passions" where previously labelled "obsessions".
3. The point may be put more generally that the emotions come in clusters (Baier, 1990: 4–5). Not surprisingly, Rorty (1988) had earlier put that observation to effect in the context of virtue theory: the virtues, she says, hunt in packs. It seems only a short leap to imagine that the vices too rarely work alone. To support this point, I shall attempt to show below that it is not justice which triggers Schadenfreude, but envy.
4. Griffiths takes Anthony Kenny's 1963 work *Act, Emotion and Will* to be seminal here. It has found its strongest expression in the work of Robert Solomon but also is a cornerstone of Charles Taylor's theory of human agency and personhood and is central to his celebrated distinction between strong and weak evaluation.
5. It might seem reasonable to suggest that the extent to which this is the case is a hostage to the heterogeneity of emotions. Typically one might think that this propositional element may be more developed according to the complexity and/or nuance of the emotion at hand.
6. It is often, but wrongly, assumed that the term is to be found only in the German language. It may also be found in the Greek *epikairekakia*, and in Swedish and Norwegian the term "Skadegladje" is also common though the etymological roots to old German might draw us back to the initial assumption in a modified form.
7. I take the categories from Portmann.
8. It could be argued that the comic is only a token of a wider class that might issue *Schadenfreude*; viz the trivial or insignificantly harmful.
9. It will probably be clear that I take my lead here from Nozick (1980: 239–246). As he puts it: "People generally judge themselves by how they fall along the most important dimensions in which they *differ* from others. People do not gain self-esteem from their

common human capacities by comparing themselves to animals who lack them. (I'm pretty good; I have an opposable thumb and can speak some language)... self-esteem is based on *differentiating characteristics*: that's why its called *self* esteem". (1980: 243, emphasis thus).

10. In the introductory section of *Envy and Equality* Rawls writes: "We are now ready to examine the likelihood of excusable general envy in a well-ordered society. (...) Now I assume that the main psychological root of the liability to envy is a lack of self-confidence in our own worth combined with a sense of impotence. (...) This hypothesis implies that the least favoured tend to be more envious of the better situation of the more favoured the less secure their self-respect and the greater their feeling that they cannot improve their prospects." Here, then we see the further conflation of related concepts, since self-confidence is not a synonym either for self-respect or self-esteem. Interestingly, in the index to Rawls' magnum opus under 'self-esteem' it actually says "see self-respect" (1971: 604).
11. We should note that Portmann has shifted to self-respect again here.
12. See Sach for a more subtle version of the relations between the concepts.
13. This is not to say that it cannot have serious consequences for the envied.
14. I say this since Kant, despite the recent urgings for a rapprochement by philosophers, did after all pen the remark in the *Anthropology from a pragmatic point of view*, that "the passions are ... without exception evil" (cited in Baron, 1995: 200). I note, however, as Baron and Sherman both do, that this remark needs to be understood in the context of his own taxonomy.
15. Since first writing this paper, Kristjan Kristjansson sent me his (2003) paper to me whereupon (to my chagrin) I find he has offered a similar critique and conceptual substitution. He prefers the label "satisfied indignation" but I have not co-opted the phrase since into the term "indignant" is often read a certain egoistic flavour. But I do not wish to push in any strong way that interpretation against an agreement in the need for a substitute term to capture the emotional neutrality over the phenomenology of felt pleasure in *Schadenfreude*
16. My thanks go to Gary Rolfe for some helpful suggestions in the preparation of this paper. Moreover, I am extremely grateful for the detailed and generous criticisms of the essay by an anonymous reviewer of the journal in relation to Kantian virtue ethics, which made me substantially alter Section 2 and make my general approach to his writings there rather more sympathetic.

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