

Pleasure

By Dr Margaret Lowenfeld

There are few subjects to which so little serious thought is given as pleasure. Pleasure in general is an aspect of life which has perhaps shown the greatest swing in estimation during the past half-century. From the old Calvinistic view that duty was or should be the paramount motive of life, and that pleasure was entirely a side-issue – slightly out of order and not to be considered seriously, if not slightly declassé – we have swung over to the exactly opposite point of view, that pleasure is the end of all life. Quite obviously neither point of view is correct, and truth lies somewhere on the arc between these two extreme standards.

A study of contemporary literature and life reveals an attitude to pleasure that is confused, unstable and unreasoned, due to the fact that little careful thought has as yet been given to the nature of pleasure in itself – what it is and why – the kinds of pleasure that there are, and how the psychological root of pleasure can be discovered.

Pleasure can broadly be considered as the agreeable emotion accompanying a successful exercise of function in any individual. There are in the main two kinds of pleasure exactly opposed the one to the other in every manifestation: these form two poles of a perfectly balanced parabola or sphere, or series of concentric circles, and it is failure to understand that the nature of these two forms of pleasure, as well as their reaction on the individual, is entirely different, which brings about a good deal of the confusion under which we at present labour. Temporarily let us call these two kinds of pleasure A and B. Under A come all those pleasures brought about by exercise of the function of the senses – the pleasure of sight, of hearing, of taste, of touch; all those pleasures to which the individual is receptive and passive. Existing among these stimuli the individual receives them and responds to them by the sensation recognised as pleasure. The activity of the organism in regard to experience is narcissuslike – first producing the stimulus then receiving it back itself as pleasure sensation – it plays a piece and hears it – it paints a picture and looks at it – cooks a dinner and eats it. The product of the activity is re-absorption into the individual cresting it.

Secondly we have type B, or objective pleasure – the pleasure of the individual *the explorer, the architect, the writer, or the craftsman) who does somethings whose value is referred to people other than the self, and who in the doing of it experiences the sensation of pleasure.

The active type (B) who enjoys working, creating and doing things, will tend to look down upon the passive pleasures as meaning idleness and waste of time, and as being sensuous, sensual and a little

derogatory – considering the man who enjoys running cross-country races for the sake of producing tone in the village boys' club as far more valuable and excellent than he who does so for the sake of the enjoyment he himself gets out of running across muddy fields.

On the other hand, those whose normal reaction is more spontaneously towards the A. pleasure tend to look upon those in the B group as rather troublesome individuals, stigmatising them as embryonic, undeveloped personalities, mistaking the whole purpose of life and having little understanding of all the world has to offer.

The reactions of both types of pleasure to the individual, his reaction to them and their natural essence, are complements of each other.

A. pleasures are essentially simple in nature: they may be refined, delicate or extremely varied in type, but the actual sensation aroused is a simple one – that is to say, it is the exercise of one or at most two senses – it is heard, seen felt, tasted, or experienced in a direct and simple fashion, and however great the refinement of the type of stimulus that is offered, the reaction is a simple one. Unavoidably and inevitably at some point this type of pleasure leads to satiation. Each individual is able to imbibe a certain amount of pleasure in a given activity, and beyond this point the organism ceases to experience enjoyment – which is satiation.

All down the ages at every period of elegance and culture, it has been proved impossible to go on being passively receptive to any experience for longer than a certain time: the stimulus must be strengthened and varied in ever-increasing degrees, and even then the individual is forced, comparatively soon, to seek new and more eccentric forms of that type of stimulus. This type of pleasure, therefore, is simple, receptive, and limited – and the limitation is an acutely personal one.

Another very important feature of this kind of pleasure is that it has no relation to the deeper layers of the personality, and it is this lack of relationship between the receptive experience and the deeper layers of the organism which provides the effect of satiation: the fact that these experiences do not touch at any point the really deeper and more permanent layers of the psyche is the reason why the individual has so limited a capacity for continuing to enjoy them.

The pleasures of Group B. are in every way different from the pleasures of Group A. In the first place, they are essentially complex – as against A. pleasures which are primarily simple. The pleasure-producing type of activity, which is an outgoing one, is always a combination of a number of forces in the individual. Individuals who are capable of the Group B. type of pleasure are those

who set out to do something, to exercise their functions and their faculties and who find in that exercise a pleasure which is to them more satisfying than the pleasures in Group A.

Group B. pleasures have certain standard characteristics – They represent the impact of the individual upon the external world, with a permanent modification of the external world as a consequence. For instance – one embroiders a set of table-mats for one's aunt, or gardens, or does some incredibly foolish piece of needlework (like the violets one embroidered on silk at school, the reception of which embarrassed one's mother so genuinely) – things of as little value as this are done with some purpose behind them, some illusory idea that one's aunt dislikes her plain table and would like to change it by putting the mats upon it, or the garden plot would look so much nicer with flowers instead of weeds, or that one's mother might like to cover a cushion with the violet embroidered silk – one is changing one's environment, and engaging on the activity, whatever it be, not for its receptive effect upon oneself, but in relation to something or someone outside one's own personality.

It is not necessarily true that Group B. pleasures are of a higher type than Group A pleasures – it may not even be particularly desirable to alter one's environment. It is, however, a fact that Group B. pleasures alter environment and therefore the first element in Group B. pleasures is a sense of power over the environment – however small, fragmentary or illusory – a builder having erected rows of jerry-built villas, transforming fields and country lanes into suburban settlements, will have a deep sense of power in having permanently altered the neighbourhood. This sense of power has no relation to the value or the skill, the success or the failure, the beauty or the ugliness of whatever the individual actually does.

The second fundamental element in Group B. pleasures is that there is in them a particle of eternity. Every individual is burdened with a sense of the fleetingness of itself and of time, with the sense that his words, his actions and his feelings all pass away and leave nothing behind, and there are few things so intolerable to the human mind as the feeling that it itself is as nothing, a thing of no weight and of no importance, which can be blown away. Therefore the completion of the smallest piece of work – the mats for one's aunt, or the embroidery for one's mother – produces a feeling of having defeated this impermanence in that something has been created that will remain after one has either moved on spatially or passed out of this life altogether.

That being so, this type of activity has a relation to two of the most profound elements in the whole of the makeup of the human psyche. The human psyche is perpetually beset by two irresistible and unquenchable pains – firstly the pain of inadequacy, felt far more acutely in modern times than if we

has lived in Winchester or Canterbury at the time of the building of their Cathedrals; today we feel crushed under in a world we cannot influence, and that we are inadequate in relation to our circumstances. Secondly the human being as always from the moment it passes through the very earliest stages of its life, the feeling of impermanence of itself, its friends, family, nation, art, school – the feeling that these may pass away and nothing remain.

Thus while the pleasures of Group B. assuage some of the deeper human needs, the pleasures of Group A. have no such relation and are entirely absorbed in the personality as it is at the moment of life and feeling, and persons whose lives are mostly influenced by A pleasures tend to age early, to become blasé and tired, and to sink quickly under the attacks of adverse circumstances, and soon lose the pristine energy with which they started on their type of career. Whereas, the B. pleasures ricochet back upon the total personality which, having some of its deepest forces assuaged, gains new life and new vigour therefrom, and people whose lives are mainly occupied with pleasures of this type seem to draw from some strange hidden source springs of energy that carry them over mountains of labour without apparently wearing away the machinery.

Both types have a very great part to play in the life of any healthy individual. The two types have been described in their more extreme form to mark the differences between them, but actually an individual wholly Group A. or completely Group B. in type would be intolerable were he to exist which he does not.