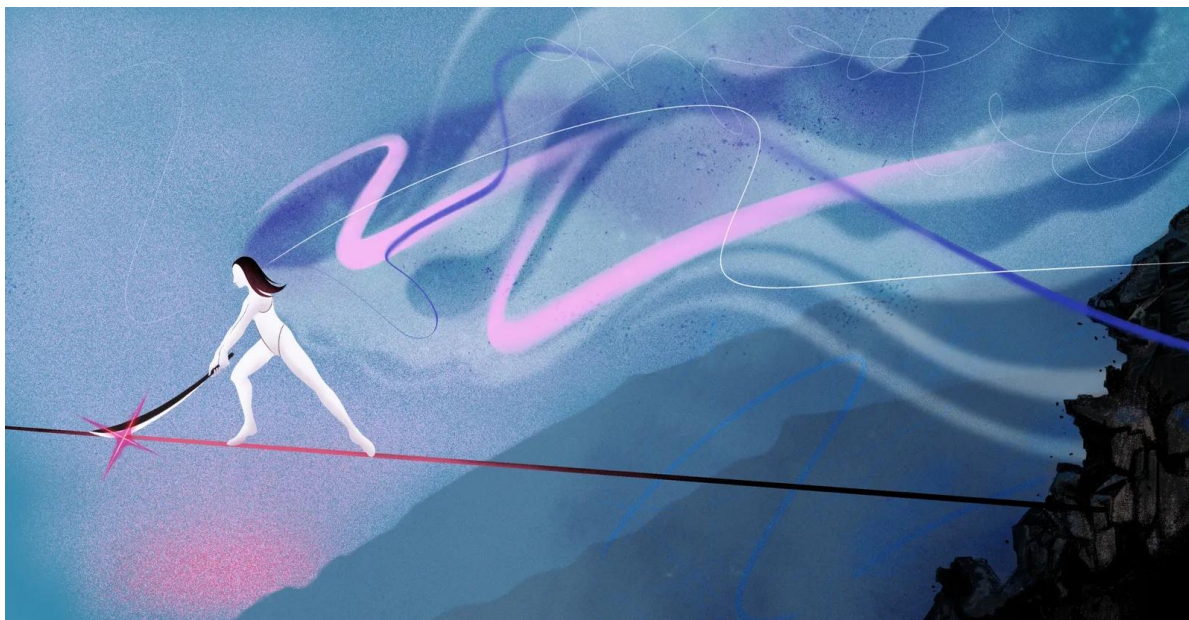


The Strange Appeal of Perverse Actions

Why do we enjoy doing things for no good reason?

Paul Bloom

July 19, 2019



Unruliness, perversity, pigheadedness—psychologists have long been interested in this bestiary of paradoxical thought and action.

Illustration by Jeremy Leung

The philosopher Agnes Callard tells us that, sometimes, when she's on a deserted road at night, she likes to walk on the double yellow lines. One evening, she decided to lie there in the middle of the road. She kept her arms pinned to her sides so that cars could pass on her left and right. A policeman approached, alarmed and confused. Was she drunk, high, suicidal? Callard explained that she had many reasons for being there; she wondered, among other things, what the stars would look like from the road's perspective. Mostly, though, she wanted to know how it would feel. "Lying on the road is not a thing one does," she writes, in an essay called "Unruliness." When one is in an "unruly" frame of mind, such an act can be appealing for precisely that reason.

Callard is careful to distinguish unruliness from rebellion. By lying down in the road, she wasn't critiquing the status quo or sticking it to the Man. Unruly people might flatter themselves as rebels, but unruliness is nothing so determinate—it's just an unwillingness to play by the rules. It's a near-neighbor, therefore, to perversity, a topic long central to theology and philosophy. A classic example of a perverse desire appears in Augustine's "Confessions," written around the year 400. Augustine recounts how, in his youth, he and his friends stole some pears. They weren't hungry—in fact, they threw the fruit to the hogs. Instead, Augustine writes, their act was "gratuitously wanton, having no inducement to evil but the evil itself." Accounting for his behavior, he concludes, "I loved the evil in me." We still explain perverse behavior this way. Think of how Alfred describes the Joker in Christopher Nolan's film "The Dark Knight": "Some

men aren't looking for anything logical, like money. They can't be bought, bullied, reasoned or negotiated with. Some men just want to watch the world burn."

In 2009, in *The Journal of Philosophy*, the philosopher David Sussman published an article called "For Badness' Sake." In it, he defined perverse actions as those undertaken when our normal desire for the good—perhaps the moral good, or maybe just the narrower good of self-interest—is reversed. This state of reversal can be expressed as wickedness, as in Augustine's case, but it doesn't have to be. Sussman considers the appeal of truly awful movies, or of corpses and grisly accidents, and notes our interest in sniffing spoiled food even though—or perhaps because—we know it to be disgusting. He reminds us that it's hard to see the "fragile beauty of icicles" without wanting to smash them, and points out that "most of us know what it is like to pick at a scab or worry a loose tooth simply because of the peculiar way in which doing so hurts."

Perverse actors—I won't call them "perverts," since that word evokes distracting connotations—can also be creative or funny. I'm a psychologist, and some of my research involves interviewing young children and soliciting their opinions about various situations, such as moral dilemmas. Like everyone else in the field, I've learned that my data will always be a little messy because kids are so often perverse: they give silly answers for fun, saying the opposite of what they really think just because they can. Scientific papers have had to be retracted because of so-called mischievous responders. Researchers who study teen-agers have it worst. In one study, nineteen per cent of high-school students who claimed to be adopted turned out to be kidding. In another, ninety-nine per cent of students who said they used an artificial limb really didn't.

Adults aren't immune to the temptations of mischief. The blogger Scott Alexander points out that four per cent of Americans tell pollsters that they think reptilian aliens rule the Earth. (Another seven per cent say that they are "not sure.") Alexander suggests that we should always keep in mind a "Lizardman constant" whenever we're trying to estimate how many people honestly hold some bizarre-sounding view. Or consider that, when the U.K. government offered citizens a chance, through a poll, to choose the name of a new polar-research vessel, the winning choice by an overwhelming margin was "Boaty McBoatface." (Officials decided to name the ship R.R.S. Sir David Attenborough, instead.)

Unruliness, perversity, pigheadedness—psychologists have long been interested in this bestiary of paradoxical thought and action. Perversity is a puzzle. It's hard to explain, scientifically, what Edgar Allan Poe described as "the imp of the perverse."

About ten years ago, the late psychologist Daniel Wegner made some progress in a paper, published in *Science*, titled "How to Think, Say, or Do Precisely the Worst Thing for Any Occasion." It described those paradoxical moments when the effort to avoid a thought makes it more likely to bubble up into consciousness. Wegner was inspired by an observation made by Fyodor Dostoyevsky in an essay called "Winter Notes on Summer Impressions": Dostoyevsky writes that trying not to think about a polar bear

makes it more likely that you will think of one. Wegner investigated this phenomenon scientifically and found that trying not to think of a white bear could make white bears pop into subjects' heads at a rate of about once a minute. (In some cases, after the experiments had concluded, white-bear thoughts kept returning for days.) Similarly, the psychologist Liane Lane and her colleagues have found that being told to keep something secret can, under some circumstances, increase one's odds of revealing it. Other research has suggested that trying not to think about racial stereotypes makes people more conscious of them, sometimes to the point of distraction and anxiety.

Wegner proposed that such attempts at thought suppression involve two distinct mental processes. First, there's a conscious and effortful system that works to create the desired outcome—for example, by finding something to think about that's not a white bear. Second, there's a part of the mind that remains alert to what's being suppressed—it scans for white-bear thoughts so that they can be shooed away. Sometimes, especially if we are tired or distracted or inebriated, the workings of the second system seep into consciousness. Now you're thinking of, and maybe talking about, just what you were trying to avoid thinking about.

Children, with their immature capacity for self-control, are particularly vulnerable to these effects. A friend of mine tells how his family made him a pie on his birthday, as a surprise. His young niece was repeatedly instructed not to reveal the secret, and she solemnly agreed. But, when he came into the house, she suddenly screamed, "There is no pie!"

Wegner's approach explains these impulsive thoughts and actions in terms of failure of control. But it can't make sense of the sort of behavior Callard and Augustine write about: perverse behavior that is deliberate, knowing, and strangely satisfying. The decision to lie down on the double-yellow lines doesn't flow from a cognitive glitch. Rather, it's a way of establishing oneself as an authentic and autonomous being. We might call it existential perversity. A person can ask: If I only do what makes sense, what use am I? Why is my consciousness relevant at all? The desire to exercise your autonomy might motivate you to turn against the expected, the reasonable, and the moral—to show yourself, and perhaps others, that you are free.

In the book "Midlife: A Philosophical Guide," which *The New Yorker's* Joshua Rothman reviewed last year, the philosopher Kieran Setiya tries to trace the deep connection between autonomy and perversity. Suppose, he writes, that you are facing a choice between A, B, and C. It so happens that you rank those possibilities in alphabetical order, preferring A to B and B to C. Now imagine that you also value having a choice. This might put you in the position—the absurd position, in Setiya's view—of preferring the opportunity to choose between B and C to simply getting A, even though you know that A is better than either alternative.

This sort of perverse preference might seem like a contrived philosophical scenario. But Setiya provides a concrete example of such a situation, drawn from the author

Joshua Ferris’s novel “To Rise Against at a Decent Hour.” The protagonist of the novel is deciding whether to have a child, and mulling over what, as a parent, he would have to give up. He thinks:

No more restaurants, Broadway plays, museums, art galleries, or any of the other countless activities the city made possible. Not that that was an insurmountable problem for me, given how little I’d indulged in them in the past. But they lived in me as options, and options are important.

This type of reasoning is familiar to many of us. But Setiya finds it ridiculous. The protagonist, he writes, “declines the opportunity in order to preserve for himself more opportunities he will not take. It makes no sense!”

On a societal level, the desire to exercise choice may create collective perversity. The policy theorists Richard Thaler and Cass Sunstein have long advocated the adoption of “nudges”—revisions to our “choice architectures” that favor, by default, the most beneficial outcomes. A business might nudge its employees by automatically enrolling them in a retirement-savings plan (though they can always change it); a cafeteria might put the healthiest food in a prominent location (though the unhealthy food is still available). Thaler and Sunstein point out that choice architectures always exist. The salads have to go somewhere, so why not give them pride of place? Still, many people find the idea of nudges upsetting; they object to having their choices shaped, even in a rational direction.

Setiya is right that much of this is foolish. There’s little to be said for voting for a political candidate just because there are so many good reasons not to; no one should revel in polluting the environment just because it feels so wrong. When the mad protagonist in Dostoyevsky’s “Notes from Underground” insists on the freedom of believing that two times two equals five, he’s plainly gone too far. And I think that Agnes Callard might be better off if she refrained from lying in the middle of the road.

Also, perversity is not as cool as people think it is. If you insist on seeing it as rebellion, it’s the sort captured by Marlon Brando, in “The Wild One”: someone asks him, “Hey, Johnny, what are *you* rebelling against?” and Brando replies, “Whaddaya got?” Such assertions of autonomy are predictable: like four-year-olds, those who make them open themselves to manipulation through reverse psychology. (You’d better not eat those peas!) The same goes for critics who take what makes sense and argue the opposite. (The final season of “Game of Thrones”? Perfection!) Perversity done wrong is just trolling.

And yet there might be something respectable about perversity done right. The righteously perverse individual appreciates the value of rationality, morality, and the good life—and then, chafing against them, chooses another path. Evolutionary biologists sometimes speak of “hopeful monsters”: although evolution typically occurs when tiny changes in phenotypes lead to greater reproductive success, hopeful monsters, which are the products of macromutations, make huge leaps through evolutionary space. Such leaps, theorists say, would be almost certain to fail—but, theoretically, could spawn

new lineages. The standard procedure for a rational decision-maker is to consider the alternatives and settle on the option that has the highest probability of maximizing whatever it is that one wants to maximize, all the while trying to avoid pitfalls, such as myopia, weakness of will, wishful thinking, fear, and overconfidence. But what if you sometimes choose to behave erratically, unpredictably? A small dose of perversity might have its benefits. On an organizational level, for instance, it makes sense for a granting institution to spend its money on the proposals that its experts think are best. And yet it could also make sense, simultaneously, to allocate some of the money by lottery—or even to put aside some small fund for the proposals that the experts think are the worst.

The right kinds of perverse actions can be exhilarating to witness, particularly for those of us who tend to be more rational and well-behaved. Last year, the artist Banksy used a hidden shredder to slice his painting “Girl with Balloon” into strips seconds after it was sold at auction, at Sotheby’s. Later, on Instagram, he posted a quote from the Russian anarchist Mikhail Bakunin: “The urge to destroy is also a creative urge.” (Banksy mistakenly attributed the quote to Pablo Picasso.) One of my favorite books is “Profane Waste,” a collaboration between the writer Gretchen Rubin and the photographer Dana Hoey. It’s a collection of photographs depicting the gleeful destruction of valuable things—a hundred-dollar bill set on fire, fine champagne poured down a drain. Just looking at the photographs gives you a taste of what Rubin describes as a “dangerous thrill.”

Perverse actions undertaken by artists, of course, often shade into rebellion. There’s a message behind them—at a minimum, they question the conventions that bind the rest of us. In a sense, they’re too public, too communicative, and too profitable to be instances of pure perversity. An example that I admire is simpler, more modest, and more absurd. It concerns the Columbia University philosopher Sidney Morgenbesser, who was famous for quips and one-liners. It’s said that a waitress once asked Morgenbesser what he wanted for dessert—apple pie or blueberry pie. He chose the apple pie. Then she returned with news: there was also cherry pie. “In that case,” Morgenbesser said, “I’ll have the blueberry.”

Paul Bloom is Professor of Psychology at the University of Toronto, the Brooks and Suzanne Ragen Professor Emeritus of Psychology at Yale University, and the author of, most recently, “Psych: The Story of the Human Mind.” His Substack is Small Potatoes.

The Ted K Archive

Paul Bloom

The Strange Appeal of Perverse Actions

Why do we enjoy doing things for no good reason?

July 19, 2019

The New Yorker Magazine, Annals of Inquiry.

<[newyorker.com/culture/annals-of-inquiry/perverse-incentives](https://www.newyorker.com/culture/annals-of-inquiry/perverse-incentives)>

www.thetedkarchive.com