

COGNITIVE PLEASURE AND DISTRESS

(Received 5 March, 1980)

His mien and his language were so noble and fearless in the hour of his death that to me *he appeared blessed*... I was pleased and I was also pained because I knew that he was soon to die.... We were laughing and weeping in turns. (*Plato, writing about Socrates*)

In this passage from the *Phaedo*¹ Plato is describing his feelings at the time of Socrates' death. The pleasure and pain that Plato felt might be called 'cognitive' since they were tied to certain states of *belief* or *knowledge* of Plato's. Plato reports that he was pleased over Socrates' courage in facing death. In order for Plato to be pleased over Socrates' courage it was necessary for him to be aware of that courage. A person cannot be pleased about some state of affairs that he does not know exists. Plato's pleasure was in some way tied to his knowledge. Plato said that he was pained 'because he knew that Socrates was soon to die', and this is to say that his pain was somehow related to his knowledge that Socrates was about to die.

Being pleased (distressed) about some state of affairs is something complex. Two phenomena are involved, pleasure (distress) and cognition. The relationship between the two phenomena is causal. To be pleased or distressed about some state of affairs is to be pleased or distressed in consequence of knowing of, or believing in, that state of affairs. When Plato was pained 'because he knew that Socrates would soon die', Plato's knowing this fact was a *cause* of his pain. It was not simply that Plato felt distressed while knowing that Socrates would die soon, since being distressed while knowing something is not a sufficient condition for being distressed *about that thing*. There are many things that Plato knew while he was distressed, yet he was distressed about Socrates' approaching death and not necessarily about the other things. What accounts for Plato's being distressed about *this thing* is that it was his knowledge and thinking of this thing that was *causing him* to be distressed.

This view of the relationship between the pleasure (distress) and the mentioned cognitions provides the basis for an account of the relationship of the pleasure (distress) to the object of the pleasure (distress). The object of Plato's pleasure — that thing that he was pleased about — was the noble and fearless bearing of Socrates. The noble and fearless bearing of Socrates was the object of the thought or knowledge which caused Plato to feel pleased. To be distressed by Socrates' approaching death is to be distressed by the thought or knowledge that Socrates was about to die. The object of the pleasure (distress) is the object of the thought or knowledge which causes the pleasure (distress).

One could, of course, ask the further question, 'What is the relation of a belief or thought to the object of the belief or thought?' However, I am not presently concerned about this question. My point is that it is through its connection with some cognition that the pleasure or distress being discussed can be said to 'have an object'.

Some recent philosophers have denied that the person's cognition is the cause of his pleasure in a case such as this. I will devote the rest of this paper to examining their arguments.

Thinking of a person who is 'pleased because' he believes that he has won the Irish Sweepstakes, Irving Thalberg produced the following argument to support his view that the belief in question is not the cause of the pleasure:

It always makes sense to ask how soon after the causal event (believing) the effect (pleasure) occurred and how the events stood to each other in space; however, could Jones honestly say whether he was pleased *right away* or only after thinking about his triumph? And how *near* to the pleasure was the belief that allegedly caused the pleasure? The etiological (i.e., causal) analysis of 'pleased because' breaks down in the face of these queries.²

What is the temporal relation between someone's feeling pleased over a piece of news and his hearing or thinking of that news? When someone feels pleased over a piece of news there may be no perceptible time lapse between his hearing or thinking of the news and his feeling pleased; he may hear the news and 'immediately' feel pleased. However, that a gap in time is not always perceptible cannot be taken to rule out a causal relation. It might have been that upon first hearing of the news that Socrates was to die Plato 'immediately' felt a terrible (very disagreeable) sinking sensation in the stomach. Yet it is clear that the hearing of the news would have been the cause of his feeling this sensation. The sensation was not about to occur even without his hearing the news. When a man kicks me in the shin I may not

notice a gap in time between his foot's contacting my leg and the onset of pain, yet clearly the kick nevertheless was the cause of the pain. Anyone who believes that there *must* be a time lapse between the occurrence of a cause and the occurrence of its effect can simply say that in these cases the lapse is so small that it normally is not, and perhaps could not be, noticed by the person in question.

Thalberg seemed to think that the temporal duration of the person's pleasure is not distinguishable from the temporal duration of his thoughts and that the thoughts could not be the cause of the pleasure for this reason. However, when someone is pleased about something the duration of his pleasure will normally differ from the duration of his thoughts, and the duration of the pleasure can be distinguished from that of the thoughts. The pleasure in being pleased about some event will be felt even at time when one is not thinking about the subject he is pleased about. J. C. B. Gosling makes this point:

Take the case of someone who is so pleased at having pulled off a deal that he throws a party. The pleasure he feels is shown in his interest in amusing his guests and his generosity with the champagne bottle. It is not a necessary part of being pleased about the deal that he should contemporaneously be aware of the deal even to the one removed extent of thinking about it.³

When someone is 'pleased at having pulled off a deal' his experience is more agreeable for a period after he learns of his success, and it is more agreeable even at times when he is not thinking about his achievement. Yet this pleasure is a constituent of his being pleased about the good news.

Within the passage of Thalberg's which was quoted, Thalberg argued that in the case of pleasure and belief it does not make sense to ask 'how *near* to the pleasure the belief was which allegedly caused the pleasure', and Thalberg interpreted this as supporting his claim that the belief could not be the cause of the pleasure. When arguing in this manner Thalberg is assuming that for two things to be related as cause and effect they must have positions in space. The argument raises difficult questions. Must a mental occurrence have a precise location in (physical) space in order to be either a cause or an effect? If so, how do we go about locating a mental occurrence in space? (For instance, is the experience of a pain in the leg itself in one's leg or in the brain, and if it is in the brain could one say precisely where? Do thoughts and beliefs have locations in the head?) These questions are very difficult and profound, and I will not directly try to deal with them.

Rather, my reply to Thalberg here is that if his argument were sound it would prove too much. If Thalberg is suggesting, as he seems to be doing, that a belief cannot be a cause of pleasure because it lacks physical location, he is committed to holding that it cannot, for the same reason, be a cause of *anything*. If he is holding that pleasure cannot be an effect of a belief because it lacks physical location, he is committed to holding that it cannot be an effect of *anything*. Thus, if Thalberg is suggesting both that causes and effects must have physical locations and that pleasure and beliefs lack spatial location, it would follow from his position that pleasure and beliefs can *never* be causes or effects. But this is a position that cannot seriously be maintained.

There are many instances in which it seems undeniable that beliefs and pleasure enter into causal relations. A man's belief that his boss will fire him can be a cause of his getting ulcers. A person's belief that he is being watched can cause him to stutter or stumble. A drug or a good meal may be a cause of someone's feeling pleased. Lack of food or sleep can cause someone to take less pleasure than he usually does in his normal activities. Admittedly, the Epiphenomenalist holds that pleasure, beliefs, and mental phenomena in general are never causes of anything, but he still holds that they are *effects* (of physical processes). Furthermore, his view that beliefs, emotions, and other mental events never have the least causal influence on physical events or other mental events will be one of the main problems in his view, and this is precisely because it makes him deny many propositions that seem obviously true (that a man's believing something may be a cause of his getting ulcers, that his being in pain may be the cause of his behaving in certain ways, etc.). Even the Identity Theorist would not deny that mental events can be causes and effects. Since a mental event for him is a physical event, it can enter into any of the causal relationships into which the corresponding physical event could enter.

Thus the position that Thalberg is committing himself to in his argument, that pleasure and belief by their very nature can never enter into any causal relations whatsoever, is unacceptable. It has much to be said against it and little to be said in favour of it. I conclude then that pleasure and belief are at least the sorts of things that can and do enter into causal relationships. And given this general view, I see no special problems in holding that they can enter into causal relationships with each other.

Bernard Williams has provided additional argument against the causal

analysis which I am proposing. One of his arguments he bases on an alleged incorrigibility of someone's judgements about the object of his pleasure and the belief to which the pleasure is connected. If the belief were the cause of the pleasure in these cases it would be possible for someone to be mistaken in judging that he is pleased because he believes such and such or pleased about such and such. If the belief were the cause, Williams argues, "it would make sense to say that I had just been mistaken in thinking that it was a certain belief that caused my pleasure; but in general no sense can be attached to this". If the object of one's pleasure in these cases were the object of the thought or belief causing the pleasure it would be possible to err in judging what one is pleased about, for it would be possible to err in judging which thought or belief is causing the pleasure. "But", Williams argues, "I cannot be mistaken in saying 'I am pleased because I have inherited a fortune' in the same way as I can in saying, for instance, 'I have a stomach-ache because I ate some bad fruit'"⁴. Gilbert Ryle was arguing for a similar conclusion when he wrote: "When I have been amused by a particular joke, the question 'What gave me that pleasure?' does not await an answer. For of course I already know that it was that joke, if it was that joke that had amused me."⁵ Ryle is arguing that the joke or the hearing of the joke is not the cause of the pleasure, for if it were one could not know incorrigibly what 'gave him' the pleasure.

But *are* these judgements incorrigible? Suppose a person is already feeling pleased or in a good mood when he hears good news or hears various jokes. In this situation it would not necessarily be obvious to him what was giving him pleasure. Someone at a party might be unsure whether it is the good news, the jokes, the music, or the wine that has been pleasing him. It is not uncommon for people not to know why they are 'happy' or what they are 'happy about'. So, too, it would not be odd for someone to say 'I feel great, though I do not know what I'm so pleased about'. If it is possible for someone to be unsure what is pleasing him, then it also must be possible for him to judge and be mistaken. The person might, for instance, assume that the jokes were pleasing him but realize later, after reflection, that the jokes were bad and that he had not really enjoyed them but that it was really the warmth of friendship, the good news, the music, and the sense of occasion which had caused him to feel so pleased. (It would also be possible for these circumstances to cause someone to be pleased by jokes that are bad. But my point is that even if the person were *not* pleased by the jokes he might, in

such a situation, falsely *believe* that he had been pleased by them. This would be a natural mistake, since people do not often carefully analyze the sources of their pleasures.) Similarly, a person at a concert might think that he is being pleased by the music when it is really his companion, the elegant plush theater, the stimulation of being out of the house, and the anticipation of the coming meal that is pleasing him.

There are *some* cases where a person would be in little doubt what is pleasing him, and it may be such cases that Ryle and Williams have in mind. If a person is not already in a particularly pleased mood and he feels more pleased immediately upon hearing a piece of good news (or a good joke), he would have convincing evidence that the hearing of the news (or the joke) caused the pleasure. But the fact that *sometimes* the question "What gave me the pleasure?" does not "await an answer" does not prove that the claim is not causal. For causal claims are not always difficult, and it is not always easy for a rational creature to err when making a causal judgement. When I see a man kick me in the leg and immediately feel pain in that leg, there is little chance that I would be wrong if I judged that the kick was the cause of the pain.

Williams provides other reasons for denying that the belief is the cause of the pleasure in the case he discusses. If the statement "I am pleased because I have inherited a fortune" means "I am pleased because I believe I have inherited a fortune" then "it is impossible to see what evidence I could have for the (causal) hypothesis, or how I could set about collecting evidence", Williams argues.⁶

What evidence might someone have for thinking that his belief in an inheritance, or his hearing of a joke, is the cause of his pleasure? The direct evidence is the temporal conjunction of the hearing or thinking of the inheritance, or the hearing of the joke, and one's feeling pleasure. That a person feels more pleased immediately upon hearing or thinking of the inheritance, or hearing the joke, provides good evidence that the cognition is a cause of the pleasure. He has the same kind of evidence for connecting his pleasure to his thought as a child has for connecting the pain in his knee with his just having fallen on it. The child's evidence is the fact that the onset of the pain begins with his falling on the knee.

Probably, additional indirect evidence of the presence of a causal relation in a particular case is contained in background knowledge which the person has of similar conjunctions in the past, and this knowledge aids him in making an intelligent causal inference in a particular case by already knowing that

pains do not often arise randomly and by knowing that physical injuries are often followed by pain. (Indeed, he will probably learn from his parents the general causal law that pain may be caused by physical injury.) Similarly, someone will gain from experience the background information that pleasure and distress do not often *suddenly* come and go at random, but that the hearing of good news or of good jokes is often immediately followed by the experiencing of pleasure and that the hearing of bad news is often followed by increased unpleasantness and distress. (We also gain evidence of a regular conjunction when we see or hear of another person's coming to feel miserable when he hears bad news.) This knowledge aids one in judging causal connections in specific cases by providing evidence of a general causal law.

What evidence might someone have for thinking that some belief or hearing of a joke was *not* the cause of his pleasure in a particular instance? That the two events are not conjoined in time in the proper manner would indicate that they are not related causally. If someone realizes that he was already pleased before hearing of his inheritance, or hearing the joke, he has solid evidence that it is not the inheritance or the joke that he is pleased about. If I feel good but do not feel more pleased upon thinking of the inheritance, and did not feel more pleased when I learned of the inheritance, I have strong evidence that I am not pleased specifically *about the inheritance*. Another kind of evidence would be gained if the removal of the circumstance believed to be the cause were not followed by a change in the state of affairs believed to be its effect. We then would have good evidence that the presence of the former circumstance was not the cause of the latter's being the way it was. For instance, suppose the person finds out that there has been a mistake and that it is not he who is to receive the inheritance but someone else. Suppose he feels no less good after learning of this fact. He would then have evidence that though he felt generally good he had not been pleased about the inheritance in particular. (That a person would be genuinely unconcerned about an inheritance would not be odd if, for instance, the inheritance is a small one or the person is already quite wealthy and thus expecting to have little use for an inheritance.) The person might conclude that he had not been pleased about any specific thing but that he simply had been in a good mood. He might realize that the cause of his feeling pleased was not his believing in the inheritance but simply his having had a good sleep the previous night and his being greeted in the morning with a beautiful, sunny day.

When Williams says that it is impossible to see how someone could 'go about collecting evidence' for the 'hypothesis' that a particular belief has caused him to feel pleased, Williams is in danger of assuming that in order to recognize causal connections it is necessary to be a trained scientist with a laboratory where one might make a 'hypothesis' and then 'go about collecting evidence'. But a man does not need to be a trained scientist to be able to conclude, with good probability of being right, that the headache he is presently suffering was caused by the clout on the head which he received earlier in the day from his wife. No greater scientific training is needed for one to be able to conclude, with good probability of being right, that the pleasure or distress which he has just begun to feel was caused by his recent hearing of good or bad news.

Making sound and reliable causal inferences is a normal part of the life of adult human beings and is frequent among children and even animals. No great intellectual sophistication is necessary. A man learns that the presence of cats causes him to sneeze or that twisting his back in a certain way causes him to feel a sharp pain; a young child learns that turning a certain knob causes a picture to appear on the television screen; a pigeon learns that tapping a certain bar produces a food pellet (i.e., causes a food pellet to appear). The pigeon, of course, does not have a sophisticated theoretical understanding of the nature of causality, but the same is true of most adult human beings. Apart from philosophers and some scientists few people give any thought whatsoever to what a causal relation is. That the pigeon lacks formal training in philosophy should not lead us to conclude that he cannot recognize one thing's being a cause of another.

I conclude, then, that when a person is pleased or distressed over some state of affairs, his thoughts or belief in that state of affairs is the cause of his pleasure or distress. The object of his pleasure or distress is the object of the thought or belief which is pleasing or distressing him.

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NOTES

¹ Plato, 'Phaedo', in: *The Dialogues of Plato*, B. Jowett translator (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1875), 58e-59a.

² Thalberg, Irving, 'False pleasures', *Journal of Philosophy* (1962), p. 67.

³ Gosling, J. C. B., *Pleasure and Desire* (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1969), pp. 62-3.

⁴ Williams, B. A. O., 'Pleasure and belief', reprinted in *Stuart Hampshire's: Philosophy of Mind* (Harper and Row, New York, 1966), p. 227.

⁵ Ryle, Gilbert, 'Pleasure', reprinted in *Donald Gustafson's: Essays in Philosophical Psychology* (Macmillan and Co., Ltd., London, 1967), p. 59.

⁶ Williams, *op. cit.*, p. 227.