# Pleasure From Another's Pain: The Influence of a Target's Hedonic States on Attributions of Immorality and Evil

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## Abstract

Can people's *feelings* about harm (i.e., their hedonic reactions) lead them to be morally condemned, even if they do not cause the harm themselves? We show that individuals who experience pleasure at serious harm that has befallen another person are judged both immoral and evil. This effect occurs for harm-causing actors, and for observers who play no role in causing the harm; actors can also be judged as immoral and evil when they experience mere indifference (Study 1). Observers are more likely to be similarly judged when they experience direct rather than indirect pleasure from harm caused to another (Study 2). The effects of pleasure are dissociable from those of malevolent desires (Study 3). Targets' experience of pleasure at the harm caused to another person leads to the social exclusion of observers (Studies 1-3) and the harsh punishment of actors, including the death penalty (Studies 1, 4a, and 4b).

People often take pleasure in others' pain. As demonstrated by decades of research on schadenfreude, people can derive enjoyment from the misfortune that befalls others, particularly if those others are disliked, envied, or seen as undeserving of their status (e.g., Cikara, Botvinick, & Fiske, 2011; Feather & Sherman, 2002; Feather, Wenzel, & McKee, 2013; Leach, Spears, Branscombe, & Doosje, 2003; Smith et al., 1996). Past studies have primarily focused on schadenfreude in instances where a target individual or group has lost standing or face, for instance, the enjoyment of a rival sports team's loss, or a peer's academic failure. However, the experience of pleasure from others' pain is not limited to these contexts and can also result from much more significant harm. For example, in 2011, many Americans cheered the killing of Osama Bin Laden, the architect of al-Qaeda's 9/11 attack on the United States ("Bin Laden's Death," 2011).

Although a person's taking pleasure in the harm or pain caused to someone who is seen as deserving of misfortune is unlikely to raise eyebrows (especially if the person is a disliked or hated out-group member, as Osama Bin Laden was for many Americans), their deriving of pleasure from the pain caused to an innocent or undeserving victim is likely to be met with shock, horror, and condemnation. It is this latter situation that is the focus of the present research. We examine how targets' hedonic states about the harm caused to another person (i.e., how they *feel* about harm caused to

others) affect whether those targets are judged as immoral and evil, both when those targets have caused the harm themselves, and when they merely learn about the harm that has occurred.

The idea that people's hedonic reactions to harm might influence moral condemnation has not received much attention in the moral judgment literature, which has focused instead on the mental antecedents of harmful action—chiefly, whether an individual intended to cause harm or wrongdoing. This research has documented the important role that intentions play—intentional acts of harm or wrongdoing are routinely condemned more than unintentional or accidental acts (Cushman, 2008; Guglielmo & Malle, 2010). Much less consideration has been given to how actors' internal states *after* harm has occurred affect whether others morally condemn them. One notable exception is the study of remorse following harm doing, which has shown that offenders who experience remorse are often condemned and punished less than those who do not experience remorse (Gold & Weiner, 2000). Based on this research, we made a symmetrical

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prediction, namely, that actors who experience feelings of pleasure following an act of harm they have committed will be condemned more than those who do not. Despite the intuitive plausibility of this prediction, it has not yet been tested empirically.

We also examine whether mere observers who have not caused harm are morally condemned for experiencing pleasure at harm. Conflicting answers to this question are suggested by current theories of moral judgment. Several major theories emphasize the fundamental role that harm plays in moral condemnation (Gray, Schein, & Ward, 2014; Turiel, 1983). Similarly, accounts of blame stress the importance of a causal connection between an actor and a negative consequence (Cushman, 2008; Malle, Guglielmo, & Monroe, 2014). Such accounts might therefore suggest that the causation of harm is a necessary component for any moral condemnation to occur. However, other lines of research suggest an opposite prediction. For instance, individuals condemn those who place bets on the chance occurrence of others' misfortune, because doing so engenders "wicked desires" (e.g., profiting from an earthquake that causes destruction; Inbar, Pizzaro, & Cushman, 2012). Condemnation is also sometimes directed toward individuals who engage in disgust-eliciting actions that do not cause direct harm (e.g., flag burning; Haidt, Koller, & Dias, 1993). Perhaps most pertinently, individuals are sometimes judged negatively simply for having "inappropriate mental states," even when they do not act on those states (e.g., when they contemplate an extramarital affair; Cohen & Rozin, 2001). This second line of research therefore suggests that harm is not a necessary trigger of moral condemnation. We aimed to complement this research by showing that people can be seen as immoral and evil for how they feel about the harm caused to another without causing any harm themselves.

Why is it that hedonic states alone, without being coupled with actual harm, would produce moral condemnation? We argue that hedonic states are powerful enough to produce these judgments in the absence of harm because they provide direct insights into a person's character. Judgments of character are known to play a key role in determining moral condemnation (see Pizarro & Tannenbaum, 2011; Uhlmann, Pizarro, & Diermeier, 2015), and the experience of pleasure at harm should be particularly diagnostic in revealing an individual's immoral and evil nature. As Schopenhauer (1903/2007) wrote, "there is no sign more infallible of an entirely bad heart, and of profound moral worthlessness than open and candid enjoyment in seeing other people suffer" (p. 79). In line with Schopenhauer's view, we predict that information about people's post-harm hedonic reactions should affect judgments of their immorality and evilness above and beyond information about their other internal states (such as their pre-existing intentions or desires to see harm occur).

In testing these predictions, we focus not just on judgments of immorality, but also on judgments of evil, which capture the most severe forms of everyday moral condemnation: "evil" is routinely used to describe the worst members of society (including serial killers, mass murderers, terrorists, torturers, and the like). Although the subject of evil has been of theoretical interest among psychologists (Baumeister, 1997; Berkowitz, 1999; Darley, 1992; Zimbardo, 2007) and philosophers (Calder, 2007), moral judgments of evil have largely been understudied within psychology (notwithstanding some important exceptions: Campbell & Vollhardt, 2014; Webster & Saucier, 2013). Because a judgment that someone is "evil" is more severe than a judgment that they are merely immoral, exploring such judgments provides an especially stringent test of the effects of hedonic reactions on moral condemnation. Will individuals be judged as "evil" even when they have not caused any harm themselves?

Existing research suggests a connection between deviant hedonic reactions to harm and evil. Sadism has been theoretically linked to evil by social psychologists in analyses of the psychological underpinnings of historical atrocities (Baumeister, 1997; Darley, 1992). Moreover, some empirical support exists for the idea that positive hedonic reactions index corrupt character. For instance, target individuals' deviant affective reactions to mild negative stimuli (e.g., a description of a person's having a cup of coffee spilled on himself or herself, Ames & Johar, 2009; or a picture of a person who looks bruised and beaten up, Szczurek, Monin, & Gross, 2012) incline people to reject those target individuals, precisely because such reactions provide diagnostic information about their discrepant (i.e., unshared) moral values. Yet, how such hedonic reactions influence global moral judgments has not been explored. For instance, it remains unknown whether a person's taking pleasure at the wrongful harm caused to another person actually leads to that *person* being seen as globally immoral and evil, rather than merely off-putting (or their response seeming morally outrageous; Szczurek et al., 2012). Of particular interest to us was whether hedonic reactions alone are sufficient to produce judgments that the person is *evil*. Building on the studies just described, we postulate that hedonic states of pleasure in response to another person's suffering are sometimes sufficient to produce judgments of both immorality and evil (even in the absence of harm causing) because they illuminate the corruptness of an individual's underlying character.

Beyond pleasure at harm, indifference at another's harm can also signal a corrupt moral character, and so we examine this hedonic state as well. Indifference signals an absence of concern for, or valuation of, another's welfare, and it should have a larger effect on judgments of those who cause harm (actors) than those who do not (observers). In cases where actors cause interpersonal harm, the victim's suffering is usually unmistakable, and actors have a special role in causing it. Their indifference to it signals a callous disregard for human welfare and should therefore lead to judgments that those actors are immoral and evil. More distant observers, however, do not have any special relation to the victim, and their indifference may merely signal a lack of orientation to,

concern for, or weighting of the victims' plight. Accordingly, their indifference, although not laudatory, should not signal immorality and evil by itself.

Finally, we also examine the role that hedonic reactions play in driving the desire for exclusion and punishment. Because pleasure at harm is such a potent signal of corrupt moral character, it should lead not just to attributions of immorality and evil, but also to a desire for social exclusion (observers) and punishment (actors).

## The Present Research

Five studies investigated how the pleasure a target person derives from a harmful act affects judgments of immorality and evil—of the target person himself or herself, of their actions, and of their hedonic reactions. In each study, we assessed both continuous judgments of immorality and evil, followed by categorical judgments of these properties. Participants rated how immoral and evil they thought the target person and their (re)action was, and then made categorical (*yes/no*) judgments as to whether or not they would classify the person and their (re)action as immoral and evil. The categorical and continuous judgments yielded very similar overall patterns.

We examined judgments of actors (who cause harm) in Studies 1 and 4, and judgments of observers (who only learn of harm) in Studies 1 to 3. Study 1 investigated whether a target's hedonic experience affected whether he or she was judged as evil. It manipulated the hedonic experience of an actor who committed a serious act of harm, as well as that of an observer who simply learned about this act of harm doing. Study 2 examined the contribution of different sorts of pleasure, by comparing direct pleasure from the harm itself with indirect pleasure resulting from some further benefit that the harm would provide. Study 3 separated pleasure from desire, by separately manipulating each of these factors to examine whether pleasure at harm affects moral condemnation regardless of whether there was a pre-existing desire for harm. Studies 4a and 4b considered whether pleasure that can be inferred from an actor's post-harm behavior (rather than pleasure that is stipulated) leads to judgments of immorality and evil, and whether such pleasure leads to greater support for the death penalty.

We examined the following six specific hypotheses across these five studies:

**Hypothesis 1:** Actors who experience pleasure or indifference following their commission of an intentionally harmful action are more likely to be seen as immoral and evil than actors who experience displeasure (Study 1) or whose hedonic state cannot be inferred (Studies 4a-4b).
**Hypothesis 2:** Observers who experience pleasure having learned about a serious harm caused to another person are more likely to be seen as immoral and evil than those who experience indifference (Studies 1 and 3) or displeasure (Study 1).

**Hypothesis 3:** The experience of pleasure from harm will lead to judgments of immorality and evil more often when targets experience direct, rather than indirect, pleasure (Study 2).
**Hypothesis 4:** The experience of pleasure from harm will lead to judgments of immorality and evil regardless of targets' pre-existing desire for the harm to occur (Study 3).
**Hypothesis 5:** People will desire more social distance from observers who experience pleasure from harm than those who do not (Studies 1-3).
**Hypothesis 6:** People will desire particularly harsh punishment (including the death penalty) for actors who experience pleasure from severe harms, as compared with actors who do not. These punitive reactions will be mediated by judgments of the actors' evilness (even when accounting for the threat posed by the actor; Studies 1, 4a-4b).

## Study 1

Study 1 investigated whether a target's hedonic state affects judgments of immorality and evil. Participants read a description of a killing and evaluated either the wrongdoer (the actor) or a person who simply learned of the killing (the observer). The hedonic state of this target person was described as upset (displeasure), indifferent, or delighted (pleasure). We also examined participants' desire to socially exclude the target, and, for actors only, to punish the target.

### Method

*Participants.* Five hundred nine participants (63% male) completed the study via Amazon com's Mechanical Turk website in exchange for US$0.50. Seventeen participants failed an attention check (the attention check described in Oppenheimer, Meyvis, & Davidenko, 2009); their responses were retained, and the results do not differ if their responses are excluded (this is true of all studies). For this initial investigation, we chose a sample of this size to ensure that there would be at least 80 participants per cell.

*Procedure.* Participants read a description of a transgression, in which the manager of an electronics store (Steven) was killed by one of his employees (James). Steven and James had gotten into an argument over James being late for work. As punishment, Steven assigned him to work over the weekend. James was very angry with Steven and, a week after their argument, he followed Steven home after work and shot and killed him.

*Independent variables.* Participants evaluated one of two targets (between-subjects): the employee who killed Steven (the actor), or another employee who learned about the killing (the observer). The target experienced one of three

possible hedonic states in response to the killing (between-subjects): They were distraught and upset (*upset*), emotionally unaffected and indifferent (*indifferent*), or exhilarated and delighted (*delighted*). Actors experienced this hedonic state in reaction to the killing they had performed, whereas observers experienced it having learned of the killing that the actor had performed. Participants were presented with a summary paragraph after they read this information, which was provided again at the bottom of the page while they answered the moral judgment questions. The full text is available in Appendix A in the online supplemental materials.

*Dependent measures.* Participants first judged the morality and evilness of the target person, his action (actors only), and his hedonic reaction, on continuous scales presented in a fixed order (as indicated below). All scales ranged from 1 (*not at all*) to 9 (*extremely*) unless otherwise noted. Participants who read about the actor first indicated how morally wrong and evil the actor's killing of Steven was. All participants then rated the target on how morally wrong and how evil his reaction was, and then, how morally bad and how evil he is as a person. For example, for the evil person judgment, they responded to the question, "How evil do you think James is?" We combined the two reaction questions (morally wrong and evil) into a composite measure of participants' moral condemnation of the reaction ($r = .90$) and the two person questions (morally bad and evil) into a composite measure of participants' moral condemnation of the person ($r = .92$).

After completing these questions, participants then made dichotomous *yes*/*no* judgments for each of the continuous judgments they had made previously.[1] For example, for the evil person question, participants were asked, "If you had to say one way or another, would you say that James is an evil person?"

Participants who read about the actor next indicated the punishment that should be assigned to him. Specifically, they indicated how severely they thought he should be punished, what an appropriate prison sentence would be (ranging from 1 = *no sentence* to 13 = *death sentence*; Harlow, Darley, & Robinson, 1995), and how much they would support the court's decision to sentence him to the death penalty (ranging from 1 = *not support this punishment at all* to 9 = *support this punishment fully*).

All participants then completed a measure of social distance adapted from Szczurek et al. (2012), in which they indicated the closest level of interaction with the target that they would feel comfortable with (1 = *living in my state*, 2 = *living in my city*, 3 = *living in my neighborhood*, 4 = *living on my block*, 5 = *living next door to me*, 6 = *a close friend or romantic partner*). Participants also indicated how likely they thought it was that the target would physically harm others in the future. As a check on the hedonic state manipulation, participants indicated to what extent the target experienced pleasure or displeasure (actor: following his

actions; observer: on learning of the killing) on a scale from −4 (*extreme displeasure*) to 4 (*extreme pleasure*) with 0 as the midpoint (*neither displeasure nor pleasure*). At the conclusion of the study, participants completed the attention check and provided demographic information. No other variables were measured or manipulated (which is true for all studies).

## Results and Discussion

Participants' judgments were submitted to a 2 (Target: Actor vs. Observer) × 3 (Hedonic State: Upset vs. Indifferent vs. Delighted) ANOVA (see Table 1 for means, standard deviations, and target by hedonic state interactions for each continuous variable).

*Manipulation check.* As expected, participants differentiated how much pleasure the target experienced based on his hedonic state, $F(2, 503) = 1,340.74$, $p < .001$. The target was seen as experiencing pleasure when he was delighted ($M = 3.51$), neither pleasure nor displeasure when he was indifferent ($M = 0.20$), and displeasure when he was upset ($M = −3.24$; $p$s < .001). There was also a significant hedonic state by target interaction ($p < .001$), such that observers were seen as experiencing more displeasure than actors when they were upset ($M = −3.48$ vs. $M = −2.01$), $t(166) = 6.44$, $p < .001$. This target difference did not emerge for either indifference or delight ($p$s > .1).

*Moral and evil judgments.* Participants' continuous moral judgments of the target and his reactions (morally wrong/evil reaction; morally bad/evil person) were influenced by the target's hedonic states, both for target actors and target observers ($p$s < .001). Moreover, both measures revealed a significant interaction between target (actor vs. observer) and hedonic state (upset vs. indifferent vs. delighted; $p$s < .001; see Table 1). These interactions reflected the fact that, in comparison with indifference, pleasure amplified the moral condemnation of observers but not actors.

For each target, we next conducted *t* tests that compared participants' composite moral condemnation judgments as a function of the target's hedonic state. Participants thought that delighted and indifferent actors were both more morally condemnable than upset actors, as were their reactions ($p$s < .001; see Table 1), though there were no further differences between delighted and indifferent actors. Specifically with regard to the person judgment, the delighted actor ($M = 8.32$) was judged more harshly than the upset actor ($M = 7.44$), $t(168) = 4.45$, $p < .001$, $d = .68$, 95% confidence interval (CI) = [4.50, 5.71], but not more harshly than the indifferent actor ($M = 8.10$), $t(168) = 1.05$, $p = .30$. In contrast, the delighted observer ($M = 6.71$) was judged more harshly than both the indifferent ($M = 3.85$), $t(169) = 9.20$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.41$, 95% CI = [2.24, 3.47], and the upset observer ($M = 1.45$), $t(169) = 20.93$, $p < .001$, $d = 3.20$, 95% CI = [4.76, 5.75].

**Table 1.** Participants' Judgments Based on Target (Actor vs. Observer) and Target Hedonic State (Upset vs. Indifferent vs. Delight) for Each Continuous Measured Variable (Study 1).

| | Actor | | | Observer | | | Target × Hedonic State interaction |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Upset | Indifferent | Delighted | Upset | Indifferent | Delighted | |
| Perceived pleasure | $-2.05_b$ (1.75) | $0.28_c$ (0.73) | $3.58_d$ (0.93) | $-3.48_a$ (1.15) | $0.12_c$ (0.78) | $3.42_d$ (1.04) | 18.52*** |
| Morally wrong action | $8.75_a$ (1.06) | $8.76_a$ (1.01) | $8.67_a$ (0.96) | — | — | — | — |
| Evil action | $8.40_a$ (1.03) | $8.40_a$ (1.40) | $8.36_a$ (1.39) | — | — | — | — |
| Morally wrong/evil reaction | $3.36_b$ (2.58) | $8.23_e$ (1.39) | $8.47_e$ (1.16) | $1.33_a$ (1.36) | $4.25_c$ (2.30) | $7.52_b$ (1.67) | 30.65*** |
| Morally bad/evil person | $7.44_d$ (1.45) | $8.10_e$ (1.54) | $8.32_e$ (1.11) | $1.45_a$ (1.30) | $3.85_b$ (2.13) | $6.71_c$ (1.93) | 79.50*** |
| Social distance | $1.43_a$ (0.80) | $1.19_b$ (0.42) | $1.24_{a,b}$ (0.67) | $4.73_e$ (1.40) | $2.90_d$ (1.60) | $1.95_c$ (1.32) | 58.17*** |
| Punishment severity | $8.18_a$ (1.04) | $8.44_b$ (0.85) | $8.50_b$ (0.94) | — | — | — | — |
| Prison sentence | $10.46_a$ (1.99) | $11.59_b$ (1.57) | $11.36_b$ (1.89) | — | — | — | — |
| Death penalty | $5.06_a$ (2.76) | $5.40_a$ (3.17) | $5.36_a$ (3.17) | — | — | — | — |
| Future harm | $6.57_d$ (2.11) | $8.01_e$ (1.30) | $7.98_e$ (1.35) | $1.78_a$ (1.28) | $3.33_b$ (1.80) | $5.29_c$ (2.13) | 20.89*** |

*Note.* Standard deviations appear in parentheses. Means within a row that do not share subscripts differ significantly from one another at $p < .05$. *F* statistics are reported. The scale for perceived pleasure ranges from −4 to 4. All other measures have scales that range from 1 to 9 (except for the prison sentence measure).
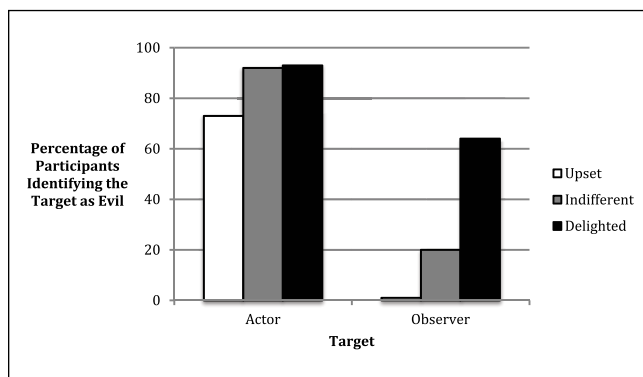*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$.



**Figure 1.** Percentage of participants who viewed the actor and observer targets as evil based on the target's hedonic state in Study 1.

Participants' dichotomous judgments of immorality and evil enabled a more clear-cut assessment of the way they categorized each target. As shown in Figure 1, supporting Hypothesis 1, close to all of the participants identified the actor as evil if he was indifferent (92%) or delighted (93%) after the killing, compared with 73% of the participants if he was upset, $\chi^2(2, N = 256) = 17.23$, $p < .001$. Once again, for actors, the experience of pleasure and the absence of displeasure were seen as equally morally reprehensible in light of the harm caused. Supporting Hypothesis 2, significantly more than 50% of the participants identified the delighted observer as evil (64%; binomial test: $p = .02$), which far surpassed the percentage of participants who thought the indifferent (20%) or sad observer (1%) was evil, $\chi^2(2, N = 253) = 86.41$, $p < .001$, which were both significantly lower than 50%; binomial tests: $ps < .001$. Similar patterns were observed for the other three measures (see online supplemental materials, Table I).

Thus, although the observer played no causal role in the death of the victim, his hedonic reaction alone was sufficient for the majority of the participants to regard him as evil.

*Social distance and punishment severity.* Consistent with Hypothesis 5, participants' desire for the social exclusion of the observer was affected by his hedonic reaction, $F(2, 255) = 81.55$, $p < .001$: Participants wanted the greatest distance (as indicated by lower numbers) between themselves and observers when the observer was delighted ($M = 1.95$), followed by indifferent ($M = 2.89$), and then upset ($M = 4.73$; all pairwise comparisons $ps < .001$; delighted vs. upset: $d = 2.04$, 95% CI = [2.37, 2.19]). An overall effect of hedonic state was also observed for actors, $F(2, 250) = 3.12$, $p = .046$. Participants desired considerable distance between themselves and both indifferent ($M = 1.19$) and delighted ($M = 1.25$) actors, who did not differ from one another ($t < 1$). Participants also wanted considerable distance between themselves and the upset actor ($M = 1.43$), but this was less than the distance than they desired for the indifferent actor, $t(166) = 2.45$, $p = .02$, $d = 0.38$, 95% CI = [.05, .44], or the delighted actor (marginal), $t(166) = 1.64$, $p = .10$, $d = 0.26$, 95% CI = [.04, −.41].

As expected, the actor's hedonic state affected support for harsh punishment, punishment severity: $F(2, 250) = 3.57$, $p = .03$; prison sentence: $F(2, 250) = 8.60$, $p < .001$. Consistent with Hypothesis 6, participants desired harsher punishment for delighted ($M = 8.54$) and indifferent ($M = 8.44$) actors than for upset ($M = 8.17$) actors; upset versus delighted: $t(165) = 2.49$, $p = .01$, $d = 0.32$, 95% CI = [.02, .62]; upset versus indifferent: $t(166) = 1.84$, $p = .07$, $d = 0.27$, 95% CI = [.55, −.02]. The same pattern was found for the prison sentence measure (see Table 1). Thus, although the targets' hedonic states occurred after the killing and did not materially

add to the harm caused, they nonetheless affected punitive responses. However, there were no differences based on the actor's hedonic state for death penalty support, $F < 1$.

## Study 2

In Study 2, we focused only on evaluations of observers as a function of their hedonic states. In particular, we examined a potential difference between direct and indirect pleasures, which parallels the well-known philosophical distinction between intrinsic and instrumental value (e.g., Zimmerman, 2015). Indirect pleasure is exemplified by a person's taking pleasure from the harm caused to another person because the harm benefits him or her in some way, that is, the harm confers *instrumental* value. Indeed, this may have been one way the observer's pleasure was interpreted in Study 1: The observer employee may have been delighted at the news of the killing because it meant that the victim would no longer be his boss. Although this reaction would of course be viewed negatively, we expect that it would not be as bad as pleasure derived *directly* from the boss's suffering itself. Indirect pleasure from another's suffering signals a complete disregard of the person's welfare. However, pleasure that derives directly from the harm itself signals something distinctly worse—that the negative welfare of the sufferer is valued *intrinsically*. For these reasons, we hypothesize that an observer whose pleasure is direct in this way will be more likely to be judged as immoral and evil than an observer whose pleasure is merely indirect (Hypothesis 3).

In the present study, we manipulated the type of pleasure an observer experienced from a harm that had occurred to a co-worker. This co-worker was involved in a hit-and-run accident that had put him on indefinite medical leave. In the case in which the observer experienced indirect pleasure at this harm, his pleasure arose from the benefit he received from it: The observer and victim were in competition with one another for a promotion, and the victim's accident took him out of the running for the promotion. In the case in which the observer experienced direct pleasure at harm, he did not receive any other benefit from the victim's harm, as the observer and victim were not in competition with one another for the promotion. In this case, the observer's pleasure was elicited directly by the suffering of the victim. Comparing these two conditions allowed us to examine whether the nature of pleasure at harm (direct vs. indirect) affects moral condemnation.

We also included a third condition in which the observer was in competition with the victim, and experienced mixed emotions when he learned about the victim's accident (pleasure that he was no longer in the running for the promotion, but sadness about the victim's injuries). In this condition, the observer also experiences indirect pleasure from the benefit of the harm, while also experiencing displeasure at the harm caused to the victim. Thus, the comparison between the indirect pleasure and mixed emotions conditions allowed us to

assess whether unbridled pleasure at the benefit derived from another person's suffering is judged more harshly than the same pleasure mitigated by concurrent displeasure at the harm itself.

Across the three conditions, we made two main predictions. First, we predicted that more participants would view the observer as evil when he experienced direct as opposed to indirect pleasure. Second, we predicted that the unmitigated experience of indirect pleasure would amplify moral condemnation relative to the mixed emotions condition.

### Method

*Participants.* Based on the effect sizes from Study 1, and the more subtle nature of the present manipulation (i.e., all targets experienced pleasure), we increased the sample size to ensure that there would be at least 150 participants per cell. Accordingly, 453 participants (68% male; $M_{age}$ = 31.62, *SD* = 11.34) completed the study via Amazon.com's Mechanical Turk website in exchange for US$0.60. Sixteen participants failed the attention check.

*Procedure.* Participants read about two employees at the same company, James and Patrick, who had known each other for 5 years. In both the Indirect Pleasure and Mixed Emotion conditions, James and Patrick had both been nominated for the same prestigious promotion to vice president. They were therefore in competition with one another, and only one of them could ultimately receive the promotion. In the Direct Pleasure condition, only Patrick had been nominated for this promotion, so James and Patrick were not in competition with one another. In this condition, James was not eligible for the promotion because he worked in a different division.

In all conditions, a few days after the nominations were announced, Patrick was the victim of a hit-and-run incident, which left him in critical condition and on indefinite medical leave from work. In both pleasure conditions, James felt only pleasure on learning of Patrick's suffering, described as follows:

> When Jason learned about what happened to Patrick, he felt a rush of pleasure. Jason was delighted to hear that Patrick was no longer going to get the promotion.

In the Mixed Emotion condition, James felt both pleasure and sadness at the news:

> When Jason learned about what happened to Patrick, he felt mixed emotions. Jason was delighted to hear that Patrick was no longer going to get the promotion, but he was upset about Patrick's injuries.

The full text is available in Appendix B in the online supplemental materials.

**Table 2.** Participants' Judgments Based on Condition (Mixed Emotions vs. Indirect Pleasure vs. Direct Pleasure) for Each Measured Variable (Study 2).

|  | Mixed emotions | Indirect pleasure | Direct pleasure | *F* statistic |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Manipulation checks |  |  |  |  |
| Perceived competition | 8.24$_b$ (1.21) | 8.53$_c$ (0.88) | 1.81$_a$ (1.96) | 1,071.61*** |
| Perceived pleasure | 4.20$_a$ (1.78) | 7.64$_b$ (1.22) | 7.73$_b$ (1.55) | 259.11*** |
| Perceived upsetness | 5.72$_b$ (1.58) | 1.66$_a$ (1.13) | 1.50$_a$ (1.07) | 528.01*** |
| Continuous measures |  |  |  |  |
| Morally wrong/evil reaction | 2.97$_a$ (1.82) | 5.79$_b$ (1.86) | 6.67$_c$ (1.99) | 158.28*** |
| Morally bad/evil person | 2.42$_a$ (1.65) | 4.77$_b$ (2.01) | 5.76$_c$ (2.08) | 121.38*** |
| Social distance | 4.43$_c$ (1.63) | 3.18$_b$ (1.67) | 2.63$_a$ (1.53) | 49.83*** |
|  |  |  |  | $\chi^2$ |
| Dichotomous measures |  |  |  |  |
| Morally wrong reaction | 0.24$_a$ | 0.80$_b$ | 0.87$_b$ | 156.75*** |
| Evil reaction | 0.11$_a$ | 0.53$_b$ | 0.71$_c$ | 116.87*** |
| Morally bad person | 0.09$_a$ | 0.55$_b$ | 0.67$_c$ | 113.73*** |
| Evil person | 0.04$_a$ | 0.36$_b$ | 0.57$_c$ | 99.04*** |

*Note.* Standard deviations appear in parentheses. Means or proportions within a row that do not share subscripts differ significantly from one another at *p* < .05. *\*p* < .05. *\*\*p* < .01. *\*\*\*p* < .001.

*Dependent measures.* Participants made four continuous judgments of morality and evil (the same judgments as were made in Study 1), which we averaged into our two composite measures of the moral condemnation of the target's reaction (*r* = .81) and the moral condemnation of the target as a person (*r* = .87). Following these measures, they answered the dichotomous moral/evil judgment measures and indicated their desired social distance from the target (these questions were also the same as those in Study 1). As a check on the manipulation, participants were asked three questions. First, they indicated to what extent the target (Jason) was in competition with the victim (Patrick) for the promotion. Next, they were asked two questions about the target's hedonic state: how much pleasure Jason experienced (1 = *no pleasure*; 9 = *extreme pleasure*), and how upset he was (1 = *not at all* to 9 = *extremely*), following the news of Patrick's injuries.

## Results and Discussion

Participants' continuous judgments were submitted to a three-level (Mixed Emotions vs. Indirect Pleasure vs. Direct Pleasure) one-way ANOVA (see Table 2 for means, standard deviations, overall *F* statistics for each continuous variable, and proportions and chi-squares for each dichotomous variable).

*Manipulation checks.* All of the manipulation checks confirmed our expectations. Participants correctly identified the target and victim as being in competition with one another in the Mixed Emotions (*M* = 8.24) and Indirect Pleasure conditions (*M* = 8.53), although slightly more so in the Indirect Pleasure condition, *t*(298) = 2.32, *p* = .02. The target and

victim were not seen as competing in the Direct Pleasure condition (*M* = 1.81), which differed from both of the other two conditions, *p*s < .001. Participants viewed the target as experiencing an equal amount of pleasure in the two pleasure conditions (Indirect: *M* = 7.64; Direct: *M* = 7.73; *t* < 1), which was greater than the pleasure attributed in the Mixed Emotion condition (*M* = 4.20, *p*s < .001). Participants also thought that the target was most upset in the Mixed Emotion condition (*M* = 5.72), as compared with either of the pleasure conditions (Indirect: *M* = 1.66; Direct: *M* = 1.50, *p*s < .001), which did not differ from one another (*p* > .1).

*Moral and evil judgments.* Both of the continuous moral condemnation composites (morally bad/evil reaction; morally bad/evil person) were significantly affected by the manipulation as revealed by omnibus ANOVAs (*p*s < .001). For each measure, participants expressed the most moral condemnation when the actor took pleasure in the suffering of the victim with whom he was not in competition (Direct Pleasure condition). Follow-up *t* tests comparing the two pleasure conditions (direct vs. indirect) revealed greater moral condemnation of the target and his reaction in the Direct Pleasure condition (*p*s < .001; see Table 2). Specifically with regard to the person judgment, the direct pleasure observer (*M* = 5.76) was judged more harshly than the indirect pleasure observer (*M* = 4.77), *t*(299) = 4.22, *p* < .001, *d* = 0.48, 95% CI = [.53, 1.46]). The Indirect Pleasure condition was judged reliably more harshly than the Mixed Emotions condition, as confirmed by follow up *t* tests (*p*s < .001; see Table 2). With regard to the person judgment, the target was seen as a more morally condemnable person in the Indirect Pleasure condition (*M* = 4.77) than in the Mixed Emotions

condition ($M = 2.42$), $t(303) = 11.06$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.28$, 95% CI = [1.93, 2.76]), demonstrating that the experience of unmitigated indirect pleasure leads to greater moral condemnation than indirect pleasure experienced alongside sadness at the harm caused to the victim.

With respect to the categorical judgments, supporting Hypothesis 3, it was only when the target experienced direct pleasure that the majority of respondents viewed him as evil (57%). This percentage did not significantly differ from 50% (binomial test: $p = .11$), but it was significantly higher than the percentage evil classifications when the target experienced indirect pleasure (36%), $\chi^2(1, N = 301) = 13.40$, $p < .001$, or mixed emotions (4%), $\chi^2(1, N = 305) = 100.74$, $p < .001$. More participants viewed the target to be evil when he felt indirect pleasure rather than mixed emotions, $\chi^2(1, N = 300) = 48.19$, $p < .001$, although both were significantly less than 50%; binomial test ($p$s $\leq .001$). Similar patterns were observed for the other three dichotomous moral and evil measures (see Table 2).

*Social distance.* The responses to the social distance measure followed the same pattern as the moral and evil judgments. Consistent with Hypothesis 5, participants were least comfortable being socially and physically close to the target who derived direct pleasure from the victim's suffering ($M = 2.63$), followed by the target who derived indirect pleasure ($M = 3.18$), and then the target who experienced mixed emotions ($M = 4.43$). All three means were significantly different from one another ($p$s $< .005$; effect size for indirect vs. direct: $d = 0.34$, 95% CI = [.18, .91]; effect size for indirect vs. mixed emotions: $d = 0.76$, 95% CI = [.88, 1.63]).

The results of Study 2 demonstrate that an observer who derives direct pleasure from harm is seen as more evil than one who derives indirect pleasure. Indirect pleasure at harm to another person conveys a value orientation much like indifference—a disregard for the person's welfare in light of the benefit that one will receive from his or her being harmed. The harm to the person is valued *instrumentally*. This is clearly condemnable, but it falls short of the utter moral corruptness implied by direct pleasure, namely, the *intrinsic* valuation of another person's suffering. Study 2 also shows that indirect pleasure resulting from harm to another person is condemned less harshly when it is experienced concurrently with displeasure at the harm itself.

## Study 3

The results of Study 2 further support the importance of pleasure in driving moral condemnation. However, one alternative interpretation of the role of pleasure needs to be addressed. Our claim is that a target's hedonic reaction to another's suffering conveys unique information about his moral character, and that the information conveyed by his hedonic reaction is distinct from the information conveyed by other mental states. However, an alternative claim is that

people use the target's hedonic reaction as a proxy for his *pre-existing* desire for harm to occur, and they morally condemn him for this perceived desire, rather than for the pleasure he experienced *after* the harm occurred. This proposal is consistent with recent findings showing that people condemn targets for wagering money on the occurrence of a negative outcome that they have no control over, such as a hurricane (Inbar et al., 2012). These findings indicate that actions that reflect immoral desires are sometimes condemned even when those actions do not cause any harm.

However, although the desire for a particular event to occur and the pleasure experienced at its occurrence are related, they are clearly distinguishable. People often feel pleasure when their desires are realized, but they may sometimes predict incorrectly that the satisfaction of their desires will bring them pleasure. Indeed, people often mispredict how future events will make them feel (Wilson & Gilbert, 2003). Thus, it is possible that a person could desire harm to befall another, but feel no pleasure when the harm occurs. Conversely, it is also possible that a person could derive pleasure from harm to another person in the absence of any pre-existing desire for the harm to occur. Because these mental states are distinct, we predict that desire and pleasure will make independent contributions to moral condemnation, and that pleasure will amplify moral condemnation even when a target harbors pre-existing malevolent desires toward the victim.

To examine this hypothesis, in Study 3, we independently manipulated both the target's desire for harm to befall the victim and his hedonic reaction to the victim's suffering after the harm had occurred. As in Study 2, we only examined observers. If our theorizing is correct, taking pleasure from another person's suffering should lead to greater moral condemnation both when the target possesses immoral desires and when he does not (Hypothesis 4). It should also lead to greater moral condemnation once ratings of those pre-existing desires are statistically accounted for. Alternatively, if the desire-based interpretation is correct, then the observer's hedonic state should only affect judgments of morality and evil in the absence of immoral desires, because when immoral desires are present, the observer's hedonic state does not provide any further information relevant to moral condemnation.

## Method

*Participants.* Based on the results from the previous studies, we selected a sample size to ensure that there would be at least 100 participants per cell. Accordingly, 404 participants (64% male; $M_{age} = 30.70$, $SD = 10.09$) completed the study via Amazon.com's Mechanical Turk website in exchange for US$0.50. Fourteen participants failed the attention check.

*Procedure.* Participants read about two employees at the same company, James and Steven. Steven frequently parked his car in James' parking spot, which bothered James. In the Desire conditions, James felt continuing animosity toward Steven

**Table 3.** Participants' Judgments Based on Desire (No Desire vs. Desire) and Target Hedonic State (Indifferent vs. Delighted) for Each Continuous Measured Variable (Study 3).

| | No desire | | Desire | | F statistics | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Indifferent | Delighted | Indifferent | Delighted | Desire | Hedonic state | Desire × Hedonic State |
| Perceived desire | 2.95$_a$ (1.83) | 4.58$_b$ (2.10) | 6.65$_c$ (1.84) | 7.08$_c$ (1.71) | 275.43*** | 30.24*** | 10.40** |
| Perceived pleasure | 2.83$_a$ (1.90) | 6.69$_c$ (1.45) | 5.91$_b$ (2.16) | 7.31$_d$ (1.38) | 112.89*** | 227.83*** | 49.67*** |
| Perceived suffering | 8.36$_a$ (1.39) | 8.43$_a$ (1.23) | 8.39$_a$ (1.12) | 8.50$_a$ (0.99) | 0.16 | 0.60 | 0.03 |
| Morally wrong/evil reaction | 3.40$_a$ (2.10) | 6.13$_c$ (2.01) | 4.93$_b$ (2.23) | 6.33$_c$ (1.96) | 17.44*** | 100.48*** | 10.30** |
| Morally bad/evil person | 2.99$_a$ (1.93) | 5.15$_c$ (2.10) | 4.49$_b$ (2.22) | 5.43$_c$ (2.03) | 18.66*** | 56.41*** | 8.70** |
| Social distance | 3.69$_b$ (1.64) | 3.10$_a$ (1.62) | 2.95$_a$ (1.61) | 2.71$_a$ (1.53) | 12.66*** | 6.86** | 1.18 |

*Note.* Standard deviations appear in parentheses. Means within a row that do not share subscripts differ significantly from one another at $p < .05$. $F$ statistics are reported.
*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$.

about this. He started fantasizing about something bad happening to Steven and wished that one of these bad events would come true. In the No Desire conditions, James had let go of any animosity he had toward Steven about the parking spot, and had no lingering negative feelings toward him.

In both conditions, James then learned that Steven's wife left him for his best friend, which caused Steven to feel distraught and humiliated. His performance at work suffered, and he turned to alcohol and drugs for relief. Participants were then informed of James' reaction to Steven's suffering: James either felt unmoved and emotionally unaffected (Indifferent conditions) or pleasure and delight (Delighted conditions). The full text is available in Appendix C in the online supplemental materials.

*Dependent measures.* Participants responded to the same measures as in Study 2: the moral and evil questions, phrased both continuously and dichotomously, and the social distance measure. The continuous measures were again averaged into a moral condemnation measure for the target's reaction ($r = .77$) and the target as a person ($r = .82$).

As a check on the manipulation, participants were asked three questions. First, they indicated how much the target (James) wanted the victim (Steven) to suffer prior to Steven's wife leaving him. Next, as in Study 2, they indicated how much pleasure James experienced from Steven's suffering. Finally, participants indicated how much they thought that Steven had suffered as a result of his wife's infidelity.

## Results and Discussion

Participants' judgments were submitted to a 2 (Desire: Desire vs. No Desire) × 2 (Hedonic State: Indifferent vs. Delighted) ANOVA (see Table 3 for means, standard deviations, and overall $F$ statistics for each continuous variable).

*Manipulation checks.* As anticipated, participants viewed the target as having a greater desire for Steven to suffer in the Desire condition ($M = 6.87$) than in the No Desire condition

($M = 3.76$), $F(1, 399) = 275.43$, $p < .001$, and as having experienced more pleasure in the Delighted condition ($M = 7.00$) than in the Indifferent condition ($M = 4.38$), $F(1, 399) = 227.83$, $p < .001$. Both of these effects held at each level of the other independent variable, $p$s $< .001$. Importantly, there were no differences in how much participants thought that Steven had suffered based on either manipulation, all $F$s $< 1$.

*Moral and evil judgments.* Our primary question was whether a target's hedonic state in reaction to another's suffering would exert an effect on participants' moral condemnation judgments independent of whether the target had a pre-existing desire for the victim to suffer. Consistent with Hypothesis 4, simple effects tests revealed that the target's delight at the victim's suffering led to greater condemnation both when the target had no pre-existing desire for the victim to suffer ($p$s $< .001$) and, critically, when he possessed such a desire ($p$s $< .005$). As shown in Figure 2 (and consistent with Hypothesis 4), the target's delight at the victim's suffering led to greater condemnation of the target as a person both when the target had no pre-existing desire for the victim to suffer ($M_{\text{Indifferent}} = 2.99$ vs. $M_{\text{Delighted}} = 5.15$), $t(199) = 7.58$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.07$, 95% CI = [1.60, 2.72], and, critically, when he possessed such a desire ($M_{\text{Indifferent}} = 4.49$ vs. $M_{\text{Delighted}} = 5.43$), $t(201) = 3.15$, $p = .002$, $d = .44$, 95% CI = [.35, 1.53]. Similarly, the target's reaction was seen as more morally condemnable when he experienced delight at the victim's suffering in both the No Desire condition ($M_{\text{Indifferent}} = 3.40$ vs. $M_{\text{Delighted}} = 6.13$), $t(199) = 9.43$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.33$, 95% CI = [2.16, 3.31], and the Desire condition ($M_{\text{Indifferent}} = 4.93$ vs. $M_{\text{Delighted}} = 6.33$), $t(201) = 4.78$, $p < .001$, $d = .67$, 95% CI = [.83, 1.99]. These results also held when statistically accounting for perceptions of the target's pre-existing desire for harm to befall the victim, $p$s $< .01$.

Separate from the effects of pleasure, the target's pre-existing desire for harm to befall the victim also significantly increased moral condemnation of the target and his reaction ($p$s $< .001$). In addition, hedonic state and desire significantly interacted for both moral condemnation composites (reaction and
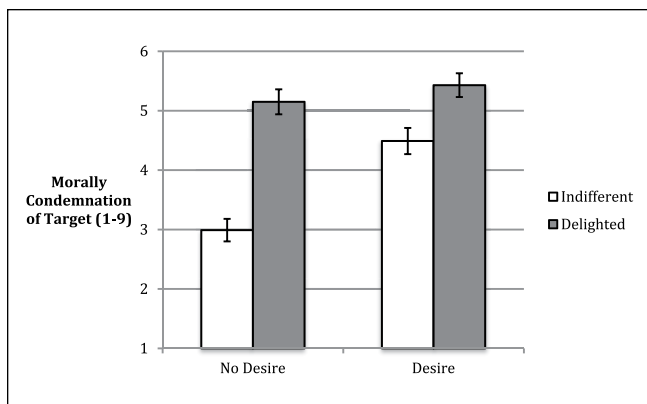
**Figure 2.** Participants' assessments of how immoral and evil the target was as a person, based on whether the target had a pre-existing desire for harm to befall the victim (no desire vs. desire) and the target's hedonic reaction to learning of the victim's suffering (indifferent vs. delighted) in Study 3.

person), indicating that the effect of hedonic state was typically larger when no pre-existing desire was present (although still evident in the presence of such a pre-existing desire; see above). Interestingly, the nature of these interactions also attests to the greater role of pleasure as compared with desire in influencing moral condemnation: Whereas the target's hedonic state affected the moral condemnation judgments both in the presence and absence of desire, desire itself influenced these judgments only in the absence of pleasure (indifferent: $ps < .001$), but not in its presence (delighted: $ps > .3$).

With regard to the dichotomous categorization measures, supporting Hypothesis 2, more participants classified the target as evil when he experienced pleasure at the victim's suffering (41%) than when he was unaffected by it (22%), $\chi^2(1, N = 403) = 17.21$, $p < .001$. This relationship was present in both the No Desire (39% vs. 13%), $\chi^2(1, N = 200) = 17.57$, $p < .001$, and the Desire conditions (43% vs. 31%), $\chi^2(1, N = 203) = 3.37$, $p = .07$. Similar patterns were observed for the other three dichotomous moral and evil measures (see online supplemental materials, Table II). Unlike the previous studies, the overall percentage of evil classifications in the Desire condition was significantly less than 50% (binomial test: $p = .01$), possibly owing to the less severe harm investigated in this study.

*Social distance.* Both malevolent desire and pleasure at harm increased how socially distant participants wanted to be from the target (Desire: $M_{NoDesire} = 3.40$ vs. $M_{Desire} = 2.83$), $F(1, 399) = 12.66$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.35$, 95% CI = [.25, .88]; Hedonic State: $M_{Indifferent} = 3.32$ vs. $M_{Delighted} = 2.90$, $F(1, 399) = 6.86$, $p = .009$, $d = 0.26$, 95% CI = [.10, .74]. The interaction between these two variables was not significant ($p > .2$).

Study 3 showed that the effect of hedonic states on moral condemnation cannot be reduced to pleasure serving as a proxy for pre-existing malevolent desires. The hedonic state manipulation exerted effects on judgments of immorality and evil independent of malevolent desire (both in its presence and its absence), and when statistically accounting for perceptions of such desire.

## Studies 4a and 4b

Studies 4a and 4b returned to assessments of actors. In all prior studies, information about a target's pleasure was stipulated explicitly. In Studies 4a and 4b, we examined whether implicit signals of pleasure (i.e., behaviors performed after the act of harm itself) can lead to judgments of immorality, evil, and support for harsh punishment. This allows for a more naturalistic assessment of the influence that actors' hedonic states have on moral condemnation and punishment. We also wanted to revisit the issue of whether an actor's pleasure can increase support for the death penalty (Hypothesis 6). This hypothesis was not supported in Study 1, but we suspected that this null result might have been due to the severe and highly calculated nature of the crime in that study: Even when the actor was upset, he was still blameworthy for having committed an extreme, premeditated act of violence (indeed, 63% of the participants were above the midpoint in death penalty support in Study 1). Thus, in Studies 4a and 4b, we examined whether manipulating pleasure after a "heat of passion" crime (which is likely to be condemned less severely than a "cool" crime such as the one we used in Study 1) would affect death penalty support.

Participants learned of a man who walked in on his wife cheating with another man, and then killed both of them in the heat of the moment. This act of violence is extreme, but not premeditated, and the actor's motivation is comprehensible. We manipulated implied pleasure in both studies. In Study 4a, we used a subtle manipulation of whether the killer took time after the killing to reflect on what he had done while listening to his favorite song (pleasure) or not (no pleasure). In Study 4b, we used a more blatant manipulation of implicit pleasure by having the killer either leave the premises immediately (no pleasure) or proceed deliberately to cut off the victims' hands and feet (pleasure). We expected that the actor would be viewed as having experienced more pleasure from the killing when he listened to music (Study 4a) or dismembered the bodies (Study 4b), which would increase the likelihood that he would be categorized as evil. Furthermore, although these actions occurred after the harm was perpetrated, we expected that they would lead to greater support for harsh punishment (including the death penalty).

### Study 4a

#### Method

*Participants.* Based on the subtle nature of the present manipulation (i.e., pleasure was implicit rather than explicit), we selected a sample size to ensure that there would be at

**Table 4.** Participants' Judgments Based on Condition (Control vs. Pleasure) for Each Measured Variable (Study 4a).

| | Control | Implied pleasure | *F* statistic |
|---|---|---|---|
| Manipulation check | | | |
| Perceived pleasure | 3.78 (2.58) | 4.71 (2.68) | 9.47** |
| Continuous measures | | | |
| Morally wrong/evil action | 7.19 (1.69) | 7.46 (1.85) | 1.87 |
| Morally bad/evil person | 5.87 (2.23) | 6.63 (2.17) | 8.98** |
| Punishment severity | 7.07 (1.84) | 7.35 (1.90) | 1.64 |
| Prison sentence | 9.35 (2.83) | 9.68 (2.71) | 1.12 |
| Death penalty | 3.39 (2.88) | 3.36 (2.91) | 0.01 |
| Future dangerousness | 4.64 (2.25) | 5.33 (2.30) | 6.99** |
| | | | $\chi^2$ |
| Dichotomous measures | | | |
| Morally wrong action | 0.94 | 0.95 | 0.08 |
| Evil action | 0.65 | 0.71 | 4.99* |
| Morally bad person | 0.63 | 0.79 | 8.98** |
| Evil person | 0.40 | 0.60 | 11.92** |

*Note.* Standard deviations appear in parentheses.
*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$.

least 150 participants per cell (the same is true of Study 4b). Thus, 303 participants (58% male; $M_{age} = 33.51$, $SD = 10.69$) completed the study via Amazon.com's Mechanical Turk website in exchange for US$0.50. Six participants failed the attention check.

*Procedure*. Participants read about a man named Rob, who walked into his home to find his wife Lisa in bed with another man (Chris). Rob was devastated that his wife was cheating on him and impulsively grabbed his gun that he kept in the closet. He then shot and killed both Lisa and Chris. Next, in the Pleasure condition, participants learned that Rob played "his all-time favorite album of soaring operatic music," thought about what he had done to the victims, and "took in the sounds of the music." After this, Rob drove away from the house. In the Control condition, participants learned that Rob simply drove away from the scene once he had killed the victims. The full text is available in Appendix D in the online supplemental materials.

*Dependent measures*. Participants were asked the same moral and evil questions (both continuous and dichotomous) and punishment questions (punishment severity, length of prison sentence, and support for the death penalty) as in Study 1, although we asked these questions only in relation to the target's act, and the target as a person, and not his hedonic reaction (because his reaction was not explicitly stated as in the previous studies). We averaged the continuous moral and evil judgments for the target's action and the target himself to form our two composite moral condemnation measures (act: $r = .53$; person: $r = .76$). Participants also answered the likelihood of future harm question from Study 1, and an additional

question about how dangerous they thought the target was (from which we computed a composite measure of the threat posed by the target; $r = .87$). As a check on the manipulation, participants indicated how much pleasure they thought Rob experienced from killing Chris and Lisa.

*Results and discussion.* Participants' judgments were submitted to a two-level (Control vs. Pleasure) one-way ANOVA. See Table 4 for means, standard deviations, and *F* statistics for each continuous variable, and proportions and chi-squares for each dichotomous variable.

*Manipulation check.* As anticipated, participants viewed the target as having experienced more pleasure in the Pleasure condition ($M = 4.71$) than in the Control condition ($M = 3.78$), $F(1, 300) = 9.47$, $p = .002$, $d = 0.35$.

*Moral and evil judgments.* The implied presence of pleasure increased participants' moral condemnation of the target as a person ($M_{Pleasure} = 6.63$ vs. $M_{Control} = 5.87$), $F(1, 301) = 8.98$, $p = .003$, $d = .35$, 95% CI = [.26, .76], but it did not significantly affect their moral condemnation of the target's actions ($M_{Pleasure} = 7.46$ vs. $M_{Control} = 7.19$), $F(1, 301) = 1.87$, $p = .17$. Supporting Hypothesis 1, on the categorical measure, significantly more than 50% of the participants viewed the target as evil when he paused to listen to music after killing the victims (60%; binomial test: $p = .02$), whereas significantly less than half the participants made this classification when he did not do so (40%; binomial test: $p = .02$), $\chi^2(1, N = 302) = 11.92$, $p = .001$. Similar patterns were observed for the categorical judgments regarding whether the target's action was evil, and whether he was a morally bad person.

**Table 5.** Participants' Judgments Based on Condition (Control vs. Pleasure) for Each Measured Variable (Study 4b).

|  | Control | Implied pleasure | F statistic |
|---|---|---|---|
| Manipulation check |  |  |  |
| Perceived pleasure | 3.61 (2.46) | 5.64 (2.12) | 58.95*** |
| Continuous measures |  |  |  |
| Morally wrong/evil action | 7.25 (1.69) | 8.15 (1.46) | 24.27*** |
| Morally bad/evil person | 5.99 (2.22) | 7.58 (1.90) | 44.44*** |
| Punishment severity | 7.33 (1.78) | 8.22 (1.31) | 24.30*** |
| Prison sentence | 9.71 (2.52) | 11.15 (2.11) | 29.08*** |
| Death penalty | 3.66 (2.96) | 4.79 (3.16) | 10.22** |
| Future dangerousness | 4.93 (2.15) | 6.49 (2.16) | 39.39*** |
|  |  |  | $\chi^2$ |
| Dichotomous measures |  |  |  |
| Morally wrong action | .95 | .95 | .09 |
| Evil action | .64 | .85 | 16.24*** |
| Morally bad person | .63 | .84 | 16.88*** |
| Evil person | .46 | .76 | 28.56*** |

*Note.* Standard deviations appear in parentheses.
*$p$ < .05. **$p$ < .01. ***$p$ < .001.

The moral wrongness classification revealed no significant differences between conditions, $p$ = .78, likely owing to a ceiling effect (94% of the participants regarded the target's actions as wrong).

*Punishment.* Contrary to expectations, there were no significant differences for any of the three punishment measures. The lack of significant findings may be due to the subtle nature of the current pleasure manipulation (listening to one's favorite music while thinking about the harm caused). Therefore, in Study 4b, we used a less subtle manipulation of implied pleasure to examine whether it could affect people's desire for harsh punishment (and the death penalty).

## Study 4b

### Method

*Participants.* Three hundred participants (55% male; $M_{age}$ = 32.30, $SD$ = 11.16) completed the study via Amazon.com's Mechanical Turk website in exchange for US$0.50. Thirteen participants failed the attention check.

*Procedure.* The procedure was the same as Study 4a except for the implied pleasure manipulation. In the Pleasure condition, participants learned that Rob did not feel that killing the victims was enough, so "he slowly cut off their hands and feet with a large kitchen knife. Rob took his time as he deliberately cut off each hand and foot." After this, Rob drove away from the house. In the Control condition, participants learned that Rob drove away from the scene once he had killed the victims. The full text is available in Appendix D in the online supplemental materials.

*Results and discussion.* Participants' composite action ($r$ = .44) and person ($r$ = .73) judgments were submitted to a two-level (Control vs. Pleasure) one-way ANOVA (see Table 5 for means, standard deviations, and $F$ statistics for each continuous variable, and proportions and chi-squares for each dichotomous variable).

*Manipulation check.* As anticipated, participants viewed the target as having experienced more pleasure in the Pleasure condition ($M$ = 5.64) than in the Control condition ($M$ = 3.61), $F(1, 298)$ = 58.95, $p$ < .001, $d$ = 0.88. Note that the effect size for the pleasure manipulation in this study is considered large, whereas the effect size for the pleasure manipulation in Study 4a was between small and medium ($d$ = 0.35). The larger effect size in the present study indicates that the dismemberment manipulation was a stronger indicator of pleasure than the music manipulation.

*Moral and evil judgments.* The presence of implied pleasure increased the moral condemnation of the target ($M_{Pleasure}$ = 7.58 vs. $M_{Control}$ = 5.99), $F(1, 298)$ = 44.44, $p$ < .001, $d$ = .77, 95% CI = [1.12, 2.06], and his actions ($M_{Pleasure}$ = 8.15 vs. $M_{Control}$ = 7.25), $F(1, 298)$ = 24.27, $p$ < .001, $d$ = .57, 95% CI = [.54, 1.26]. Supporting Hypothesis 1, on the categorical measure, significantly more than 50% of the participants viewed the target as evil when he cut off the victims' hands and feet (76%; binomial test: $p$ < .001), with significantly fewer participants making this classification when he did not do so (46%; which did not significantly differ from 50%, binomial test: $p$ = .33), $\chi^2(1, N = 300)$ = 28.56, $p$ < .001. Similar patterns were observed for the categorical judgments about the evilness of the target's reaction and his moral badness as a

person (although again, there were no significant differences on the moral wrongness measure, *p* = .77, likely owing to a ceiling effect; 95% of the participants judged the target's actions as wrong).

We further examined whether the target's dismembering of the bodies led to increased moral condemnation because of the pleasure it implied, or alternatively, because it implied that the target was more dangerous (and more capable of future harm). To do so, we conducted a multiple mediation bootstrap analysis (Preacher & Hayes, 2008) examining the effect of implied hedonic state (pleasure vs. control) on moral condemnation, with judgments of the target's pleasure and his likelihood of future harm (which was assessed by the composite measure of the threat he posed, *r* = .85) as mediators. Both the judgment of the target's pleasure, *B* = .12, *SE* = .06, 95% CI = [.02, .23], and the composite threat measure, *B* = .36, *SE* = .07, 95% CI = [.24, .51], were significant mediators of this effect. Thus, although attributions of pleasure do not wholly account for the effect of dismemberment on moral condemnation, they play a significant role independent of the role played by judgments of future threat.

*Punishment.* Consistent with Hypothesis 6, and differing from Study 4a, participants desired harsher punishment for the target who dismembered the bodies (*M* = 8.22) than for the target who did not (*M* = 7.33), *F*(1, 298) = 24.30, *p* < .001, *d* = 0.57, 95% CI = [.54, 1.25]. The same difference was observed for the prison sentence measure (*M* = 9.71 vs. *M* = 11.15), *F*(1, 298) = 29.08, *p* < .001, *d* = 0.62, 95% CI = [.92, 1.97], and for the measure of death penalty support (*M* = 3.66 vs. *M* = 4.79), *F*(1, 298) = 10.22, *p* = .002, *d* = 0.37, 95% CI = [.43, 1.83].

We additionally examined whether participants' assessment of the target's evilness would underlie their differential support for the death penalty, even when accounting for consequentialist concerns regarding the target's future dangerousness. We used the continuous measure of how much participants viewed the target as evil, and conducted a multiple mediation bootstrap analysis with the target's implied hedonic state (pleasure vs. control) as the independent variable and the extent to which the target was seen as evil and the perceived likelihood of future harm as the putative mediators. The evil person judgment was a significant mediator of the effect of implied pleasure on death penalty support, *B* = .15, *SE* = .08, 95% CI = [.01, .31]. The composite threat measure was also a significant mediator, *B* = .35, *SE* = .09, 95% CI = [.21, .55]. Therefore, it appears that a signal that a person derived pleasure from his harmful actions can lead him to be judged as evil, and as a significant future threat, both of which then bolster support for the ultimate punishment, the death penalty.

Taken together, Studies 4a and 4b demonstrate that participants can infer a target's hedonic state from his behavior, which leads to greater judgments of evilness, and, in some instances, to greater punishment (Study 4b). However, these

inferences of pleasure do not inevitably lead to greater punishment (as illustrated by the null results of Study 4a). Instead, the results suggest that reasonably strong behavioral demonstrations of pleasure are needed to influence punishment judgments.

## General Discussion

Five studies demonstrated that a target person's hedonic reactions to harm influence whether they are seen as immoral and evil. The effect of hedonic states on judgments of immorality and evil was highly robust and occurred even when targets did not cause harm themselves. Moreover, a target's hedonic states also influenced whether he or she was seen as an appropriate candidate for social exclusion and punishment.

Actors who experienced pleasure or indifference in response to suffering they caused tended to be seen as immoral and evil (Hypothesis 1), regardless of whether this pleasure was described explicitly (Study 1) or implied by their behavior (Studies 4a, b). Mere observers of harm were also judged as immoral and evil when they experienced pleasure from harm and were not condemned when they experienced displeasure. However, unlike actors, observers were typically not morally condemned when they experienced indifference (Hypothesis 2). When observers experienced direct pleasure at another's suffering, suggesting they intrinsically valued this suffering, they were more likely to be judged as immoral and evil than when they experienced indirect (instrumental) pleasure at suffering (Hypothesis 3). The role of pleasure in leading to moral condemnation is not reducible to its simply providing information about an observer's wicked desires (Hypothesis 4). An observer who took pleasure from harm was more likely to be seen as evil than one who did not, even when they both harbored pre-existing malevolent desires toward the victim.

Across all studies, we also saw that actors' and observers' hedonic states have implications for how people think they should be treated. Individuals desired greater social distance from observers who experienced pleasure from harm (Hypothesis 5, Studies 1-3). Individuals were also more likely to support harsh punishment, including the death penalty, for actors who experienced such malevolent pleasure (Hypothesis 6; Studies 1, 4b). Judgments of the extent of the actor's evilness mediated support for the death penalty, even when accounting for the perceived future threat that he posed, thereby demonstrating that desire for the most punitive response to wrongdoing is unlikely to be driven by consequentialist reasoning alone. These studies therefore demonstrate that hedonic states are important for the understanding of moral condemnation. Hedonic states are highly relevant for judgments of immorality and evil (even in the absence of harm causing), and they strongly influence punitive responses.

These studies extend previous research on moral judgments in three important ways. First, they illustrate that the

perpetration of severe harms, although undoubtedly important for judgments of immorality and evil, is neither necessary nor sufficient for either of these judgments to be made. It is not necessary because mere observers of harm can be judged as immoral and evil based solely on their hedonic reactions. It is not sufficient because perpetrators of severe harm are not always seen as immoral and evil, such as when they do not indicate pleasure or indifference in reaction to their harm (or when other mental states they experience indicate a disposition that does not reach the level of true maliciousness). For instance, the killer who did not show pleasure in Studies 4a and 4b was judged evil by less than half of the participants (and this percentage likely would have been further attenuated had he shown signs of remorse or displeasure; Gold & Weiner, 2000). These results therefore pose a challenge to accounts that regard harm as a critical prerequisite for moral condemnation (e.g., Gray et al., 2014; Turiel, 1983).

Second, these results extend existing research by documenting the influence that two understudied internal states (pleasure and indifference) have on moral condemnation and punishment. Past research has shown how a variety of mental states affect moral condemnation and punishment, including intentions, desires, and beliefs (e.g., Cushman, 2008; Guglielmo & Malle, 2010; Inbar et al., 2012). When present, each of these mental states contributes to more severe moral judgments. The present research extends and complements this prior research by providing evidence that how an actor or observer *feels* about a harm provides a window into understanding his or her character, which in turn influences condemnation and punishment.

Third, this research provides insights into how judgments of evil differ from judgments of immorality. Our findings indicate that people typically have a higher threshold for judging someone as an evil person rather than a morally bad person. Although judgments of immorality and evil produced very similar results across our studies, participants were less likely to characterize a person as evil than as morally bad in each study ($p$s < .001). For example, in Study 4a, whereas 63% of the participants viewed the actor who simply left the scene after killing his wife and her lover (without listening to his favorite music) as morally bad, only 40% characterized him as evil.

There is more research to be done on how judgments of evil are made and on the effects of pleasure on such judgments. One question is whether there is a qualitative or merely quantitative difference between viewing a person as evil as opposed to morally bad. Our findings provide evidence for a quantitative difference, as our participants were less likely to view someone as evil than as morally bad—the threshold for judgments of evil is set higher than it is for judgments of moral badness. However, the present results cannot speak to whether there is also a qualitative difference, such that, for instance, judgments of evil are responsive to a particular subset of features that does not overlap perfectly with the features that drive judgments of moral badness. Although we found similar effects of our hedonic state manipulations on judgments of immorality and evilness, these results do not rule out the existence of a qualitative difference. Future research is needed to address this possibility.

There may also be important cases in which a person's experience of pleasure at the harm caused to another will be seen as relatively acceptable, or even laudatory. An illustrative example is the case of Americans cheering the death of Osama bin Laden mentioned in the "Introduction" section of this article. Fellow in-group members may tolerate or even applaud one's expression of this sort of pleasure, particularly when it is based on the harm befalling an especially disliked or hated out-group member. Further research is needed to this question as well.

The present findings add to our understanding of judgments of immorality and evil. They show that the hedonic states people experience in response to harm and suffering affect how they are viewed morally. When a person experiences pleasure (and sometimes indifference) from harm caused to another, it provides evidence that his or her moral nature is corrupt. This dismal view of the person's character leads to ostracism and support for harsh punishment, which extends to support for the ultimate penalty of death.

## Note

1. Participants who evaluated actors were also asked to categorize the moral wrongness and evilness of their *actions*. None of these measures were significantly affected by the hedonic state manipulation, $p$s > .3 (see Table 1).

## Supplemental Material

The online supplemental material is available at http://pspb.sagepub.com/supplemental.

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