When Bad Things Happen to Other People

John Portmann

Routledge
New York and London

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—Cheshire Calhoun, co-editor of *What is an Emotion?*

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What a wee little part of a person's life are his acts and his words! His real life is led in his head, and is known to none but himself.

—Mark Twain

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Introduction

The Sometimes Sweet Suffering of Others

We suffer. In various ways and to varying degrees, we suffer.

Do we deserve to suffer? If not, then why do we suffer? And what, if anything, does our suffering mean?

Though answers to these perennial questions elude us, we have not stopped wondering if we are to blame for our hardships. For many centuries very different kinds of people have believed that God, or some all-knowing cosmic force, causes us to suffer after we sin. Not long ago Rabbi Harold Kushner tried to assure us that God does not operate like this: it is not because we are bad people that we suffer, for bad things can happen even to good people. Much suffering happens randomly, Kushner urged us to accept, and has nothing to do with cosmic justice. Kushner's message, by no means an original one in the late twentieth century, landed his book *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* on the best-seller lists.

What about the bad things that happen to *other* people? The doubts we have about our own goodness pale in comparison to the doubts we entertain about the goodness of others. Especially when we think about others with whom we have nothing in common, skeptical thoughts colonize our minds. We are more likely to view the misfortunes of others as deserved than we are our own. Even when we do not genuinely believe that someone else deserves his suffering, we may try to convince ourselves he does.

This book concerns how we *feel* about the bad things that happen to other people, not what we *do* about them. As such, this book concerns character, not conduct. Curiously, some moral philosophers have insisted that a person's character and emotions don't merit much attention. Kant and his many followers tend to see conduct as all-important. It's not how we feel about other people that matters, it's how we *treat* other people. I

disagree. With Aristotle, Schopenhauer, and Nietzsche, I view a person's character and emotions as compelling subjects of moral study.

Our emotional responses to the misfortunes of others can tell us much about our characters. Some of our most revered moralists have insisted that virtually everyone feels sympathy when bad things happen to other people, for being human means being sympathetic to others. This cheery position seems to *require* us to feel sympathy for people who suffer, which I see as a problem. For nothing undermines sympathy more than the requirement to feel it. (The indiscriminate yearning to feel sympathy, a form of sentimentality, comes in a close second.) Sympathy either comes to us uninvited or not at all.

Other, less cheery thinkers have roundly rejected the idea that to be human is to feel sympathy for others. This crucial discrepancy signals trouble ahead: if we cannot agree about whether people naturally sympathize with others, we will not be able to acknowledge, much less evaluate, people who celebrate the bad things that happen to others.

We are surrounded by people who take pleasure in our misfortunes. Nietzsche and Freud agreed on this and constructed philosophical arguments around what they took to be the frequently selfish motives of people caught up in moral deliberations. Although I am less cynical than they, I believe Nietzsche, Freud, and others who agree with them describe our emotional lives much better than anyone else. I also believe that the fears of our moralists have much to teach us about how to get along well with others.

We do well to appear sympathetic generally. This may be difficult when we feel indifferent to the bad things that happen to others. In indifference we do not engage with those who suffer in any way. We simply do not care about their setbacks, or cannot be bothered by their misfortunes. We may feel that we have to save our limited sympathy for someone who merits it more, or we may feel that time constraints prevent us from thinking much about the suffering of another.

Sometimes we pretend to sympathize with others when we don't, because we are taking out a sort of insurance policy to cover our own needs when disaster strikes us. Pretending to be sorry remains a permanent possibility for all of us, which complicates human relations. It seems in our best interest to appear benevolent toward those around us: doing

so increases the likelihood that others will help us get what we want, or at least decreases the chances that others will disrupt our plans. Faking our feelings comes at a cost, though: we wonder whether others might be doing it too when they comfort us.

It can be difficult indeed to *make* ourselves feel as we think we ought to feel. Saying "I'm sorry" is easier than feeling sorry, even though many people consider "sorry" the hardest word to say. Nonetheless, sorrow may at times seem simply impossible, for it can feel wonderful to learn that something bad has happened to someone else. Even Kant, who believes we are all inclined to feel sympathy toward others, admits this much, writing in the *Critique of Practical Reason*:

> When, however, someone who delights in annoying and vexing peace-loving folk receives at last a right good beating, it is certainly an ill, but everyone approves of it and considers it as good in itself even if nothing further results from it; nay, even he who gets the beating must acknowledge, in his reason, that justice has been done to him, because he sees the proportion between welfare and well-doing, which reason inevitably holds before him, here put into practice.[1]

Kant does not state in this passage that *all* people deserve to suffer, but even the claim that *some* people deserve to suffer can set us to arguing. It might be thought that a stiff Protestant moralist such as Kant would advocate tirelessly forgiving everyone, even annoying neighbors (this is what Jesus exhorts his followers to do). However, even Kant's patience has its limits.

Kant's thinking in this passage raises a vexing question: does permission to "approve" of the suffering of other people amount to permission to *celebrate* it? Not exactly. Kant's moral psychology resembles that of Augustine, St. Thomas Aquinas, and some modern moral philosophers: love the sinner, hate the sin. It is not the suffering of others that brings us joy, but rather the evidence of justice triumphing before our eyes. Through this crucial difference Kant can think of himself not as a malicious person, but a virtuous one.

Michelangelo depicted this pleasure in *The Last Judgment*, perhaps

the most famous painting in the West. As we raise our eyes above the sinners suffering horribly in hell, we see a joyful group of angels. Looking beneath them at the damned, the angels blow trumpets in jubilation. One of the angels brandishes the tablets of the law as if to say to the damned, "See, you're getting what you deserve." Another artistic depiction of Kant's pleasure can be found in an arresting and highly unusual painting of the Crucifixion by the Norwegian painter Edvard Munch. *Golgotha*, which contains autobiographical elements, includes a couple of prominent onlookers who smile with delight. One of them looks directly at us. It is surprisingly rare in paintings of the Crucifixion for a witness in the crowd to engage us so openly in his approval of Christ's suffering, even though we know that plenty of onlookers that day believed Jesus received exactly what he deserved. These are presumably some of the same people whose misery the angels celebrate in Michelangelo's masterpiece, the spiritual core of the Sistine Chapel.

We often believe, as Kant seems to in this passage, that bad people cause trouble for themselves. We may view misfortunes as the appropriate consequences of imprudence, stupidity, incompetence, bad judgment, or evil. Good people love justice; loving justice is a virtue. When bad things happen to bad people, the world seems to be working fine.

When *we* suffer, we may fear that others think we deserve to suffer. The harsh judgment of others only increases our suffering. And so, we may cringe when we read of Kant's confidence that a man who suffers will agree with others that he deserves to suffer (Anna Freud was later to classify such feelings as a neurosis, "identifying with the aggressor"). As we grow older and get to know suffering better, we may find that we have to overcome something slightly dreadful when we resolve to hold someone else guilty for his or her suffering. Reassuring ourselves that we are good even when we approve of the suffering of others may lead us to tell ourselves a story such as Kant tells himself.

Disagreement about suffering — what it is, who deserves it, and how much — divides us deeply. Schopenhauer asserts that mental afflictions hurt much worse than physical ones — he even suggests that we slap, burn, or puncture our bodies when mental afflictions beset us. The resulting physical pain, he counsels, will serve as a good distraction from the horror of mental suffering. We might argue at length over whether mental

suffering hurts more than physical pain, but we will all agree that suffering deserves our attention. Surprisingly, Schopenhauer was the first Western philosopher since the ancient Greeks to ponder suffering at length. Following Schopenhauer, I focus here on mental or spiritual tribulations and neglect torture and sadism.

Schopenhauer and Kant both understand that what other people think of us can make us suffer or increase our suffering. A black slave in the novel *Beloved,* by the American writer Toni Morrison, silently endures decades of cruelty at the hands of white people, only to announce shortly before her death what she had at last learned from sixty years as a slave and ten years as a free woman: there is no such thing as bad luck in the world, only white people. She restates Sartre's famous line from the play *Huis clos* "Hell is other people" (*"L'enfer, c'est les autres"*). Baby Suggs, Morrison's fictional slave, does not believe that she has deserved the bad things that have happened to her. More to the point, she affirms that *people are a part of the bad things that happen to others*. Deliberately excluding natural catastophes such as hurricanes, I will argue that we are ourselves the bad things that happen to other people — living in community virtually requires us to be so. All of us share responsibility for the social world we constitute; we share reponsibility for many of the bad things that happen to other people. We do well to regret that we are a part of the bad things that happen to other people, but not to deny it.

Character drives judgments of whether other people deserve to suffer. That we may disagree with the moral viewpoints of people who suffer leads to the question of how sensitive we should be to other moral viewpoints. Two centuries after Kant, there is something deeply dissatisfying about the *Zeitgeist* according to which we ought to embrace different moral stances as wonderful, if exasperating, examples of cultural diversity. This *Zeitgeist* is a subset of the notion that we owe everyone compassion. It is easy to prescribe compassion for every tear another sheds, so easy that our own displays of compassion may strike us as perfunctory and hollow. Those who demonize taking pleasure in others' misfortunes find in the cultivation of an ideal of compassion a defense against the idea that we cause others to suffer by pursuing our own private goals and projects.

That we can have mistaken and pernicious beliefs is no objection to the claim that we take what we believe to be true. The world remains full

of people who believe that Jews, gays, and blacks, for example, deserve persecution, physical assault, or segregation. By discerning and clarifying beliefs about what people deserve, we gain better access to a culture's general idea of what kinds of suffering deserve sympathy and, accordingly, of what a good person's character should include or exclude. The ways people think about the suffering of others in any given era contain fascinating glimpses of important cultural forces we cannot plainly see or perfectly control.

In our own time, there would be few court battles or wars if those who suffered simply accepted their plights as deserved. Nietzsche showed how easily we persuade ourselves that anyone who competes with us for a good job, an attractive mate, or a comfortable home is a bad person in some real sense. Nietzsche thought lofty ideas about social justice were just thinly disguised rationalizations for revenge. This cynicism undermines belief in our moral goodness as civilized people. Our insistence that some people really do deserve their misfortunes presents a real problem, in part because the rules and conventions that determine who deserves what change over time and, moreover, regularly provoke disagreements within a society and across nations.

However imperfectly, we distinguish between trivial and serious misfortunes. In comedy, for example, we laugh at what we take to be the trivial misfortunes of others. In tragedy, however, we could scarcely conceive of laughing. What we think about justice guides our emotional responses. Just as people disagree about justice, so do they disagree over separating the trivial from the profound.

Most of us will allow ourselves in good conscience to laugh at the minor embarrassments of others. Consider banana peels. Someone slips on a banana peel and an audience erupts in laughter. Cartoonists have deployed this familiar image of an unsuspecting person flailing and falling to great comical effect. And yet Schopenhauer and other moralists have insisted on the immorality of taking pleasure in *any* misfortune another person suffers. This very serious view makes some sense, for the pleasure of comedy frequently arises from the defects, failures, or absurdity of another person or of other groups of people. *The Name of the Rose,* by the Italian semiotician and novelist Umberto Eco, played off of and dramatized the vague apprehension of evil in all laughter. Not just Roman

Catholic monks of the Middle Ages in Eco's novel, but a variety of other thinkers as well have detected shades of the diabolic in comedy. Not surprisingly, some of our own laughter may lead us to question the robustness of our compassion for others.

The laughter cartoonists elicit through slips and falls turns on a belief in the triviality of some misfortunes. If there were such a thing as trivial misfortune, then taking pleasure in it might be an aesthetic matter akin to worries over taste, manners, and modes of self-presentation. Those who laugh might defend themselves by saying that morality does not or should not descend into triviality. Triviality certainly does suggest limits to the reasonableness of moral inquiry. Laughter at even the harmless slips and falls of others, however, raises important questions about both the starting-point and the structure of justice, guilt, blame, responsibility, and benevolence.

We still struggle to cope with suffering — our own or anyone else's. Although he died over a century ago, I take Schopenhauer to represent a powerful, conservative moral current in the contemporary West. He vehemently denies that there is such thing as a trivial misfortune. He warns us in *The World as Will and Representation* that we should expel from our communities anyone ever caught taking pleasure in the injury of others. He asks us how, if we take morality seriously, can we both love our neighbor and laugh when he falls? A profoundly difficult question finds a simple answer: play it safe, treat all suffering as though it were a sickness unto death. Surely Schopenhauer's solution must be wrong-headed, even though it is impossible to draw a clean line between trivial and non-trivial suffering. His position tempts us to a quick and easy resolution, for his denial of triviality in the realm of suffering circumvents the pressing need for a way to distinguish minor from significant misfortunes.

Schopenhauer carefully insists that the only pleasure we may take in the bad things that happen to other people is in the triumph of justice. Religious thinkers and moral philosophers have thought that the object of our pleasure — someone else's suffering or justice — makes all the difference to moral evaluation of our emotions. Indeed, we are all expected to love justice. Think here of the first Psalm in the Hebrew Bible, where we read, "Happy are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked . . . *their delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law they meditate day*

and night" (my emphasis). Change the "law of the Lord" to "the law of morality" and Schopenhauer the atheist agrees enthusiastically.

The justice people sought in biblical disputes and early courts took as their model the justice God metes out for mortals. Various creeds have endorsed an ideal of justice according to which God punishes the sinful. Religious believers aim to imitate God when they make decisions about the appropriateness of suffering. Can such an undertaking ever succeed? It is difficult to say. According to a negative view of human motivation (for example, Hobbes, Nietzsche, and Freud), beliefs about justice serve the interests of the person who holds them. According to a positive view (for example, Kant and Schopenhauer), people hold beliefs without regard to personal benefits. (It is of course possible that disinterested justice and self-interest may sometimes coincide.) We can assure ourselves that we are good people if the pleasure we take in others' misfortunes has nothing to do with ourselves and everything to do with God. Religious believers can circumvent the same apprehension of evil many thinkers have located in laughter by attributing their pleasure to the recognition of divine justice, not to the ugly enjoyment of another human being's suffering.

In most of the modern world, beliefs and principles are more prevalent forms of aggression toward others than physical attacks. In the subtlety of these beliefs and principles lies a conviction that many of the bad things which happen to others are appropriate and that at least some of our pleasure in that suffering is moral. The principles and beliefs by which we organize our lives and make sense of the world lead us into frequently invisible conflict with people who do not share our principles and beliefs. Aversion to sexual promiscuity or sex between men, for example, may lead us to think of someone bearing the visible scars of syphilis or AIDS, "He deserves that." Cancer is an even better test of how we work out the "game" of who deserves what. Other people know that our views about appropriate suffering may someday affect them personally; not surprisingly, other people may try to dissuade us of our belief that their suffering, or the kind of suffering they are likely to experience, is appropriate.

A troublesome notion of moral appropriateness emerges as both the solution and the problem here. The Cambridge philosopher C.D. Broad asserted, "It is inappropriate to cognize what one takes to be a fellow man *in undeserved pain or distress* with *satisfaction* or with *amusement* [his

emphases]."[2] He found this matter "plainly of the utmost importance to ethics and to esthetics," and lamented that it still awaited an adequate analysis. Several years later the Berkeley sociologist Arlie Russell Hochschild issued a similar call: "We need to ask how different sexes, classes, and ethnic and religious groups differ in the sense of what one 'ought to' or 'has the right to' feel in a situation."[3] And ten years after her advice, Richard Rorty concluded a study of human suffering by asserting that "detailed descriptions of particular varieties of pain and humiliation," rather than philosophical or religious treatises, are "the modern intellectual's principal contributions to moral progress."[4] Moral progress comes down to clarifying and testing our notions of the appropriateness of suffering.

Moral philosophers invoke a standard of appropriateness frequently and with varying success, as in discussions of sexuality, just war, or capital punishment. This tendency extends far into the past, certainly back to Plato's *Republic,* in which descriptions of the good life hinge on proportionality. Judgments about both appropriate and trivial suffering depend on judgments about proportionality. No one has managed yet to produce an algorithm for deciding just what suffering is appropriate and what is not.

A decision in the abstract could hardly be of much use; we must attend to the nature of the relationship between the sufferer and the judger. The same is true in comedy, where a joke's success depends on appropriateness: it would be unwise to tell Polish jokes to Polish people, or "dumb blond" jokes to a blond person. Were a blond person to tell the "dumb blond" joke, however, the humor might well seem appropriate. We notice the attitude of the person who tells the joke and take that into consideration before reacting to the joke. We laugh *with* people when we include ourselves among those being laughed at. Determining whether we laugh with others or at them requires self-awareness. And so our sense of where we fit into the world surfaces when we react emotionally to the bad things that happen to other people.

A person who detests Polish people might fail to make us laugh at a hilarious joke about someone Polish. By the same token, we might react with revulsion to a judge who invites a murder victim's father to pull the switch on the murderer. Justice affects our emotions, despite the reluc-

tance of philosophers to admit as much. The emotions, many philosophers have insisted, should have nothing to do with justice. But they do.

In the course of defending some of the pleasure that comes from others' suffering, I want to question whether modern justice differs from primitive revenge. If our ideal of justice is not itself entirely moral, then neither is our pleasure that justice has been served when bad things happen to other people.

What if this distinction between justice and revenge were just a fantasy? Or bad faith? Then it would be impossible to find a moral defense for taking pleasure in the misfortunes of others. I don't think there is much difference between enjoying that someone suffers and enjoying that justice is being served (through his suffering), and yet I allow that there is *some* difference. Ultimately, it is a vital difference, one that keeps our justice system in business. This difference — or the possibility of difference — makes pleasure in the misfortunes of others morally acceptable. My own sense, which could hardly be proven in empirical terms, is that most pleasure in the misfortunes of others includes *both* objects — knowledge that another suffers deservedly *and* the suffering itself. For this reason my defense of pleasure in others' misfortunes is an ambivalent one.

My examination of pain and humiliation contributes to moral progress by straining and clarifying conventional standards of the appropriateness of suffering. The point of this inquiry is not to extend the range of permissible hatred by legitimizing emotional cruelty around transgressions of divine law and grave offenses against the state. Rather, the point is to show that those who feel joy when bad things happen to other people can claim they do not feel hatred at all, but rather love for justice. If Kant could speak to us, he would surely tell us that the passage quoted above testifies to his revulsion to injustice, not to any kind of malice.

The distinction between taking pleasure in the suffering of another and taking pleasure in the execution of justice will lead to a discussion of how societies make sense of prisons and institutional punishment. Justifications for penal codes help explain how we can think ourselves high-minded advocates of justice rather than vengeful primitives when we take pleasure in the execution of, say, a serial killer. The distinction relies on

finding a moral difference between pleasure which derives from our own well-being and pleasure which stems from the well-being of others.

My exploration of demonized pleasure has been motivated in part by a desire to understand the sensibility of people who routinely seek out stories of tragedy or betrayal among public figures. If there is no such thing as morally acceptable pleasure in others' misfortunes, then we should feel guilty when we relish the sudden reversals of good fortune we hear about on television or read about in the newspapers. We stand guilty of malice, because any pleasure in the misfortune of another is immoral.

Our culture both encourages and thwarts pleasure in the misfortunes of others. These mixed messages can generate terrible anxiety, some of which I aim to dispel.

Key to Abbreviations

Sigmund Freud	*CD*	*Civilization and Its Discontents*
	FI	*The Future of an Illusion*
	JR	*Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*
Immanuel Kant	*MM*	*The Metaphysics of Morals*
	LE	*Lectures on Ethics*
	OFBS	*Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and the Sublime*
Friedrich Nietzsche	*A*	*The Anti-Christ*
	BGE	*Beyond Good and Evil*
	EH	*Ecce, Homo*
	GM	*On the Genealogy of Morals*
	HH	*Human, All Too Human*
	WP	*The Will to Power*
	Z	*Thus Spake Zarathustra*
Arthur Schopenhauer	*OBM*	*On the Basis of Morality*
	WWR	*The World as Will and Representation*

I

When Pretty Bad Things Happen to Other People

THESE CHAPTERS CONSIDER THE MORALITY OF TAKING pleasure in others' misfortunes. The main point I try to establish is that this emotional response stands on social standards of moral appropriateness. When it does not rise from convictions about social justice, the pleasure is not necessarily malicious: low self-esteem, for example, should slow us from a hasty condemnation of those who inappropriately celebrate the woes of other people.

Beyond that, comedy complicates our intentions to treat other people well. Appreciation for the comical may signal a willingness to work out moral ambiguity by playing; in comedy we try out attitudes to other people without really knowing where those attitudes will lead. Comedy deserves moral tolerance, for an explorer's attitude differs from an assailant's.

Finally, we disguise this demonized pleasure for reasons that raise questions both about our sincerity and about the sophistication of the communities we inhabit.

One

Much Ado about Nothing?

THE GERMANS HAVE COINED A WORD FOR PLEASURE IN THE MISFORTUNES of other people: *Schadenfreude*. The idea of such pleasure horrified R.C. Trench, whom the *Oxford English Dictionary* identifies as the first person to use the word *Schadenfreude* in English. Trench, an English archbishop, concluded in 1852 that the very availability of a word for "the joy of another's injury" would taint all of a culture that relied on that language. It was as though all German speakers carried an infection, just by virtue of their linguistic resources. Trench worried that the infection might spread to English speakers.

Trench succeeded in persuading at least one editor for the *Oxford English Dictionary*. Unlike the *Oxford English Dictionary*, most American and German lexicons do not associate *Schadenfreude* with malice. Because English already included the word "malice" at the time of Trench's writing, *Schadenfreude* stood for something even worse.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* also runs together *Schadenfreude* and cruelty. According to the *OED*, cruelty is "the quality of being cruel; disposition to inflict suffering; delight in or indifference to the pain or misery of others; mercilessness, hardheartedness: *esp*. as exhibited in action." On this point C.D. Broad demonstrated a much deeper understanding of cruelty than the *OED*, for he left moral evaluation of pleasure in others' misfortunes open to the notion of appropriateness — both with respect to the just deserts of the sufferer and the degree of suffering involved.

Since Trench, scholars have disagreed about how to translate *Schadenfreude* into English. In a footnote to his translation of Nietzsche's *On the Genealogy of Morals*,[1] Walter Kaufmann claims that Arthur Danto's *Nietzsche as Philosopher*[2] features numerous mistranslations. Kaufmann

asserts that there is no English equivalent for *Schadenfreude* and that Danto errs in rendering it as either "the wicked pleasure in the beholding of suffering" (p. 181) or "in the sheer spectacle of suffering: in fights, executions, . . . bullbaiting, cockfights, and the like" (p. 174). Against Danto, Kaufmann insists, "In such contexts the word is utterly out of place; it signifies the petty, mischievous delight felt in the discomfiture of another human being." I agree with Kaufmann that English has no equivalent for *Schadenfreude*. Though Kaufmann does well to eliminate the notion of wickedness from *Schadenfreude*, he fails to make room for the notion of desert, or deservedness, at the heart of *Schadenfreude*. True, *Schadenfreude* does signify petty mischievousness at the shallow end of the spectrum; toward the deeper end, though, *Schadenfreude* can center on quite significant misfortunes (or so I will argue in Part Two).

Danto considers this pleasure wicked; Kaufmann does not. How should we regard the moral status of *Schadenfreude*? To the extent that *Schadenfreude* signifies love of justice or repugnance to injustice, this emotion is a virtue. Aristotle tells us that every virtue is in the middle between two vices; the virtue represents a "golden mean." But for Aristotle, not every vice is a matter of degree. For example, all adultery and all assault are wrong, even once in a while. Envy and spite are wrong emotions, no matter when you feel them. The very words "adultery" and "spite" indicate that they are wrong, unlike "sex" and "anger," which are in many circumstances perfectly acceptable *(Nichomachean Ethics* 1107a8–27). Likewise, pleasure in the misfortunes of others in various circumstances is morally acceptable. Only we ourselves can know whether we have hit the mean, that is to say, whether we feel *Schadenfreude*, as opposed to envy or malicious glee. "*Schadenfreude*," unlike "spite" or "adultery," is morally acceptable. It lies between the vices of envy and cruelty and easily unsettles us by its proximity to both.

Naming pleasure in the misfortunes or suffering of others underscores the extent to which language is conventional. Conventions do not undermine meaning by making it arbitrary; instead, conventions give life to meaning. This is to say that I am not arbitrarily choosing an idiosyncratic definition of *Schadenfreude* in order to validate my defense of it: *Schadenfreude* is not a word I have coined. Different kinds of English speakers already believe that *Schadenfreude* rides on the coat-tails of justice and that