

# Hidden delights

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Paul Bloom

HOW PLEASURE WORKS

The new science of why we like what we like

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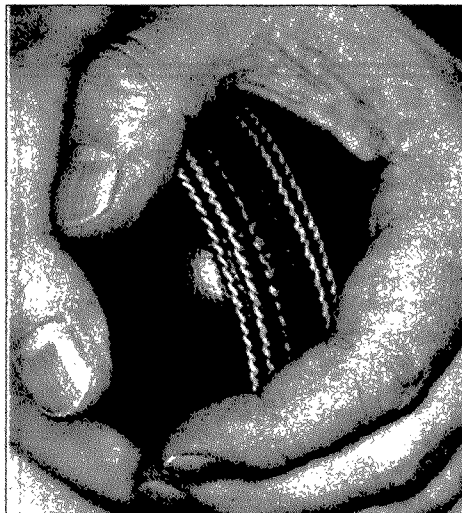
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Cricket balls are mass-produced, but only one came off the bat of Brian Lara to take him past Garry Sobers's world record Test match high score of 365 runs (against England, Antigua 1994). Suddenly that ball was uniquely transformed, and in a curious way. It became a sports fan's Koh-i-Noor, with its own proper name – "The 366 Ball" – and acquired an allure that drew devotees to view it first-hand on show at Lord's in the summer of 2007. Like a random household object that happened to be once owned by a president, this winning ball acquired a winning soul. Its new essence, not to be detected by mere inspection of the leather, is a hidden record of its history.

The psychologist Paul Bloom has long explored the human cognition behind such essentialist ideas, most notably in his book *Descartes' Baby* (2004), an accessible sketch of a rich tradition in experimental psychology, including work carried out in Bloom's own lab. He argued that a dualist view of the world is an evolved adaptation, as natural to humans as learning to walk and talk. Bloom's experimental work, much of it focused on cognitive development in young children, shows that we cannot help but see



ourselves and our social associates as two-sided coins. Each of us is a visible body with a non-visible soul, or whatever one calls that occluded piece of the person. The welded pieces do occasionally come apart – there are spiritless corpses and bodiless ghosts – but mostly when we look at a person, we see not just a physical structure, but a hidden essence too. In the earlier book, Bloom described the central role of essentialism in human mental life, explaining phenomena as varied as supernatural belief (where the soul can exist without a body), personal constancy (where the body ages but the soul is the same), and slapstick humour (where the soul goes one way, the body the other). What's striking is the sheer breadth of our obsession with the hidden. We see imperceptible essence in everything from sex to sculptures to sports equipment. Here's where pleasure comes in.

In *How Pleasure Works*, Bloom explores the place of human essentialism in the anatomy of human desire. His opening example concerns our love of the masterpiece, and our sense of betrayal at the fake. Hermann Goer-

ing's enjoyment of the Vermeer he had acquired at vast expense during the Second World War was severely lessened when the work turned out to be by van Meegeren. Or conversely, Bloom relates Arthur Koestler's annoyance with a friend who had bought a Picasso reproduction: when she learnt that it was in fact an original, she suddenly found it more beautiful. More beautiful? Isn't it exactly the same? No, Bloom argues, not exactly. There's more to our enjoyment of art than meets the eye. Bloom's careful working through of the logic and findings of a fascinating domain of experimental psychological research shows that our penchant for hidden essences accounts for much of why we want the things we want. Examples abound in this thoughtful and entertaining book. There's the tape measure once owned by J. F. Kennedy, its acquired essence a source of great pleasure to its owner at \$50,000. There's sex with a virgin, a desire defined by a belief about the person involved and not necessarily about the experience itself. And there's Perrier, which tastes better than cheaper bottled water, but only if you know (or believe) it's Perrier.

Seemingly irrational devotion to a cricket ball only makes sense if you have a predilection for what Bloom calls "realities that are not present to the senses". What's required is a psychological bent for "unseen order", a term William James used in characterizing the object of human religious thought and experience. Bloom notes that scientific endeavour, another source of pleasure, has this same focus on hidden realms. Science reveals what we can't easily see. But the point applies to human mental life most generally, well beyond the desires that are the focus of Bloom's new book. Unseen order is a constant guide for human cognition, in moments both heavenly and mundane, pleasurable and dull. The mere use of language, for instance, presupposes a great unseen order in the rules that link linguistic sights and sounds to the concepts and meanings behind them. Going only by what is present to the senses, the ink marks you now see on the page are just that: ink marks. It is your mind that takes these little marks and gives them little souls, word-souls or meanings grounded in realities that are, as Bloom says, not present to the senses. To "see" an author's intentions in ink marks is to put them there, in a way that only humans know. Paul Bloom's engaging account shows that desire is mostly just like this, but not because such depths are unique to it. The depths of desire are the same depths we see in all the kinds of hidden meaning that shape our human lives.