



Former FTX chief executive Sam Bankman-Fried, who faces fraud charges over the collapse of the bankrupt cryptocurrency exchange, departing from his hearing at a federal court in Manhattan, New York, on Jan 3, 2023. Bankman-Fried's misfortunes have aroused a widespread sense of schadenfreude among commentators and op-ed columnists, says the writer. PHOTO: REUTERS

Is it wrong to feel happy about someone else's misfortune?

Known as schadenfreude, this feeling may appear unseemly, but it's better to face it as part of human nature.



Chong Siow Ann

The Japanese have a saying: "The misfortune of others tastes like honey." Some who have been following the ongoing morality tale in the financial world may be savouring that honeyed sensation.

The hitherto tech wunderkind Sam Bankman-Fried, who had been lauded as a different kind of crypto titan and messiah, one who advocated for regulation and accountability in the Wild West of the cryptocurrency world, and who had pledged to give away most of his earnings to charitable and liberal causes, is now seen as a grifter operating one of the world's largest Ponzi schemes.

The spectacular bankruptcy following the implosion of Bankman-Fried's FTX cryptocurrency exchange, his subsequent arrest with its US\$250 million (S\$340 million) bail and the pending trial have aroused a widespread sense of schadenfreude readily and almost gleefully admitted to by a number of commentators and op-ed writers. Schadenfreude is that all too common human penchant for feeling pleasure at someone's else misfortune. This German word, which has been incorporated into the English language, is itself a composite of two other German words: *schaden*, meaning damage or harm, and *freude*, meaning joy or pleasure – damage-joy.

CLEAR SIGN OF EVIL OR NOT

The pious and moralists have long looked askance at schadenfreude. For R.C. Trench, a

19th-century British archbishop, even having a word for such an emotion was unwholly and an indication of a society's corruption. (A journalist writing in the English magazine *Spectator* asserted rather haughtily in 1926 that there "is no English word for schadenfreude because there is no such feeling here.")

The 19th-century German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer also came down hard, and called it "an infallible sign of a thoroughly bad heart and profound moral worthlessness". He stated that nursing it in one's heart was a clear sign of evil, and recommended ostracising from human society any person who did.

But scientists who study schadenfreude (and there is a considerable body of research on this) take a more forgiving and equanimous view: They assure us that it is a very human thing. We are social animals – some social scientists have even described us as "ultra-social" – who are usually acutely aware of others, of our relationships with one another, and of our social status.

As repugnant as schadenfreude may seem, scientists also posit that it is not gratuitous, but rather has an adaptive function, based on what is known as Social Comparison Theory. In essence, we evaluate ourselves not so much by objective standards as by comparison with those around us, and that is how we generally gauge our relative place in society.

We largely want to be liked, respected, looked up to – desired and wanted which underpin our motivations and shape a lot of our behaviour. If we see ourselves falling behind, we would be spurred to pull ourselves up and drive ourselves even harder, and when people around us mess up, stumble and lose some social status, the theory goes, we would be animated by a better feeling about ourselves that usually comes with a frisson of pleasure at the other's misfortune. And so, schadenfreude.

But we don't feel that with all people, certainly not with people

we genuinely care for. Aside from a lack of personal affection and concern, there are other things that would evoke schadenfreude. Some say it has to do with envy, while others say it's resentment. It's probably both of these animus, since envy is but the resentful longing for things that we do not possess.

From the perspective of some people, there is something unseemly about young people getting enormously rich. Getting rich is supposed to be the reward for years of hard work, a slow assiduous process of accumulating wealth, and the spectacle of a young billionaire like the 30-year-old Bankman-Fried can be particularly galling for some people.

When he rocketed to that lofty mount of great wealth and fame, and from which he preached to the masses, many were initially enthralled by him and believed that he was for real. With his precipitous fall, there is that inevitable sense of betrayal and outrage which sharpens that pleasure of watching him being bruised and humiliated.

The schadenfreude that we feel following the fall of someone who is seen to be arrogant, dishonest, hypocritical and criminal comes from the gratification that justice has been done, which in turn

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stems from another deeply ingrained tendency of our psyche: the "just world" bias. We like to think that the world is a fair place where the bad would receive their comeuppance and the good their reward, even if reality doesn't quite match up most of the time; and those times when they do happen give us that assurance that there is justice after all.

In such instances, we are afforded that additional pleasure of feeling morally superior. We can say, "I wouldn't do such bad things to become rich and powerful". And it is all the more pleasurable when it comes with no personal cost or effort.

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FREUDENFREUDE

But still, it is a guilty and hence furtive pleasure, and most decent people would feel sheepish, if not ashamed. Neither is it just about appearing to be malicious and vindictive by others, but rather, uncomfortably, our schadenfreude might be revelatory of our frailties, our pettiness, our envies and our inadequacies.

Too much unlettered schadenfreude can also be detrimental. Research has found that schadenfreude on social media can snuff out empathy, making people less compassionate towards those who differ from them, and it can paradoxically lower a person's self-esteem, especially when they are comparing themselves to high achievers.

That being the case, there are those who advocate that we should tame or transcend it with what is called *freudenfreude* (a German sounding but not truly German word), which refers to that act or capability of finding pleasure in another person's good fortune.

In a New York Times piece by psychologist Juli Fraga on this purported opposite of

schadenfreude, she suggests that one way of cultivating *freudenfreude* in ourselves is by what she calls "bragitude", that is, to deliberately coast away from boasting about ourselves and instead express gratitude when someone else's success or support has led to our own – but, presumably, it shouldn't be ersatz nor humblebragging.

Another recommendation is to show an active and enthusiastic interest in someone else's happiness by getting that fortunate person to talk about their experience. And if your heart isn't quite up to listening to all that, she heartens us to persist and persevere because "happiness can flourish when you make a heartfelt effort to engage with a positive activity", which would turn us into a "joy spectator".

But I think otherwise. Schadenfreude, I believe, is very much a part of human nature. It is probably like a reflex which comes in a flash. We can't help it. So it is better to face up to it rather than to deny its existence, or beat ourselves up for it or force ourselves to sublimate into a "joy spectator" of someone whom we actively dislike – none of which is likely to get us anywhere.

What we should do is to think afresh about what this much-reviled emotion does for and to us, and what it tells us about our relationships with others, and about ourselves.

So long as it remains passive and we don't continue to revel and wallow in it like pigs in mud, schadenfreude can serve as a reminder that even the most envious people are fallible – just like us, and mishaps happen to us all.

And having a sense and capacity for gratitude is probably the best foil. Whenever we feel envious of others, we should quell it with thoughts of the people who love and care about us and who in turn matter to us, of the things that we have achieved and enjoyed; and whatever good fortune and luck that we have had.

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