

NO PAIN, NO GAIN

**The Understanding of Cruelty in Western Philosophy
and Some Reflections on Personhood¹**

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Almost daily, we read and hear of car bombings, violent riots and escalating criminal activities. Such actions are typically condemned as "cruel" and their "cruelty" is taken as the most blameworthy trait, to which institutions are obliged, it is implied, to respond by analogously "cruel but necessary" measures. Almost daily, we read and hear of tragic cases of suicide, usually involving male citizens of various age, race, and class, whose farewell notes, if any, are regularly variations on an old, well-known adagio: "Goodbye cruel world." Additionally, many grave cruelties are neither reported nor even seen by the media: people are cheated, betrayed, belittled and affronted in many ways, which are as humiliating as they are ordinary. Yet, what is cruel? What meaning unites the plethora of phenomena that are reported "cruel"? How is it possible for cruelty to be so extreme and, at the same time, so common? This essay wishes to offer a survey of the main conceptions of cruelty in the history of Western thought, their distinctive constants of meaning being considered in view of a better understanding of cruelty's role in shaping each person's selfhood.

Keywords: Cruelty – Evil – Liberalism (of fear) – Pain – Person(hood)

Richard Rorty claimed famously that 'liberals are the people who think that cruelty is the worst thing we do.'² With this statement, he intended to set himself squarely amongst the proponents of that 'liberalism of fear' which Judith Shklar had been establishing as a recognised liberal strand since the early 1980s. This strand of liberalism individuates an ultimate dichotomy 'between cruel military and moral repression and violence, and a self-restraining tolerance that fences in the powerful to protect the freedom and safety of every citizen.'³

Such a clear-cut opposition to cruelty is taken to connote liberalism in the public sphere, whilst none is as starkly presupposed in the private sphere. In the latter context, Rorty believes the main aim to be 'private perfection', or aesthetic 'self-creation', not "cruel-less" 'justice' or 'human solidarity'.⁴ Rorty goes as far as to affirm that these two aims, i.e. private perfection

¹ This paper draws upon this author's previous studies and publications on the understanding of cruelty in Western philosophy and particularly upon two surveys prepared, respectively, for Italian high-school teachers (2007) and Icelandic theologians (2008). Given the positive feedback received about these surveys, this paper is now submitted to professional philosophers via an ISI philosophy journal.

² Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* xv-i.

³ Shklar, *Ordinary Vices* 237.

⁴ Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* xiv.

and solidarity, cannot be reconciled 'in a single vision'.⁵ According to him, 'there is no synthesis of ecstasy and kindness', though we may commendably strive for one.⁶ True to his disavowal of foundationalism, Rorty states: 'There is no answer to the question "Why not be cruel?" – no noncircular theoretical backup for the belief that cruelty is horrible. Nor is there an answer to the question "How do you decide when to struggle against injustice and when to devote yourself to private projects of self-creation?"... Anybody who thinks that there are well-grounded theoretical answers to this sort of question – algorithms for resolving moral dilemmas of this sort – is still, in his heart, a theologian or a metaphysician... [And a] post-metaphysical culture seems to me no more impossible than a postreligious one, and equally desirable.'⁷

Rorty offers no advocacy for private cruelty. Rather, he works out the consequences of Freud's realisation 'that in fact everything to do with our life is chance.'⁸ It is in this way that Rorty's reading becomes open to the possibility that cruelty may colour, if not even at times inform, our private transactions. For instance, ordinary cruelties take place in the education of children, or in the children's persistent and wilful challenges to their parents' better judgment, as well as in the process of separation between parents and children; not to mention the ritual humiliations, the sleepless nights, the heart-breaking crises, and the embarrassing sexual self-discoveries involved in love relationships: which infatuation, affair, divorce, or lasting marriage has not been affected by some kind of grinding mercilessness by one partner upon the other? Even the decorous and demure Baruch de Spinoza admitted that 'cruelty is what we do to those we love.'⁹

Perhaps, this use of 'cruelty' is equivocal. Parental conundrums and love affairs are not as 'cruel' as, say, police abuse and military action; perhaps they should be treated as different forms of evil. Yet, sticking to a catholic use of 'cruelty' would not be entirely arbitrary, for an incredible variety of interpretations and examples of 'cruelty' have been offered in the long history of Western thought, many of which are to be summarised hereby.¹⁰ Out of this *mare magnum* of hypotheses and examples, only diverse and broad criteria can be extracted, focusing on the most frequent connotations of cruelty, e.g.:¹¹

- *Pain*: Whether only physical or also psychological, serious or minimal, justified or unjustified, cruelty implies pain¹²

⁵ Id.

⁶ Ibid. 160.

⁷ Ibid. xv-i.

⁸ As cited in *ibid.* 31.

⁹ Spinoza, *Collected Works* 3.38 540. Spinoza defined cruelty also as 'the desire whereby a man is impelled to injure one who we love or pity' (as cited in Trice, *Encountering Cruelty* 220).

¹⁰ Analogously catholic are the findings of contemporary social psychology (cf. note 12 below).

¹¹ It is left to less humble colleagues to determine which stricter interpretation or specific example of cruelty should be regarded as correct and true, hence also which more exact criteria for cruelty should be listed instead of those offered in the present survey.

¹² In their 1997 and 2000 studies, Caputo, Brodsky, and Kemp discuss research conducted in psychoanalysis, clinical psychology, and criminology. Researchers in these three fields are said to have devoted much attention to the issue of cruelty, either as a pathological condition or as a trait of the criminal mind. Still, the persistent attitude amidst them has been to explain why people behave cruelly, relying upon the commonsensical understanding of the term, hence skipping any significant definitional step altogether. Caputo, Brodsky and Kemp then endeavour to take just such a definitional step, on the

- *Excess*: Whether of pain as such or of its usages to acceptable ends (e.g. penal sanctions), or of our hopes in a tolerable life, or of our abilities to understand reality, cruelty eventually steps “beyond”—acceptability, tolerability, comprehensibility
- *Roles*: Whether directly or indirectly established, cruelty requires the roles of victim and perpetrator, even when the latter is institutional, impersonal or unknown¹³
- *Power*: It is only by means of power differential that the roles of victim and perpetrator can be established
- *Mens rea*: Whether delighted in or indifferent to the pain inflicted, the perpetrator possesses a culpable mental attitude. Interestingly, when tackling impersonal and institutional perpetrators, several thinkers have personified the universe or the State
- *Evil*: Cruelty is a species of evil. Even when conceived of as good, it is either an instrumental evil or an apparent evil, the goodness of which must be revealed and justified
- *Paradox*: Cruelty horrifies and, at the same time, fascinates. This is just one of the many contradictions contained within cruelty, which can be aptly described as paradoxical. The array of diverse conceptions collected below further substantiates this point

As diverse, broad and perfectible as they may be, these criteria can assist the reader in perceiving the family resemblances across five recurrent and/or significant conceptions of cruelty, which follow below as I—V. For each of them, emphasis will be placed on implications pertaining to the development of the human person.

I. Cruelty has been regarded very often as a quintessentially human *vice* affecting specific individuals. This conception of cruelty is characteristic of ancient and medieval philosophers, whose approach to ethics typically centred upon the notion of personal character rather than upon the notion of rightful or good actions and norms—this latter approach being predominant amongst modern and contemporary thinkers. Also, this first and older conception of cruelty takes a chief interest in observing what consequences cruelty has for the perpetrator, rather than for its victims, as commonplace instead for modern and contemporary approaches to cruelty. In particular, ancient and medieval philosophers have suggested that cruelty is a vice affecting persons involved in punitive contexts, e.g. courtrooms, schools, armies. In *De Clementia*, Seneca claims that ‘cruel are... those who have a reason to punish, but no moderation in punishing.’¹⁴ Besides, ‘those who enjoy torturing’ are said to be falling into ‘bestiality’ or ‘folly’, not ‘cruelty’.¹⁵ ‘Cruelty’ is thus defined as ‘the propensity of the spirit towards harshness’, rather than towards unrestrained lust for blood.¹⁶ As a vice, ‘cruelty’ is said to be ‘absolutely contrary to human nature’,¹⁷ and it can take ‘private’ (e.g. family feuds) and ‘pub-

grounds of linguistic usages recorded amongst university students and employees. Yet they conclude with a list of reported cases of cruelty that go from schoolchildren’s vulgar epithets and petty humiliations to physical assault and sadistic torture.

¹³ God Himself has been accused of being cruel, as with Job’s lamentation in the Old Testament: ‘You have become cruel to me; With the might of Your hand You persecute me.’ [Job, 30.21].

¹⁴ Seneca, *De Clementia* II.2 §3.

¹⁵ Id.

¹⁶ Id.

¹⁷ Ibid. III.23 §1.

lic' forms (e.g. tyranny).¹⁸ Cruelty is the opposite of clemency, yet cruel is also 'to forgive everybody and forgive nobody'.¹⁹ Clemency does not mean indiscriminate forgiveness, but rather a blend of moderation and justice. As famously discussed by Aristotle, our vices spring from a lack of balance within the human soul; to exceed in forgiveness is as conducive to vice as to exceed in harshness.

Aquinas' *Summa Theologica* echoes Seneca's position: 'Cruelty apparently takes its name from "*cruditas*" [rawness]. Now just as things when cooked and prepared are wont to have an agreeable and sweet savour, so when raw they have a disagreeable and bitter taste. Now it has been stated... that clemency denotes a certain smoothness or sweetness of soul, whereby one is inclined to mitigate punishment. Hence cruelty is directly opposed to clemency.'²⁰ Also for the *doctor angelicus* of the Catholic Church is 'cruelty... hardness of the heart in exacting punishment',²¹ hence a form of 'human wickedness', whereas 'savagery and brutality' are a form of 'bestiality'.²² Cruelty contains an element of rational deliberation, which 'savagery' and 'brutality' do not possess: they 'take their names from a likeness to wild beasts... deriving pleasure from a man's torture.'²³ Cruelty is therefore something evil that we do intentionally and which corrupts our character by exceeding in what would be otherwise acceptable; but it is also something that we can do *something else* about, for all vices can be remedied by proper self-correction. As Aristotle and the medieval pedagogues used to teach, we are responsible for the kind of person we become.

II. The distinction drawn by Seneca and Aquinas between cruelty and bestiality, epitomised by sadistic pleasure, seems to vanish with several modern thinkers, who actually take *sadism* as the paramount, if not the sole, example of cruelty. This is a second, fairly common conception of cruelty, according to which cruelty turns into something worse than a vice, indeed something devilish and extreme. To some, cruelty becomes so extreme a tendency, that it transforms into a sheer figment of our imagination, i.e. some kind of philosophical or literary "ghost". Thomas Hobbes, for instance, argues that 'Contempt, or little sense of the calamity of others, is that which men call cruelty; proceeding from security of their own fortune. For, that any man should take pleasure in other men's great harms, without other end of his own, I do not conceive it possible.'²⁴ Bishop Butler, on his part, states that 'The utmost possible depravity, which we can in imagination conceive, is that of disinterested cruelty.'²⁵ David Hume, on this point, affirms: 'Absolute, unprovoked, disinterested malice has never, perhaps, had place in any human breast... [hence we doubt that] the cruelty of Nero be allowed entirely voluntary, and not rather the effect of constant fear and resentment.'²⁶ The element of rational deliberation that Seneca and Aquinas observed in cruelty is adamantly underplayed in this second conception of cruelty, as Thomas Hobbes' understanding reveals once more: 'Revenge without

¹⁸ Ibid. III.3 §2.

¹⁹ Ibid. I.2 §3.

²⁰ Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, II-II, q159, a1.

²¹ Id.

²² Ibid. II-II, q159, a2.

²³ Id.

²⁴ Hobbes, *Leviathan* 126.

²⁵ As cited in Raphael, *British Moralists 1650-1800* vol.1 334-5.

²⁶ As cited in *ibid.* vol.2 72.

respect to the example and profit to come is a triumph, or glorying in the hurt of another, tending to no end (for the end is always somewhat to come); and glorying to no end is vain-glory, and contrary to reason; and to hurt without reason tendeth to the introduction of war, which is against the law of nature, and is commonly styled by the name of cruelty.²⁷ Rather than a vice, for which a person must take responsibility, cruelty morphs into a malaise of the soul, the result of a poor, incompetent or broken mind, which reduces the humanity of its carrier and makes her closer to wild animals. Perhaps, this malaise can be cured, or at least confined by appropriate measures of social hygiene. After all, animals can be tamed and trained; though sometimes they are rather put in cages or butchered. And the cruel human person, now likened to the beast, can be treated instrumentally, like commonly practised with horses and pigs; all this, naturally, being the case for the greater good of the commonwealth to which she and her victims belong.

III. The idea of cruelty as something sick, if not even something sickening, colours also the work of the French sceptic Michel de Montaigne. In his *Essays*, he observes that ‘cowardice is the mother of cruelty’²⁸ and states: ‘I cruelly hate cruelty, both by nature and by judgment, as the extreme of all vices. But this is to such a point of softness that I do not see a chicken’s neck wrung without distress, and I cannot bear to hear the scream of a hare in the teeth of my dogs... Even the executions of the law, however reasonable that may be, I cannot witness with a steady gaze.’²⁹ As for wars, ‘I could hardly be convinced, until I saw it, that there were souls so monstrous that they would commit murder for the mere pleasure of it... For that is the uttermost point that cruelty can attain.’³⁰ The conceptions of cruelty as vice and sadism are accounted for in Montaigne’s reflections, but they are also subtly advanced to a broader condemnation of cruelty as harm to be avoided: capital punishment might be reformed, hunting abandoned, and wars prevented. In this perspective, his contribution to the understanding of cruelty in Western history is momentous, and it connects the modern conceptions with the ancient one. Moreover, Montaigne is the first Western intellectual to devote an entire essay to the topic of cruelty—a sign of how genuine was his hatred for cruelty. “Montaignesque” is therefore the third conception of cruelty to be presented, i.e. cruelty as *harm to be avoided*.

The champions of the European Enlightenment are probably the most vocal and best-remembered members of this approach. Montesquieu, for example, labels as ‘cruel’ ‘torture’ and bloody ‘punishments’,³¹ legal servitude for insolvent debtors³² and colonial occupation.³³ Voltaire describes as ‘cruel’ the civil wars of religion,³⁴ rape, corporal punishment and mutilation, even when legally administered in the name of justice.³⁵ Adam Smith, champion of the

²⁷ Hobbes, *Leviathan* 210.

²⁸ Montaigne, *The Complete Essays*, II.27.

²⁹ *Ibid.* II.11.

³⁰ *Id.*

³¹ Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws* VI.12.

³² *Ibid.* XV.1, 7, and 15.

³³ *Ibid.* XXVI.22.

³⁴ Cf. Voltaire, *Toleration and Other Essays*.

³⁵ Cf. Voltaire, *Candide* (especially chapters 4, 8 and 19).

Scottish Enlightenment, ascribes the attribute ‘cruel’ to infanticide,³⁶ personal *vendetta*,³⁷ economic monopolies,³⁸ burdensome taxes of succession or of passage of property,³⁹ the sufferings of the ‘race of labourers’ in periods of economic recession,⁴⁰ and mercy to the guilty.⁴¹ In Italy, Pietro Verri argues that ‘Reason can show [what] is unjust, extremely dangerous, and immensely cruel’⁴²—and reason led him to condemn ‘torture’ as ‘cruel’.⁴³ Cesare Beccaria, the most influential penal reformer of all times and a friend and student of Verri, condemns ‘torture’ as cruel too,⁴⁴ while noticing that ‘Man is only cruel in proportion to his own interest, to the hatred or fear he conceives of.’⁴⁵ Hence, it ought to be a duty for the legislator to ‘make sure that men fear the laws and only the laws. Fear of the law is salutary; but man’s fear of his fellows is fatal and productive of crimes. Slavish men are more debauched, more sybaritic and crueller than free men.’⁴⁶ For Condorcet, instead, ‘cruel’ was the neglect of ‘the progress of education,’⁴⁷ as it constituted the shameful act of ‘abandon[ing] men to the authority of ignorance, which is always unjust and cruel.’⁴⁸ Even the non-instrumental thinker *par excellence*, Immanuel Kant, did espouse the spirit of reformation of his age, and calls ‘most cruel’ the institution of ‘slavery’ exercised in the ‘Sugar Islands’ by Dutch landowners,⁴⁹ whereas just ‘cruel’ are the ‘duels’ fought in the name of ‘military honour’.⁵⁰

19th- and 20th-century political and legal reformers followed in the footsteps of the “enlighteners” of the 18th century. Amongst them are also Judith Shklar and Richard Rorty. Significantly, Judith Shklar defines cruelty in two interesting ways. The former reads: ‘Cruelty is... the wilful inflicting of physical pain on a weaker being in order to cause anguish and fear... [it is] horrible... [it] repels instantly because it is “ugly”... and disfigures human character.’⁵¹ The latter reads: ‘Cruelty is the deliberate infliction of physical, and secondarily emotional, pain upon a weaker person or group by stronger ones in order to achieve some end, tangible or intangible, of the latter.’⁵² Whether her definitions are correct or not, Judith Shklar believes that cruelty, to a meaningful extent, can be kept in check by appropriate doses of liberalism, which is itself a “child” of the 18th century. Good laws and good political arrangements can reduce the pain that we impose upon/suffer from weaker/stronger creatures like us. That is the hope that animated the American and the French Revolutions, as well as many of the emancipatory struggles fought during the following two centuries. Still, additional cruelties

³⁶ Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* V.I.25.

³⁷ Ibid. VI.III.12.

³⁸ Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* IV.8.17.

³⁹ Ibid. V.2.116 and 125.

⁴⁰ Ibid. I.11.263.

⁴¹ Ibid. II.I.27.

⁴² Verri, *Osservazioni sulla tortura* 18.

⁴³ Id.

⁴⁴ Beccaria, *Dei delitti e delle pene* cpt. XI.

⁴⁵ Ibid. XIII.

⁴⁶ Ibid. XLI.

⁴⁷ Condorcet, *Esquisse d’un tableau historique des progrès de l’esprit humain* sketch X.

⁴⁸ Ibid. sketch II.

⁴⁹ Kant, *Zum ewigen Frieden. Ein philosophischer Entwurf* II.3 §4.

⁵⁰ Kant, *Philosophy of Law* II (“Public Right”) 49 art. E.

⁵¹ Shklar, *Ordinary Vices* 8-9.

⁵² Shklar, “The Liberalism of Fear” 29.

can be retrieved—and rejected—in other areas too. Giacomo Leopardi, Italian pessimist and poet, aims at a different target. Talking about the alleged fiction of an afterlife awaiting us *post mortem*, created by philosophy and religion, he argues: ‘The human genus, extraordinary example of infelicity in this life, looks now upon death not as the end of its miseries, but as that after which more unhappiness has to come... [Not only] you have been crueller to the human being than fate or necessity or nature... but you have surpassed in cruelty the most ferocious tyrants and the most ruthless executioners ever seen on Earth.’⁵³ And he adds: ‘If these convictions of mine originate from sickness, I don’t know; I know that, whether I be sick or in health, I detest men’s cowardice, I refuse any consolation or childish illusion, and I am brave enough to endure the absence of any hope, and to stare calmly at the desert of life, and not to lie to myself about men’s infelicity, and to accept all the consequences of a painful, but true, philosophy, which may be useful to nothing else but allowing the strong man to see, with stoical gratification, all of destiny’s cruel and hidden cloaks being stripped off.’⁵⁴ Though living as such may be cruel, crueller is to live in fear of the priest’s superstitions and the philosopher’s fancies. In more recent times, Tom Regan sketches a fascinating taxonomy of cruelty, which he derives from yet another area that seems engulfed with cruelty: the human treatment of animals. As Regan writes: ‘People can rightly be judged cruel either for what they do or for what they fail to do, and either for what they feel or for what they fail to feel. The central case of cruelty appears to be the case where, in Locke’s apt phrase, one takes “a seeming kind of Pleasure” in causing another to suffer. Sadistic torturers provide perhaps the clearest example of cruelty in this sense: they are cruel not just because they cause suffering (so do dentists and doctors, for example) but because they enjoy doing so. Let us term this *sadistic cruelty*... Not all cruel people are cruel in this sense. Some cruel people do not feel pleasure in making others suffer. Indeed they seem not to feel anything. Their cruelty is manifested by a lack of what is judged appropriate feeling, as pity or mercy, for the plight of the individual whose suffering they cause, rather than pleasure in causing it... The sense of cruelty that involves indifference to, rather than enjoyment of, suffering caused to others we shall call *brutal cruelty*...Cruelty admits of at least four possible classifications: (1) active sadistic cruelty; (2) passive sadistic cruelty; (3) active brutal cruelty; (4) passive brutal cruelty.’⁵⁵ Whichever class of cruelty we encounter in life, Regan believes that we must try to eliminate it. In particular, he focuses on (3) and (4), i.e. the types of cruelty that seem to characterise most commonly the human-animal relationship. Persons are not only cruel to other persons: as long as pain is taken to be a relevant ethical factor, then also animals can become victims, and maybe even perpetrators.

IV. As inheritors of the projects initiated in the 18th century, we can find Shklar’s and Regan’s definitions rather appealing. However, how many types of cruelty and cruel areas of behaviour can be actually tackled? How many revolutions, with their load of gunpowder and bayonets, should be fought? If three centuries of worldwide-expanding liberalism have not eliminated it, what reasonable expectations can be entertained *vis-à-vis* the future?

Few are the philosophers who have pondered upon the *paradoxical* character of cruelty—a fourth conception that can be retrieved in the history of Western thought. Cruelty persists

⁵³ Leopardi, *Operette morali* “Dialogo di Plotino e di Porfirio.”

⁵⁴ Ibid. “Dialogo di Tristano e di un amico”.

⁵⁵ Regan, *The Case for Animal Rights* 197-8.

within our lives and societies despite its being commonly denounced as something extremely negative and despite the recurring attempts to promote social progress and reform existing institutions. Judith Shklar herself admits that ‘cruelty is baffling because we can live neither with nor without it,’⁵⁶ and this is probably the reason why ‘philosophers rarely talk about cruelty... I suspect that we talk around cruelty because we do not want to talk about it... What we do seem to talk about incessantly is hypocrisy, and not because it hides cowardice, cruelty, or other horrors, but because failures of honesty and of sincerity upset us enormously, and they are vices which we can attack directly and easily. They are easier to bear, and seem less intractable.’⁵⁷ A notable exception to the general avoidance of the subject denounced by Shklar is constituted by Philip P. Hallie. Firstly, Hallie defines ‘cruelty’ as ‘the infliction of ruin, whatever the motives’⁵⁸ or, in two alternative versions, ‘the activity of hurting sentient beings’⁵⁹ and ‘the slow crushing and grinding of a human being by other human beings.’⁶⁰ He then distinguishes the instances of ‘cruelty upon humans’ between those ‘fatal cruelties’ that are due to nature and the far from uncommon ‘human violent cruelty’ that is due to our fellow human beings.⁶¹ To the latter he adds ‘implicit’ or ‘indirect’ cruelties, i.e. cruelties arising from ‘indifference or distraction’ rather than from evident ‘intention to hurt.’⁶² Thus understood, human cruelty can be further divided into ‘sadistic’ and ‘practical’: whereas the latter refers to forms of instrumental cruelty, the former is ‘self-gratifying’.⁶³ This way, Hallie attempts to encompass and map the vast, polymorphous universe of cruelty, the intricate nature of which explains perhaps its little permeability to philosophical analysis, which at least as Judith Shklar alleges. Secondly, Hallie cuts the Gordian knot of cruelty’s intrinsic complexity by referring to it as a paradox, candidly and straightforwardly. Why simplifying something that cannot be simplified? Why misrepresenting it, in the attempt to represent it clearly? Hallie has in mind five particular cases of paradoxical cruelty:

- Cruelty brought about without any open ‘intention to hurt’, but in the name of altruism, happiness, and justice.⁶⁴ ‘Substantial maiming’ may easily derive from ‘wanting the best and doing the worst’⁶⁵
- Cruelty due to ‘intention to hurt’ aimed at avoiding worse cruelties, e.g. *in terrorem* literary techniques⁶⁶
- ‘The *fascinosum* of cruelty’ i.e. its appeal to our ‘*fond noir à contenter*’⁶⁷ as well as its ability to titillate ‘sexual pleasure’,⁶⁸ higher ‘awareness’,⁶⁹ the liberation of sensual ‘imagination’,⁷⁰ and ‘masochistic pleasure’⁷¹

⁵⁶ Shklar, *Ordinary Vices* 3.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.* 7 and 44.

⁵⁸ Hallie, *The paradox of cruelty* 14.

⁵⁹ Hallie, “Cruelty” 229.

⁶⁰ Hallie, *Lest innocent blood be shed* 2.

⁶¹ Hallie, *The paradox of cruelty* 5-6.

⁶² *Ibid.* 13-4 and 29-31.

⁶³ *Ibid.* 22-4.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.* 15-20.

⁶⁵ *Id.*

⁶⁶ *Ibid.* 20-2. In the 20th century, literary scholar André Dinar also argued: ‘The cruel authors cauterise the wounds that can be healed and mark with hot irons the incurable ones, so to expose their horror.’ (*Les auteurs cruels* 7).

- Cruelty implied by the ‘growth’ of any individual through painful ‘individualisation’ for the sake of ‘human authenticity’⁷²
- ‘Responsive’ cruelty due to ‘provocative’ cruelty,⁷³ as with legal punishments or just wars, although ‘mitigation’ is recommended⁷⁴

Being a Christian, Hallie has no desire to promote cruelty. Quite the contrary, his work on this topic begins as an effort to reduce it. Nevertheless, as he deepens his understanding of it, Hallie comes to recognise that not all cruelty ought to be avoided, for its disappearance would be more harmful than its persistence. This is particularly true of the painful processes of growth and maturation, as well as of artistic disclosure of sorrowful truths or extreme sexual elation. Rorty’s remarks about the continuing presence of cruelty in the private sphere were not utterly off the mark. Moreover, Hallie admits that cruelty may be a necessary evil in the public sphere. As baffling as this may be, cruelty seems to find justifications for enduring in many aspects of life.

V. Some philosophers have stepped beyond the sole acknowledgment of cruelty’s paradoxical character and entertained plainly the seemingly contradictory notion that it might be *good*. This is the fifth and last conception of cruelty, which comprises two main groups of thinkers.

In the first group are included those thinkers have argued that cruelty does not need to have intrinsic value (or disvalue), but instrumental value alone and, as such, that cruelty may be capable of fulfilling a positive function. Typically, cruelty can be a tool to promote the common good. Niccolò Machiavelli, for example, argues that ‘Those [cruelties] may be called properly used... that are applied at one blow and are necessary to one’s security, and that are not persisted in afterwards unless they can be turned to the advantage of the subjects.’⁷⁵ According to him, ‘Every prince ought to desire to be considered clement and not cruel. Nevertheless he ought to take care not to misuse this clemency. Cesare Borgia was considered cruel; notwithstanding, his cruelty reconciled the Romagna, unified it, and restored it to peace and loyalty. And if this be rightly considered, he will be seen to have been much more merciful than the Florentine people, who, to avoid a reputation for cruelty, permitted Pistoia to be destroyed [by the rioting between the Cancellieri and Panciatichi factions in 1502 and 1503].’⁷⁶ Jacques Derrida is to state an analogous political wisdom in the dawn of the 21st century: ‘Politics can only domesticate [cruelty], differ and defer it, learn to negotiate, compromise *indirectly* but without illusion with it... the cruelty drive is irreducible.’⁷⁷ Rather than combating

⁶⁷ Hallie, *The paradox of cruelty* 70-5.

⁶⁸ Ibid. 41 and 46.

⁶⁹ Ibid. 43.

⁷⁰ Ibid. 42 and 50.

⁷¹ Ibid. 48.

⁷² Ibid. 55-8 and 60-2.

⁷³ Ibid. 33.

⁷⁴ Ibid. 79-82.

⁷⁵ Machiavelli, *Il Principe* VIII.

⁷⁶ Ibid. XVII

⁷⁷ Derrida, *Without Alibi* 252.

cruelty at all costs, one ought to learn how to draw as much good as possible from it. After all, the initiation of social life as such makes use of cruelty: why should its continuation be devoid of it? This is what Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari seem to suggest, for example. The acquisition and continuation of the shared semiotic abilities that allow for human communities to develop is never devoid of cruelty. Schooling and socialisation are no free meal: ‘Cruelty is the movement of culture that is realized in bodies and inscribed on them, belabouring them.’⁷⁸ Sharing a similar awareness, Clement Rosset explores the instrumental role of cruelty in the private sphere, rather than the public, and writes provokingly: ‘Joy is necessarily cruel.’⁷⁹ According to him, ‘Cruelty is not... pleasure in cultivating suffering but... a refusal of complacency toward an object, whatever it may be.’⁸⁰ Now, ‘the “cruelty” of the real... is the intrinsically painful and tragic nature of reality.’⁸¹ For instance, ‘the cruelty of love (like that of reality) resides in the paradox or the contradiction which consists in loving without loving, affirming as lasting that which is ephemeral – paradox of which the most rudimentary vision would be to say that something simultaneously exists and does not exist. The essence of love is to claim to love forever but in reality to love only for a time. So the *truth* of love does not correspond to the *experience* of love.’⁸² For Rosset, the answer to cruelty’s paradox lays in the nature of reality, which is ultimately cruel.⁸³ To a relevant extent, then, persons are shaped by cruelty and are bound to encounter it also and above all if they wish to derive some satisfaction from their mortal existence. The only way to live well, for Rosset, involves learning to embrace the suffering that life will unavoidably unload upon us.⁸⁴ As for art, Antonin Artaud echoes Rosset’s tragic awareness: ‘Death is cruelty, resurrection is cruelty, transfiguration is cruelty’⁸⁵... ‘Everything that acts is a cruelty.’⁸⁶ To be is to be cruel—there is no way out of cruelty, which, however, must be conceived anew: ‘Cruelty is not just a matter of either sadism or bloodshed, at least not in any exclusive way... [It] must be taken in a broad sense, and not in the rapacious physical sense that is customarily given to it.’⁸⁷ Although never as clear as Rosset on what this novel understanding of cruelty may be like, Artaud developed a new set of shock- and scandal-filled stage techniques and communication devices, i.e. his (in)famous *Theatre of Cruelty*, aimed at eliciting higher levels of awareness from the audience: ‘All this culminates in consciousness and torment, and in consciousness *in* torment’.⁸⁸

⁷⁸ Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus* 144.

⁷⁹ Rosset, *Joyful Cruelty* 17.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.* 17-20.

⁸¹ *Ibid.* 76.

⁸² *Ibid.* 98.

⁸³ Rosset’s thought can be regarded as belonging legitimately to the fourth conception of cruelty as well. In truth, the distinction between the fourth and the fifth conceptions is not clear-cut, and the same can be said of the distinctions between the other conceptions previously presented (especially between the first and the third, and the second and the third). These distinctions are mostly a matter of different conceptual emphasis, rather than of mutual incompatibility.

⁸⁴ Rosset is a Nietzsche scholar and has been influenced by Nietzsche’s criticism of Schopenhauer’s “escapism” from life and its harshness.

⁸⁵ Artaud, *The Theater and its Double* 101-3.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.* 85.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.* 102.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.* 114.

In the second group are included those thinkers that have argued that cruelty might be intrinsically valuable, maybe even a virtue, which enriches our lives in a unique way and allows for the full realization of our nature. The most “in-famous” example in this sense is that of the Marquis de Sade, who argues: ‘Cruelty is imprinted within the animals... that can read the laws of Nature much more energetically than we do; [cruelty] is more strongly enacted by Nature among the savages than it is among civilized men: it would be absurd to establish that it is a kind of depravity... Cruelty is nothing but the human energy that civilization has not yet corrupted: it is therefore a virtue and not a vice... Cruelty, far from being a vice, is the first sentiment that Nature has imprinted within ourselves. The child breaks his toy, bites his nurse’s nipple, strangles his bird, long before he has reached the age of reason.’⁸⁹ Sade infers from the naturalness and unavoidability of cruelty a reversed Rousseauvianism: ‘Remove your laws, your punishments, your customs, and cruelty will not have dangerous effects any longer... it is inside the civilized domain that it turns into a danger, as those capable of it are almost always absent, either because they lack the force, or because they lack the means to respond to the offences; in the uncivilized domain, instead, if it is imposed over the strong, then he shall be able to react to it, and if it is imposed over the weak, it will not be else than conceding to the strong according to the laws of nature, and this will not be inappropriate at all.’⁹⁰ Equally notorious is the case of Friedrich Nietzsche, according to whom: ‘Cruelty is here [in my writings] revealed, for the first time, as one of the oldest and of the most necessary elements in the creation of culture... The psychology of conscience is... not, as is alleged, “the voice of God within the human being;” but the instinct of cruelty.’⁹¹ Nietzsche longs for ‘those immense periods of time characterised by the “morality of mores” which precede ‘world history... [and] were the real and crucial history that shaped the character of humankind – when to suffer was a virtue, cruelty was a virtue.’⁹² If Sade reversed Rousseau’s *bon sauvage*, Nietzsche reverses Seneca’s treatment of cruelty as vice.⁹³ For Nietzsche, cruelty used to be a virtue in prehistoric times, and its appeal survives in rarefied forms today: ‘Almost everything we call “higher culture” is grounded in the spiritualisation and intensification of cruelty... The painful ecstasy of tragedy is cruelty... Everything sublime, included the highest and most refined pleasures of metaphysics, receives its sweetness exclusively from the ingredient of cruelty mixed with it.’⁹⁴ According to Nietzsche, ‘cruelty belongs to humankind’s most ancient celebratory delights... since those who are cruel enjoy the utmost exhilaration of the feeling of power.’⁹⁵ Thus, he

⁸⁹ Sade, *Philosophy in the Bedroom* dialogue III.

⁹⁰ Id. It must be said that Sade was not always consistent with this inverted Rousseauvianism of his. In the same work, Sade states: ‘We distinguish two types of cruelty... [the former] originates from stupidity and, involving no reason or analysis, makes the individual that was born like this similar to a wild beast... [This type of cruelty] does not provide any pleasure, for the one who is prone to it does not search for any refinement... [The latter type of cruelty] is the result of the sensitivity of the organs, it is known only to extremely delicate beings, and the excesses it generates are nothing else than refinements of their delicateness; it is this delicateness that employs all the resources of cruelty to alert itself, as it vanishes too easily because of its fineness.’ (Id.).

⁹¹ Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo* “Geneaologie der Moral”.

⁹² Nietzsche, *Die Morgenröthe* I §18.

⁹³ Rousseau never used the phrase ‘*bon sauvage*’; still, this phrase describes well his attitude towards the history of human civilisation.

⁹⁴ Nietzsche, *Jenseits von Gut og Boese* 7 §229.

⁹⁵ Nietzsche, *Die Morgenröthe* I §18.

concludes, cruelty should be recovered in a healthy way, for human beings are cruelty-prone animals that live in the mundane world, not the God-like, spiritualised, “fallen” creatures of which religion and philosophy have pointlessly blared about. As animals they have bodies, selves, and “knightly” instincts. They are born to compete against one another and the most deserving ones ought to survive and dominate. Any departure from this natural logic is a concession to degeneration. Exemplarily, the ‘magician/pope’ of Nietzsche’s *Zarathustra* discovers this hard truth in his delirium, for he realizes that his own pantheon of abstract instruments of power is the utmost and most cruel betrayal of any chance for real fulfilment. Nothing of what he has preached to lead his flock *is*, in fact: ‘*In vain! / Pierce further! / Cruellest spike! / No dog – your game just am I, / Cruellest hunter! /.../ Speak finally! / You shrouded in the lightning! Unknown! Speak! /.../ Surrender to me, / Cruellest enemy, / - Yourself!*’⁹⁶

Nietzsche’s virtue has hardly anything to do with Seneca’s vice. The five conceptions of cruelty presented above differ too much from one another to be able to provide any one clear set of guidelines about the role that cruelty can or should play *vis-à-vis* any desired development of human personhood. The family resemblances suggested in the third paragraph leave the field open to many diverging paths, which reflect not only the dissimilar interpretations of cruelty, but also the various presuppositions and conceptions that the cited authors have concerning personhood as such, the opportunities and the means of its development, not to mention the uneven ontological, cosmological, theological and ethical commitments that they are willing to pledge. Nevertheless, there is value in plurality. Each conception offers a conspicuous amount of food for thought. If cruelty is a vice, for example, then we can attribute and claim responsibility for it and for the sort of person we are. If cruelty is sadism, however, its horror may well remind us that that very same responsibility knows of limitations, possibly due to socio-pathological factors. And if these factors can be modified, then much could and should be done to prevent and reduce cruelty. Certainly, there may be divergences regarding the fundamental values that ought to guide these modifications, whether at the individual or at the collective level. Besides, we may also come to realise, like Artaud and Hallie, that cruelty possesses a tragic dimension, i.e. that cruelty may only be reduced and not eliminated *in toto*. We might even want to avoid its extensive elimination as a desirable goal, for there may be cruelties capable of enriching life. Moreover, embracing the cruel character of existence might serve itself as a precondition for any meaningful life to be lived. Avoiding the hopelessness, the self-pity and the negative nihilism of, say, Arthur Schopenhauer, who dreamt of utter annihilation as the supreme wisdom, we may want to side at least with Leopardi’s pessimism, which found enough value in life by way of the stoical ability to contemplate reality for what it is. Or we may prefer another, less austere option. The extent of the embrace is not easy to measure—perhaps it is impossible to measure; or it varies with each and everyone’s particular “arms-span”. Certainly, Sade and Nietzsche went very far. The libertine and the knightly blond beast that they worship are *prima facie* unlikely heroes; it is improbable that the reader would like to encounter them in real life. More likely, they could enjoy being such characters, as the fascination with murderous villains seems to suggest, whether in the shape of the saga-inspiring Egill Skallagrimsson or the computer-generated criminals of *Grand Theft Auto*. Individual daydreaming is one thing, however, and collective life is another. Which balance is to be found between the two, whilst striving for aesthetic self-realisation on the one hand and for

⁹⁶ Nietzsche, *Also Sprach Zarathustra*, „Der Zauberer“ IV.65.

justice on the other, is the dilemma that Richard Rorty refused to resolve for us. Probably, each one of us has to find the solution by herself.

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