

Cruelty

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She had to carry a bag of heads. Blood was dripping from the bag. The armed men made her laugh about this. When they arrived, the bag was emptied and she saw the heads of her children. This happened in Sierra Leone toward the end of the twentieth century. An account of the event was given by the woman who had been forced to carry the bag. Hers is a story of cruelty and suffering, reminiscent of similar stories told and sometimes recorded over the millennia. It is a story about the twin constellation of cruelty and suffering, perpetration and victimhood. Cruelty is the intentional inflicting of suffering. It is suffering plus agency. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, it can also be to delight in or be indifferent to the pain or misery of others and to act in a merciless, hard-hearted fashion. There is, of course, also suffering without cruelty and perpetration: there can be no cruelty without suffering, but there can be suffering without cruelty. Human beings can and do suffer without anyone in particular being responsible for the suffering (although magical and conspiratorial thinking, with their belief in excessive agency, will attempt to identify a perpetrator, someone to hold accountable). Contemporary politics of life, with its focus on the maximization of vitality, is likely to define suffering as an absence of intervention, as an act of omission.

Animals, including human beings, can also suffer at the hands, or, rather, claws and teeth, of perpetrators that seem incapable of intentionally inflicting pain. A common manner of death for beasts of prey is to be devoured by predators. Predation, however, is more than a simple uptake of nutrition. For predatory mammals, “the prey’s terror and struggles to escape as it is brought down, the shedding of its blood, and its vocalisations as it is wounded and eaten, often while it is still alive” (Nell 2006: 212) is, in biochemical terms, a matter of sexual arousal and pleasurable reward, even before satiation. While it is true that human animals also kill other animals, they rarely eat their prey while it is still alive. Besides, few would conclude that lions and hyenas, chimpanzees, and orcas ought to be arrested and charged with animal cruelty (in the double sense of cruelty *to* animals and cruelty *by* animals). Despite continuing efforts to erase the distinction between human and nonhuman animals, calling nonhuman predators cruel is likely to be considered a case of anthropomorphism: human intentions (as in *mens rea*) are projected onto nonhuman animals. The inversion of anthropomorphism is zoomorphism. It too confuses human and nonhuman characteristics. Zoomorphism comes in various guises, one of which is the idea that human collectives are either predator or prey (a recurring trope, for example, in Hitler’s rhetoric). Another guise of zoomorphism is the projection of the predator–prey distinction upon interpersonal relationships, such that power and wealth are made out to be the result of devouring others, which is a popular imagery in both witchcraft and the world of business. Whereas anthropomorphism ascribes volition and morality to animals, zoomorphism can relieve human beings of the moral accountability that comes with the ability to make choices.

Cruelty, then, involves an element of choice; in other words, that the perpetrator has the choice to *not* torment the victim and that the inflicting of suffering is a voluntary act by the



perpetrator. But volition is a fraught concept. The debate on volition has raged in various guises—voluntarism versus causalism, free will versus determinism, agency versus structure—for centuries. While theologians and philosophers—joined, more recently, by social scientists, psychologists, and neuroscientists—have done their utmost to prove that volition is nothing but a fabrication, European intellectual and social movements like Renaissance humanism, the Enlightenment, nineteenth-century liberalism, and twentieth-century existentialism have argued that the emancipation of the human being is predicated on granting him or her the capacity to make autonomous decisions. To quote Immanuel Kant (1784): “Enlightenment is the human being escaping from his or her self-incurred immaturity. Immaturity is the inability to use one’s reason without being guided by someone else. This immaturity is self-incurred if it is not caused by a lack of intellectual capacity but of the resolve and courage to use it without external guidance. *Sapere aude!* Have the courage to use your own reason is thus the motto of the Enlightenment.” By itself, though, this appeal says nothing about the consequences of *sapere aude*. To use one’s own reason without the guidance or control of others could very well lead one to commit cruel acts, like forcing a woman to carry a bag that contains the heads of her own children. Humanist, Enlightenment, liberal, and existentialist ideas of individual autonomy come up against the fact that human beings who are free to choose might make choices that are harmful to themselves and others. It is in this historical and analytical sense that cruelty is contingent on the human ability to make autonomous decisions. It is also the reason why liberal thinkers like Judith Shklar (1982, 1989) and Richard Rorty (1989) considered cruelty to be the greatest of all evils. Cruelty subverts the core idea of individual freedom by turning it from a perfect virtue into the quintessential vice. Imperatives (categorical or otherwise), rules (golden or otherwise), and laws (natural or otherwise) are needed to limit the freedom of the individual, which means that individual autonomy no longer functions as a paramount principle, only as a lofty, unfulfillable, potentially disastrous ideal.

According to this line of reasoning, the curtailing of human autonomy for the sake of cruelty prevention ought not just apply to individuals but to collective actors like governments and corporations as well. To commit cruel acts in the interest of public benefit, such as “national security,” should be unacceptable. As we know, it is not. Cruelty is often widely accepted because it is draped in language like “enhanced interrogation,” “collateral damage,” “jihad,” “honor,” and so forth. Concepts obscure the suffering inflicted by perpetrators. At times, this is also true of theoretical concepts in scholarly fields like international relations and peace and conflict studies, which might serve the same purpose, or, at least, have the same effect. Concepts like “national interest,” “just war,” “hegemonic stability”—not to mention the most insidious concept of them all: “realism”—cover up the cruelty they engender and result in. Peace and conflict studies emerged as a separate academic field in reaction to the language of international relations, its focus on power politics, and its complicity in terrorism and warfare. Peace and conflict studies was initially an outgrowth of a flourishing international peace movement. It was created at a time when the social sciences were thrall to behaviorism, cybernetics, and systems theory more generally. The odd combination of peace politics and objectifying positivist science (see Stade 2005) gave birth to concepts like structural violence (that is, deprivation, repression, alienation, etc.), which remains the single most popular contribution of peace and conflict studies to scholarship and activism at large. It is a highly problematic concept, however, in that it is often used to blur the distinction between suffering caused by physical violence (rape, torture, maiming, etc.) and other forms of suffering. The woman who carried the heads of her children in a bag was, as far as we can ascertain from available records, poor and unfree in terms of human development (as it is defined by Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum). Attributing the same moral and psychological weight to her suffering due to structural violence as to her carrying the heads

of her children in a bag would be to dehumanize her and others who suffer and have suffered similar fates.

This is why ethnographically informed conflict studies, preferably with an existentialist bent, as found in, for example, Nordstrom (1997), Taussig (2003), Jackson (2004), and Finnström (2008), holds the promise of understanding cruelty in a way that conventional peace and conflict studies cannot. Even the genre of ethnographically informed conflict studies, however, struggles with notions of perpetration, volition, and culpability. More to the point, conflict studies grounded in long-term naturalistic observation, perhaps more than any other type of study, is entangled in questions of morality. It is faced with the dilemma of needing to suspend judgment in order to understand even the most cruel acts and the inability of most human beings, including researchers, to rid themselves of moral intuitions. Although psychoanalysts, psychiatrists, and therapists have a longer tradition than ethnographic fieldworkers of addressing the kind of inner conflicts that the performance of their profession can bring on, their answers, which are meant to resolve or at least disarm such conflicts, seem as unsatisfying as anthropologists invoking “methodological relativism” (as opposed to moral relativism) to calm the nerves of their students. Unsatisfying as it may be, we, as researchers of suffering and perpetration, are in all likelihood condemned to enduring the absurdity of, at the same time, trying to make sense of cruelty and being abhorred by it (see Stade 2014).

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