

passive enjoyment of media violence and blood sports to the activities of interrogators and abusers, is reinforced by these diffuse and very old emotional circuits that humans share with animals, that "are able to imbue 'cold' perceptions with a 'hot' affective charge" (Panksepp & Panksepp 2000, p. 115). This would in turn account for the apparent universality of these emotions, which erupt as powerfully in the educated and morally exemplary citizens of the twenty-first century as in the monsters of history.

NOTES

1. Though not further considered in this paper, psychological punishments that inflict no physical pain are also cruel, as in solitary confinement, public shaming, or social ostracism. The *pittura infamanti* (defaming portraits) of mediaeval Florence had "fearsome potency as an instrument of official state punishment" (Edgerton 1985, p. 60; see also Miller 1993).

2. Self-inflicted pain is not the preserve of masochists, but a pervasive social phenomenon in contests and sports, especially contact, endurance, and "extreme" sports. Humour and the mutual vulnerability of lovers also hold cruelty in tension. A life without reflexive pain would be dull and colourless, but again, as with psychological pain, and except in passing, I have excluded this domain from the argument.

3. I have dealt with war and massacres from the perspective of the individual actors, and not in their political context: the exhilaration of the machine gunner is relevant, but, in this target article, the military command structures that control these events are not.

4. A wall carving in the north palace at Nineveh shows King Ashurbanipal and his commanders walking over headless enemy bodies, with a beheading still in progress (Bersani & Dutoit 1985, fig. 26). Roman commanders summarily executed rebels: a stone relief (Andreae 1978, Fig. 536) shows the beheading of rebellious barbarians under Marcus Aurelius in about 170 AD.

5. Ariès (1981) chronicles a similar process, within a similar time frame, that has displaced natural deaths from the public to the private domain.

6. This condition recapitulates the famous passage in Hobbes' *Leviathan*: in war, "every man is enemy to every man . . . in such condition, there is no place for industry, because the fruit thereof is uncertain. . . ; no account of time, no arts, no letters, no society; and which is worst of all, continual fear, and danger of violent death; and the life of man, solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short" (Hobbes 1651/1996, p. 84)

Victor Nell presents plausible hypotheses about how human cruelty may have evolutionary roots in carnivores' emotional preparedness to hunt. However, humans' greater mental capacity can be expected to add unique properties to cruelty, as it does to most other motives. Nell himself suggests that there is a kind of cruelty that "presupposes a theory of mind" (sect. 2), henceforth ToM, a condition that would limit it to humans and a small number of other species with advanced mental development. He initially speaks of this condition as necessary for all cruelty, but much of his subsequent discussion covers species without ToM. It is not clear whether a cat plays with a mouse partially in order to savor the distress of the victim, or merely since it is an optimally challenging game. The common human projection onto this activity certainly includes the savoring, as in *Tom & Jerry*, but since a real Tom has no ToM, he is presumably not imagining his victim's suffering, much less trying to induce it.

I doubt if many human hunters are rewarded by evidence that their prey is suffering. In the television show *Northern Exposure*, the protagonist was introduced to bird hunting, and said afterwards, "I loved the shooting; it was the dying I couldn't stand." Habitual hunters can obviously stand the dying more, but there is little evidence that they glory in it. Primitive Amerindian hunters were not necessarily any more sadistic. Sometimes they would perform ceremonies before a hunt to apologize to the spirits of the intended quarry. On the other hand, their enjoyment of torturing captives was clearly on a par with that of the ancient Roman mobs at the Coliseum (Adair 1736/2005). My point is that the urge to do injurious things while disregarding or actively avoiding attention to the suffering of victims is different from the urge to seek out and even enhance this suffering – although the disregarding might sometimes be a reaction against the latter urge. Killing in war can be intensely pleasurable (Bourke 1999, pp. 1–31; Grossman 1995, p. 115) and is more apt than killing in hunting to intentionally inflict suffering, but most infantrymen throughout history never even fired their weapons at the enemy (Grossman, pp. 17–39). Even in the euphoria of combat, the thrill is not usually that of cruelty but of winning a mortal contest or of the power of wielding a "magic sword . . . all you do is move the finger so imperceptibly, just a wish flashing across your mind . . . and poof! In a blast of sound and energy and light a truck or a house or even people disappear" (William Broyles, quoted in Bourke 1999, p. 2). The simultaneous perception that the "mutilated and dead [are] sad and beastly" (Bourke 1999, p. 21) does not enhance the high for most soldiers, and indeed soon spoils it.

The puzzle for motivational science is Nell's "affective cruelty," as opposed to the kind that is incidental to hunting or war, or the workmanlike "instrumental" kind practiced dispassionately for extrinsic reasons, which probably includes that of the obedient subjects in Milgram-type experiments (sect. 6.2.1). The point of affective cruelty is to let yourself experience the suffering of the victim vicariously, but with the kind of attitude that yields net pleasure rather than pain, an attitude perhaps best called negative empathy. Intended physical injury and intended suffering are entirely dissociable. Medea killed her children not to be cruel to them, but to be cruel to their father, Jason.¹ The crucial question is how this attitude works, that is, how negative empathy rewards. To discuss this, I need to include the psychological cruelty that Nell does not cover, which is the only kind seen in everyday life.

I have argued elsewhere that empathy, the exercise of your ToM, is itself rewarding (Ainslie 2001, pp. 161–86; 2005; 2006). My basic argument is that emotion is a goal-directed (rather than conditioned) process that largely serves as its own reward, but that entertaining emotions at will attenuates them into daydreams, because the urge to anticipate the high points undermines any longing or suspense that might make them even moderately intense. You therefore learn to make adequately rare and surprising external events the occasions for emotions.

Open Peer Commentary

Cruelty may be a self-control device against sympathy

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Abstract: Dispassionate cruelty and the euphoria of hunting or battle should be distinguished from the emotional savoring of victims' suffering. Such savoring, best called *negative empathy*, is what puzzles motivational theory. Hyperbolic discounting theory suggests that sympathy with people who have unwanted but seductive traits creates a threat to self-control. Cruelty to those people may often be the least effortful way of countering this threat.

Events interpreted through the models of other people built by your ToM usually turn out to be the most satisfactory ones for occasioning emotions.

Emotions cannot be divided strictly into positive and negative, because all emotions must have a fast-paying reward component in order to have their characteristic vividness. Some emotions are usually aversive because initial attention to them leads to longer-term inhibition of reward, but even fear and grief can be cultivated in ways that make them pleasurable, for instance, in horror movies and tear-jerkers. Anger is often called negative, but it shares many psychometric and neurophysiological properties with the more obviously positive emotions (Lerner et al., in press). I agree with Nell that cruelty need not involve anger (sect. 3.4), but I have argued that, like anger, it often becomes preferred despite its spoiling effect on other rewards because it repairs a felt vulnerability (Ainslie 2001, pp. 183–86). As with anger, there are people who cultivate cruelty habitually, presumably in default of richer sources of reward, but occasional cruelty seems to be common to everyone. It is the commonplace examples that best differentiate negative empathy from Nell's examples of predation: the pleasures of seeing the boor get his comeuppance, the driver who cut us off stopped by the police, and the pretensions of the poseur punctured, as well as less respectable examples like *schadenfreude* and our minor persecution of people whom we hope we do not resemble.

What sometimes impels us toward cruelty? Because sympathy is a mental response quickly rewarded by emotion, it is hard to bring under voluntary control. But there are people with traits that we fear in ourselves or who might exploit such traits, sympathy with whom might let them weaken us or even enchant us. In the absence of more direct controls, cruelty toward these people might be the handiest way to reduce our sense of potential seduction. That is, sympathy with the thief or heretic, with someone who has a sexual taste we are afraid we might develop, with a painfully naïve younger sibling who has traits we have barely overcome, with the rejecting lover we can't get over or the needy lover who threatens to become dependent, with any object of envy, even with someone whom we are conscious of having wronged – sympathy with any of these people might threaten to weaken us. A solution that hedonically pays for itself in the short run is to attack positive empathy with negative empathy, “set affection against affection and master one by another: even as we used to hunt beast with beast” (Francis Bacon, quoted by Hirschman 1977, p. 22). The capacity to do this undoubtedly comes from a more elementary process, perhaps the sheer arousal occasioned vicariously by anyone else's strong feeling – as in the fascination of a fight or car wreck, perhaps by the inherited preparedness for predation that Nell suggests. However, because of its tendency to spoil other sources of reward, it is apt to be cultivated only by people with a need to suppress their sympathy.

NOTES

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1. This was not just Euripides' imagination. I professionally encountered the case of a man who, when his wife served him with divorce papers, killed their children and himself, “to give her something to think about.”

A murky portrait of human cruelty

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Abstract: In this commentary, I review diverse lines of research conducted at both the macrosocial and microbehavioral level that

dispute the view that cruelty is inherently gratifying. Expressions of pain and suffering typically inhibit rather than reinforce cruel conduct in humans. With regard to functional value, cruelty has diverse personal and social effects, not just the alluring benefits attributed to it.

In the target article, Nell brings an unusually broad perspective to bear on the possible origins of human cruelty. He reports that, despite the cultural evolution over the many millennia, human cruelty is still overwhelmingly present in the contemporary world. The cited examples of contemporary cruelty highlight the need for further specification of the defining criteria for what belongs in this category. Boxing may be construed as an attenuated form of cruelty, but why does motorcycle racing qualify as a vestige of the pain-blood-death complex? If psychic pain is a modern proxy of physical slaughter, does cruelty essentially become a boundless category?

There is a difference between behavior motivated and reinforced by conditioned pain-based gratifications and by its functional value. For example, motorcycle racing can bring monetary prizes, social status, and a sense of self-pride for a race well run. But what do these rewarding benefits have to do with cruelty and pain gratification? Empirical evidence indicates that cruel behavior can be more readily modified by varying its functional value than by relying on inherent affective gratifications of pain cues (Bandura 1973).

The cited support in the target article for the upper stages of the theory of human cruelty, which are amenable to empirical test, is largely in terms of biblical quotations, anecdotes, descriptions of ancient Greek practices, medieval carnivals, and arena spectacles in the ancient Roman era. Except for passing comments, surprisingly little attention is devoted to the third stage of cruelty. This stage requires the most detailed theoretical specification because the link from gorging excitedly on prey in the pain-blood-death complex to the exercise of social power is the most enigmatic.

The support for the sexualization of cruelty at the hunter stage is essentially metaphoric and anecdotal. As evidence for the fusion of sex and aggression, Nell reports that !Kung hunters use the penis as the metaphor for their hunting bow. He refers to a hunter who claims that thoughts about the kill produce the best sex, and a Vietnam veteran who found killing to be erotic. No evidence is presented, however, on whether these experiences are anomalous or normative ones.

In commenting on the “beauty of war,” Nell cites the example of a military pilot mesmerized by the beauty of surface-to-air missiles. One can find support for almost any view by careful selection of cases. The vast numbers of soldiers who experience the hell of war and suffer posttraumatic stress disorders receive no mention. The infliction of death and destruction remotely by satellite and laser-guided missiles actually creates problems for Nell's theory. People behave more injuriously when they do not see and hear the pain and suffering their acts cause. Faceless hardware wars heighten destructive conduct by eliminating the restraining effect of human suffering.

Findings of sexual arousal at depictions of rape, as measured by a penis transducer, further dispute that cruelty is inherently erotic. Rapists are sexually aroused by depictions of pain and suffering of a rape victim, whereas non-rapists are aroused by consensual sex but are turned off by sexual cruelty (Abel et al. 1977). Verification by selective examples of cruelty elevates atypical reactivity to universal proclivity.

At the macrosocial level, Nell greatly exaggerates the prevalence of human cruelty. There exist wide intercultural differences representing both warring and pacific societies with large intra-cultural variations and even rapid transformation of warring societies into peaceful ones (Alland 1972; Bandura 1973; Gardner & Heider 1969; Levy 1969; Sanday 1981). The Swiss used to be the main suppliers of mercenary fighters in Europe. As they transformed into a pacific society, their militaristic vestige is evident only in the plumage of the Vatican guards.