

Michael Reid Trice, *Encountering Cruelty: The Fracture of the Human Heart* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2011)

Trice offers a phenomenology of cruelty—that charts how cruelty is *lived* by human subjects—which exposes cruelty as a “fracture” of the human heart. The fracture can be traced through a series of “contours” that invade and corrupt the soundness of the varying spheres of human existence—the intrapersonal, the interpersonal, and institutional life. Employing as a lodestar to his study Friedrich Nietzsche’s charge that cruelty is concealed in Western ideals and is embedded in the systems of governance that enshrine these ideals, Trice tracks the sublimations of cruelty through the “closed teleological myths” that redefine cruelty as the good. Just as tragedies have a narrative structure—beginning, middle, end—that resolves the paradoxes of the human condition and permits catharsis of the audience’s frustrations, so “for instance, the enshrined sublime Ideal, once more of Justice, can conceal a thirst for revenge” (p. 5). With the death penalty, we cruelly murder our social offenders, but our ideal permits us to redeem this murder as an act of redemption. However, though cruelty is concealed, it remains active but sublimated. Revenge is sought in the name of Justice, Trice explains. Thus our very institutions of justice act to “transvalue” (contradict) our shared communal values; it allows us to act out our instincts for blood and cruelty and channel our thirst for revenge (instincts contrary to the ideal) through institutions that conceal their true nature. Beginning, middle, end. Offense, execution, resolution. We murder to express our disdain for murder.

The brilliance of *Encountering Cruelty* resides in the painstaking care of Trice’s detailed charting of the effects of cruelty through the inner life of the human person and out into the world of intimate relations and human interpersonal encounter. Trice’s use of geological metaphors to trace the wound lines through the human heart help us to visualize with aching clarity the costs of the concealed cruelties of our systems and our rituals upon individuals, intimate groups, and communities within the human world. He calls upon Bible stories that exemplify cruelty—Job, Abraham and Isaac, Cain and Abel—to demonstrate the god’s exemplary cruelty to men, and he draws from these myths the effects of cruelty that demand reconciliation—struggle, contagion, becoming an enigma to self, excision and *ressentiment*. His careful analysis of the contours of cruelty in the human heart allows us a broad view across the landscape of cruelty, revealing how the objectification that enables sensitive creatures such as we to engage in cruelty against our neighbors, the neighbors whom our holy books require us to love *as ourselves*, annihilates interpersonal reciprocity and transvalues interpersonal well-being. A therapeutic plan for reconciling communities and healing individuals in the wake of cruelty, argues Trice, must take into account the many agonizing and destabilizing contours that cruelty has carved out across the human psyche.

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Trice's objective in exposing each of the fault-lines, carved through the landscape of the human heart, is to offer a map to guide theologians in their efforts to help the psychically wounded, victims and perpetrators, move forward from their histories of suffering and harmdoing. Trice sees the theologian as the great reconciler, called to restore people's well-being after cruelties have destabilized their core and eroded their inner resources. His anatomy of the contours of cruelty serves as a wall-chart of the human psyche, indicating where the hurt is stored up and where the theologian must apply his healing therapies.

Many kudos to Michael Trice! This book is beautifully written, despite its dark topic, and its painstakingly careful analysis of the effects of human suffering is virtually unmatched in the history of the phenomenology of violence. It is a must read for all educated persons who wish to understand why the victims of historical sufferings continue to visit their abjection upon innocent others. Though the book is meant as a guidebook for theologians, working as practitioners of reconciliation, it is equally useful to the secular philosopher, since the timeless truths of myth continue to serve as didactic vehicles for the human drama.

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