

Thinking of the Shadow. Conceptions of Cruelty in the History of Western Thought

As regards thinking of the shadow, I can contribute to the present discussion *qua* intellectual historian who, together with the theologian Michael Trice, has reconstructed in recent years the understanding of a particular manifestation of the shadow in the long life of Western philosophy: cruelty. Between 1998, when I started investigating Judith Shklar's and Richard Rorty's liberalism of fear, and 2017, when I completed a volume of collected essays of mine to be published by Northwest Passage Books under the title *Philosophy of Cruelty*, I devoted considerable time and attention to retrieving, mapping and reflecting upon the conceptions of cruelty developed in the history of Western thought. What follows here is a concise overview of the five most common and/or most articulate conceptions that I have identified in the course of my studies, and repeats almost *verbatim* what I state in the aforementioned collection of essays of mine. Longer and more detailed analyses can be retrieved in my older publications on this subject. Please note also that my research is intentionally limited to explicit uses of the terms "cruelty" and "cruel" in the languages accessible to me. Extending it to cognates such as "violence" or "aggressiveness" would make the project unmanageable.

Cruelty as Vice

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 centres upon the notion of personal character rather than upon the notion of rightful or good actions and norms—the latter being predominant amongst modern and contemporary thinkers. Also, this former 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 suggested that cruelty is a vice affecting persons involved in punitive contexts, e.g. courtrooms, schools, armies and households. In *De Clementia*, Seneca claims that "cruel are those who have a reason for punishing, but do not have moderation in it".^[1] Besides, he claims that, as concerns the person who "finds pleasure in torture, we may say is not cruelty, but savagery - we may even call it madness; for there are various kinds of madness, and none is more unmistakable than that which reaches the point of murdering and mutilating men."^[2] "Cruelty" is thus defined as "harshness of mind in exacting punishment", rather than unrestrained lust for blood.^[3] As a vice, "cruelty" is said to be "an evil thing befitting least of all a man",^[4] and it can take private forms (e.g. family feuds) as well as public forms (e.g. tyranny, insofar as "[t]yrants", unlike kings resorting to cruelty "for a reason and by necessity[,...] take delight in cruelty").^[5] Cruelty is the opposite of clemency, yet "it is as much a cruelty to pardon all as to pardon none."^[6] Clemency,

Thinking of the Shadow. Conceptions of Cruelty in the History of Western Thought

according to Seneca, does not mean indiscriminate forgiveness, but rather a balanced blend of moderation and justice.

As famously discussed by Aristotle, our vices are said to 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 and combines it with Aristotle's ethics:

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.[\[7\]](#)

Also for the *doctor angelicus* [angelic doctor] of the Catholic Church is "cruelty... hardness of the heart in exacting punishment",[\[8\]](#) hence a form of "human wickedness"; whereas "savagery and brutality" are a form of "bestiality".[\[9\]](#) Cruelty contains an element of rational deliberation, which "savagery" and "brutality" do not possess: these, in fact, "take their names from a likeness to wild beasts... deriving pleasure from a man's torture."[\[10\]](#) 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, whatever the initial endowment of inclinations and talents in our character, each of us is responsible for the kind of person she becomes.

Cruelty as Sadism

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 or 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."[\[11\]](#) Bishop Joseph Butler, on his part, states that "[t]he utmost possible depravity, which we can in imagination conceive, is that of

Thinking of the Shadow. Conceptions of Cruelty in the History of Western Thought

disinterested cruelty.”[\[12\]](#) David Hume, on this point, affirms: “Absolute, unprovoked, disinterested malice has never, perhaps, had place in any human breast”.[\[13\]](#)

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 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.[\[14\]](#)

Rather than a vice, for which a person must take responsibility, cruelty morphs into a malady 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 malady 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 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.

Cruelty as Avoidable Harm

The idea of cruelty as something sick, if not even something sickening, colours also the work of the French Renaissance sceptic Michel de Montaigne. In his *Essays*, Montaigne observes that “cowardice is the mother of cruelty”[\[15\]](#) 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.[\[16\]](#)

As for wars, it is worth repeating that Montaigne remarks: “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.”[\[17\]](#) 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

Thinking of the Shadow. Conceptions of Cruelty in the History of Western Thought

perspective, his contribution to the understanding of cruelty in Western history is momentous, just as momentous were his *Essays* for the West's intellectuals in the three centuries following their publication, 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 stark 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 gruesome “punishments”, legal servitude for insolvent debtors and colonial occupation.[18] In his essays *On Tolerance*, Voltaire describes as eminently cruel all wars of religion, whilst in *Candide* he condemns as such rape, corporal punishment and mutilation, even when lawfully administered in the name of justice.[19] Adam Smith, champion of the Scottish Enlightenment, ascribes the attribute “cruel” to infanticide,[20] personal vendetta,[21] economic monopolies,[22] burdensome taxes of succession or of passage of property,[23] the suffering of the “race of labourers” in periods of economic recession,[24] and mercy to the guilty.[25] In Italy, Pietro Verri argues that “[r]eason can show [what] is unjust, extremely dangerous, and immensely cruel”—and reason led him to condemn “torture” as “cruel”. [26] Cesare Beccaria, the most influential penal reformer of all times and both a friend and a student of Verri's, condemns torture as cruel too, whilst also noting: “man is only cruel in proportion to his interest to be so, to his hatred or to his fear.”[27] Hence, it ought to be a duty for the legislator to “[c]ause men to fear the laws and the laws alone. Salutory is the fear of the law, but fatal and fertile in crime is the fear of one man of another. Men as slaves are more sensual, more immoral, more cruel than free men”. [28] For Jean-Antoine-Nicolas, Marquis de Condorcet, instead, “cruel” is the institutional neglect of “the progress of education”, for it constitutes nothing but the shameful misdeed of “abandoning men to the authority of ignorance, which is always unjust and cruel”. [29] Even the non-instrumental Enlightenment thinker par excellence, Immanuel Kant, does espouse the spirit of reformation of his age, and calls “most cruel” the institution of “slavery” exercised in the “Sugar Islands” by Dutch landowners,[30] whereas merely “cruel” are the “duels” fought in the name of “military honour”, which, like “Maternal Infanticide”, lead to cases of “Homicide” as distinguished from “Murder”. [31]

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. Judith Shklar, who was a Montaigne scholar, defines cruelty in two ways. The former reads: “Cruelty is... the wilful inflicting of physical pain on a weaker being in order to cause

Thinking of the Shadow. Conceptions of Cruelty in the History of Western Thought

anguish and fear... [it is] horrible... [it] repels instantly because it is 'ugly'... and disfigures human character". 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." Judith Shklar believes that cruelty, to a meaningful extent, can be controlled by appropriate doses of liberalism, which is itself in many ways a child of the 18th century: "the first right is to be protected against the fear of cruelty. People have rights as a shield against this greatest of human vices. This is the evil, the threat to be avoided at all costs. Justice itself is only a web of legal arrangements required to keep cruelty in check." [32] 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 animating the American and the French Revolutions, as well as many of the emancipatory struggles fought during the following two centuries. Still, additional cruelties can be retrieved—and rejected—in other areas too. Giacomo Leopardi, for one, aims at a different target. He associates cruelty with the rewards and punishments awaiting us post mortem [after death], which he claims to be nothing but the sorrowful fictional creations of tragically misguided philosophies and religions. Whether "healthy or sick", these creations are, in his view, signs of "cowardice" and mere "childish illusions" that were developed in the face of "the absence of any hope, ...the desert of life, ...men's infelicity[,]... and destiny's cruelty". [33] Though living as such is cruel in and for itself, even crueller it is to live in fear of the priest's gloomy superstitions or the philosopher's hollow concepts.

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. [34]

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 the human-animal relationship in contemporary societies. 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 (though Regan does not explore this avenue).

Cruelty as Paradox

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 dynamite, should be fought? If three centuries of worldwide-expanding liberalism, culminated with Francis Fukuyama's post-Cold-War proclamation of "the end of history", have not eliminated it, what reasonable expectations can be entertained *vis-à-vis* the future?[35] Few are the philosophers who have pondered upon the paradoxical character of cruelty—a fourth conception that can also be retrieved in the history of Western thought. Cruelty persists within our lives and societies despite its being commonly denounced as something extremely negative and, above all, 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" 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.[36]

Philip P. Hallie marks a notable exception to the commonplace avoidance of the subject denounced by Judith Shklar. Firstly, Hallie defines "cruelty" as "the infliction of ruin, whatever the motives"[37] or, in two alternative versions, "the activity of hurting sentient beings"[38] and "the slow crushing and grinding of a human being by other human beings".[39] 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.[40] To the latter he adds "implicit" or "indirect" cruelties, i.e. cruelties arising from "indifference or distraction" rather than from evident "intention to hurt".[41] 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".[42] By way of this articulate taxonomy, richer than Tom Regan's itself, Hallie attempts to encompass and map the vast, polymorphous universe of cruelty,

whose intricate nature explains perhaps its little permeability to philosophical analysis. Secondly, Hallie cuts the Gordian knot of cruelty's intrinsic complexity by referring to it as a paradox, candidly and straightforwardly—in a book's very title. 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:

1. Cruelty brought about without any open "intention to hurt", but in the name of altruism, happiness, justice, etc.[43] "Substantial maiming" can derive from "wanting the best and doing the worst".[44]
2. Cruelty caused by genuine "intention to hurt", but aimed at educating and therefore avoiding worse cruelties, e.g. "in terrorem" [terrifying] literary techniques.[45] As 20th-century French literary scholar André Dinar also observes: "The cruel authors cauterise the wounds that can be healed and mark with hot irons the incurable ones, so to expose their horror".[46]
3. "The *fascinosum* [lure] of cruelty",[47] as well as its ability to titillate "sexual pleasure",[48] higher "awareness",[49] the liberation of sensual "imagination"[50] and "masochistic pleasure",[51] are all pursued willingly and proactively, very often, by fully conscious persons.
4. Cruelty implied by the "growth" or maturing of any individual through painful "individualisation" for the sake of "human authenticity".[52] No person becomes mature, well-rounded and responsible without facing a significant amount and variety of pain in her life, and without learning how to face probable, if not inevitable, later doses of the same bitter medicine.
5. "Responsive" cruelty enacted in retaliation to "provocative" cruelty,[53]g. penal chastisements and just wars, although "mitigation" is recommended.[54]

Being a devout 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. Moreover, in an implicit reminder of Beccaria's own wisdom, Hallie admits that cruelty may be a necessary evil in the public sphere. As baffling as this may be, cruelty seems to find rather easily assorted justifications for enduring in many aspects of life.

Cruelty as Good

Some philosophers have stepped beyond the sole acknowledgment of cruelty's paradoxical

Thinking of the Shadow. Conceptions of Cruelty in the History of Western Thought

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 who 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. For instance, cruelty can be a tool to promote the common good. Niccolò Machiavelli is among them. 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].[\[55\]](#)

Jacques Derrida states something analogous when he writes in recent years: “Politics can only domesticate [cruelty], differ and defer it, learn to negotiate, compromise indirectly but without illusion with it... the cruelty drive is irreducible.”[\[56\]](#) Instead of combating 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 makes itself 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.”[\[57\]](#) Sharing a similar awareness, Clément Rosset explores the instrumental role of cruelty in the private sphere, rather than the public one, and writes provokingly: “Joy is necessarily cruel.”[\[58\]](#) According to him, “[c]ruelty is not... pleasure in cultivating suffering but... a refusal of complacency toward an object, whatever it may be.”[\[59\]](#) Now, “the ‘cruelty’ of the real... is the intrinsically painful and tragic nature of reality.”[\[60\]](#) For instance:

[T]he 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.[\[61\]](#)

For Rosset, the answer to cruelty’s paradox lays in the nature of reality, which is ultimately

cruel. Rosset's thought could then be regarded as belonging legitimately to the fourth conception of cruelty as well, i.e. cruelty as paradox. 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; and as we emphasise the fifth conception, it can be stated that, to a relevant extent, persons are shaped by cruelty and are bound to encounter it also and above all if they wish to derive a modicum of satisfaction from their mortal existence. The only way to live well, for Rosset, who was a Schopenhauer scholar, involves learning to embrace the suffering that life unavoidably unloads upon us. In the field of drama, Antonin Artaud echoes and expands Rosset's tragic awareness: "Death is cruelty, resurrection is cruelty, transfiguration is cruelty... Everything that acts is a cruelty."[\[62\]](#) 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."[\[63\]](#) 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 Theatre of Cruelty, which was aimed at eliciting higher levels of personal awareness in the audience: "All this culminates in consciousness and torment, and in consciousness in torment".[\[64\]](#)

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".[\[65\]](#) Sade, who approves also of more refined forms of cruelty (i.e. the civilised libertine's), 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.[\[66\]](#)

Equally notorious is the case of Friedrich Nietzsche, whom the reader has already met repeatedly in this book. Idealising and idolising primeval societies, barbaric bravery and warrior mores, Nietzsche wishes to:

[E]mpathise with those tremendous eras of “morality of custom” which precede “world history” as the actual and decisive eras of history which determined the character of mankind: the eras in which suffering counted as virtue, cruelty counted as virtue, dissembling counted as virtue, revenge counted as virtue, denial of reason counted as virtue, while on the other hand well-being was accounted a danger, desire for knowledge was accounted a danger, peace was accounted a danger, pity was accounted a danger, being pitied was accounted an affront, work was accounted an affront, madness was accounted godliness, and change was accounted immoral and pregnant with disaster![\[67\]](#)

If Sade reverses Rousseau’s bon sauvage [noble savage (the term was never used by him, but is commonly associated with him)], Nietzsche reverses Seneca’s treatment of cruelty as vice. For Nietzsche, cruelty used to be a virtue in prehistoric or barbaric times, it is a fixed element in the human make-up, and it survives in countless rarefied forms today:

Cruelty is what constitutes the painful sensuality of tragedy. And what pleases us in so-called tragic pity as well as in everything sublime, up to the highest and most delicate of metaphysical tremblings, derives its sweetness exclusively from the intervening component of cruelty. Consider the Roman in the arena, Christ in the rapture of the cross, the Spaniard at the sight of the stake or the bullfight, the present-day Japanese flocking to tragedies, the Parisian suburban laborer who is homesick for bloody revolutions, the Wagnerienne who unfastens her will and lets Tristan und Isolde “wash over her” – what they all enjoy and crave with a mysterious thirst to pour down their throats is “cruelty,” the spiced drink of the great Circe.[\[68\]](#)

Given all this, as Nietzsche concludes, cruelty should be recovered in an honest and healthy way, for human beings are cruelty-prone animals that live in the mundane world, not the God-like, spiritualised, ‘fallen’ and heaven-seeking creatures of which religion and philosophy have pointlessly blared about for centuries. Just like all other animals, so do human beings have bodies, selfish selves, and ‘knightly’ instincts calling for competition, predation and domination. Humans are born to race against one another and the most deserving ones, in the end, ought to survive and lead. Any departure from this natural logic is a concession to degeneration and, essentially, an unhealthily indirect manifestation of repressed cruelty, which cannot but harm our species by letting slaves dominate over masters, priests over knights, and ignorant masses over cultured elites. Instead of understanding and embracing the cruel but actual reality of the world, which is the only

place where true existential meaning can be found, the degenerate pursue mystification and escapism. Exemplarily, the loathed magician/pope of Nietzsche's grand and initially ill-received philosophical allegory, i.e. his 1883-91 *Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A Book for All and None*, discovers this hard truth in his delirium, as he realises that his own pantheon of abstract instruments of power (angels, demons, God, etc.) is the utmost and most cruel betrayal of any chance for real fulfilment. Nothing of what he has been preaching during his life, in order to lead his flock, is true and truly valuable: "*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!*"^[69]

Concluding Remarks

This brief overview of the five most common and/or most articulate conceptions of cruelty that can be retrieved in the history of Western thought shows already how diverse the interpretations of this term can be. Cruelty, like many other concepts that we employ regularly in our language, whether in ordinary or technical discourses, is inherently contested, i.e. it allows for a variety of readings, usages and applications. As Michael Polanyi used to argue in the 20th century, it is important for concepts to be adequately ambiguous, insofar as they are meant to grasp a plethora of subsidiary details that we are only tacitly aware of, and of some of which we may become aware by subsequent processes of analysis, elucidation, comparison, critique, reflection, study, etc. These processes may even lead to a breakdown in the applicability of the concept, which is then abandoned *in lieu* of alternative ones. This abandonment does not mean that the concept is mistaken or useless. Quite the opposite, a concept is correct and useful insofar as we successfully interact with other persons by referring to it, that is, by referring to phenomena by means of it. As a concept in both ordinary and philosophical language, cruelty is no exception to the way in which several conceptions can be produced of any such item, and an array of diverse realisations about human affairs can be unpacked from it by reflecting upon it—in this case, by thinking of the shadow.

Endnotes

[1] Lucius A. Seneca, *De Clementia*, translated by John W. Basore, London: Heinemann, 1928-35[55 AD], II.iv.1-4. Whenever possible, given the great variety of editions over the centuries of Latin classics, I use the standard referencing system for such sources.

[2] Ibid.

Thinking of the Shadow. Conceptions of Cruelty in the History of
Western Thought

[3] Ibid.

[4] Ibid. I.xxiv.1-xxv.2.

[5] Ibid. I.xii.1-4.

[6] Ibid. I.ii.2-iii.3.

[7] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, translated by Fathers of the English Dominican Province, 1920[ca. 1268], <<http://www.newadvent.org/summa/>>, part II of part II, question 159, art. 1. I utilise here the standard scholarly referencing system for Aquinas' *Summa*.

[8] Ibid.

[9] Ibid., art. 2.

[10] Ibid.

[11] Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, London: Andrew Crooke, 1651, <<http://socserv2.socsci.mcmaster.ca/econ/ugcm/3ll3/hobbes/Leviathan.pdf>>, part I, chapter VI.

[12] As cited in *British Moralists 1650-1800*, edited by D.D. Raphael, Indianapolis: Hackett, 1991, vol. 1, 334-5.

[13] As cited in *ibid.*, vol. 2, 72.

[14] Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, part I, chapter XV.

[15] Michel de Montaigne, *The Complete Essays*, translated by Donald Frame, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998[1580], II, 27. Given the great variety of editions of Montaigne's essays, I do not refer to page numbers and use the standard scholarly system instead, i.e. book and essay number.

[16] *Ibid.*, II, 11.

[17] *Ibid.*

[18] Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*, translated by Thomas Nugent, New York: Cosimo, 2011[1748], book VI, chapter, 12; book XV, chapters 1, 7 & 15; book XXVI, chapter 22.

Thinking of the Shadow. Conceptions of Cruelty in the History of
Western Thought

[19] Cf. Voltaire, *Oeuvres complètes de Voltaire*, edited by Louis Moland, Paris: Garnier, 1877[1769].

[20] Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, 6th edition, London: A. Millar, 1790, <<http://www.econlib.org/library/Smith/smMS.html>>, part V, chapter I, §25.

[21] *Ibid.*, part VI, chapter III, §12.

[22] Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, edited by Edwin Cannan, Indianapolis: The Online Library of Liberty, 1901[1776], <<http://www.econlib.org/library/Smith/smWN.html>>, book IV, chapter 8, §17.

[23] *Ibid.*, book V, chapter 2, §§116 & 125.

[24] *Ibid.*, book I, chapter 11, §263.

[25] *Ibid.*, book II, chapter I, §27.

[26] Pietro Verri, *Osservazioni sulla tortura*, Rome: Newton, 18 (translation mine).

[27] Cesare Beccaria, *Crimes and Punishments*, translated by James Anson Farrer, London: Chatto & Windus: 1880[1764], 140-1.

[28] *Ibid.*, 243.

[29] Condorcet, *Esquisse d'un tableau historique des progrès de l'esprit humain, Xème & IIème époque*, 2004[1793-4], <<http://www.eliohs.unifi.it/testi/700/condorcet/index.html>> (translation mine).

[30] Immanuel Kant, *Zum ewigen Frieden. Ein philosophischer Entwurf*, part II, chapter 2, §3 (translation mine).

[31] Immanuel Kant, *Philosophy of Law. An Exposition of the Fundamental Principles of Jurisprudence as Science of Right*, translated by W. Hastie, Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1887[1796], part II, section I, chapter 49, art. E.

[32] Judith Shklar, *Ordinary Vices*, Cambridge: Belknap, 1984, 237.

[33] Giacomo Leopardi, *Operette morali*, "Dialogo di Tristano e di un amico", <http://www.leopardi.it/operette_morali.php>, (translation mine).

Thinking of the Shadow. Conceptions of Cruelty in the History of
Western Thought

[34] Tom Regan, *The Case for Animal Rights*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983, 197-8 (emphases removed).

[35] Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man*, New York: The Free Press, 1992.

[36] Judith Shklar, *Ordinary Vices*, 3, 7 & 44.

[37] Philip P. Hallie, *The Paradox of Cruelty*, Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1969, 14.

[38] *Encyclopaedia of Ethics* (edited by Lawrence C. Becker, New York: Garland, 1992), s.v. "Cruelty", by Philip P. Hallie, 229-31, 229.

[39] Philip P. Hallie, *Lest Innocent Blood Be Shed: The Story of the Village of Le Chambon, and How Goodness Happened There*, New York: Harper & Row, 1985[1979], 2.

[40] Philip P. Hallie, *The Paradox of Cruelty*, 5-6.

[41] *Ibid.*, 13-4 & 29-31.

[42] *Ibid.*, 22-4.

[43] *Ibid.*, 15-20.

[44] *Ibid.*

[45] *Ibid.*, 20-2.

[46] André Dinar, *Les auteurs cruels*, Paris: Mercure de France, 1972[1942], 7.

[47] Philip P. Hallie, *The Paradox of Cruelty*, 70-5.

[48] *Ibid.*, 41 & 46.

[49] *Ibid.*, 43.

[50] *Ibid.*, 42 & 50.

[51] *Ibid.*, 48.

Thinking of the Shadow. Conceptions of Cruelty in the History of
Western Thought

[52] Ibid., 55-8 & 60-2.

[53] Ibid., 33.

[54] Ibid., 79-82.

[55] Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*, translated by W.K. Marriott, 1908[1515], <<http://www.constitution.org/mac/prince00.htm>>, chapter XVII.

[56] Jacques Derrida, *Without Alibi*, translated by Peggy Kamuf, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002[2000], 252.

[57] Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, translated by Robert Hurley, Mark Seem and Helen R. Lane, New York: The Viking Press, 1977[1972], 144.

[58] Clément Rosset, *Joyful Cruelty: Toward a Philosophy of the Real*, translated by David F. Bell, New York: Oxford University Press, 1993[1988], 17.

[59] Ibid., 17-20.

[60] Ibid., 76.

[61] Ibid., 98 (emphases removed).

[62] Antonin Artaud, *The Theater and its Double*, translated by Mary Caroline Richards, New York: Grove Press, 1958[1938], 101-3 & 85.

[63] Ibid., 102.

[64] Ibid., 114 (emphasis removed).

[65] Sade, *La Philosophie dans le boudoir ou Les Instituteurs immoraux*, Paris: Larousse, 1966[1795], 139 (translation mine).

[66] Ibid., 140-1 (translation mine).

[67] Friedrich Nietzsche, *Daybreak*, translated by R.J. Hollingdale, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997[1881], §18.

[68] Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, translated by Judith Norman, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002[1886], §229.

Thinking of the Shadow. Conceptions of Cruelty in the History of
Western Thought

[69] Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, translated by Thomas Common, 1891[1883-91], part IV, §65, section 1 (generally known and translated as *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*).

Share this:

- [Share](#)