



Cruelty as a Foundation for Character Development

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1. If it is difficult to find widespread, cross-cultural, and even theoretical agreement on an appropriate list of virtues for the purpose of normative character education, perhaps we might begin with a vice. I present cruelty, often considered to be the worst of the vices, as a candidate for universal, non-controversial, and cross-cultural contempt. The negative side of a picture of ideal character could be clarified, even established. If work in this direction is plausible (and this paper is exploratory, to say the least), cruelty functions as a foundation for character education: one can agree on the sort of person one does not want to be and work from there. We plant a flag at the negative end of the map.

It is Montaigne who I follow in naming cruelty the worst of the vices. ‘Among the vices’, he admits to us, ‘I cruelly hate cruelty, both by nature and judgment, as the worst of all vices’ (Montaigne, 1958: 182). But in Montaigne’s immensely readable confessional style, he offers no argument for the position, only personal revelation. Just what kind of philosophical argument would be sufficient to make such a case, though, does not spring easily to mind. The decision, after all, is partly personal. But the personal opinion that cruelty is the worst of the vices runs deep and wide, and this does not count for nothing.

‘It seems to me’, wrote Judith Shklar in her essay ‘Putting Cruelty First’, ‘that liberal and humane people, of whom there are many among us, would, if they were asked to rank the vices, put cruelty first. Intuitively they would choose cruelty as the worst thing we do’ (1984: 44). If by ‘liberal and humane’ people, Shklar has in mind modern, educated, Westerners with a sympathy for vaguely left-wing ideas, the category would be too small, for I believe it is more accurately the case that cruelty is considered the worst of the vices by a large majority of people throughout history, of varied educations, ethnicities, eras, and religious loyalties.¹ Let me begin in making a case for cruelty’s place at the top of the vices by noting, anecdotally, the widespread acceptance of cruel traits and behaviour as a suitable target of fear and revulsion.

¹ Nussbaum writes wisely, ‘One might attempt to refurbish descriptive relativism by characterizing it as the view that moral norms differ across societies in significant and interesting ways. This position seems plausible, although its proponents frequently exaggerate the extent of difference by describing the entirety of a culture in a way that equates the culture with its oldest or most traditional strands, ignoring significant dissenting or minority voices (1998: 1786). And she continues, ‘The fiction of cultural homogeneity and closedness propagated by early anthropologists was far from accurate and often resulted from the researcher’s failure to consult more than one “native” (1998: 1786, fn. 1750).

2. It would be dishonest and anachronistic to pretend that cruelty through the ages has always been understood in precisely the same way,² but even with the caveat, its similarities significantly outweigh the differences, and a very recognizable and roughly unified picture of cruelty emerges from all the varied societies where it is spoken of.

Consider myth and religion.³ For the Greeks, Eris, the goddess of strife and discord is described by Hesiod (*Works and Days*, ll. 11-24) as capricious and cruel. The Zeus of Prometheus Bound is painted in negative light because he is a cruel tyrant. In Aztec mythology Cihuacoatl is the fertility goddess with a voracious appetite for human hearts (Sigal, 2010). The Mexica rulers appropriated Cihuacoatl, and stories about her, to justify human sacrifice and the relentless demand for labour on the part of the commoners. The commoners, in turn and understandably, greatly feared Cihuacoatl, seeing her as 'a cruel, relentless creature', in the words of Cecelia Klein (quoted in Blake, 2008: 33). Lamashtu, the most dreaded of the Mesopotamian goddesses, stole children from their mothers. Prayers were offered to protect against her, and one incantation opens:

Great is the daughter of Heaven who tortures babies
Her hand is a net, her embrace is death
She is cruel, raging, angry, predatory

(Bane, 2012: 199)

On an amulet from Byblos, we read: [Lamashtu] is furious (ez-ze-et), she is cruel (šam -rat), she is a goddess, she is of terrifying brilliance (na-mur-rat) [...] She does not cease entering [the houses of pregnant females], she does not cease holding [to the bed of those giving birth]. (West, 1986-1990: 355).

Our fairy tales over the centuries are filled with cruelty; the villain is commonly defined by it. In *Hansel and Gretel*, a witch lures children to her house with candy intending to eat them. In *Snow White*, a queen learns there is a girl with a prettier face than hers, and swiftly orders a hunter to bring her the girl's heart. When he cannot do it, the queen goes out herself, dressed as an old woman, and determined to kill the girl with a poisoned apple. Bluebeard murders wife after wife, storing them in his basement protected by a magical key. The Big Bad Wolf eats up Red Riding Hood's grandmother, dresses in her clothes, and awaits the young girl in her grandmother's own house, pretending to be the old woman and ready to eat Red Riding Hood after a very odd conversation where she is made to guess the wolf's identity.

² See for example Winter (2018: 89-110).

³ I am not placing these words together as synonyms...

Suetonius's gossipy portraits of the twelve Caesar's almost always descend into stories of horrific cruelty providing the element of monstrosity so crucial to Suetonius's pull:⁴ 'Soon Tiberius broke out in every sort of cruelty and never lacked for victims' (p. 136); 'Everything that Caligula said and did was marked with equal cruelty, even during his hours of rest and amusement and banquetry' (p. 162); '[Domitian's] good-will and self-restraint were not, however, destined to continue long, and the cruel streak in him soon appeared' (p. 301); 'Nero was no less cruel to strangers than to members of his family' (p. 229).

The most reviled historical figures are often the cruellest. At Ranker.com hundreds of thousands of people from around the world continually vote to create a list, in this instance, of the all-time worst people in history. As of November 26th 2018 (an admittedly recent date), these are the top ten:

Joseph Stalin

Adolf Hitler

Osama Bin Laden

Pol Pot

Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi

Idi Amin

Chairman Mao

Otmar Freiherr von Verschuer

Josef Mengele

Albert Fish

The list is shot-through, in almost every case, by cruelty. It is widely taken to be supreme.

3. With a brief and anecdotal view of cruelty's place in world consciousness, let me try and focus my argument for its supremacy by comparison. Here is an unpleasant experiment for the purpose of testing our intuitions. Consider the atrocities committed against the Putumayo Indians from 1903-1916 by the rubber barons of the Peruvian Rubber Company, especially at the hands of Armando Normand:

⁴ Page numbers are from Suetonius (2007).

[Normand's] atrocities include pouring kerosene on Indians (men and women) and setting them alight, burning men at the stake, dashing out the brains of children; and again and again cutting off the arms and legs of Indians and leaving them to speedy death in this agony. Sometimes he gave their trunks to his dogs to eat. When an Indian refused to carry a load for him he had the man's legs held apart and made [an associate] beat [him in that place] with a club until he died. He burned children alive when their parents fled to the forest. He had a Peruvian flag soaked in kerosene and wrapped around an Indian woman, then set alight to it. He flogged small children to death.' (Furieux, 1969: 183)

Place the cruelty of Armando Normand against another vice exemplified in history and see in the end, after head to head comparisons, which is left standing. If we recognise that it is not merely cruelty at issue here but extreme cruelty, and any other vice taken to its extreme could be similarly problematic, I suggest that even if the comparison was between vices at their extreme manifestation, cruelty would still rank highest. Consider, then:

- The cowardice of Francesco Schettino the captain of the Costa Concordia who in 2012 abandoned his ship before the passengers and crew, leaving thirty-two people to die.
- The hypocrisy of Ted Haggard who, after preaching stridently for many years against homosexuality, was found to be a drug addict who spent a great deal of time with male prostitutes.
- The envy of Cain, sufficiently jealous of his brother Abel to go out into the field and kill him.
- The greed of Bernie Madoff ruining thousands and thousands of lives in the syphoning of savings and retirement plans.
- The pride, even hubris, of the White Star Line who decided against providing enough life boats for every person on board the RMS Titanic because the ship was, to their minds, unsinkable.

Horrendous as these things are, do we feel something stronger when we hear of Armando Normand's reprehensible cruelty? Do we intuitively hate cruelty more?

But one candidate may present more competition than the foregoing. On March 20th, 2003, at The Connecticut Forum, Elie Wiesel said:

I believe that indifference is what is worse in human nature. Some people like to be indifferent – it's easier. And also because indifference is not even to be the beginning of a process; it's the end of a process. It's almost worse than hatred. Hatred, you can fight it, you know how. You don't even know how to fight indifference. Because a person doesn't realise that he or she is indifferent.

Wiesel believed that the horrors inflicted upon the Jews by the Nazis were enabled in large part by the indifference of those caught up in it, and by the indifference of those watching on. In the US News & World Report in October 1986, Wiesel said, 'Indifference, to me, is the epitome of evil'. If a terrible cruelty initiated the Final Solution, beginning in Hitler and the men and women who made high-level decisions with him, it was the indifference of the wider population, the ordinary men and women running the camps, the accountants and the doctors, the journalists and the diplomats (in Germany and abroad) who facilitated the enterprise. It was their turning a blind eye and getting on with the job that gave that initial cruelty any power whatsoever on the ground. And so Wiesel raged against an indifference in the general population which, had it opened both eyes and shaken itself awake, would have stopped the Final Solution dead in its tracks. But instead it shrugged and carried on.

Is indifference worse than cruelty? The comparison is a game almost not worth playing. At some level it does not matter, and to squabble over the details on this front is to miss the forest for the trees. However, for the purpose of a specific sort of question, mapping out our views about the peak of vicious character, we can push a bit further on our intuitions about both these vices.

4. When we ask a question like 'Which vice is worse?' we need more information to know what we mean by worse; what are the criteria by which such a thing is judged?

Factor one: a vice can be bad for the agent or bad for those around them. Intemperance may be a very bad thing for an intemperate person but have little effect on the people nearby; it is the agent himself who eats and drinks to excess. Cruelty, on the other hand, can propel a person to the top of their organisation, boosting a career enormously, but be very bad for the victims. And a second factor to consider: extreme cruelty of the kind displayed by Armando Normand might be rather rare, or at least comparatively rare placed alongside the sort of widespread indifference seen in Nazi Germany. If we were to tabulate the scope of the damage done by each of these vices, indifference, being the more common vice, would score more highly than the more isolated cases of extreme cruelty.

I will need to clarify the system of hierarchy, then, taking into account both of these concerns. When I speak of a vice being the worst, I am first thinking of suffering inflicted upon others. Because an agent with a vice is often in some way responsible for it (or the progression

of it), we might say that the person who is made to suffer by another agent's vice is more innocent, and therefore the victim of a greater wrong than the vicious agent who may well be harmed by their own vicious traits. In searching for the worst vice I am looking for the vice which brings the most harm to another – often innocent – person. But now, what do I mean by 'most harm'? Is this achieved by widespread indifference or by occasional pockets of extreme cruelty?

There are two ways we might calculate the 'greatest harm'? One is to collect every harm occasioned by one particular vice, say indifference, and another particular vice, say cruelty, and to see which has done the most damage over time. This could range over all of history for all people or more narrowly over the lifetime of one individual person. Either way it would be a quantitative ranking of harm. But we need not exclude qualitative harm from the equation. We can envisage some theoretical formula that is able account for a combination of quantitative and qualitative harm in the case of each vice, and to once more collect every instance of these now dual measures over history, concluding with a result or set of results revealing the vice which has caused the most harm. Even on this second more sensitive reading, though, if one vice is very common, and the other is quite rare, it will probably still be the vice with the markedly higher quantitative appearances that will have the higher numbers in the end.

But I am not primarily interested in whatever vice can cause the most amount of harm over time. To that end, my ranking of the worst vice will not be determined by a gathering together of every instance of that vice through history (personal or national or whatever else) and blurring those appearances together as a whole, important as that may be for thinking about what character traits will be worth inculcating. Saying that cruelty is the worst vice first takes into consideration the qualitative experience of the suffering victim in the individual case and, second, the mindset of the cruel agent in the individual case. I believe that the experience of suffering from the vice itself is worse for the victim of cruelty than it is for the victim of indifference, and that the mindset of the cruel agent is, intuitively, more morally problematic than the mindset of the indifferent agent.

As regards the former, Gabriele Taylor (in her comparison between brutality and cruelty) writes:

Unlike brutality, cruelty always involves mental activity, in that the cruel but not the brutal need to ascribe a mental life to the victim and assess it from their particular point of view, which, in turn, requires thought on their own part [...] The victim of brutality need only be available and destroyable. More is necessary of the victim of cruelty: not only has she to be capable of suffering, she should, for best effect, also be capable of remembering such suffering and of formulating fearful expectations. (Taylor, 2006: 116-117)

Taylor takes her lead from Machiavelli advising the Prince that it is sometimes necessary to be very cruel if one wishes to avoid hatred and discord in a given people. Machiavelli himself gives us the example of Hannibal whose 'inhuman cruelty' served to keep a wild and varied army in line and, without it, apparently, his other virtues would not have sufficiently held the reigns (1998: 67). The way in which this cruelty serves to maintain order is by fear and terror. Taylor writes, 'Repeated acts of cruelty, or continuous expectation of being treated cruelly, will have a paralysing effect, and will reduce the person concerned to the status of a victim undermined in her capacity as an agent' (2006: 115). The victim of cruelty undergoes the fear that comes with having a tormentor, someone who desires their suffering, even takes pleasure in it, and goes further again in putting their desire into action. The act or acts in question, being designed especially to bring suffering, holds a specific terror for the victim who understands what is coming; indeed the tormentor is often at pains to ensure an awareness on the part of the victim. For the victim, this state of affairs is worse than in the case of indifference. The tormentor does not have a place with indifference itself since the indifferent agent is not in the first place trying to torment. The element of fear, apprehension, and tension is not present in the same way.

The victim of cruelty also suffers as the target of intentional behaviour. Representative definitions of cruelty almost always ascribe intent on the part of the agent. Victor Nell writes that cruelty is the 'deliberate infliction of physical or psychological pain on another living creature, or on the self' (2006: 212), and Judith Shklar has it as 'the wilful inflicting of physical pain on a weaker being in order to cause anguish and fear' (1982: 17). While this cannot guarantee the success of a cruel action, intent plays an important role in success as it does in many arenas of life. In the individual case of cruelty, the person who is intending to bring suffering will probably have a better rate of success than the one who indifferently allows it whenever it should happen to pass by, if ever. Again, this is worse in the end for the victim. In the individual case the victim of cruelty is more likely to experience the suffering which is intended than she is in the case of indifference where, whatever happens to be allowed, be it cruelty or something else, is not directed with the same purpose. Indeed, a lack of intention is often at play with the latter.

I have so far argued that the qualitative experience of cruelty is worse for the victim. Now I want to say that the mindset of the cruel agent is more disturbing than the mindset of the indifferent agent. There is something especially horrific in the agent who desires to bring suffering to another and takes pleasure in this. Taking pleasure in causing another to suffer is crucial to a definition of cruelty and helps to rule out 'benevolent oncologists', for example, who may cause people to suffer but are surely not cruel for doing so (Parmer, 2017: 404).⁵ And so, it is worse to intentionally knock a child onto the road than it is to turn away when you see a child playing very near a road. It is worse still to intentionally push a child enjoying oneself

⁵ I would say, as Parmer essentially does, that the torturer who takes no pleasure in the suffering they bring is not cruel but callous (2017: 404).

because of the suffering it brings. Such behaviour is constitutive of cruelty. And even where cruelty fails, the mindset and the behaviours are still problematic.

A terrorist whose bomb does not go off has not succeeded in his plot, but we may well label the acts and mental states leading up to that point cruel. It should also be said that the terrorist has not only revealed a cruel disposition (the potential for future cruelty) for he does strap a bomb to his chest, does go into the crowded train station, and does pull the trigger (Robinson, forthcoming). These are properly cruel actions even without the violent culmination of an explosion. Likewise, the man who tries and fails to poison his boss has still performed a cruel action even though not technically a 'successful' one. I do not think we need the man to successfully poison his boss to 'earn' the attribution of cruelty. This is perhaps different to the way that a temperate man may need to successfully refrain from drunkenness in order to be called temperate (Robinson, forthcoming).

To compare failures, which can happen with any vice, a failure of cruelty is worse than a failure of indifference, if such a term makes sense given the lack of intention in the latter. Nevertheless, here is an example. Nero wishes to make his chef suffer for burning his breakfast and sends him to the arena to be eaten by lions. Unbeknownst to Nero who does not get to the arena in time that afternoon, the lions do not find the chef appetising, but Nero still goes to sleep happy, believing the chef was painfully killed. Next, a cupbearer hears a rumour that Nero has sent the chef to be eaten by lions, but, indifferent to this, he does nothing further to investigate the rumour nor rescue the chef. In the end, the chef is not eaten since the lions did not find him appetising. Although both cases result in failure, Nero's mindset and his behaviour is morally worse than the cupbearer's.

5. I think the direction of these comparisons is making clearer the particular profile of cruelty and its problems. I have tried to show that cruelty simpliciter is worse than any other vice simpliciter when compared head to head, and in doing so we begin to see the contours of cruelty emerge.

But now we want to know what is so bad about cruelty in and of itself. Here I need to put a sharper point on the forgoing. This will still be an argument, a normative thought and not an objective fact about cruelty's place at the top, but with that said, what is the problem with cruelty?

I begin with the premise that the worst thing a person can experience is suffering. The term 'suffering' is intentionally broad. The OED gives, 'To have (something painful, distressing, or injurious) inflicted or imposed upon one', and, 'The bearing or undergoing of pain, distress, or tribulation'. That may be cashed out in different ways. A person can suffer physical pain, mental anguish, emotional hurt, and spiritual torment. We can suffer loss of relationship or possession or identity or hope. And we can experience combinations of these. The degree to which a person suffers is impacted by the (a) the depth of the subjective feeling of suffering, either

physical, mental, emotional or spiritual, (b) the knowledge that one's physical, mental, emotional, or spiritual suffering is based upon some objective state of affairs (i.e. the victim's child is really in danger somewhere, or the tormentor has really broken the victim's legs, etc.),⁶ and (c) the degree to which one is aware that the suffering experienced is being intentionally brought about, even knowing who is causing it, and why.⁷ The cruel agent is one who intentionally aims to cause another to suffer, either physically, mentally, emotionally or spiritually, and takes pleasure in this. Since suffering per se is the worst thing that a sentient being can experience, the cruel agent is one who wishes to bring about the worst thing possible for another (usually) person or an animal, often taking pleasure in this.⁸ The cruel agent who wishes to make this suffering as extreme and effective as possible will (a) attempt to make the depth of the subjective feeling very strong, (b) base their cruelty on objective states of affairs made known to the victim, and (c) terrify the victim with the knowledge that the cruelty is intentional in order to create fear, apprehension, and domination leading to diminished agency.

Not every instance of cruelty is going to require the cruel person themselves putting into practice (a), (b), and (c). Not all cruelty needs the element of causation. Common examples of cruelty include a person finding enjoyment while simply watching a victim experience (a), (b), and (c). If a woman goes to the arena to see an unarmed slave suffer at the hands of an armed and armoured gladiator, she performs no cruel actions but exhibits a mental cruelty where she enjoys the suffering of the slave who undergoes (a), (b), and (c). Where it takes a certain sort of person who is able to themselves perform the cruel actions leading to suffering, many more are able to display mental cruelty without the element of causation.

Where cruelty is successful, its causing another person to suffer is the worst type of behaviour one person can inflict upon another. (To be clear, I am talking about cruelty simpliciter; not every instance of the suffering brought about by cruelty will be equal). Where cruelty fails, the motivating desire is nonetheless the worst kind of desire a person can possess, wishing as it is for the victim to suffer and taking pleasure in this. Where cruelty contains no element of causation, it is the worst type of mental activity a person can undertake, comprising as it does the enjoyment of seeing another person suffer, often at the hands of a cruel agent. Aside from the morally problematic status of the cruel agent, the victim of cruelty suffers. The victim of cruelty suffers a subjective pain, either physical, mental, emotional or spiritual. The victim of cruelty suffers in the knowledge that their pain is based upon an objective reality. The victim of cruelty suffers at the hands of a tormentor who takes pleasure in their fear, apprehension, and lack of agency. And take together, this why cruelty in and of itself is the worst of the vices.

⁶ This element is not necessary, but is certainly helpful. Mental cruelty can easily be based upon lies and deceit.

⁷ Element (a) and possibly (c) will be very important in cases of animal cruelty, and humans in general will feel the impact of (a), (b), and (c).

⁸ Though I have argued that cruelty can still obtain where the target is not definitely known to be sentient (Robinson, forthcoming).

6. It is very confronting to hear about, perhaps even to meet, people who desire to bring suffering and who take pleasure in this. Reading notorious examples of cruelty through history can leave us feeling sick and angry. In suggesting cruelty as a foundation for character development, then, are we only interested in these extreme cases that leave us reeling?

I think it is of enormous importance when considering why we 'cruelly hate cruelty' to borrow Montaigne's phrase, or why 'put cruelty first' to borrow Judith Shklar's, to recognise that what we hate about cruelty is actually not so far from each one of us. The empirical details of specific extreme examples of cruelty through history are not at all irrelevant, but we must see that a crucial part of what we hate about cruelty is common to every instance of it.

Montaigne wrote, 'Nature herself, I fear, implants in men some instinct towards inhumanity' (1958: 187).⁹ Montaigne has hit upon an uncomfortable truth. We are prone to cruelty in various guises. Sometimes we will have a reason for it. Gabriele Taylor divides our justifications for cruelty into two camps: reactive and aggressive reasons (2006: 118):

Reactive reasons are a response to some perceived suffering or humiliation on the agent's part, who sees his cruelty as a means of getting his own back and re-establishing himself by reducing the status of the other. Aggressive reasons are precautionary in that the agent makes the first move in order to prevent a situation where she might find herself at the mercy of others.

It does not take much imagination to think of scenarios where ordinary people possess reactive and aggressive reasons for cruelty. And if we accept that cruelty is the worst of the vices and reveals a troubling attitude toward other sentient beings, we need to be on the lookout for cruelty in our own lives along with those explanations we give ourselves to try and justify it. In righting a wrong, it is all too easy to go beyond restoring a measure of balance, heading out towards cruelty. The woman who is slighted by her boss in a staff meeting may go beyond seeking an apology and aim to see her boss humiliated in front of the office. The boy who is worried that he will become a target of bullying may lash out at someone else, causing this person to suffer and establishing his own superiority before it is threatened. Cruelty is most insidious when we believe we have a reason for it. Where we believe we have been wronged or where we fear that we could soon be at the mercy of another, we need to be especially careful that we do not try to solve these predicaments with cruelty and to justify our cruelty with reasons. There is a vast gulf between having reasons and having good reasons.

⁹ In Vonnegut's *Mother Night*, the narrator, Howard Campbell Jr., writes, 'I doubt if there has ever been a society that has been without strong and young people eager to experiment with homicide, provided no very awful penalties are attached to it' (1968: 103).

Cruelty is not a distant vice, as if it were the select property of criminals and tyrants. It creeps up all too regularly through us when we act to make another suffer, sometimes to redress the balance and sometimes as a preventative defence. But this so-called rational cruelty is not the only sort we exhibit in ordinary life. Taylor writes that cruelty can be roughly divided into reacted and aggressive reasons, but sadly it does not always take one of those two courses. Cruelty in ordinary life can arise out of a kind of guilty pleasure.

In a column for the Tribune in early 1945, Orwell wrote about a poster he saw for a waxwork museum displaying German atrocities from the war: 'Horrors Of The Concentration Camp. Come Inside And See Real Nazi Tortures. Flogging, Crucifixion, Gas Chambers, etc. Children's Amusement Section No Extra Charge.' That final sentence, despite its unintended humour (or perhaps because of it), reveals a grim misunderstanding of the whole affair.

As one might expect knowing anything about Orwell's indiscriminate curiosity, he went to see it, and described it as 'grubby, unlikelike and depressing' (1968: 316). He admits that attendees were probably very aware of their motives for going in and somewhat ashamed of them. 'However', given the exhibition's implicit connection to Britain's victory – perhaps a moral victory, it might have been thought – over German crimes, 'you can wallow in the most disgusting descriptions of torture and massacre, not without any sensation of guilt, but with the feeling that you are performing a praiseworthy political action' (1968: 316-317). By turns depressing and insightful, he comments on this general idea with the following:

The journalists responsible know very well what they are doing. They know that innumerable people get a sadistic kick out of thinking about torture, especially the torture of women, and they are cashing in on this widespread neurosis [...] And one can get a very similar kick out of barbarous actions committed by one's own side so long as they are thought of as the just punishment of evildoers. We have not actually got to the point of Roman gladiatorial shows yet, but we could do so if the necessary pretext were supplied. If, for instance, it were announced that the leading war criminals were to be eaten by lions or trampled to death by elephants in the Wembley Stadium, I fancy that the spectacle would be quite well attended. (Orwell, 1968: 317)

It is possible that the guilty pleasure one takes in witnessing atrocities may be ultimately connected to an underlying, even subconscious, resentment attached to reactive reasons or some precautionary fear stemming from aggressive reasons. But in the absence of a deeper quasi-rational explanatory role of that sort, it may just be an 'instinct toward humanity', as Montaigne warned. On many occasions this inhumanity will be passive, taking a tour of a museum of atrocities, watching a mismatched gladiatorial battle from high up in the stands, or looking on as someone is bullied in the office or on the schoolyard. I think it poses no difficulty to understand why active cruelty should be an issue, but what is the problem with the passively

enjoying the suffering of another sentient creature? If the cruelty is to take place with or without us, what harm can be added in our enjoyment as spectators?

Life is substantially diminished if the only thing taken into account is the consequences. How we live and why is part of the thickness of reality. It matters not only that one tells their partner how they love them, but also that one means it. It matters that one tries to help fix a broken-down car because they feel compassion for the family on the side of the road even if ultimately it cannot be fixed. It matters if a father plans a day at the zoo for his children even if it rains and they never find out. It matters whether a dentist drills a child's tooth for the pleasure of seeing them suffer or does it because it is the right thing to do even if both men perform the exact same actions. And it matters if one who sits in the stands of the arena enjoys the suffering of the slaves or feels a deep sorrow for them.

The cruelty that is all too familiar in our own lives, whether due to reactive and aggressive reasons or simply out of a guilty pleasure, ought to be the recipient of the same hatred that is reserved for extreme cases. This is because intentional behaviour designed to bring suffering to another and taking pleasure in this or the enjoyment of seeing another suffer at the hands of a tormentor, represents the worst impulses in us – the worst type of actions one can perform and the worst type of desires one can possess. It goes without saying that there are more and less extreme appearances of cruelty, but at the heart of each occurrence is the intention to bring suffering to another sentient being or, if the causal element is absent, the enjoyment of seeing or hearing about such a thing take place.

7. To finish, I am challenged by a line from Natalia Ginzburg's essay, 'The Little Virtues', where she writes, 'As far as the education of children is concerned I think they should be taught not the little virtues but the great ones [...] Besides, the great can also contain the little, but by the laws of nature there is no way that the little can contain the great' (1985: 121-123). And, in like manner, there is no way that the vices can contain the virtues, as if concentration upon these darker dispositions might somehow, directly teach a child compassion and generosity. Shklar has written elsewhere that the emphasis on cruelty does not provide a summum bonum to which we strive but a summum malum we all wish to avoid (1989: 29). But why focus on this summum malum, cruelty? It goes without saying that there is nothing pleasant about it. For the purpose of character development, would it not be better to seek compassion and generosity and those traits we do wish to inculcate? I close with four brief replies.

First, there is a conceptual work to be done in mapping out the landscape of our ideas about normative character and its development. I have argued for cruelty's place as the worst of the vices, the epitome of the character we do not want to possess. Even if we rarely venture into those dark corners of the map, we at least know that the geography has been charted. Our picture of ideal character, if it is to be complete, must contain both the negative and positive poles.

Second, if there is disagreement or unclarity surrounding the good traits we ought to try and possess, I have tried to show that we may find widespread agreement about the worst of the bad traits, and I have tried to give an account of what it is we – that is, a great many of us throughout history, of varied educations, ethnicities, eras, and religious affections –hate about cruelty.

Third, Rebecca Solnit has written recently, in an essay titled ‘Politics and the American Language’, ‘When the subject is grim, I think of the act of naming as diagnosis. Though not all diagnosed diseases are curable, once you know what you’re facing, you’re far better equipped to know what you can do about it [...] Naming is the first step in the process of liberation’ (2018: 1). If cruelty is not so far from each one of us, we must be able to identify it in our own lives and to identify what precisely is wrong with it if we are to ward off its deepening place in our constellation of character traits.

Finally, Markus Wild has written that, for Montaigne, ‘the hatred of cruelty is an even greater motivation toward benevolence than any model of virtue could ever be’ (2011: 210). It may be that a proper understanding of cruelty and its horrors will serve as a powerful motivation to be compassionate and generous and patient, etc. Cruelty lights a fire in us, inspiring us to fight for those countervailing virtues which can stomp out cruelty where it presents, and instead fill up the world with something far better. So long as we are careful with our negative emotions,¹⁰ in the absence of cruelty’s disappearance from the world altogether, the hatred of cruelty may at least bring about the slow, probably uneven, definitely difficult, but absolutely necessary reduction of it in our own lives and the lives of others.

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¹⁰ See Nussbaum on the dangers of anger, for instance (2016).

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