



# Cruelty

A Book About Us

Maggie Schein

palgrave  
macmillan

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*This book is dedicated to the guardians of stories and communications that transform us: parents, teachers, witnesses, seekers, doers, tellers, those who see, who show, who mesmerize, who walk with us, who talk with us, those who exist in awe, and to “the little prince” in each of us.*

*—and to the Pilot who drew a Sheep for the Little Prince.*

*—and to the Little Prince’s Rose and to the endless question: “Is it yes, or is it no?”*

# Prelude

## Defining Cruelty: Dictionary Definitions (Fail)

**From: MERRIAM-WEBSTER Dictionary (2022)<sup>1</sup>:**

crueler or cruller; cruelest or cruelest

Definition of cruel

1: disposed to inflict pain or suffering:

//devoid of humane feelings

// a cruel tyrant

// has a cruel heart

2a: causing or conducive to injury, grief, or pain

// a cruel joke

// a cruel twist of fate

b: unrelieved by leniency

// cruel punishment

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<sup>1</sup> Accessed 5/15/2022: <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/cruel>.

**From: The OXFORD Dictionary (2021)<sup>2</sup>:**

**noun**

(pl. **cruelties**)

1. [uncountable] cruelty (to somebody/something) behavior that causes pain or suffering to others, especially deliberately cruelty to animals. The deliberate *cruelty of his words cut her like a knife*. Opposite kindness.
2. [countable, usually plural] a cruel action. *Frightening cruelties were inflicted on child factory workers well into the 19th century*.
3. [countable, uncountable] something that happens that seems unfair *the cruelties of life*.

**From: CAMBRIDGE Dictionary (2022)<sup>3</sup>:**

**Cruel** | **cruellest** or **crueler** |

Extremely unkind and unpleasant and causing pain to people or animals intentionally

Willfully causing pain or suffering to others

Synonyms:

barbaric

barbarous formal

brutal

callous

hard (SEVERE)

harsh (UNKIND)

**INHUMAN**

sadistic

savage

tyrannical

tyrannous

vicious

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<sup>2</sup> Accessed 5/15/2022: [https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/us/definition/american\\_english/cruelty](https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/us/definition/american_english/cruelty).

<sup>3</sup> Accessed 5/15/2022: <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/english/cruel>.

### Sample of a US Legal Definition<sup>4</sup>:

“The deliberate and malicious infliction of mental or physical pain upon persons or animals.”

Please register that the nature and quantity of the details provided in US legal definitions often vary depending on their contexts, from the constitution, amendments, bills, laws specific to categories of victims like children, the elderly, nonhumans, the incompetent or mentally deficient, Supreme Court of The United States (SCOTUS) decisions, rules of engagement, war crimes, and so on, but in general, they are vague and have in common mal-intent and/or extreme physical pain.

**Note:** Each of these dictionary definitions offered for “cruelty” contains aspects that might contribute to an understanding of cruelty, but they are pitifully short of even the half of it, sharing and displaying our confusion in authoritative garb. Some definitions and synonyms dictionaries do, importantly, explicitly or implicitly, point to the connection between our understanding of “humanity” as part of our understanding of “cruelty.” Remember, the Cambridge Dictionary uses “inhumanity” and “cruelty” almost interchangeably. Thus, it follows, that “humanity” has a moral valence and is in direct contrast to whatever “cruelty” is. Though each dictionary definition is a touching stone, offering something, each is also inadequate. My attempt to offer groundwork does not claim to be adequate either. Rather, it attempts to gather together the provisional bits we can, from anecdotes, philosophy, psychology, to common sense and experiences, for building out a broader platform for discussing cruelty. Chapter 1 offers the background and a detailed formula or skeleton of a definition of cruelty. Here is a short summary of that suggested formula:

**Cruelty:** A human being perverting, or being responsible for the conditions for the perversion, of what should make a creature flourish as one of its kind against that creature, resulting in its harm somehow. The mecha-

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<sup>4</sup> Accessed 5/15/22:



nisms driving the perversions may involve deliberation, indifference, malice, good intent; legal, societal, conventional, or religious violation, reprimand, or sanction; extremity, pain, suffering, pleasure; or an ordinary/incidental use—please be forewarned that I am putting “harm” and “somehow” to more work here than they are likely to be assumed to be doing. For our purposes, “harm” is not to be conflated with “pain” or “suffering,” and “somehow” isn’t meant as a glib brush-off but, rather, as an alert that we are in amorphous, unfinished, parts of unknowns.

If that sounds complicated, that is because it is, but *it is complicated mostly because we haven’t really talked it through*. There is plenty to unravel, undam, and plenty of diverting and competing tributaries and riptides of thought to explore.

# Preface and Author's Notes

## Preface: Firefly Death Necklaces

“The Aim of Knowledge,” says Hegel, “is to divest the objective world of its strangeness, and to make us more at home in it.” Different men find their minds more at home in very different fragments of the world.

—William James<sup>1</sup>

It is the time of day when afternoon swings into dusk and dusk into evening, when parents take their cocktails and children reign over the front lawn, looking to see who is interested in whom and what. I am not a particularly attractive child. I am slight, fast, aggressive—for a girl—not unpretty, but I am not the perfectly symmetrical face, with the bee-stung lips and Disney blonde hair that my best friend is. I am weird, also, and more than just a bit socially awkward. Among those on my lawn, enjoying the transitions of light and catching more fireflies than any of us, is my opposite. He is the boy everyone, including most of the boys, including the parents, has a crush on. It is undeniable. He's that sort. I'm not sure if he's even actually handsome. That doesn't seem to matter. He keeps his fireflies in a jar into the lid of which he's poked holes so they will live.

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<sup>1</sup>James, William. *A Pluralistic Universe*. Intro. Levinson, H. (University of Nebraska Press; Reprinted from the original 1909 Ed), P.11.

He knew to do that. He brought along a nail to poke the holes with. He's good that way. Charming that way. He looks over at me and deftly catches a few more as I watch. Is that for me? Eli sits down next to me. His knees punctuate his lankiness. He pulls out a thin needle and a spool of waxed thread. With care, he takes one firefly, its mating light flickering on and off, and he gently pulls off its wings. Those are in the way. Fireflies don't scream, so this work goes unnoticed by most of us. He then pierces the fireflies just at the—I am not sure what you call it—so that they are immobile, still flashing their lights, and still alive. Then he threads them, with their bellies all alight, puts them around my neck, and ties the back, lifting my hair to get a good knot. And now I am queen of the fireflies. I am it. They pump their bioluminescent bellies in a last and futile attempt to carry on. And I wear them. And Eli made them for me. And then, of course, all their lights go out.

Is this a nostalgic story? Maybe. But in so many ways, this is a story about the bittersweet tincture in which humanity and inhumanity muddle: cruelty.

Are you cruel? I would very much like to believe that I am not a cruel person, and that I belong in the flock of those at least aspiring toward good most of the time, toward that mercurial virtue we sometimes mean when we say, "humanity." I would also like to believe that most people are not cruel creatures and that the dungeons of "inhumanity" are percussed with the footfalls of rare and extreme anomalies of nature, nurture, culture, and fate. Wouldn't you?

In public, probably most of us agree. I certainly *want* to agree. Who among us, who is not already an outcaste from the "us" of society, would proudly display how cruel he can be and how often he wants to exercise that skill? We might've made a firefly necklace for our crush, or we might've worn one, but we cannot confess to being cruel. That was for love. And we were young. And fireflies are magical. And we didn't know better. Or maybe it was their karma to be around our loved one's neck? And, for the record, Eli *was* handsome.

It might be all right in good company, well-footed by years of shared good intent, to vent such thoughts, fantasies, and questions. Or, if one is an artist, to work them out on the page, the sounds, the canvas, or the stage.

For most of us, most times, however, it's really not all right. I attempt to hold dear to honesty in this, even when it's raw, because the topic is too difficult and too important not to do so. I suspect that most people can identify with me in the story above, with Eli, or with my beautiful friend who watched that scene play out and wondered why the necklace wasn't for her, or the other friend, who at the corner of the lawn, bore horrified witness to what was happening to the fireflies as a violation of something unidentifiable, or the quiet one to the side whose father just moved him to town, away from the mother who expressed her own pain by making wounds in the flesh of her child, and whose screams were, unlike the fireflies', audible, and yet mostly ignored. The realities of this scene may not make us inhuman, and they may not solidify our virtue, but they make us perplexingly and, simultaneously, essentially human. This book is an attempt to come clean, for ourselves, about what being human might mean, morally speaking (but ironically, not appealing to any specific moral or ethical doctrine), so we can get better at it.

Some of us have strung up fireflies in youthful naiveté and curiosity; some carry the inarticulate historical wounds from slavery—as slave, trader, witness, slaveholder, or something in between. Have you been inexplicably reduced to tears and rendered intellectually impotent by a throwaway, underhanded, comment, no matter how thick your skin or how well cured your experiences? We've all been, and rightly so, emotionally desiccated by daily news reports. On another swing of the pendulum, some of us have tortured. Others have survived torture. Some have abused. Some have endured abuse. Some have survived it. Some are carved into their current shapes by it. Some secretly pride themselves on being master bullies, while some pride themselves on being the cunning and stealthy underdogs that won't be broken. Welcome to this conversation: we're talking about cruelty. We are talking about how not to do it, ways we might find to cheat what appears to be a unique and inextricable pitfall of being human; how to respond to it when we witness it; how we respond to it when we suffer it; and, as part of each of those pursuits, the ways in which each of us might come to understand **what** cruelty is. And, also, through this lens, what *we* are.

Talking about cruelty is undeniably awkward. I know, because I do it a lot. Because of this, I have come to recognize a peculiarly stable pattern

of responses when the subject comes up—from scholars across different disciplines to the only other person at the bar in a small-town joint. Let's take one instance (modified) from my real life.

I am at dinner with guests of my employer. They are sophisticated and lovely people, and they generously invite me into the conversation. Knowing I am a scholar and a writer, they ask me what I am working on. "Cruelty," I say. Eyes drop, guests swallow hard and tighten their jaws a bit; forks weave squeakily across the empty parts of their plates like kids rocking back and forth when caught in a lie. Say that you work on cruelty out loud in front of anyone who doesn't know you that well. Then try the same thing with the subject "beauty." Try to make it fairer and say "injustice" or even "human trafficking." There will be a marked difference in responses from your interlocutors. Although I am the one bringing up the subject, and that puts me in a peculiar light, I am not particularly intriguing, depraved, or colored by the light and shadows of the macabre. Cruelty is. And discomfort with it belongs to all of us, or it should. I just happen to interrogate it more than many do.

The mention of cruelty puts our emotions in a thumbscrew, puts our reactions on the rack, on view, and invites presumptions of intimacy, accusations of arrogance, ignorance, callousness, shameful worries, and painful memories. Talking honestly about it can expose truths we may prefer to keep tucked away and, at the same time, may confirm that at some level, even when exposed by floodlights, we are impenetrable to each other and unknowable to each other. Thinking and talking about cruelty quickly reminds us that others are, to quote the Australian philosopher Raimond Gaita, "limits to our wills."<sup>2</sup> No matter what realizations we come to, any conversation will twist those screws and wrench those intellectual joints.

So, let's be gentle with each other in this conversation. There may be a bitter, twisted charm to the nostalgic firefly example, but there is no such release when talking about any one man's torture or another's. No experience of cruelty is comparable to any other, and incidences of cruelty span

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<sup>2</sup>Gaita, Raimond. *A Common Humanity: Thinking About Love, Truth, Justice.*, (New York, Routledge, 2002), P. 52.

a bafflingly expansive range from the ordinary to the extraordinary. Each is relentlessly personal and intimate, nonetheless.

Here is a lurking question: given how strange, difficult, and perverse cruelty is, why write a whole book on it? What is wrong with me? The answer to the latter we'll leave aside for cocktail hour. But for the first: to establish for us a shared ground on which we can at least stand with each other for exploration, disagreement, and thought. We don't yet have that with the subject of cruelty, not the way we do with, say, beauty, justice, evil, or even compassion. That work hasn't been done for us yet. This book attempts to pick up some of that slack and create an arena of shared knowledge where we can all gather for reflection, where we can agree, disagree, refine, and collectively help each other come to a better understanding of cruelty. In that attempt, the chapters take us through the experience—the difficulty—of engaging with cruelty as a subject; some reasons for our frustration, which—in cahoots with the challenging nature of the topic itself—are partially that even the “experts” and the scholars tend to avoid it and haven't helped us out overly much; provide a survey of what has been offered about cruelty in both art and scholarship so that we are better prepared; an investigation into the stories we tell ourselves about humanity and inhumanity; a formula or scaffolding of cruelty so that we can start actually debating the topic; and, finally, a hesitant way for us to move from a conversation about what we don't want to be to a conversation about how to be better at being human.

Since I answered a question about why I wrote this book, (and I grant that I wasn't overly forthcoming, but there will be a time and a place for more vulnerability and personal honesty), I get to ask you one: why did you pick up a book on cruelty? What was your reaction when you saw the title, and what of that reaction compelled you to read this far? The reader has a stake in this. So do I. So does whoever saw you pick up the book. This is not a subject one can have in front of oneself and keep at arm's length. Perhaps that is another reason the scholars shy from addressing cruelty and its orbital concepts head-on. Before we go further, ask *yourself* why you picked up this book on cruelty, and what you want from it. When have you been Eli, me, or the fireflies? I don't need to ask, “Have you?” We all have, just in varying degrees.

## Author's Notes: An Unorthodox Approach

**Please Read Appendices A (attached):** Poems and Prose Excerpts: Cruelty through the lyrical, visceral, and the metaphorical, and **B:** Reader's Guide: Where to Look Next? (please see my website under "Reader's Guide" at [www.maggieschein.com](http://www.maggieschein.com)):

**Appendix A:** In the originally intended version of this book, positioned prior to Chaps. 1, 2, 3, 5, 7, 10, and 11, there was a poem or an excerpt of a poem or prose that was selected to provoke unexpected questions, thoughts, sensations, perceptions—in short, to help illustrate and help facilitate the practice of approaching the main subjects of the chapter and the work as a whole through a much broader lens than only argument, persuasion, or other more conventional approaches to scholarly works. Cruelty, humanity-as-having-a-moral valence, and inhumanity are ubiquitous terms and concepts, but most conventional treatments of them fall short of unveiling what we need to experience—unless we are also willing and open to engaging our faculties of perception and processing in an expansive, unorthodox, and often destabilizing way. To adhere to the standards of “scholarly publication and production,” the poems had to be moved from the front of the chapters to Appendix A. So, I must ask a favor of the reader to help make the effort of this book complete: **Please see Appendix A: Poems and Prose Excerpts: Cruelty through the lyrical, visceral, and the metaphorical.** Please read the poem or excerpt corresponding to a chapter prior to reading the chapter.

**Appendix B:** <http://maggieschein.com/appendix-b-readers-guide/>: This section includes references to works and authors loosely generalized into categories of scholarly disciplines and themes as they appear in or relate to those in *Cruelty: A Book About Us*. The sections are intended to serve as basic introductions to the subjects, themes, scholars in their academic homes as they are relevant to the subjects that splay out around the idea of “Cruelty.” This addition to the book is meant to serve as a general reference, to help guide the reader or any instructor who uses the book but might not be familiar with all the tendrils it reaches out with. Appendix B is not intended to serve as a comprehensive or ordinary literature review, as one might find in a more traditional scholarly paper or

academic book. Though fundamentally grounded in scholarly research, *Cruelty: A Book About Us* braids many disciplines from literature, philosophy, ethics, moral psychology, developmental psychology, social psychology, law, history, and the humanities in general. It is a book that is meant for us all, to be acknowledged wherever and however it appears, and so for those curious about particular avenues that are brought up, the Reader's Guide attempts to provide brief, editorial, introductions. For the Reader's Guide, I've chosen authors, themes, and works that I think were particularly influential for this book and that also represent important aspects of the subject that extend beyond and differ from what is offered here.

—With Gratitude, M. Schein



# Acknowledgments

I can't accommodate an "acknowledgments" section. It is far too intimidating, and I am far too indebted and lucky. It is impossible to count the loss of the influential dead, the who's and the what's of their influence and importance; it is equally impossible, if one is lucky, to have trouble counting the influence on and importance for oneself and work of those who belong to the living. I would not dare try, so consider this a cursory, symbolic gesture, and one that is hopefully forever unfinished.

For this conversation, this book, I am infinitely grateful to more individuals and institutions than I can list. Here are a few, in no particular order:

Without the trust and generosity of the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, The Janet Prindle Institute for Ethics, Robert R & Carolyn Smith Frederick Opportunity Foundation Fellowship, The University of Chicago, The University of DePauw, and my mentors, colleagues, and friends, this work would not have been possible; the same is true of my parents, Dr. Martha and Mr. Bernie Schein, who have been my constant supporters, dealers of questions, my own personal Loki (times 2!), *trust-ers*, as the first to the second to the twentieth readers, barometers of the truth and difficulties of this subject, and for their love. Also, to the rest of my uniquely talented, kind, and generous family, including my sister, Lara Alexander—especially for her recommendations in children's

literature. I must express ineffable gratitude for more care, patience, skill, genuine brilliance, creativity, and love than any one person deserves to receive, to my husband, Mr. Jonathan Hannah, without whom this book would never have been completed, and neither would I be.

I am grateful to acknowledge a few of the special individuals who have been with me in this meandering marathon on cruelty for over a decade (or in some cases over two) and whose contributions, conversations, and support on all fronts have been precious:

Professor Danielle Allen, my dear friend, former dissertation chair, supporter, confidant, interlocutor, and source of consistency and brilliance; my fellow “professor of cruelty,” mentor, and friend (both despite our disagreements and because of them), the author, essayist, and teacher, J. M. Coetzee—who, for reasons unknown to me, never gave up on me or this subject and who, also for reasons that make me even more curious, believes in the value of humility enough in this conversation to allow me to share some of the raw, behind the curtains, exchanges we’ve had in our efforts to think through the issues surrounding inhumanity and cruelty over the past couple of decades; third, my wonderful friends and colleagues—in particular the remarkable, generous, and kind Chris Ferro, Jess Minor, and David Kidd, who have been constant champions and invaluable interlocutors; and of course the few contemporary philosophers and authors who bravely, rashly, or both dedicated their investigations and insights into cruelty and who have been gracious and welcoming enough to consult with me: Raimond Gaita, Rosalind Hursthouse, George Shulman, Thomas Nagel, Giorgio Baruchello, Simon May, Andrew Cullison, Pat Conroy, Tim Conroy, Corrin Tanner, my former agent and source of support and advice, Peter Riva, and every student who has graced me with their trust. A particularly vibrant and saturated gratitude goes to the unexpected and/or divine luck to have Arnold I. Davidson as first my teacher and mentor in graduate school (without whom I would never have finished), and then beloved friend and supporter in ways that are indescribably important to me, to my life, daily, and whose energy, insight, care, humor, genius, and kindness are invaluable.

I also want to acknowledge all who witness or experience acts of cruelty: whether their own or that of others; whether human, a moral player, or not. May we continue the conversation and the explorations. This is, after all, a book about *us*.

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# 1

## What the Scholars Owe Us

Incidences of cruelty may make us cringe in fear, empathy, or shame. They may make us turn away in horror because what is happening is unbearable to witness or to undergo, is beyond our capacities to imagine, or is confirmation of our fundamental helplessness and vulnerability. They may also incite curiosity—perversely or genuinely—or annihilate or cripple our bodies or psyches in cases of physical or psychological abuse. If we look with open eyes, we can see that they also can motivate us, spurring us to learn to prevent, rectify, or heal from acts of cruelty, or even learn how to execute cruelty better by pushing the limits of what we can know about another and what we do with that knowledge. Sometimes, cruelty slides between our judgment of either good or bad and, therefore, matures us in necessary ways, like a stern guardian. Cruelty is all at once confounding, provocative, horrible, and ubiquitous. It is also, no matter the particular act or experience in question, uncomfortably intimate.

I am talking about it still, but how do I know if I am supposed to turn away or to look directly at it? It feels a bit shameful either way. In that sense, cruelty is obscene. We often find ourselves forced to say its name, though, when we find that other words for “bad” just won’t do: when your lifelong partner cheats on you with your best friend; when a

particular kind of bully comes up—the kind where you just can’t quite put your finger on what exactly churned your gut upon hearing what he did; when the blind woman’s caretaker hands her a tube of Preparation H (used) instead of the tube of lip gloss she asked for; when the young baggers at the grocery stock the elderly and mentally disabled new hire’s intact bags with ones weak with gaping holes, and then snicker as the customers become frustrated with him; when political torture comes into view, or the death penalty, child abuse, rape, nonhuman welfare; confidence games; when we are betrayed, lied to, or when we are privy to the liquid nitrogen words and actions of a genuine sociopath or psychopath, like Edmund Kemper, who said, during his trial, “With a girl, there’s a lot left in the girl’s body without a head. Of course, the personality is gone.”<sup>1</sup>

I just lumped together a serial killer/rapist/necrophiliac and an inappropriately used tube of Preparation H in a paragraph about cruelty. On the one hand, this seems perfectly reasonable. They are all examples of cruelty. On the other hand, listing them together seems deeply disrespectful (at best) of their difference in degree and context. What’s similar enough about them to allow the paragraph to make sense? What’s distinct about them that makes us at the minimum nervous and at the most repulsed, dismissive, insulted, wounded, or worried? It’s worth asking, but there may not be one completely satisfactory answer. Note of forewarning, apology, and hope: throughout this book, there are times where I use “cruelty” and “cruelties” in a global, omnipresent, singular way. It is the lens through which we are looking. It has wide angles, close-ups, and filters, and it is important to aim, to keep track of what we need to set our focal trajectories on. There will be times, as a conceptual tool, point of (suggested) fact, temporal reality, or exercise, that I ask us—momentarily and for certain reasons—to collapse or condense degrees, contexts, and subcategories of cruelties into a slice that hones our perceptual fields in order that we may extract certain insights. I anticipate that these moments may be cringe-worthy, off-base or color to some, and profoundly callous, inappropriate, incorrect, disgusting, disturbing, or otherwise painful, to others. I will repeat repeatedly: cruelty is very difficult to talk about and to figure out how to talk about or to talk about what we aren’t talking

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<sup>1</sup> Accessed 3/4/2022: [http://www.azquotes.com/author/42856-Edmund\\_Kemper](http://www.azquotes.com/author/42856-Edmund_Kemper)

about—resisting definition and sloppily undoing its own tracks as it makes them are two of cruelty’s slippery currencies, its trademarks. I ask that we fumble along and try to relish the fumbles like archeologists tripping over the toes of a sarcophagus.

It is sometimes tempting and easy to settle comfortably in the idea that any absence of empathy or emotional investment is a clear and defining feature of cruelty. Just for a reminder that will continue to rear its medusa’s head, Heinrich Himmler, who despite being partially responsible for one of the largest genocides in modern Western European history, as well as an expert torturer, apparently loved his pet bird so much that his entire household was instructed to tiptoe at night so as to be sure not to disturb it when it was asleep. That’s very caring and thoughtful. For the bird.<sup>2</sup>

In general, we haven’t much of a problem trotting out the accusation that some act or statement was cruel. And artists do like to portray cruelty in its myriad forms. And internet resources catalogue it, index it, promote it, “cancel” it, and, in short, exercise social and monetary interests. But the difficulty for us, both emotionally and intellectually, is: do we know what we mean when we call something “cruel,” and do we register what happens to us and to others when we start to interrogate the subject of cruelty? Given the liberality with which we use the term, often feeling quite justified in doing so, perhaps we might think “It must be obvious!” Let’s entertain that thought.

What is obvious about cruelty? What are we sure we know and are likely to agree on, within the usual variations of detail? We know it’s bad. That doesn’t get us far because betting on the wrong horse with one’s retirement savings is also bad, but it would take a little more of a story to make it cruel. We can agree, perhaps, that something cruel causes extreme suffering to another person or creature—extraordinary suffering. Torture, for instance. Torture, according to survivors such as Jean Améry, “Is the attempt to kill a man without his dying.”<sup>3</sup> It is, without doubt and by definition—even if justified in some eyes—cruel.

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<sup>2</sup>In addition to other sources, this vignette is recounted in *Camus at Combat: 1944–1947*, (Princeton University Press, 2006), P. 20.

<sup>3</sup>Améry, Jean. *At the Mind’s Limits: Contemplations by a Survivor on Auschwitz and Its Realities*. (New York: Schocken, 1986), Trans. Sidney and Stella Rosenfeld (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1980).



What about when and where torture is legal? That's our first snag. Hang tight, because as soon as we've gotten over that one, we'll get tripped up by the next intellectual or emotional hurdle. Of course, torture is cruel. But much of the time it is also legal. So, legality will not be one of the anchoring plot points in this journey. Things may be cruel *and* legal.<sup>4</sup> Even if bullying of a certain sort is legislated against, your partner and best friend's betrayal of you and the treatment of the elderly, mentally feeble new bagger are not. All right, but we can still rely on the use of extreme physical damage. Of course, we can. Death is pretty much the ultimate physical damage one can suffer, or at least the end of suffering completely. But if the death penalty is legal in even one state, then it certainly skids under the Eighth Amendment's interpretation of cruelty. So perhaps death is too extreme, too finite, to count as physical damage—legal or not. Let's try physical suffering. Perhaps that is the marker of cruelty. The dead can't suffer beyond death (or so it is reasonable to assume). So, there is a limit to the death penalty's capacity to inflict cruelty,<sup>5</sup> if physical suffering is our measure. But it's not. We can't rely on that either.

Let's return to the betraying and conniving hearts of your closest friend and your partner. There is no comparing degrees or even genres of bad between them and the executioner or the torturer, but before they both appeared here together we would likely have called either and both cruel, precisely with no thought of comparing the one to the other. Your friend and partner caused no demonstrable physical suffering at all, and though the betrayal was imaginably emotionally painful to you, one would hesitate to assume it would cause irreparable emotional or psychological damage to a relatively well-adjusted you. One can't say the same for torture, not if the torture is well executed.

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<sup>4</sup> As Montaigne says in evidence of the cruelty of the death penalty: "Even the executions of the law, however reasonable they may be, I cannot witness with a steady gaze." *The Complete Essays of Montaigne*, Trans. Donald M. Frame (Stanford University Press, 2008), p. 314.

<sup>5</sup> Many states in which the death penalty is legal are embroiled in complex moral and legal controversies over the executed person's perceived suffering and the potential violation of the Eighth Amendment on that basis. See: <http://www.theatlantic.com/national/archive/2014/04/Oklahoma/361414/> and <http://www.deathpenaltyinfo.org/ohios-new-lethal-injection-procedures--include-pinching-inmate-test-consciousness> for examples.

All right, surely malice. Ill intent? One must *mean* to be cruel. That should be obvious. Bullies mean to cause the harm they cause. Torturers learn to cause and are intentional about the harm they cause. On a different scale entirely, your partner may have been unhappy in your relationship, but choosing to betray it *and* deprive you of your best friend, as opposed to leaving it or repairing it, was likely not just convenience or fate. It needs more heft in the moral weight than those. Assuming your partner and friend are also relatively capable adult human beings, it is not unreasonable to attribute a certain degree of conscious intention to hurt you to the core in their choices.

A quick jaunt through parts of history, however, will weaken our certainty about the perpetrator's state of heart or mind as the cruelty pathogens. Himmler remains my uncomfortable icon for "why" so that I don't take it for granted. But he is only an icon. There is a plethora of very real, and far more ordinary, others. In the early twentieth century, it was recommended by some that teachers wash their students' tongues with lye soap when they cursed—for their own good.<sup>6</sup> The same, in the mid-late nineteenth century, was recommended of Native American children who had been stolen from their families if they spoke their native language to each other—which happened to be the only language they knew—for their own good, and to save them.<sup>7</sup> In the words of Col. Pratt, one of the founders of the infamous Pennsylvania Carlisle School, such measures were necessary to "kill the Indian; save the man."<sup>8</sup> During the Renaissance (as well as in other times), women were often brutally and publicly penalized with a "scold's bridle" and a stake through the tongue<sup>9</sup> for expressing their opinions in private or public, or for thinking too hard and on issues too complicated for them<sup>10</sup>—for their own good. They could, after all,

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<sup>6</sup> Carl Allanmore Murchison and Granville Stanley Hall. *Journal of genetic psychology* 5, (1988).

<sup>7</sup> Adams, David Wallace. *Education for Extinction: American Indians and the boarding school experience, 1875–1928* (University of Kansas Press, 1995).

<sup>8</sup> *The Indian Industrial School: Carlisle, Pennsylvania, 1879–1918*. Official Report of the Nineteenth Annual Conference of Charities and Correction, (1892), 46–59. Accessed 6/3/2022. <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/n/ncosw/ACH8650.1892.001?rgn=main;view=fulltext>

<sup>9</sup> Brown and McBride, *Women's Roles in the Renaissance*, (Greenwood Press, London, 2005), P. 67.

<sup>10</sup> See sources such as Aristotle's *Politics* and Talleyrand-Perigord, "Rapport sur l'instruction publique", (1791).

fall ill, lose fertility, or become frigid and unfit for motherhood and wifehood from the stress and unnaturalness of such unfeminine habits. According to journalist and scholar on race in America, Ijeoma Olué, in *The Stranger*, it “is in no way new for white people to take what they want from other cultures in the name of love and respect while distorting or discarding the remainder of that culture for their comfort.”<sup>11</sup>

Slaves? Where do we begin? According to the “wisdom” during the times of legal slavery in the US, a literate slave could become easily confused. Literacy and learning of that sort were thought to be unnatural and harmful to him, both spiritually and existentially. Of course, there were monetary and civic dangers as well. Thus, it was not only proper and strategic, but also the benevolent thing to do, to keep him from his letters, which included punishing him if he were caught doing the most human thing: that is, learning and becoming facile in customary forms of communication.<sup>12</sup>

Continuing this conversation takes some effort. I am not certain that all the examples listed so far would count as cruel to everyone. They likely don’t. That is okay. The purpose here is to lay the pavers so that our questions and concerns at least can get a foothold. I have certainly been humbled, if not aggressively schooled, for talking about the rape and torture of human beings in the same category or kind as a living-firefly necklace or cruel infractions of romance and domestic disharmony. I can acknowledge that, though, and still challenge us to entertain the idea that we agree most of the aforementioned types of actions, restrictions, and punishments could be called cruel. With good reason, we can’t really be sure of the intent—either good or ill—of the perpetrators. But we can be assured there is no shortage of testimonies, recorded and written, from people committing similar acts, that sound really quite convincing about their good will and benevolent intentions. If they really didn’t mean well,

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<sup>11</sup> See, Jensen, Robert. *The heart of whiteness: confronting race, racism, and white privilege*, (City Lights, San Francisco, CA, 2005).

<sup>12</sup> See sources such as Neil Hamilton, *Rebels and Renegades: A Chronology of Social and Political Dissent in the United States*, (Routledge, 2002), P. 114, and James Hunt, *The Negro’s place in nature: a paper read before the London Anthropological Society, 1863*. These kinds of cruel patronizing benevolence were also staples of the *Friends of the Indian*, a society devoted to “helping” Native Americans in the late 1800s. See: Prucha, Francis Paul. *Americanizing the American Indians: Writings by the “Friends of the Indian”, 1880–1900*. (Harvard University Press, 1974).

they appear to have convinced even themselves of their own benevolence, and, therefore, even they wouldn't know it if their good intentions were false. It can leave one's tongue stunned and one's thoughts gnarled.

By now it is probably clear how cocktail chatter and dinner conversation become increasingly difficult to navigate when one is emceeding on the topic of cruelty. Some interlocutors likely want to argue now, want to give the "what abouts," the "what ifs," the "whys," and the "buts" their due. The "whys" can be particularly persistent: Why did he commit it? Why did I suffer it? Why is it inhumane—*was* that really inhumane? They want to kick up the myriad mole tunnels these questions bring up. But let's wedge ourselves back into what little may be obvious before we follow every diversion. Unfortunately, in addition to letting illegality float away, we are quickly losing our grip on malice as the singular defining feature of cruelty. This is unfortunate because wrong emotion, or excessive negative emotion, is not only intuitively appealing as one of our major culprits, but it is also one of the most commonly identified, in the rare instances of philosophical, legal, and psychological scholarship on cruelty. However, scholars in those disciplines, like us, end up floating between the banks of "this is the cause" on one side, and "it's some deficit or violation of humanity, though we don't know what the humanity is of which it is in violation" on the other side, all the while shoving away the siren's menagerie of the likes of Artaud, The Marquis de Sade, Lars von Trier, or Anthony Burgess—the fetishizing of the "art" of cruelty.

It is easy, when looking at examples such as those presented so far, to see why someone with the bitter palate of George Bernard Shaw might've picked up on how often cruelty must be "whitewashed by a moral excuse, and pretense of reluctance."<sup>13</sup> One of the challenges over our dinner conversation is that, without sharper knives to trim away the fat from the meat, the extraneous from the essential, so we can see what cruelty is, what really makes something cruel, we aren't well set up to be clear—for ourselves—or to see past—in others—such dangerous whitewashing, excuses, and false reluctance.

Let's return to our assumption that all of us agree on the cruelty of all the scenarios presented so far: ordinary, extraordinary, those not

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<sup>13</sup> Accessed on 10/31/22, <https://gutenberg.org/files/?908/908-h/908-h.htm>

identified by extreme legal violation, obvious malice, extreme physical harm, or lasting psychological damage. What boundary then does cruelty cross? What species of wrong is it if it can be each of these, but not only one, nor all? Even the United States Supreme Court has taken a pass, using the phrase “society’s evolving sense of decency” as the measure against which to determine a punishment “cruel” or “unusual.”<sup>14</sup> This can be frustrating. It may also be frustrating that I get to air some of my roller coaster questions and my interlocutors do not, yet. Please indulge me, just for a few moments more if you would—knowing that I am not satisfied either. For instance, I want to complain: “So really? It was *not* only not cruel, but taught and sanctioned in the thirteenth century to quarter a man for betrayal or murder? It was legal and required? There was a *practiced craft* to drawing and quartering?<sup>15</sup> Which means one could fail to quarter someone properly then, and not now. In our times, attempting to quarter someone, whether skillfully or not, is an entirely different kind of problem from lack of skill. So, could this horrible penalty, legal, and taught then, but not now, still be cruel at both times?”<sup>16</sup> Tragically, we don’t have to reach back in history nor to remote and mysterious places for examples like these. They are merely a stone’s throw away—for some of us fatally and literally. Under Sharia law (interpreted by the state, not literally adhering to the Quran),<sup>17</sup> stoning a woman for adultery (which could include being the survivor of rape) requires some amount of skill and adherence to rules. The Iranian-Islamic Penal Code is explicit regarding the proper stones to use as well as the depth and consistency of the dirt hole the convict is buried in for stoning. It must be neither too loose nor too restrictive. According to Section 119: “The stones for stoning to death shall not be so big that one or two of them shall kill the convict,

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<sup>14</sup>Trop v. Dulles, 356 U.S. 86 (1958).

<sup>15</sup>Heinrich Kramer, *Malleus Maleficarum*, 1486, sect. 3.

<sup>16</sup>It should be noted that our death penalties still require skill and complex protocols; that is, one can fail at executing execution, be fired for killing someone incorrectly, in this instance, causing too much or the wrong kind of suffering while killing them. Many states consider such protocols, their consequences, and their categories for assessment as sufficient for indicating humane treatment.

<sup>17</sup>Accessed 3/4/2022 <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2010/07/08/stoning-a-woman-in-iran-for-adultery.html>

nor shall they be so small that they may not be called ‘stones.’”<sup>18</sup> An “evolving sense of decency,” along with (cultural and historical) variations of moral and legal violations, still do not really help us understand what we mean when we call this stoning and the absurd displays of regulation and cautions against breaches of ceremony “cruel.”<sup>19</sup>

It does seem, though—and this I say at dinner, during which one guest orders veal and another a veggie plate—that one commonality between all these genres and degrees, contexts, and conditions is that cruelty, whatever else we might agree or disagree on about it, is *the worst*. Cruelty is the superlative, or transcendent, in a list of “bads.” It is, in that meaning, something “*beyond bad*.” For the purposes of my dinner, this gets me nearly nowhere other than wishing I’d said I studied shore birds of the Low Country or Renaissance art. After a few trembling attempts to change the subject, we are still on cruelty and trying to eat—the consumer of veal silenced by fragrant gravy, and the slicer of roasted carrots comforted by the fact that even if vegetables can scream, no one present is evolved enough to hear them do so.

But we do agree that cruelty is “the worst.” We also have the authoritative company of those such as the Frenchman Montaigne, or the Stoic Seneca, who unabashedly put cruelty as the superlative in their list of vices; and the political philosopher, Judith Shklar, who, in studying injustice, does so as well. This might make us feel slightly less flighty. Even with that, we can’t exhale completely just yet. It is not clear what exactly we might mean by “the worst.” It makes sense now to tamp down the drama, to take some of the emotion off to the side, and to hush the

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<sup>18</sup> See sources such as the *Islamic Penal Code* 104 and 119, IHRDC Translation of the Islamic Penal Code of the Islamic Republic of Iran—Book One & Book Two Incorporating all amendments up to January 2012. Adopted by the Legal Affairs Commission of the Islamic Consultative Assembly on Tuesday 30/07/1991. <http://www.wluml.org/node/3908>, and Elyse Semerdjian, *Off the Straight Path: Illicit Sex, Law, and Community in Ottoman Aleppo*, (Syracuse University Press, 2008), P. 22–23.

<sup>19</sup> For an early and more sophisticated example of moral and philosophical consternation about the customs of one’s times, and rebelling against the cruelty of the “sense of decency” of one’s time, see Montaigne’s essays, “Apology for Raymond Sebond” and “Cowardice: The Mother of Cruelty.” *Montaigne, The Complete Essays of Montaigne*. Trans. By Donald Frame, (Stanford University Press, CA, 1965).

clamoring of “whys” and “what abouts” and ask, “Okay, *what* is it? *What* is cruelty?” Will understanding what it is help us be better at not doing it, at avoiding suffering as much from it? It is important to keep in mind that those are two very different sets of questions.

If we’ve put malice, extreme violation of laws or moral codes, senses of decency over time, extreme physical or psychological suffering, and the other usual culprits out on long ropes, then what have we really got left to stabilize ourselves? We can’t steady our understanding of cruelty on it being just mine or yours or then or there or measured by how much or how bad. So far, all we can agree on is that cruelty reigns in this strange superlative role as the worst. But compared to what? To any kind of bad. But what’s the *there* there? What’s the boundary, if not *this* time, *this* place, *this* set of moral or legal rules, this measuring tool, this sense of decency, this measure of extremity of harm, or of suffering?

It may seem that all we have left, and this really doesn’t go over well, is to sample our synonyms and pick through our antonyms. Perhaps in that we will find something. What happens, for instance, if we toy with the idea that acts of cruelty are, nearly always, synonymous with acts of inhumanity—or at least with words like “inhuman” and “inhumane”? Of course, *something* happens. Acts of *inhumanity* violate something we consider virtuous or important about humanity. That’s obvious. That’s grammatically assured.

Right?

Mostly, yes.

Except that then, as we take a sip of our tea and scoop the last of our mash onto our forks, we must wonder what we mean by “humanity.” I am intimidated. Bringing it up is intimidating—unless we’re talking about biological classification, in which case, it’s still problematic, but not necessarily grand—that’s a matter of fact-parsing. It’s not clear what this question is beyond that. This is often where the conversation ends and the subject of what we might order for dessert mercifully sweeps in. But when the server is late, it is not uncommon for a certain—and I will argue justifiable—unease and resentment to begin to take hold.

As the philosopher Pierre Hadot observes with a flourish of obvious disdain, “Generally speaking, university is just fencing in front of

mirrors.”<sup>20</sup> Humanity, *humanitas*,<sup>21</sup> humane, human, inhumanity, inhuman, inhumane, cruel—these are not dinner topic conversations. Despite the fact that cruelty can be both extraordinary and/or ordinary, it is really unwieldy in conversations. Erectile dysfunction, breast cancer, and gallbladder disease also make for awkward topics over dinner, but we do not get lost circling *what* they are. They are usually subjects sanctified in their own spaces of proper investigation and dissemination of expert knowledge: in private homes, medical halls, labs, and journals. Then, after the experts have taken their time with them, in their cocooned arguments with each other, insulated from the clawing and clamoring of details with no saliency filters, testing, investigation, rumination, the experts simply tell us what’s what, no matter how ordinary the person is who has these ailments or who must understand how to care for someone who has them. The experts *must* understand; the rest of us just learn the most superficial details they have extracted for us so we can make informed choices. When my doctor tells me I have gallbladder disease, it is not usually my concern what that term means in the abstract, and it is not mine to debate. She, her cohorts, superiors, predecessors have done that work for me. With being human, with having humanity, with being present to inhumanity and to cruelty, it appears not to be quite so. In what lab does this thing we are talking about, our humanity and its opposite, our inhumanity, our cruelty, get investigated with such concentration, such isolating rigor? Where are the extracts from the specialized knowledge? Who are the doctors?

We are not alone in both avoiding and being confounded by cruelty. Attempts to fully explain why cruel acts are “the worst” of any kind of bad, from ordinary playground taunting that sours from “mean” to “cruel,” to physical violence that goes beyond easily identifiable physical and emotional suffering and compels us, therefore, to call it “cruel,” seem unsatisfactory to most of us. Cruelty, though referenced and mentioned often enough in life, art, and scholarly works, has suffered the fate of the neglected bastard child: always lurking, frequently trotted out for conflicting and divisive purposes, and rarely attended to with concentration.

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<sup>20</sup> Hadot, Pierre. *Philosophy as a Way of Life*. Ed. Arnold I. Davidson. Trans. Michael Chase. (New York, Blackwell, 1995), P. 272.

<sup>21</sup> Cicero, *On Duties*, Ed. M.T. Griffin and E.M. Atkins, (United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 1991), P. 117.



Discussion of cruelty isn't absent in scholarly literature and in philosophy, of course. In philosophy, it appears most frequently in works that would now be considered rooted in some variety of "virtue ethics," as opposed to moral systems based primarily on principles of reason, law, or religion, though, as we will see, there are plenty of exceptions and hybrids. The philosopher Plutarch, along with the Stoics Cicero and Seneca, understands cruelty as resulting from some kind of "excess" of an emotion like rage or vengeance. That is not necessarily malice, but, clearly by its extremity, is an emotion gone rogue to the point of negativity. A cursory study of these understandings of cruelty, like our other, more intuitive, options, will slide into the line-up, sidling up next to the other contenders with no claim of any more authority than the others.

Scholars in most humanities and liberal arts disciplines, those we trust with the big questions, are liberal with the use of the word "cruel" but rarely address the concept of cruelty directly or at length—and even then cruelty is almost never the subject of conversation, disagreement, collaboration, or elaboration among them.

We may agree with Plutarch<sup>22</sup> that cruelty may be caused by an excess of rage or vengeance. Or with Seneca, who describes cruelty as an act of "savagery" that goes "beyond the bounds first of custom and then of humanity,"<sup>23</sup> and as an excess that results in a kind of bestial sadism, or with Cicero who describes it as a deficit of a naturally good aspect of being a human being (*humanitas*).<sup>24</sup> These more scholarly interpretations of cruelty reveal it to be much the same as before we brought in the philosophers' theories at all: they are parasitic chameleons that feed on the substantial aspects of our experiences, and most of them fade away when one tries to pin what cruelty is down as its own thing, as a distinctive vice. Now, as before, the assumption that the vice of cruelty is often the opposite of humanity, is inhuman, is consistent. What remains unclear is what

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<sup>22</sup> See Appendix B: The Reader's Guide, for more on Plutarch, reason and "beasts," as well as on the Stoics such as Seneca. <http://maggieschein.com/appendix-b-readers-guide/>

<sup>23</sup> Seneca, L. *Moral and Political Essays*. Ed. Cooper, J.M. and Procopé, J.F., (Cambridge University, 1995), P. 55.

<sup>24</sup> Cicero. *On Duties*, Ed. M.T. Griffin and E.M. Atkins (United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press 1991).

that means, or, in these cases, how a decidedly human emotion (rage or vengeance) could, merely by excess, turn inhuman.

Both academia and the general public, therefore, are deprived of the maturation of thoughts about cruelty implicitly promised to us by academic commitment to such investigations. This deprivation contrasts strikingly with the extraordinarily deep, continuous, and diverse academic, theological, and popular attention devoted to the positive concepts of *Eudaimonia*,<sup>25</sup> human flourishing, the moral importance of being human, the virtues associated with being a human, humanity,<sup>26</sup> or divine or natural goodness. It is also in contrast to cruelty's brethren: "evil," "misfortune," and "injustice." In the words of the political philosopher Judith Shklar, "Philosophers rarely talk about cruelty...one looks in vain for a Platonic dialogue on Cruelty."<sup>27</sup> This is a moment when our disappointment may be warranted. In contrast to the disappointed, though, there are others who recognize this fault line as a welcome hail for our attention; quite frankly, our faith is shaken in the value of the going currencies in the scholarly fields of the humanities and social sciences of objectivity, rationality, verifiability, and replicability for understanding the intricacies of the moral valence of being human and the intimacies of being in the world. And, as William James points out about philosophy, it is not at all as pristine or chaste as one might assume:

...like all professionalism it can go to abusive extremes. The end is after all more than the way, in most things human, and forms and methods may easily frustrate their own purpose. The abuse of technicality is seen in the infrequency with which, in philosophical literature, metaphysical questions are discussed directly and on their own merits. Almost always they are handled as if through a heavy woolen curtain, the veil of previous philoso-

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<sup>25</sup> *Eudaimonia* is a concept central to Ancient Greek philosophy and specifically relevant to what we now call "Virtue Ethics." Its meaning—something like human good, happiness, or flourishing—is of enough importance and complexity that it still remains a prominent subject in classics, ancient philosophy, ethics, moral psychology, and virtue theory.

<sup>26</sup> These, the virtues (plural) associated with "humanity," are positioned here, for discussion's sake, as distinct from the whole "virtue of humanity," the latter of which this work will devote quite a bit of effort to understand.

<sup>27</sup> Shklar, Judith. *Ordinary Vices*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), P. 7.

phers' opinions. Alternatives wrapped up in proper names, as if it were indecent for a truth to go naked.<sup>28</sup>

It is important to attend to a point James is beginning to make subtly and that I emphasize to the point of risking pulverization. In James' gentle language, it is "the infrequency with which, in philosophical literature, metaphysical questions are discussed directly and on their own merits." When we hone in on sifting out questions about the "why" of cruelty to focus on the "what" it is, on the insecurity that can wash over us when we acknowledge that insecurity is one of the modes of being of the kind of being we are, it can feel awfully intimate, exposed, vulnerable.

Well, we might rightly say, we wear an expensive cover-up coat when talking about a descriptor, a metaphysical category, and a moral designation that is often considered the opposite of cruelty: there is no shortage of what the scholars in many disciplines think of humanity. No, there is not. And over dinner, it's a lovely and endless resource for conversation. There is a rich assortment of sophisticated, complicated, subtle, and gross agreements and disagreements. But there is, and this is really where we are all in the same boat and, perhaps looking forlornly toward the ivory towers and dusty library barracks, little on what its logical fraternal twin, inhumanity, is. What does inhumanity violate?<sup>29</sup> James seems to be a bit resigned that so goes the way of many a foundational contemplation. "Such are the rules," he cautions us, "of the professorial game—they think and write from each other and for each other and at each other exclusively. With this exclusion of the open air all true perspective gets lost, extremes and oddities count as much as sanities."<sup>30</sup>

When we start talking about a lack of humanity, the absence of humanity, the perversion of humanity, or the violation of humanity, what might it be that we are talking about? One can act inhumanely, for certain. A crime can be one because it violates humanity, is against humanity. Are we all nodding? Can one, in the course of violating other norms, also

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<sup>28</sup> James, William. *A Pluralistic Universe*. Intro. Levinson, H., (University of Nebraska Press; Reprinted from the original 1909 Ed.).

<sup>29</sup> Please don't rush to conflate "violating humanity" with being or acting "inhumanly."

<sup>30</sup> James, William. *A Pluralistic Universe*. Intro. Levinson, H., (University of Nebraska Press; Reprinted from the original 1909 Ed), P. 16–17.

violate one's moral agency? What would that mean? Can one, while not violating other norms, violate humanity? This is where studying inhumanity, and acts of cruelty, in particular, can lead us down a dark, narrow, and peculiar pathway. Acts of inhumanity violate something about what it means to be a human being, to be able to be right or to be wrong according to any moral system at all, whether based in reason, nature, science, convention, or faith. And of course, if we walk down this path long enough, it might be uncomfortably necessary to return to humanity—that well-tended, legitimate child of philosophy, law, psychology, culture, and intuition—and probe it for what we mean when we attribute “humanity” to someone, *such that that term is the opposite of what we mean by “inhumanity.”* And what is the moral valence of that attribution? It must be a good one, right?

**Note**—and I put this potential Achilles heel up on the chopping block honestly—it is important to register here, and always in conversations about cruelty, the corners we are sanding down, the pocks we are filling with resin. Right now, we are truing “cruelty” with “inhumanity,” “inhumane,” or “inhuman.” Careful interlocutors will already be brandishing the cuttings we’ve shaved off: “Even if your partner and best friend’s betrayal was a cruel act, it would not constitute an act of inhumanity, right?” Most reasonable people would agree to that. So, I concede that that particular scenario may involve cruelty but may not qualify as an act of inhumanity. Along with the bullying of baggers and the fireflies killed for a briefly romantic necklace, that example has done quite a bit of work in our conversation. And it may be time to retire them with the promise that each may make a cameo appearance later.

It is not terribly difficult to drum up other examples that serve a similar (but not identical) function and that could reasonably be called inhuman or inhumane, or downright violations of humanity. Consider the legal, scientific practice of restraining a monkey, cutting open his skull, and stimulating various parts of his brain while he is fully conscious to see what makes his brain produce and sustain the production of dopamine. This act is, or was, legal. The scientists testify to the purity of their processes, the benevolence of their intentions, and the necessity for the good of all—including monkeys—of their findings. That example should hit closer to “inhumane.”

How do we think, then, of scientists who possess genuine care over our relative primates, such as apes, chimps, or bonobos? When I went to visit the Bonobo sanctuary in Atlanta as a curious teenager, Kanzi, the bonobo famous for learning to use a keyboard to express himself, literally expressed himself: he thought me attractive, masturbated, and politely asked for a paper towel to clean himself off. Then, he “apologized.” Where is the line for excusing oneself? How did he know to behave as what a human would consider “polite”? The weird answer is probably not fully knowable to us, but we do know that researchers such as those who have custody of sexual and similiar beings often do use sexual behavior in an ... ethical? ... attempt to connect. It is not, therefore, a long imaginative plank to connect rules of politely accepting a “jackpot reward” for getting an investigator’s questions right with the possibility that that reward for creatures with highly developed sexualities might involve sexual drivers with those with whom they have established relationships of intimacy anyway, i.e., the researchers. Is taking advantage of that (in many ways mutual) primate nature inhuman or perfectly human of us as the ones holding the others captive?

At this point in the fictional dinner, the guests and I beg to be released by the check, or at least another digestive, a strong one. However ill-prepared we might be for it, this subject—what we mean when we attribute “humanity” to someone, such that that attribution is the polar opposite of what we mean by “*inhumanity*”—is not a mental and emotional charge we can just abandon. If there are no expert guides in these caves, then perhaps we should explore the writings on each of the walls and make mercenary use of any discipline, any comment, any drawing, any response that may promise insight. Where do discussions of inhumanity and cruelty veer off most cleanly from each other? And what have we, in our casual conversation, overlooked or left out?

No doubt, a great deal. What about the victims? Who counts as one? We haven’t even broached that yet. We have much more to prepare, to ask, and to discuss.

Where we are right now in the conversation is acknowledging that cruelty is awkward because it hasn’t been talked about. It hasn’t been subject to late-night, early-morning, career-defining essays, intellect-baring forums, and lectures in academic auditoriums. It is, in the end, not about

which laws or gods or rules are right or wrong or just or unjust (the weapons of most of our moral thrashings and “flailings”) but about us and our relationship to every sentient creature in our world. It is that intimate. It is about why we are different from a falling rock and why a thrown rock is different from a thrown baby or a skinned cat.<sup>31</sup> Unfortunately, the day I was editing this chapter, a current, tragic story appeared in my news feed, which illustrates this point in an excruciatingly real event. In summary, two nearly 18-year old boys chose to push a 75 pound log off a cliff in a state park and onto a woman taking photographs, killing her. Imagine how differently an impact and how different a response would be if the woman had been killed by a tiger’s clumsy foot fall as he was running from a poacher... The story we tell about why it matters and how different the boys versus the tiger are will critically guide how we cleave the concept of our humanity and what is revealed in the prisms of its facets. Whatever prism that facet projects will structure our vision of what is violated in acts of inhumanity. Now it is on us.

Our next task will be to listen attentively to the cries and watch carefully the writhing and sufferings of others to see if they reveal something about humanity or are simply expressions for the wind to carry away—whether or not *they* make *us* matter morally.<sup>32</sup>

Bad things happen. Often, those bad things happen in direct relationship to aspects of a creature that should help it avoid bad things happening. The difference between ordinary bad, unforeseen and negative outcomes, natural misfortune, and cruelty is that we, as human beings, are causing this perversion that seems to characterize cruelty, and we think makes sense to consider ourselves in some way *responsible* for the anticipated trajectory’s reversal.

Over the course of this conversation, I hope we will explore the formula for cruelty I have proposed and that we will wring it for insights

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<sup>31</sup> <https://www.foxnews.com/us/teen-who-pushed-log-off-cliff-that-killed-a-mother-pleads-guilty>. Accessed online, 2020.

<sup>32</sup> There is a place in which the victim’s presence and perspective take more leading roles than they do in most disciplinary ethical literature: that is in the distinction between natural misfortune and injustice, which we will touch on. The practical application of and assumptions undergirding this distinction sets important conditions on the answer to the question of our moral relevance as human beings—for a broader understanding see the ethical works of Plutarch, Montaigne, and J. Shklar in more detail.

into what we can learn about being better at being the kind of being we are in our ideals of what we are. The formula has been presented already, but since much of this discussion will revolve around it, it is worth articulating it in a more formal way.

**Primer of the skeletal formula of cruelty we are working with:** Our beginning approach to cruelty relies on the idea that each kind of creature has a way of being what it is, and being what it is to flourish *as one of its kind*. Philosophers, in their typical way, make this poetically simple and complicate it nearly beyond practical use at the same time. The thought is an easy one to begin with. Thinking through the thought becomes more difficult because we don't know what we don't know. The thought begins with the ordinary observation that each kind of creature has a good way of being the kind of being it is—as the kind of thing it is—and that that good way of being the kind of thing it is has weight and value that, if you are the sort of creature who values things and weighs things—as we, as human beings are and do—then the way of being of others should matter. It matters to them. This should matter to us, because of what *we* are. Flies have wings so they can be good flies, do what they do, and fly. Bees dance to inform their colony of where the good nectar is. Bees who are good at being bees do that (see theorists such as Rosalind Hursthouse or Philippa Foot). Cats practice hunting because cats that are being good at being a cat, hunt. Human children who are good at being human children must trust so that they can be fed, protected, and hopefully, if they are really good at being good human children, loved and loving. Human adults who are good at being human adults must aim to cultivate this kind of trust and development in human children. And so on. A cat may be defective at being a cat, it may be bad at being a cat, but it can't be, morally speaking, a *bad* cat.<sup>33</sup> Is the same true of us as fully functional human adults? We can be defective humans, bad at being human, but can't we also be *bad or inhumans*. What are the differences?

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<sup>33</sup> This kind of thinking comes out of a long and tangled philosophical lineage from Plutarch and Aristotle, to Elizabeth Anscombe, P.T. Geach, Rosalind Hursthouse, and Philippa Foot. For good references, see: Foot, *Natural Goodness*, (Oxford, 2001), P. 16–17 and Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics*, (Oxford, 2002).

**Our working formula for cruelty:** A human being taking aspects/traits/characteristics of what should make a creature flourish *as one of its kind* and using those aspects or traits for the harm of the creature, in essence perverting<sup>34</sup> those aspects and traits. My go-to examples, as above, are a fly and a child. Children must trust and must display their need to survive, and they flourish by having those needs responded to—or so it is supposed to go. The pedophile who uses the trust of a child and the need (say for a treat or for attention) to lure it into abuse is perverting aspects and traits of the child that should make it flourish and using them against him or her. For a simpler case, flies need wings to live out the 24–48 hours they have to live. To pull the wings off them as a pastime, to watch them merely crawl or decorate a young girl’s necklace, is explicitly taking what should have made them flourish and disabling them from doing so, and, therefore, is a perversion of what could make them flourish as being good fireflies.

Giving humans this unique form of responsibility—no matter one’s moral or ethical orientation—reflects how we understand ourselves to be different from other aspects of nature and also challenges us with the question we will chip away at until we have some evidence of the shape inside: to what in us is it that we owe this burden and credit? Is it justified? Is it even the right question? How do we belong here, who or what is our “in-group,” and how do we approach that question and its spores?

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<sup>34</sup>Throughout this book, I use the word “perverting” in the literal and technical sense of turning, distorting, or corrupting something from its original, natural, or intended course. Most formal definitions of the word include the old French, *pervertir*, from the Latin, *pervertere*, and from “per” or to bad effect, completely and *vertere*, or to turn. So, to turn something back on itself destructively.





# 2

## Professors of Cruelty: Some Anxieties About Being Us

“Only the one who was in anxiety finds rest, that only the one who descends into the lower world rescues the beloved, that only the one who draws the knife gets Isaac.”

—Søren Kierkegaard.<sup>1</sup>

“Diogenes used to stroll around Athens in broad daylight brandishing a lit lamp. Whenever curious people stopped to ask what he was doing, he would reply: ‘I am just looking for a human being.’”

—Plutarch.<sup>2</sup>

### Part One: Anxieties About Being *Human*

The author, fabulist, and essayist Paulo Coelho said, “Anxiety was born in the very same moment as mankind.”<sup>3</sup> The usual way we go about talking about ourselves in relationship to the rest of nature—everything on the

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<sup>1</sup>Kierkegaard, Søren. *Fear and Trembling/Repetition*. Trans. And Ed., Howard Hong and Edna Hong, (Princeton University Press, New Jersey, 1983), P. 27.

<sup>2</sup>Plutarch. *Plutarch's Lives : Translated from the Original Greek, with Notes, Critical and Historical, and a Life of Plutarch*. (New York :Derby & Jackson, 1859).

<sup>3</sup>Coelho, Paulo. *Manuscript Found in Accra*, (Vintage; Reprint edition, 2013).

spectrum of the living that populates what counts as our world—tends to front with something to disguise our anxiety about whether and how we belong. I'm suggesting that this anxiety is an organic, innate, constitutional part of having humanity, and though we may initially be a bit repulsed by that or react defensively, it is justified; we have the reason and the possibility of the unraveling of reason and sense-making for it. We drape ourselves with prescriptions, declarations, suspicions, or conspiracies: we are rational or flout that we have reason, whereas the rest is not or does not. We are divine, whereas the others are not. We are creators ourselves (free-will, autonomy, self-determination), or we are cursed, whereas the others—the rest of nature—are not. We can go to heaven or hell, or so some of us tell ourselves. And the others? Who is to judge? Who are we to judge? And to judge who is to judge?

We have a habit of trying to resolve our anxiety about our place in the world by insisting on how we are different from other things in our world instead of earnestly examining why we are anxious in the first place. I'm asking that we ask why we are anxious in the first place.

Anxiety.

Even the word shimmies uncomfortably. Anxiety is a squirrely thing. It's not only fear. It's not only discomfort. It's not necessarily avoidance. Anxiety is one of the most chimerical and fascinating states of being (I'm not sure it's even always really an authentic emotion, despite that, for therapeutic purposes, we often treat it as one). It is a psychological state, though. It is a prohibitive state, meaning it blocks us somehow—or it is a symptom of us being blocked; it is like racehorses saddled up but running in place, or like us wobbling on a balance beam with no way off of either end. It doesn't make sense mostly, and that's its trade. It resists most efforts to identify its cause and, therefore, often thwarts resolution. I think it's okay to find some encouragement in that: it (only) *resists* our efforts, but it is not wholly immune to our efforts. There are many approaches to resolving anxiety. Some people offer recommendations about how to avoid experiencing it altogether.<sup>4</sup> Some tuck us into the resignation that it is simply a state of being (think of those such as Jean

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<sup>4</sup>Chuang Tzu, *The Essential Chuang Tzu*. Trans. Sam Hamill, J.P. Swanton, Shambhala; First edition, 1/250 edition, October 19, 1999).

Paul Sartre<sup>5</sup> or other existentialists) like a constantly flickering image on a television. Others offer professional counseling or self-help methods for overcoming or managing personal experiences of it.<sup>6</sup> Still others have temperaments more akin to one of the grand masters of the anxious and depressed-yet-hopeful philosophers and prophets of both secular and religious faiths: Søren Kierkegaard. If you find his company more to your liking, then you find a gritty home in the ruthless and painful urging that one must experience anxiety fully, and maintain it, to get beyond it: a leap of faith directly through—not over, not resting in, not resisting, not pretending to ignore—a cloying, sharp, irrevocable chasm of anxiety: the “paradox of faith.” “I have faith,” Kierkegaard says, “by virtue of the absurd, by virtue of the fact that for God all things are possible. And precisely because resignation is the antecedent, faith is no esthetic emotion but something far higher; it is not the spontaneous inclination of the heart but the paradox of existence.”<sup>7</sup>

And then we have the testimonies of those whose voice somehow reaches from intollerable territories of genocide, of slavery, from that which most of us have never experienced and which, by our nature, we are not equipped to even imagine, much less to inhabit, because they are experiences of anti-being, anti-existence. The construction of these environments is “beyond bad” (which is also, in some way, true of any act of cruelty, whether extreme or ordinary<sup>8</sup>). These are conditions survivors often describe, in one way or another, as the *unsurvivable* and *incomprehensible*. They are uninhabitable not just psychologically or emotionally, not just intellectually, empathetically, sympathetically, or contemplatively, but also in perversely existential, un-real-reality-ways. In his Afterword to Zalmen Gradowski’s *The Last Consolation Vanished: The Testimony of a Sonderkommando in Auschwitz*, Arnold Davidson says,

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<sup>5</sup> Sartre, Jean Paul. *Being and Nothingness: A Phenomenological Essay on Ontology*, (Washington Square Press, 1993).

<sup>6</sup> Ortner, Nick. *The Tapping Solution: A Revolutionary System for Stress-Free Living*, (Hay House Inc.; 8th edition September 16, 2014).

<sup>7</sup> Kierkegaard, Søren. *Fear and Trembling/Repetition*. Trans. and Ed., Howard Hong and Edna Hong. (Princeton University Press, New Jersey, 1983), P. 46–7.

<sup>8</sup> Schein, Margaret. *Cruelty: On the Limits of Humanity*. Dissertation for The University of Chicago’s Committee on Social Thought, 2006.

“Being beyond our understanding,” which those who had to try to grasp Existence and its presen-absence during the Shoah must be, “should not imply violating and destroying our understanding.”<sup>9</sup> But many cruelties seem to flourish by doing just that.

The “lucky” ones, those who survive genocides, the Shoah of WWII,<sup>10</sup> extreme, mass cruelties, long enough are often then self-compelled or are asked “to explain the inexplicable,” as Charlotte Delbo, the poet and Auschwitz survivor, describes it. One might react like her in the face of the multiple *what’s* that evade confrontation from any single direction; she, who inexplicably lived through and after Auschwitz, says of one human body in particular on a heap of bodies in the camp, “I look too. I look at this corpse that moves but it does not move me”<sup>11</sup> (see excerpt from Delbo, *The Measure of our Days* in Appendix A). There are other individuals who attempt to force the inexplicable and the uninhabitable within the fragile weaves of the explicable and habitable through defiance; they push to expand the world such that it can contain what most people would call “evil,”<sup>12</sup> or they try to cast the ever-persistent remainders out. The soldiers march on their paths either with porous abstractions or with crumbling debris of the concrete “real.” They may be devotees of the “head,” objectivity, reason, or logic, or of the “gut” or more romantically the “heart,” emotion, perception, and intuition, or of both, requiring a lyrical stealth. They desperately fight to wrangle into coherency the differences between being human as having humanity and having the absence of humanity *as* inhumanity in live practice and only *by a human being*. It’s a distorting mouthful.

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<sup>9</sup>Gradowski, Zalmen. *The Last Consolation Vanished: The Testimony of a Sonderkommando in Auschwitz*. Ed. and Forward by Philippe, Mesnard; Ed. and Afterword by Arnold I. Davidson; and Trans. by Monet Rubye. (The University of Chicago Press, Chicago IL, 2022). P. 169.

<sup>10</sup>To many, describing what happened to the millions of people massacred and tortured in WWII as the “Holocaust” is painfully inaccurate and disrespectful. This reaction is justified by a number of reasons, one of which is that “holocaust” means “sacrifice.” “Sacrifice” involves something considered holy and a rite performed in connection with the spiritual. The Jews, queers, Gypsies, sick, feeble, old, young, unneeded, in the way, and so on weren’t sacrificed; they were slaughtered.

<sup>11</sup>Delbo, Charlotte. *Auschwitz and After*. Trans. Rosette Lamont, (Yale University Press. 1995). P. 19.

<sup>12</sup>For an elegant and insightful treatment of different sorts of approaches and the different reaches of the different literary mechanisms and approaches some survivors use, see Davidson’s Afterword to *The Last Consolation Vanished* (cited above), P. 255–258.

Responses to cruelties can become animated, acting like magic dust, illuminating an outline of a draft of our understanding of what kind of beings we (and others) are and in what evolutionary phase the world in which we must get along is: is it becoming undone, deconstructing in the real, ticking seconds it takes us to reach for it? Is it leaving us unmade or eviscerating us—in many cases literally? Are the disasters and perversions happening en masse, microscopically, both at once, and is the world being remade without consent or consideration for the irregular shapes some of us make—bewilderingly? How could one (or parts of one) withstand that experience and then come out on the other side of the barriers that should separate human, humane, and inhuman and inhumane, and still have humanity oneself? The categories become limp, and there are no ontological safety nets. How could one communicate that to others? How can one not?

One could, like the aforementioned former *Sonderkommando*, Zalmen Gradowski, not just have one's faith evacuated, not just find the source of the imprints left of one's former inner faith mocking, but also come to resent its previous existence. In that instant arrives the disintegration of the world outside of one that continues carrying on, disrobing one from anything that makes meaning. Gradowski, knowing he will end up walking the same collapsed path as those he spends his days leading to their murders and to their corpses' final destinations, writes to the reader:

Yet sometimes the heart is stabbed, the soul is pierced—why do I sit so 'calmly,' why do I not cry, not mourn... Is all feeling frozen, numbed, atrophied? Sometimes I hoped, sometimes I consoled myself that a time would come, a day when I will have earned the right to cry—but who knows... that ground is shaky.

What I want now, and this is my only wish, since I cannot cry for them, may a stranger's eye let fall a tear for my loved ones.

My family who were burned here on August 12, 1942, a Tuesday at 9 o'clock.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup>Gradowski, Zalmen. *The Last Consolation Vanished: The Testimony of a Sonderkommando in Auschwitz*. Ed. and Forward by Philippe, Mesnard; Ed. and Afterword by Arnold I. Davidson; and Trans. by Monet Rubye. (The University of Chicago Press, Chicago IL, 2022). P. 58–59.

Even his own very deep faith and love can't produce proof of his humanity to himself. He intercedes on behalf of his family and himself in a droning lamentation fashion after the quote above to recite the names of his family and dates of their murders, that we may cry—and not just for him, I don't think, and not just in his stead, but also, in some immediate capacity, to cry *his* tears.

Delbo cannot be stirred, and Gradowski cannot weep—two of the most organic, private, and intense human intimacies with the “external” world, and if one is so inclined, us.<sup>14</sup>

To “explain the inexplicable:” to performatively, but also necessarily, expose the epitome of our fundamental vulnerability. To claw one's way to belonging, to meaning-making, to mattering, to being *with*, is one of our primal sets of drivers. On it, even the very first seconds of our survival are dependent—the newborn's expectant community usually does not bother to count fingers and toes until the infant exposes its dependence on and supplication to the requirements of this world and its commitment to an existence of *being among* those who administer the world by making a movement and then a sound. And thus, the new being must announce itself and be recognized. Ironically, though a shared aspect of existing among those who have humanity, reconstructing and communicating the experience of the destruction of the capacity to commune takes an absurd quantity and kind of ingenuity, strength, vision, and, above all, love and faith. *Impossible* faith, even when it takes a shape beyond that of doubt, expansive certainty, or freedom. The creation, existence, and survival of manuscripts like Gradowski's are testament to the reality of the possibility of that faith.

I offer the below because when faced with situations like it, which most of us cannot withstand, naturalistic nihilism (see Chap. 8 for more on that kind of response to the existence of cruelty), or a form of Kierkegaardian faith, seem the only rational possibilities. Except, as Delbo compels through her poetry and prose, that would be a futile effort in explaining the inexplicable by subjecting reality to only that which can be lit by rationality and accepting only that which passes through its particular sieves.

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<sup>14</sup> *ibid.*

In the below excerpt (for a more comprehensive and powerful experience of the passage, again please consult Appendix A and the cited source), Delbo continues from her vantage point in the camp near one of the places they stacked the bodies. Of the many women prisoners who had been gassed and dumped in the mass grave, one Delbo refers to as “Alice.” The women in the barracks took care of each other as best as they could. They mostly all knew each other by name. They counted each other as alive or not in the mornings and evenings. When she was alive, Alice—Delbo and the others knew—wore an artificial leg. Here is a small part of Delbo’s description:

It is a haystack of carefully piled corpses, as with a real haystack under the moonlight and snow, at night. But we look at them without fear. We know that here one is on the borderline of the bearable and we struggle against letting go.

Lying in the snow, Alice’s leg is alive and sentient. It must have detached itself from the dead Alice.

We kept on going there to see if it was still there, and each time it was intolerable. Alice abandoned, dying in the snow. Alice we could not approach because weakness nailed us to the spot. Alice dying alone, not calling anyone.

Alice had been dead for weeks yet her artificial leg was still resting in the snow. Then it snowed again. The leg was covered over. It reappeared in the mud. This leg in the mud. Alice’s leg—severed alive—in the mud.<sup>15</sup>

As with Delbo, Gradowski doesn’t really expect to *explain* or to reconstitute sense-making where there is nothing to reconstitute and no world in which to reconstitute it. Sit for a good, non-intellectual, minute, in this vacuum of human capacity for being, for belonging to humanity, for being human—or at least get as close to that precipice as you can. Again, throughout his Afterword, Davidson describes the unique, consuming, demanding, and yet romantic tension Gradowski persists through and stretches the reader uncomfortably and irretrievably across (in particular, see pages 160 and 185 of the Afterword). Gradowski and Delbo’s approaches could not be more unique and distinct from each other. I pair

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<sup>15</sup>Delbo, Charlotte. *Auschwitz And After*. Trans. Rosette Lamont. (Yale University Press, 1995), P. 41.

them together not because both authors are survivors of the Shoah,<sup>16</sup> and not because of their lethally subtle and penetrating voices, but because in so being and doing, they invite and allow us to join with them, impossibly, in a place void of the components that can make up any sense of belonging, above understanding, *beyond bad*, at the lip where humanity curls in on itself: the pure extremity of cruelty.<sup>17</sup>

Gradowski often speaks with us in a present tense and in a subjunctive mood of suspended wishes, wonders, and ifs that trail off or scream at us, and he pleads to us who are *in* time to take on the moral mantle for him—to take his hand, to be in his present, to cry. He asks us through the echoes of a tense that he no longer has the luxury of inhabiting himself, except for in the eerily, icily, wistful disinhabited or depersonalized omniscient present underneath a mocking or shunning moon—“sometimes ‘*the*’ heart, ‘*is*,” he says stoically, with the ding of imploding isolation. The erratic suspension and repulsion of sensory processing, psychological attachment, of affective, intellectual, or spiritual orientation in the world often hungrily resonates with Delbo’s perceptiveness of the aliveness of Alice through the lifeless life of this artificial leg that seems so literal, interactive, so present, that the leg seems to invert itself out of the lifeless, discarded, non-sentient mundane and into a metaphor that surpasses mere association or representation. It can’t be real. It can’t be unreal, either.

It is difficult to write about those who write about experiences that are truly incomprehensible, demanding to be understood and shared, simultaneously un-feelable and overwhelming, and both the original teller and the witness/reader/commentator participate in the nuclear fusion and fission of cruelties. According to Davidson, and I will quote at length below for reasons that I think will be clear, Gradowski’s language “is not that of

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<sup>16</sup>I do not mean “survivor” necessarily in the temporal, corporeal, way. As mentioned, Gradowski was murdered in the camp. Delbo, as the title of her book indicates, did live a life after Auschwitz. They are both and neither “survivors.”

<sup>17</sup>Please remember that I do not mean to grade, rate, or rank instances of cruelty in terms of their destruction or in any way that anchors us to qualifying and quantifying sufferings. All cruelty is “beyond bad” (see Schein, DePauw University Magazine, July 5th, 2022. <https://www.DePauw.edu/stories/details/the-boulder-question-by-maggie-schein/> and Schein, *Cruelty: On the Limits of Humanity*).



empathy, but of direct participation.”<sup>18</sup> What is so difficult about this? Let’s also keep this question on the table: why do these particular kinds of circumstances, ours and his, require that he succeeds and that we acknowledge trying and failing to fulfill his needs? And how does he know that he must try and why has he faith enough that one of us will find him? Sifting through the iterations of these questions and crawling through the proliferation of possible answers are not straight or clear paths, nor are they paths with promises of endings.

Davidson continues:

Neither reason nor affect in themselves are sufficient for Gradowski. He wants us, as literally as possible, to be with him in Auschwitz, that is, he is not satisfied with our empathy towards him and his fellow condemned, all smothered by brutality and waiting for death—such empathy is too removed, too unstable.

Before we listen further: stop at those last two phrases above. Empathy, the ultimate in human intimacy, the supposed feeling *with* another, *for* another, *as* another, is too “*removed*.” Take a moment to ask yourself what that might be interpreted to mean. As a side note, I am serious about the requests for self-reflection in the course of this project, and it is only fair to acknowledge that this kind of move can be off-putting or intrusive for a book like this one. Usually, we are trained to read, catalogue, read for what the author says, how, what they mean or not, how we respond to the author’s words and the author’s thoughts and thoughts of others, but we aren’t always demanded to take our own real time and be, well, present *ourselves* to the questions. That is, our exercise is usually centered around the questions as such, around the subjects that make up our mutually unstable ground. But the subject, as mentioned, *is* about Us, and therefore, it *is* also about You.

Back to, Davidson: how can empathy be too far away from what is essentially affectively inhabiting the other? Even if one takes Davidson to mean so-called “rational empathy,” how is this Not only *not enough*,

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<sup>18</sup>Please note that although Davidson highlights Gradowski’s unique style of immediate “lyrical lamentation” and present companionship, he also points out that Gradowski is aware that we cannot make it to the absolute interior of his experience. That is, that distance must be acknowledged, and it is.

but also not even the same species of *being with*? And what, exactly, is unstable? Or better, what needs to have stability in order for something like empathy to be proximal to what it is supposed to be? To do the work we need it to do?

Of the many things we are to make of and take from Gradowski's unique use of language, one is that in his direct and intense moments he somehow cracks the temporal walls separating, as well as holding up, the temporal world, and sustains our visceral and intellectual attentions. As Davidson explains:

He demands that we be present with him at Auschwitz, going through, hour by hour, what he is going through as he experiences it. Empathy becomes superfluous; Auschwitz is, as it were, happening to us at the same time that it engulfs Gradowski. Gradowski's peculiar style expresses itself in a language of demonstrative immediacy, of deixis, and pulls us into his world so that we are lying, sitting, and standing next to him, our distance diminished. He is...someone whose experience we directly share.<sup>19</sup>

I dedicate so much time to these exceptionally distressing cases because I think we need the time, the push, to take in the extremity and penetration of the perversions, the utter desecration of what it means to BE that they demonstrate is possible. It may seem uncomfortably irritating, distorting, or as though it relies on a false comparison of absurd proportions by including voices from the Shoah or about such instances in the same handful as more ordinary, less devastating ones. However, doing it this way forces us to attend to the fragility, neediness, and necessity of the elements that make up our fundamental beingness and the capacities we require in order to remain human when faced with having to face the impossibility of being an inhuman human and the possibility of existing, but also of having been undone, unmade, deconstructed, and taken out of circulation, so to speak—whether by systemic torture and death, random or isolated instances of extreme cruelty, by ostracism, ignorance, by

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<sup>19</sup> Gradowski, Zalmen. *The Last Consolation Vanished: The Testimony of a Sonderkommando in Auschwitz*. Ed. and Forward by Philippe, Mesnard; Ed. And Afterword by Arnold I. Davidson; and Trans. by Monet Rubye. (The University of Chicago Press, Chicago IL, 2022). P. 157.

gaslighting, and so on—from the unthinkably extreme back to that used tube of preparation H from Chap. 1.

When it comes to anxiety about mankind, personhood, being a certain kind of being that belongs in the world *somehow*, I am not quite sure where I personally fall, but I suspect it's somewhere between the moderately effective palliative approaches and the Kierkegaardian paradoxes of faith. That is, on a good day, I do try to take stock and self-regulate with what does work, of what I can know or what I can learn; on the other days, I am sunk by the facts indicating that we really don't know very much about what we know and don't know. That makes learning a humbling and possibly not just fruitless but also dangerous ambition, depending on how we try to go about it. In short, I am hopeful because one must be, but I am not an optimist. My world has not been so undone that the threads of tense, mood, time, and space no longer offer me safety ropes, but I am now frighteningly more aware of how dependent I am on them and what happens when they are detached and aimless or formless.

I want to back up and slow down a bit. I still think it might help if we can identify what the relevant anxiety is about even if we can't figure out or agree just yet what the solution is or why the anxiety exists, when it seems like a defining feature of ours. As we've seen, one of anxiety's powers is in hiding what it is really about and cornering us into a "why?" before we ever get a grip on the "what."

Let's return to Coelho's thought about anxiety and mankind. It is a grand, nearly grandiose, one but it rings sharply pitched bells of truth. I'll take it a bit further and propose that when we talk of "mankind," we are talking about our moral relevance, and that when we talk about moral relevance, we are exposing our insecurity about why we think we matter in the world. Shklar, when detangling one knot between natural misfortune (the nonhuman domain) and injustice (the moral-socio-conventional-human domain), says: "But however it began, no worse disaster had or has ever befallen us than our departure from nature to culture."<sup>20</sup> By this, I believe, she confirms we are confused and we

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<sup>20</sup> Shklar, Judith. *The Faces of Injustice*. (Yale University Press, 1990), P. 53.

continue to confuse ourselves about our place in the world. Her work is more concerned with how we try (and often fail) to make sense of suffering; mine is more to make sense of how we make sense of causing suffering in the form of cruelty, and what that says about the sense we make of what we are.

I offer the blanket challenge that nearly all of our moral systems are fundamentally rooted in an anxiety, and that that anxiety is born from dangling questions, from uncertainties of what humankind is—what I am, what you are, and what we are—in relation to nature, to others, to anything we might be able to consider that is “not us.” And we must have a “not me” or a “not us,” to settle our anxieties. Where else are we to understand where, to what, when, and to whom we belong? Our attempted answers to that fundamental anxiety determine for what we can be blamed, how, and how we might intervene, correct wrongs, and, as importantly, where we are simply pawns, or irrelevant, or incapable.

How do we belong here? To compound things, we are also uncertain—or at least disagree about—what the nature of “here” even is. At the heart of it, nearly every moral tradition—and every response to the problem of inhumanity and cruelty—is a response to the question: do we humans belong in, to, and with the natural world? For the record, I obsessed about how to phrase that question because I wasn’t sure what would happen if I said, “*with the rest of*” the natural world, or not. If I include “rest of,” it already makes us sound like we are part of it. And if I leave it out? That there doesn’t seem to be an obvious middle of the road way to construct the question means I am in the dark, a terrible writer, or that there is no easy way to get to our question. Or all three. But our language, the vocabulary, syntaxes, and semantics that shape our shared perception of reality, force us to take a stand facing in one direction or the other. That forced torque helps us disguise our fundamental anxiety. So, let’s tease it out from hiding. To collect a drop from William James’ quiet and clear stream:

We have so many businesses with nature that no one of them yields us an all-embracing clasp. The philosophic attempt to define nature so that no one’s business is left out, so that no one lies outside the door saying, “Where

do *I* come in?” is sure in advance to fail. The most philosophy can hope for is to not lock out any interest forever.<sup>21</sup>

But, and James is well aware of this and is casting “philosophy” in a broad swath above, it is not *only* the philosophic or traditionally scholarly attempts at defining both nature, ourselves, and ourselves with or in that-which-is-not-us, that are constrained and restricted in their reach. Religious, spiritual rationalisms of various sorts (including isolationist or nihilistic ones) all testify to our desperation to comprehensively root and orient ourselves in an ontology that we cling to with more or less elaborate, but, as James would specify, “intimate” teleological narratives.<sup>22</sup> “The place of the divine in the world must be more organic and intimate,” he cautions. This intimacy is a banner aspect of the more general category of “spiritualisms” which James contrasts with a cynical “materialism” (e.g., in “I. Types of Thinking”).<sup>23</sup>

I suffer from a vertiginous insecurity and a visceral uncertainty about where in the natural order this thing that I am, not just me, but me qua human being, belongs—if it belongs at all. Lest you become concerned, I am not having a personal existential crisis: rather, we all are in the same one, as James seems to indicate in his opening to *A Pluralistic Universe*. In response to the chaos we seem to be and to cause, a pessimistic friend of mine likes to say in a sour-candy tongue-in-cheek proclamation, “Dinosaurs. If only there were still dinosaurs, everything would go back into order.” When I respond, “And then we would likely not exist,” he says, “Exactly.”

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<sup>21</sup> James, William. *A Pluralistic Universe*. Intro. Levinson, H. (University of Nebraska Press; Reprinted from the original 1909 Ed), P. 32.

<sup>22</sup> The impact of our inability to escape time does not end and begin with life as only a peregrination toward its own end; rather, it impacts how we learn, how we experience not just ourselves (we may have an awareness of our impending nonexistence and so on), but, as importantly, *everything else*. That we are bound, or experience ourselves as if we are bound, in time impacts how we experience and interpret, how we sense, perceive, react, and respond to everything. In other words, our experience of time is a morally relevant aspect of our exhibiting “humanity,” and an issue that will reoccur throughout this conversation in various ways.

<sup>23</sup> James, William. *A Pluralistic Universe*. Intro. Levinson, H.m (University of Nebraska Press; Reprinted from the original 1909 Ed).

I have another friend. She is an Indigenous wise woman who also studies Taoism. When she looks around in amazement that we are still here, that she is still here, that there are still some bees left trying to go unnoticed despite their tenacity, she says, “What we perceive as our chaos is part of the order. We are as much in it and of it as all other elements of it.” Both kinds of responses, those that are cryptically pessimistic about human existence as belonging and those that more optimistically want to emphasize the possibility that we belong by trying to belong, testify that we are in a state of constantly trying to justify our place in the world and explaining ourselves to ourselves. Hence the anxiety. This is the risk of trying to justify and explain the “why” before we give proper due to trying to understand the “what.”

Chapter 1 intended to agitate the conversation with the observation that there is a spectrum of cruelty from the ordinary to the extraordinary, from the malicious, the benevolent, to the indifferent. Using cruelty as this broad refracting telescope through which to examine ourselves as part of “humanity” reveals facets of us worth considering anew, such as our anxiety about how we belong in with and to the natural world. Let me make it clear: I am not asking how we are superior, or if we think we are superior as many do.<sup>24</sup> That question or neurotic obsessive tic is sinking in a Western tradition of quicksand rationality.<sup>25</sup> I am saying we have this foundational anxiety concerning how we are different, that we don’t know what it is really about, and that’s what *defines* “anxiety” as a state of being, which, in this case, is also a condition of ours that is morally relevant. I don’t think the main issue is one of superiority, as most religions, politics, and disciplines tend to make it out be: concern that boomerangs around whether we humans are better or worse than other participating entities in this world is just continuing evidence that we don’t know how we belong. Red herring ways to avoid anxiety can manifest in many forms.

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<sup>24</sup> Korsgaard, Christine. *Fellow Creatures: Kantian ethics and our duties to animals*. Tanner Lectures on Human Values, (Princeton, 2004), P. 5. In contrast, see James, William. *A Pluralistic Universe*, “I. The Types of Thinking,” and “II. Monistic Idealism.”

<sup>25</sup> Wilson, Catherine. *Moral Animals: Ideals and Constraints in Moral Theory*, (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 2004).

To remind, this is not an evolutionary or scientific inquiry into the origin and trajectory of *Homo sapiens* on earth. It's a speculative, contemplative, uncomfortably amorphous one. Gaita confirms by saying that, "If by 'human beings' we meant only homo sapiens, the term could play no interesting moral role. And if beyond identifying a species, if it were merely a way of recording moral opinion—as in 'What a Human Being!'—then it would play no interesting role either."<sup>26</sup> His point is that "humanity" does have an interesting, morally relevant, and I am emphasizing, anxiety-stimulating, role.

Just as our conversation right now isn't based in strictly scientific inquiry nor is it under the thumb of formal rules of argumentation and proofs, it's also not an attempt to prioritize narratives about us as fallen angels, children of a god or gods, bastards of Mother Earth, or any other spiritual or naturalistic explanation of being here—though those kinds of stories may storm efforts to self-regulate our anxiety. Rather, this chapter is an invitation to stand together in front of the mirror and to talk about what we believe we see—knowing we very likely will be off the mark. We are all expert amateurs in this. As much scholarly, scientific, and theistic energy has been devoted to what we think we are, to what we can discover about our evolution, the parts that make us up and upright, the stories we tell about where we come from and where we go, even so, our reflections are not protected by academic disciplines or guarded by sentry citations or religious tracts—they are still personal, just like cruelty.<sup>27</sup> As Gaita reminds us again, "It is sad but true that human kind understands itself partly by the crimes it knows itself to be capable of. We must therefore strive to give them their right names."<sup>28</sup> In our case, we are here trying to

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<sup>26</sup>Gaita, Raimond. *A Common Humanity: thinking about love and truth and justice*, (Routledge, NY, 2002), P. 263.

<sup>27</sup>I insist on the "personal" in opposition to the "scholarly" not because I want to privilege one over the other. Not because I subscribe to some kind of ontological or epistemic relativism. Rather, it's because some things, or some parts of existence, simply aren't well handled by rational argument. Facts, reason, logic are powerful, but they are only successful when they are the right key for the right lock, and for much of our lived life in morality, they simply don't quite fit. See Cora Diamond, "Anything but Argument" in *The Realistic Spirit*, (MIT Press, Cambridge, MA 1991).

<sup>28</sup>Gaita, Raimond. *A Common Humanity: thinking about love and truth and justice*. (Routledge, NY 2002), P. xxviii.

understand what the name, the designation “cruelty,” means and what that says about us.

We will continue to revisit some of what we discussed here, and, in particular, the havoc our anxiety about our place in nature wreaks on our abilities to speak coherently about cruelty between humans and humans, human and nonhuman animals, and humans and those considered not-moral-agents (whether human or not).

Back to our mirror and our dioramic backdrop. We are here, and here is the natural world, adorned with our hybrid “artificial” additions. That is obvious enough—but it needs to be said, since we do have this anxiety about how and why. How we explain that we belong, don’t belong, or could come to belong reflects something about our moral orientation, what we think matters about calling ourselves human, morally speaking. What about the designation “human” puts us somehow not quite all the way *in or of nature*, and also places us possibly, or sometimes, or conditionally, *in a moral realm*, and so a place, in other words, where we can pass judgment on ourselves and others about not just right and wrong, but also about good, bad, evil, about passing judgment on passing judgment, and, of course about cruelty? Calling ourselves “human” is able to do all of this—if it couldn’t, we couldn’t judge ourselves inhuman.<sup>29</sup>

This awkwardness in our relationship with ourselves and with the world also becomes glaringly unavoidable when we venture to attribute moral importance to anything whose humanity—or personhood—might be called into question. In this questioning, we are often jolted and divided individually and collectively to the point of obsessively guarding that with which we have identified, violent or civil protests, volatile political, legal, religious, ethical demonstrations and battles, murder, execution, war, genocide and instances of mutual mass destruction.<sup>30</sup> Just to be provocative, think of the familiar issues around the status of primates used in

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<sup>29</sup> As discussed, a squirrel might be an incompetent squirrel, a dog might be a bad (i.e., undesirable) dog, and a cat might act unexpectedly for a cat (though “unexpectedly” for a cat is a difficult one to discern), but we don’t call any other failure of a natural kind an “*in*” or “*un*” of its kind. As suggested above, we don’t make sense of the thought that there could be “*insquirrel*” actions or an *insquirrel* squirrel. See Philippa Foot, *Natural Goodness*, (Oxford University Press, 2001).

<sup>30</sup> There are, from thinkers and activists on both sides, too many debates about what counts as “persons,” who or what is entitled to “rights,” the difference between “rights” and “moral consideration,” and the moral implications of the non-sentience or sentience of plant life to list here.



medical or scientific testing as “persons” who have “rights” or “moral subjectivity.”<sup>31</sup> Think about how we defend the moral importance of a fetus at week six, or eight, a psychopathic serial killer, a pig, bees, trees, or excrement. These are huge questions, but the protest banners and picket line barricades drop up and down between us and our shared-but-tribalistic worlds as theater curtains manned by a madman on the ropes.

As this chapter is being written and edited (May of 2022–May 2023), there is a reinvigorated (or simply rehydrated), dangerously divisive and dysfunctional debate occurring in the US over abortion rights, access, morality, and legality. It is not easy to think about or think through; what counts as a spiritual human? A legal personhood? A morally responsible agent or subject? What about an intellectually and developmentally delayed 10-year-old girl who is raped and impregnated by her father and who, despite being a minor and unable to pass a legal “mental competency” assessment, could be charged as an adult with murder for killing herself and/or for having an abortion. According to the Catholic tradition, human life begins at inception, and yet a still-born baby birthed does not make the mark for Baptism. Of course, there are plenty of theological arguments that can be bandied about, but that they must be is part of the point.<sup>32</sup>

While we stand in front of this mirror together, let’s respectfully stack those kinds of arguments and debates in a pile in the corner. That’s not to dismiss them. We can return to them when we are more decent. We’re all naked here, and remember we are standing here hesitantly or with tell-tale bravado identifying which moral system each of us actually does try to follow or believes in, or which is best or right. We are standing here awkwardly exploring what we mean when we say I, or you can, do, or should follow any moral system at all.

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<sup>31</sup> See authors and works such as: Wise, Steven. *Rattling the Cage: Toward Legal Rights for Animals*. Wise (Perseus Books Cambridge, 2000), and, Rudacille, Deborah. *The Scalpel and the Butterfly: War Between Animal Research and Animal Protection*. (Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, New York, 2000).

<sup>32</sup> This book was published in 2023, during a level of political and moral radical extremism in the United States of America. Roe Vs. Wade, which protected the rights of females’ choice for pregnancy termination, was overturned, and states were implementing and executing harsh legal penalties for females who choose to violate their state’s policies, many of which make no exceptions for rape, child abuse and molestation, risk to the mother’s well-being or life, or viability of the fetus.

## Part Two: Anxieties About Not Being Human or About Being *Non-human*

Mark Twain wrote, “Of all the animals, man is the only one that is cruel.”<sup>33</sup> Do you matter in the world differently than a nonhuman, a beast, an animal? If you belong among the ones who can be cruel, how and why? Do I matter the same way? Who or what might not? The difference between the first issue, the set of arguments and debates we’ve stacked in the corner (which moral system do you like?), and the second issue (why we get to be morally important and believe in a moral system at all) is both odd and important. Your reactions, thoughts, beliefs, and opinions about our place among the other inhabitants of the natural world betray how you think we are different from them, morally speaking. Or how we are one with them. And though one might wish this were a binary, lulling one like a stuck metronome into an unresolvable acquiescence, it is definitely not. Nearly all parts are moving parts, and we mix and match and adjust scales, in endless variations. Your answer at any given time (one expects them to develop and change over time, right?) to why we humans are different from other aspects of nature, how we belong here, and how we can be said to “have humanity” or not<sup>34</sup> influences which kind of moral thinking you think is the right one—that is, what you think is correct, or good, humane, and why. Consequently, in a world in which sense-making can still be had, if only fleetingly, such a position is also supposed to influence what you think is wrong, or bad, or inhumane, or cruel, and what reaction, response, rectification, allows you to move forward with humanity intact. By proceeding this way, we are now inverting the path of our usual trajectory of thought, something we may need to explore.

Usually, in college, in a coffee shop, in a political debate, we go about this kind of conversation assuming that our preferred moral orientation (religious, secular, scientific, naturalistic, spiritual, skeptical, agnostic, etc.) dictates our understanding of our place in the natural world as above, or in, with, or below, and so on. And this makes sense, for a start. For instance, if you adhere to traditional Judeo-Christian moral dictates,

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<sup>33</sup> Twain, Mark. *Collected Tales, Sketches, Speeches, and Essays 1891–1910*. The Library of America.

<sup>34</sup> Imagine *in-dog* in place of *in-humanity* as the operative category here.

you likely also believe that human beings are made in the image of the divine and that the rest of nature is, in contrast, made by the divine for us, we who are in *His*, G-d's, image. We understand our fundamental kind of belonging or alienation based on that sort of narrative.

Similarly, but in a different genre, if you are one of those who believes that morality is inextricably rooted in and governed by rational thought (where rationality is discrete from perception, sensation, emotion, and other capacities that may be threats to objectivity, consistency, shareability, unchangeability, or universality), and that what is good is what is rational and what is rational dictates what is good, then you likely belong to the crew who relies on the idea that humans are different from and superior to the rest of nature because we have rational cognitive functions that are superior to whatever else there may be—we have “bigger brains,” self-regulation, self-control, maybe even autonomy and free-will, and, therefore, freedom from the tyranny of nature (ours, theirs, its). Our way of belonging in that story is scaffolded accordingly. Essentially, as part of that belief, we do or can know for better or for worse, have choice not just about what to do (though that is usually heavy-handedly overweighted and distorted) but also about what kind of being to be (good or bad are only two of many options), and that is alot. In this second version, we don't necessarily sin, but we can be wrong, we can be incorrect, out of balance, at odds with, and we can suffer the incorrectness of others. We can suffer more as well as think more than those who have smaller mental faculties, and each of those is related to the other. Of course, this means our suffering, the suffering that can be thought and expressed to others (ostensibly), is more valuable than suffering that may be ineffable, at least to some of us. Or so, and this is important and a rather hungry underbelly of much of this discussion that is easy to overlook, this is the reasonable conclusion that is to be drawn from the commitments laid out by the scaffolding of this genre of narrative.

Our value (so these kinds of stories go), personally and collectively, increases based on the capacity to suffer more than someone or something else, which is evidenced by our capacities to contemplate our own deaths, plan and plot the deaths of others, to anticipate eternal love and reward or its opposite, and even by the very fact that we calculate the

value of lives and so on.<sup>35</sup> In these stories, the proof of our *belonging* is in the *value* of our lives—we are *worth* it, by reason or by divinity—or so most of our thinking goes. The underlying algorithms of moral mattering are actually consistent enough that they can be quite lenient in terms of which processing system they select as the decisive one and still, at the end of the day, no matter if we identify as a rationalist, a utilitarian, a virtue-ethicist, or a consequentialist, we end up relying on “valuing,” and without explicit examination, the fall back tools for that involve calculation. And the value of each of us (if we qualify as human) is positioned in contrast to the value of other aspects and inhabitants of nature. And so, underneath what appears to be a variety of options, we often end up trapped (perhaps fencing in front of mirrors). This is an idea echoed from the ancients, through Nietzsche, Twain, Diamond, Hadot, Améry, and so on.

Value is often represented with the image of scales; a gain is a loss. Often the value of life is measured in terms of a capacity to “think about” our suffering because we think that thinking about or anticipating our suffering makes us suffer more, and that increases the *value* of our suffering, or so we often insist.<sup>36</sup> The fact that justice is also memorialized with an image of scales is not insignificant—it means that often we think of the balancing of justice as transaction, and transactions as balances that can be measured and quantified, as opposed to more holistic or existential states of being-with-and-in-the-world. Tell that to the victim of a genocidal regime. Ask that of those who didn’t survive a genocidal regime. Walk up to Gradowski; face him on the day of his slaughter just before he is murdered; ask him if the value of those other beings standing with him, the number, or the kind—what is the rate of the going form of the currency of being?—in the gas chamber with him, *is* more or less, *has* more value or less, than the batch that were gassed previously. Or the ones that will come next.

In a beautiful and volatily clenched rage against the confusions of responsibility and the nature of justice that genocide brings—and in

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<sup>35</sup> Though sometimes alluring in the potential for elegance, think about the implications, what it says about us, that iterations of utilitarian and consequentialist thinking are so legitimate they take up one of the positions in the moral cannon’s Trinity.

<sup>36</sup> McMahan, Jeff. “*Eating Animals the Right Way.*” *Daedalus*, (Winter, 2008).

response to the questions of forgiveness, reparations, and pardon to restore balance: Vladimir Jankélévitch says:

No, it is not our place to pardon on behalf of the little children whom the brutes tortured to amuse themselves. The little children must pardon them themselves. While we turn to the brutes, and to the friends of the brutes, and tell them, Ask the little children to pardon you yourselves.<sup>37</sup>

Value should not be confused with virtue. Justice should not be confused with equality. Balance should not be confused with substantive, with moral content. The ontological or existential mitochondria of moral consequence is not to be confused with only that which can be calculated or substantiated. If it's not clear, I think the image and conceptual apparatus of scales for some of our most important or most critical moral considerations is dangerously misleading. But that is for another conversation. Right now, it is important that such a concept, foundational as it is to the public, social, and domestic, private, and personal domains, doesn't stabilize the quakes and rumbles of our anxiety.

If we about-face our thinking, if we really, just as an experiment, look again at ourselves and ask how we realistically belong in the world first, or most primally, and then see what kinds of "should's" "mustn't's," "cans," and "can't's" boil up from our honest look, we may be surprised. That is, we wouldn't want to ask of a red-green color-blind child to pick out the red stripes in a picture of the flag, and we wouldn't penalize him or think badly of him for failing to do so. Rather, we would ask him which colors he can see and then to pick those out, wouldn't we? I am asking us to do the same with ourselves about how we are significant morally. We will not, I don't believe, see the full pictures in their full palates of relational vibrancies.

No "off the rack" approach to our anxieties about ourselves, about how we matter morally and how we belong with the world will satisfy any single one of us. As we have rifled through, there are traditional categories that most of us tend to fall into when explaining how we belong or don't belong in or with nature and what we assume makes us morally special or that confirms that we believe we are not. The previous offerings were a

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<sup>37</sup>Jankélévitch, Vladimir. "Shall we pardon them?" *Critical Inquiry*. Vol. 22, Number 3.

very crude, very broad-stroke sampling. Wherever you find yourself in the conversation about how we belong, that position involuntarily propels you to explain how we are special, how we are moral creatures. To summarize: what follows from these kind of origin/nature stories is who or what you think does not count as a moral creature, to what you are responsible, to whom or what you need be responsive, how you can or should be responsive, what or who should be responsive and responsible to you, who it is possible to owe, what you do not owe and are not owed, and by what or whom, from what and from whom you should not expect responsiveness and responsibility. The consequences of these beliefs both *are* and *have* real, daily, material consequences.

## Part Three: Anxieties About Having These Conversations

When faced with all of this, are you like the realistic naturalistic nihilistic character in Coetzee's masterpiece, *The Lives of Animals*? That character, the fictional philosopher, Prof. Elaine Marx, whose insights I wished I had had in my repertoire when I was in graduate school being quizzed by my cohorts, represents a not uncommon, but very difficult to maintain, position: "Are you not," she challenges, "expecting too much of humankind when you ask us to live without species exploitation, without cruelty? Is it not more human to accept our own nature?"<sup>38</sup> This is a resigned position that accepts that as part of the natural world, our lives, too, are "Nasty, brutish, and short,"<sup>39</sup> just as it is for lambs to the slaughter. Just as it is for the goslings who are dinner for the black night heron. As it is for the night heron who is lunch for the red-tailed hawk. As it is for the hawk who is shredded, with her full belly, by a bored or righteous murder of crows.

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<sup>38</sup> Coetzee, J. M., and Gutmann, Amy. *The lives of animals*. (Princeton, N.J., Princeton University Press, 2001), p. 55.

<sup>39</sup> Hobbes, Thomas. Of course, Hobbes also thought of us as solitary, not as in nature, so much as alienated from everything. The original quote from Hobbes, 1588–1679. *Leviathan*. (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1968), is from a paragraph expressing that "the life of man, solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short."

Or, do you know someone who tends to think the natural, nonhuman-centric world is cruel and brutal, and we, being commonly cruel and brutal, fit right in—but this time, as the lion, the killer not the killed? If I'm upfront, I again want to return to our anxiety about how and where we belong and say that the Elaine Marx position makes me very uneasy. It's a sort of a sexy-defiant, radical "fuck you" stance. It's a rare and demanding position to hold in reality (see Chap. 3, for more on this)—in fact, I will prod that it's inauthentic at best and impossible at worst. In the end, it's as revealing as any other position, though. If you start at it, what can it go next? How do you climb from the organic, quotidian savagery of natural reality to the moral accusation that someone was a cruel and not just incorrect, or a bad/faulty specimen of its kind? This kind of pessimistic naturalism greases us out of any grip on the idea that we are beings who can do something "beyond bad,"<sup>40</sup> beyond incorrect, beyond the possibility of correction, beyond violations of human-made laws or religious dictates. And yet we tend to think we can have such thoughts and that they have meaning. If we say and think we understand that some actions "violate humanity,"<sup>41</sup> then we need to know better what we are talking about. That's why we are still gaping in front of this mirror. What is a violation of humanity, and how does looking at cruelty this way help us understand what we mean about ourselves when we say that we are human—and that we can fail to be? My hope, again, is that attending to what cruelty is can help us find some answers.

At the time of writing this, I'd been in a 20-some-year-long engaging, though sporadic—often very quiet—tussle with the author, professor, and thinker like no other, J.M. Coetzee ("Coetzee" and "John" from here on), who I was lucky to have as a teacher and fellow traveler in these inquiries during graduate school. It began when I was an uppity, frustrated student and he was just about to win his second Booker Prize. His office hours with me were awkward, tough, and profitable in thought and camaraderie—at least for me. He is not an easy man. I am not the first or only one to say that. There is little easy about him. But his concern, I

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<sup>40</sup> Schein, Margaret. *Cruelty: On the Limits of Humanity*. (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago; The Committee on Social Thought, dissertation, 2006).

<sup>41</sup> For a common, albeit undefined, use of "violations of humanity," please see: "*The Face of Human Trafficking*" | Megan Rheinschild | TEDxSantaBarbara, 2017.

think, for the subject of cruelty, for the wounds only it opens and closes, and its mysterious gateways and gatekeepers, offered and still offer a gentle, humble, fearless, honest, ruthless earnestness. We often just sat in anxious silence (or at least, I was anxious), thinking of what to say; which key to use to unlock which gate, and which weapon we might anticipate needing or which healing poultice, since neither of us knew what was on the other side of any given turn.

Despite our disagreements, which continue to be valuable friction to this day, his office hours back then felt like a peculiar second home to me for reasons I have never fully identified. He was one of the very few who didn't blink when I said, as a slight, young, unflinching, and in many ways, incredibly ignorant female in a very male world, "I study cruelty." I hadn't met anyone in the ivory tower so willing to stare with another person at our reflections, be present with another person in front of our mirrors with the patience and a cocktail of fear and curiosity, the pain, the confusion, the awe, and the skill as he did. On the street corner with a random neighbor, yes. In the therapist's office, likely canned, in the academy, no. He said we were fellow "Professors of Cruelty." It's how I title many of my emails to him even now. It validated the difficulty of the conversations and made me acknowledge a dedication to the subject that I'd been uneasy to accept and embrace.

In our discussions, Coetzee insists that humans are not the only ones who can be cruel. I insist that we are—or rather, I insist that we should look at ourselves and behave as if we are. I knew, those decades ago when I sat in his office, that I was not sure I trusted in my own insistence about that. I was, however, sure it was important to see what happened with the experiment of doing so, with what my mistakes might reveal. I still think it's important to see us through the lens that says only we "humans" can be cruel. We might be wrong about that in fact, but "facts" are coquettish things. I believe that in this practice, we can gain some insights into how we belong or don't in nature and with ourselves; we might see something in what our anxiety breeds—we might start peeling away to the "whats" in our questions about how about being human matters morally and what cruelty is.



**NOTE:** In more recent email exchanges with Coetzee about a draft of this chapter, I reiterated the below thoughts in an effort to support my position. Names are redacted for privacy, and Coetzee's direct responses are contained only in my website (see the link below) for copyright protections. These exchanges, along with the rest of those between us, are extended. I extract from them in this context in part to establish that I am sincere about this not being an easy subject to talk about, think about, and that that fact requires genuine conversations that are often exposing. Going up in conversation with the likes of Coetzee is not something to take easy or for granted. The anxiety about what we are and how we belong reveals itself in real, dynamic, unabashedly unfinished dialogue. The partial exchanges between Coetzee and I that are referenced in this book are important to share because they demonstrate the difficulty of two people who have thought about and studied cruelty for the majority of their lives. Neither of us is shy about it. Nor are we unaware of the potential offenses and complications. Again, for copyright restrictions, I was not able to include the verbatim and full exchanges in this book. However, with Coetzee's permissions, verbatim conversations between us referenced in this book can be read here: <http://maggieschein.com/coetzee-and-schein/>.

For now, here is what I can say: Coetzee's responses to my awkward and clunky prompts need to be looked at for *his* own words. I have tried to summarize, abbreviate, and accommodate the thoughts as much as possible. He always challenges me to be clear in our use of language—and I unhappily but honestly say I rarely succeeded. This is something anyone who interrogates cruelty over time should be ruthlessly challenged with. Coetzee does it in his customarily potently direct and deliberate way. I'll begin for now with this jagged conversation:

Dear John,

Back to the "Can only humans be cruel?" debate you and I have: although we might descriptively or poetically say the cat is cruel to the mouse, or that "April is the cruelest month," is there an occasion you can think of in which it is appropriate to accuse a nonhuman of being cruel to a human?

Even a dog that bites the hand that feeds him is only considered a “bad dog,” right? He might be considered legally (at least here in most states) a “dangerous animal,” but I can’t imagine anyone would in seriousness call him cruel.

As always,  
Maggie

These are some of the questions that the conversations bring up. Before you visit Coetzee’s full responses, again first turn the questions about this to yourself: in common discourse, how do we, how do you, distinguish between humane and inhumane slaughter? We have tried to round these corners before. What are we measuring our humanity against? Are cruel slaughters “cruel” because they cause more pain than necessary (and why? and who determines what is “necessary”?); a specific kind of pain; an extended pain; death for our gain; death to which we are indifferent; pain that causes us pleasure, amusement, or satisfaction?

Coetzee responds that it depends on how we define and use “cruel.” To his query, I flirted with what stops me from restricting the attribution of “cruelty” to humans only:

Dear John,

I understand mine was clearly an unfair demand, since I’ve stipulated which use/meaning of the word I’m focused on, and that one, of course, is human-based. My question is not just about my restricted stipulation. We call non-human behavior among predators and prey in the non-human world cruel—of course we can and do and I believe that use/meaning has legitimate application. My question was can you think of an instance in which it is ordinary or customary to accuse a non-human of being cruel *to a human being*? That is, in ordinary parlance, does it ever “go both ways?”

Again, even when Roy (of “Siegfried and Roy”)<sup>42</sup> was brutally mauled by one of his personally raised, loved, and trained tigers, without provocation, not only was the tiger not blamed, but there was no talk of betrayal, cruelty or anything of the sort. When a dog bites the hand that feeds him, he is a bad, mean dog, not a cruel dog; when an animal rebuffs the affections of a caretaker (say experiences such as Jane Goodall and Sue Savage Rumbaugh

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<sup>42</sup> Accessed 6/5/2022: <https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2022/jan/17/vegas-siegfried-roy-tiger-wild-things-mystery-exotic-animal-sin-city-counter-terrorism>

have had),<sup>43</sup> that might hurt the human's feelings, and the ape or chimp might be called rude, crude, or mean or even disrespectful, but we don't usually call the animal's behavior against the human cruel, right? Does that question make more sense, or am I still not articulating it correctly?

Thank you and best,  
Maggie

The exchange continues as we struggle with the issues, and Coetzee brings up the indifference that he suggests marks cruelty and that is not particular to human beings.

Dear John,

Okay,

I suspect, in addition to me still working this out, is that I am operating off of my definition of cruelty. Do I read you correctly in saying that for you it is mostly a matter of indifference? As in Kierkegaard: "At the bottom of enmity between strangers lies indifference"?<sup>44</sup> In which case, certainly non-humans are masters of it. I am in awe of their capacity to be completely indifferent to the presence, the plight, and the very existence of others, including both those of their own kind or territory, and us humans. It's mesmerizing, really, how important and prevalent irrelevance and indifference are to their ethos, their lives, their worlds.

But that is not my bare-bones structure—definition of cruelty. I don't exclude indifference, of course, but I do include attitudes and actions that count as entanglement and engagement with another.

For instance, I recently went for cocktails with one of the original FBI profilers of serial killers and serial rapists. He was field trained and helped develop the training for what became profilers for all divisions of the FBI: from torture to child sexual assault.

He talked about his cases and he used words like "brutal," "violent," "savage," "horrific," and so on, but on only one did he use the descriptive "cruel."

That case was an abduction of a woman in the back of a van equipped with video and torture devices, weapons, plastic tarp, in full display. The

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<sup>43</sup> Accessed 6/5/2022: <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/0162309586900506>

<sup>44</sup> Kierkegaard, Søren. *Fear and Trembling/Repetition*. Trans. And Ed., Howard Hong and Edna Hong. (Princeton University Press, New Jersey, 1983).

perp videoed everything, but never physically touched the victim. And then he eventually released her. When I asked my new friend why that one was cruelty and the others barbaric, unspeakable, horrific, and so on, he said that it was because the perp used her fear to become aroused and to torment her, but no physically sexual or just physical assault. That is a perfect example for my definition of cruelty. Fear is an instinct for flight or aggression for survival. The perp didn't allow either of those useful trajectories for that response in his scenario. Rather, he perverted that necessary and natural instinct, literally, for his own pleasure, without physically harming her at all. He was not indifferent. On the contrary, he was quite engaged.

The bare bones of my definition are that (a human) takes what should make a creature flourish as one of its kind and perverts it for its harm. That may be due to intention, that may be indifferent, that may be out of ignorance, that may be out of misguided benevolence (“Save the man, but kill the Indian”), it may be for sadistic pleasure, and so on.

As I've said, I acknowledge there are artificial constraints I've built into this formula. My reason is that I think looking at what we mean by “humanity”—if we mean anything coherent at all—through that lens is revealing.

That may help not at all, but if there's any of it that helps clarify, or if you can address the indifference question, I would be very happy.

As always,

MS

The difference in his position and mine is subtle: he doesn't believe cruelty has to be a moral or specifically human term or accusation. I, however, would like to see what happens if we commit to going with my insistence that it is.

I am still not convinced that indifference is the key.

Dear John,

I am sorry to abuse your “office hours” again but not so sorry that I won't continue to try to do so. Thank you for your indulgence.

Here're two things that are interesting to me about operating with a definition of cruelty based on a concept of indifference (which, as said, is not only not central to my definition but also would only be included in its description in select instances—for instance, those in which a certain kind

of responsiveness was expected based on our understanding of the nature of the creature causing the harm): first, so much of the natural world survives because most of the time, most creatures are completely indifferent to the goings on of the lives of most other creatures. That is, that very indifference describes the well-fed wild cat's complete disinterest in the presence of an injured, screaming, (and therefore easy to eat or simply extinguish) rabbit nearby. Are they also indifferent to suffering, sometimes. But I do question when we ask that question what we are expecting of them and how much projection (usually with the sufferer) is occurring. The first point really is that if indifference is the key concept, it is as responsible for peace as it is for cruelty AND all the world is cruel, which certainly takes the oomph out of the concept of cruelty, I think.

Second, you are using indifference to establish that nonhumans can be cruel as well as can humans. The odd thing is that those like Jeffery Masson<sup>45</sup> try to make the opposite case. Granted, he does a strange twisty-turn, folding in some kind of undefined reason as well (or something. Masson's understanding of "unnecessary" and "violent" is unclear to me. Those are relative terms that must be unpacked to be useful). But at the end of the twisty-turns of his observations, it seems clear that he thinks the indifference of humans is morally different than the indifference of non-humans.

If I am honest, at the heart of all of this is something of a justification, I think, of the sense that we, humans, don't belong. We must earn our place—and of course, that in general, we suck terribly at doing that and should be kicked out of the property, so to speak. At least that's true in a crude way for me. Perhaps that is where you and I differ fundamentally? You are either more of an optimist about our nature and our place in nature than I, or more of a pessimist about nature itself (meaning we belong in the brutality and cruelty just fine).

The retort, of course, is that I am some kind of romantic about "nature." I expect to get that back at me. I am not, I don't think. But I do concede it's a fine and complicated attempt at a balancing act between being honestly humble about our place in this place and NOT over-valuing the owners and natives, so to speak.

So, do you have further thoughts on indifference?

Best,

M

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<sup>45</sup>Masson, Jeffery. *Beasts: What Animals Can Teach Us About Human Nature*. Bloomsbury USA; Reprint edition (February 10, 2015).

And he does have more to say. The genuine exchange is quite complex.

“Dear Maggie,” he begins as always. He starts his response by addressing “indifference” as a limning or absence of empathy, either by will or inability. And then the touchy subject of psychopaths and sociopaths emerges, as it usually does, with anyone in conversation about cruelties. One could say that since those so diagnosed might lack capacities for empathy (I disagree with him on this), then “cruelty” cannot be a description of their behavior. I see his point, and I might have thought myself into a straightjacket on this. But. There is a “but”: think of Steinbeck’s Lenny’s, from *Of Mice and Men*. Could his acts be described violations of humanity or as “cruelty”? Did Lenny lack empathy? (no.) Reason? (no.) Was he indifferent? (no.) Could we say this disabled man was cruel, and if so, what work does that do for our understanding of the moral valence of “humanity”? And could we say the same of a whale who abandoned her pod of babies because the sea was simply *too much*, and who we could then call an *un-whale*? Could we say of a dolphin, a species celebrated for coming to the aid of humans about to drown, who simply swam away at a fainted and drowning swimmer that it was cruel or an *in-dolphin*?

The morning of July 14th, 2022, while editing these emails for this chapter, I stumbled across a tragic case in New Mexico on the day’s news. Dumpster divers heard whining in the dumpster and assumed it was an animal. In the trash bag was an infant boy with his umbilical cord still attached. What do we say about his eighteen-year-old mother who threw him in there? It took less than 1 minute for her to dispose of the being, the existence, of that life. If a lioness abandons her cub to die, do we call her cruel?

In this same email to Coetzee, I say, or rather inquire about Jeffrey Masson: “J. Masson thinks the indifference of humans is morally different than the indifference of non-human.” Coetzee’s response here needs to be seen in his own words. It is layered and fascinating. Again, first ask yourself, what do you think of the predicaments I proposed and partially forced? Do you want to call on a certain sort of faith to weigh in here? Would you, do you, believe in something divine that might make a difference between the mother throwing her newborn in the trash bin and the tiger who kills his caregiver, or the orca who leaves her newborn to drown? One might go there, but to what degree, what cost and what benefit?

Do you, reading this now, think the indifference of humans is morally different than the indifference of nonhumans? In our conversations, Coetzee says: “Only a human being could believe so. If you want Masson’s observation to have any force, you have to believe there is a morality outside the human realm, a morality which is not a human construct. I would not be averse to going down that route, but to do so is a major step.”

Finally, Coetzee tackles me on my statement about pessimism. I said to him: “You are either more of an optimist about our nature and place in nature than I, or more of a pessimist about nature itself (meaning we belong to the world of brutality and cruelty just fine).” In an unsurprising twist, he denies being more of an optimist than me—that was a bit pokey of me to say so, but it did get a response from him that is brilliant, seasoned, and of course worth reading.

In the end, I think I can say that he and I agree that developments of capacities of perception over those, or undergirding those (as Plutarch, too, would have it, I think), of reason are crucial if we are to think of ourselves less miserably and behave less destructively.

Here is my response to his emails, in which some of the complications, such as sociopathy and psychopathology, appear:

Dear John,

Thank you very much for your response and keeping me company (as well as challenged, of course).

I understand. I also completely agree.

I spend a long time on studying psychopaths. I sat with profilers who created the FBI profiling system they still use. I worked with adolescent ones, as well as sociopaths (and yes, I make a distinction between the two).<sup>46</sup> And also certain kinds of Autism. That’s an offensive and awkward

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<sup>46</sup>Very briefly: I believe it’s helpful, though without scientific consensus and often in direct opposition to some industry beliefs, to think of psychopaths as ill, as sickened by trauma (and therefore, they can possibly be managed). I believe sociopaths are constructed the way they are, which is lacking what we consider empathy or a sense of a different person’s mind, a “you map,” as some psychologists call it, and a commitment to the social and moral domains of humanity. That is, they are defective at having what it appears we consider full “humanity,” unless we want to somehow skin humanity from its moral valence, or morally laudable behavior, acting humanely, from being human.

pairing to bring up, but it is one that often comes up. I don't believe those traditionally diagnosed with either psychopathology or with autism lack the capacity for empathy. Sociopaths, on the other hand do. I make a distinction between sociopaths and psychopaths precisely because I think there's an important difference between those who literally can't (aren't equipped to) perceive—by our major perceptual faculties, including the cognitive ones—the being-ness of another (or whatever kind of language one wants to use there to capture the fullness of another), those who can but whose perceptions of the fullness of the another's being are a source of perversion, and third, those who can, but who are unable to process what they perceive in the normal or expected way and who also can't output behavior that demonstrates their perception (so, in order, that would be sociopath, psychopath, and certain varieties of what is usually diagnosed as autism).

I do believe that all 3 kinds of creatures force us to buckle down or buckle in and think long and hard about what work we want “empathy” to do. I am aiming, personally, to get through the entire book on cruelty without using the word “empathy” at all.

That word, “Empathy,” has gotten so contaminated and unstable, I'd just prefer to let it combust on its own and not get scorched by it. I probably won't succeed in that, but I am aiming for it.

For item #2 (morality), I understand. And I am struggling with that. It is a leap.

For item #3 (pessimism), yeah. completely agree. Unfortunately. however, that is why I am trying to write this book come hell or high water or both.

As always,  
MS

Clearly, I failed in not using the word “empathy” in this book. I have still, I think, attempted not to rely on it to do work it is not fit for doing.

I still insist that we see what happens if we commit to the idea that only humans, among all of nature, can actually be cruel. That, among other things, but that one thing, being the only creatures who can be cruel, might distinguish us from the nonhuman-centric world. The question, then, is what about us makes us capable of being cruel? If we can answer that, we might have further and strange insights into what makes “human being” morally interesting.



What distinguishes us in nature is that we are (as far as we know) the only organism that suffers its whole life from not knowing what it is, how it should be to be the best version of itself, and where or if it belongs. We are distinguished by a perpetual and systematic ignorance—to be distinguished from an existential crises. If we can acknowledge that, we might understand the “what” of our anxiety and make our way to why we are anxious.



# 3

## Himmler, Himmler’s Canary, and Us

We no longer believe that truth remains truth when the veils are withdrawn; we have lived too much to believe this. Today we consider it a matter of decency not to wish to see everything naked, or to be present at everything, or to understand and to “know” everything.

—Friedrich Nietzsche.<sup>1</sup>

We use the term “learned helplessness” to describe the interference with adaptive responding produced by inescapable shock and also as a shorthand to describe the process which we believe underlies the behavior... The phenomenon seems widespread, and such interference has been reported in dogs by a number of investigators... Nor is it restricted to dogs: deficits in instrumental responding after experience with uncontrollable shock has been shown in rats..., cats..., fish..., mice..., and men...

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<sup>1</sup>Nietzsche, Friedrich. *The Gay Science*, Trans. Kaufmann, W. (Random House, 1974), P. 37.

Inability to control trauma not only disrupts shock escape in a variety of species, but also interferes with a range of adaptive behaviors.<sup>2</sup>

—Martin E. P Seligman.<sup>3</sup>

As frustration digs its heels in during discussions of what cruelty is, inside and outside the academy, someone inevitably and rightly asks, “What does the dictionary say?”<sup>4</sup>

### To Repeat:

#### From Merriam Webster’s Dictionary:

cruelty noun

cruelty | \ 'krü(-ə)l-tē \

plural: cruelties

**1:** the quality or state of being cruel<sup>5</sup> **2: a:** a cruel action; **b:** inhuman treatment; **3:** marital conduct held (as in a divorce action) to endanger life or health or to cause mental suffering or fear.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>Seligman, (M. E. P. 1972). *Learned Helplessness. Annual Review of Medicine*, 23, 407–412. Departments of Psychiatry and Psychology, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Here is the remainder of the paragraph from which this excerpt is taken: “Rats that receive inescapable shocks initiate less pain-elicited aggression toward other rats (28), are slower to learn to swim out of a water maze (29) as are mice (25), and are poorer at food-getting behavior in adulthood when very hungry (17). Situations involving uncontrollable events other than shock can produce effects which may be related to failure to escape shock: Escape deficits can be produced by inescapable tumbling (30), passivity following defeat in fighting (31), ‘sudden death’ following defeat (32) or restraint (33), and retardation in learning to bar press for food following uncontrollable food (34). In addition to impairing voluntary responding, uncontrollable shock produces more stress than controllable shock as measured by behavioral suppression (37–39), by defecation and conditioned fear (35), and by subjective report (40). Finally, more weight loss, anorexia, and whole brain norepinephrine depletion is found in rats experiencing uncontrollable as opposed to controllable shock (35, 36, 41). In summary, experience with uncontrollable trauma typically has three basic effects: (a) animals become passive in the face of trauma, i.e., they are slower to initiate responses to alleviate trauma and may not respond at all; (b) animals are retarded at learning that their responses control trauma, i.e., if the animal makes a response which produces relief, he may have trouble “catching-on” to the response-relief contingency; and (c) animals show more stress when faced with trauma they cannot control than with equivalent controllable trauma. This maladaptive behavior appears in a variety of species including man, and over a range of tasks which require voluntary responding.”

<sup>3</sup>Accessed on 5/14/22: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Learned\\_helplessness](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Learned_helplessness)

<sup>4</sup>For a legal discussion, see: Burton’s Legal Thesaurus: <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0261517711001221>

<sup>5</sup>Accessed on 5/14/22: <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/cruel>

<sup>6</sup>Accessed on 5/14/22: <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/cruelty>

**Definition of cruel 1:** disposed to inflict pain or suffering; devoid of humane feelings; a cruel tyrant; has a cruel heart 2a: causing or conducive to injury, grief, or pain: a cruel joke, a cruel twist of fate: unrelied by leniency: cruel punishment.

One must look at them, but dictionary definitions, as we have seen, can be woefully inadequate, and the ordinary can become extraordinary especially when we aren't looking. While traveling through Indiana, sometime around 4 pm in the late 2000s, and after a long day of conferences, I stopped at a local pub. The ragged, elderly, scruffy-but-comfortable fellow next to me introduced himself as "Randy, the small town drunk." Without even introducing myself or asking his name, I turned to him and said, "If I ask you what is cruelty, what do you say?" He didn't hesitate, blink, or lift his cup. He looked at me like I was insane, naïve, or just simple to ask such a dumb question. He shook his head slightly, and said, "That's easy, Honey. Cruelty is kicking a good dog." And then he took a swig of whatever the bartender had filled up his to-go 7-11 super cup with and left. It is often true that, as James says, "The best philosopher is the man who can think most simply."<sup>7</sup>

Clearly, I had overestimated what my years of study and experience could offer. I've heard hundreds of attempts to answer my question: "cruelty means someone did something was 'mean'"; "bullies are cruel"; "cruelty means you are indifferent to someone else's pain"; "when you cause pain or suffering intentionally"; "calling an ugly girl ugly"; "taking pleasure in hurting someone"; "killing an animal unnecessarily"; "unnecessary brutality or violence"; "butchering a child." Couldn't those all be a right answer? Yes. But that is part of our challenge here. None are the only, or the always, answer. Are there cases in which all, or one, might not be? That's a discussion we have yet to have. All the ones I've had, over decades, have room for ambiguity. For "ifs." For curiosity.

"The Old Masters," Auden says, "how well they understood the human condition."<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup>James, William. *A Pluralistic Universe*. Intro. Levinson, H., (University of Nebraska Press; Reprinted from the original 1909 Ed), P. 15-16.

<sup>8</sup>Auden, W.H. "Musée des Beaux Arts" (1938) in *Collected Poems*, E. Mendelson ed., (Random House, 1940), P. 179.

The dictionaries might not be able to steady us, and the wisdom of our abused and abusing friends and elders, though clearly ringing bells of truths, may do so with magical and deeply complex braids of poetry, wherein clarity is most often beyond the grasp of objective reason. Cruelty, the fact of cruelty, isn't just confounding in its perverse capacity to force us to face that we are in contradictory states of knowing and believing what is true about our place in the world, about how we belong or don't, about what is special about us. The reflection of ourselves through this lens, though often awful, is often one that also can spur anger, action, activity; it can urge one to want it to do something. It's reasonable to begin to satisfy that urge in the civilized fashion of trying to combat our frustration with attempts to understand. Dutifully, we apply our faculties of understanding. We define, classify, categorize, and see if it leads us to win any fights or, at least, to some place of more clarity. But in the end, those may be decorative tools, not necessarily the substantial ones we need.

## **Round 1: Aberrations, Madness, and the Unexpected**

I finished a first draft of this chapter on Saturday, April 20, 2018. I was sitting in my living room when I ran the thoughts in it by two colleagues (a philosopher and a professor of politics and journalism), my husband (educator, musician, and renaissance man), my father (educator and writer), and my mother (educator, writer, and clinical psychologist) for their feedback. We were eating empanadas with salad, and we were using knives.

Let's turn to you. Take stock of where you are sitting right now. Take a look around you. Who and what is around you—don't surf. Really look. Are you sitting in your living room reading this? Is your child, parent, or partner nearby? Are they cooking? Perhaps you are in a bookstore (if such brick-and-mortar structures still exist). You might have a couple next to you, an elderly widower, an exhausted teenager, a homeless woman trying to be invisible or pretending that you are. A cat. A dog. There is probably

a bird somewhere nearby that you are not ripping the head off of and a tree you are not hacking to death—whether or not you've had a rotten day and whether or not a naggingly indecent part of you wonders what it might feel like to rip off a bird's head, feel the predatory efficiency of red-tailed hawk. In all likelihood, you are not going to knife the person who sits by you on the park bench as you read.

You might, though, crunch and squish the spider at your feet that is making its way over a rather sticky patch of who-know-what-flavor spilled ice cream. Why? She might have had the intent to bite you (it's hard to be up on your venomous spiders, their temperaments, and their capacity for intentional action, so better to be safe than sorry?); she might have frightened the person next to you, making him squeal and flinch; she might have crept you out. You might just be eager to crunch, to squish, and crack exoskeletons which might be satisfying in a small, privately primal, way.

It is also not improbable that there is a small child watching you. If so, he might seek out his own little critter to squish, joining in the game. Bonding and mimicry are critical to childhood development. Or, to the contrary, he tucks his chin in, furrows his brows, pinches his lips, and, steeling himself, walks right up to you to confront you for a merciless and unjustifiable killing of a living creature who did you no harm. Children have been proven wickedly mature in empathy and commonly possessing more sophisticated traits of what are often considered by certain psychologists as the "Moral Domain"<sup>9</sup> than adults often do. "From the mouths of babes," turns out to be something that can be scientifically validated, when it comes to being a decent creature.

Keep sitting where you are. Get comfortable. You are fine. Those around you, probably including the spiders taking up their homes in your baseboards, all think and feel the same thing, all enjoying the breeze, or scraping off sticky bits from one of eight legs of the sticky spider-leg-hairs. Everyone is unconcerned. Probably. As has been explained and requested of the reader in the Author's Note in the Preface: most chapters in this book were intended to be preceded by an excerpt from a poem resonant with its themes. For various reasons, the full quoting of those

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<sup>9</sup>Nucci. Larry. *Nice is Not Enough: Facilitating Moral Development*, (Prentice Hall, 2008).

excerpts, including Auden's, "Musée des Beaux Arts" which conceptually belongs with this chapter, are now in Appendix A. I ask of the reader to please read the relevant excerpts. Auden's poem, with painful deftness, reminds us about the tragedy of when the son of a hopeful father burnt our collective hopes and plunged from unimaginable heights to his drowning death and our minted humility: "The ploughman," begins Auden, "may Have heard the splash, the forsaken cry, But for him it was not an important failure; the sun shone As it had to on the white legs disappearing into the green Water, and the expensive delicate ship that must have seen Something amazing, a boy falling out of the sky, Had somewhere to get to and sailed calmly on." I'm not invoking Auden's brilliance to make either you or me feel dull or callous, not yet. We are still trying to understand ourselves right now, and right now, as you are reading this, you know that something terrible is happening somewhere to someone or to some creature; you believe it is possible it is not happening to you and will not happen to you in the near future, and yet all the while someone else is eating or opening a window or just walking dully along just after witnessing or committing something terrible.

Admitting we are naïve is hard (see Chap. 4 for much more on this), but we are often even more uncomfortable admitting that we should not be naïve—that there is a very unromantic and morally essential aspect of that state. It's scary; it's frightening; it's overwhelming. The truth about what we do, what we are capable of doing, what has been done, and what we know will continue to be done by us or to us can make us feel helpless—because sometimes, many times more often than we'd like—we are, indeed, naïve, but willfully or by omission, and often helpless, by circumstance. Or cruel, by us. Or inhuman. But we are not truly ignorant of those facts. Not really.

On that same evening of April 21, 2018, mentioned earlier, while my family, my colleagues, and I were eating and discussing an initial draft of this chapter, my father said to me, with the rest of the company nodding in agreement, "Maggie, don't be so dramatic. No one thinks like that. Are you depressed? This is all so dark." My mother asked, "How is this relevant to what you are discussing, to what you want to say, and to what you want to be heard about in this work on cruelty?" My philosopher

colleague said, “The examples and the argument in this chapter sounds like you are reaching, frankly. Careful not to be sensationalistic; that will cheapen the work.” My colleague, who is also a professor of political thought and a philosopher said, “You need to make this more relevant: include the news, what’s going on now so people will care about it.” Good, considerate, and conflicting advice from all. I was frustrated at that moment. What I was trying to make clear, and what I believe (still) as true is that though we are aware of our capacity for atrocity, we routinely and blindly take it for granted that it won’t happen—and that me, or you, or that guy over there won’t perpetuate it. That might seem an obvious cliché. What I realized in the conversation that night was that though I took that fear, that sense of helplessness and frustration, as a shared reality—as a cliché, even—it clearly wasn’t going over well with my company. I was not sure what to make of all of it. Even if there was shared fear, it was deeply unconscious and likely repressed there under the force of a perpetually falling anvil. The world, unfortunately, helped clarify that for me with unwelcome haste.

Stanley Cavell thought hard, deep, and with astounding sensitivity about how we perceive and respond to what happens—tragic, cruel, real, imagined, or not—to others, and how we think about how we perceive the pain of others, how these kinds of responses reflect us to ourselves. In an essay published in 1969 titled “The Avoidance of Love,” which takes classical tragic theater (specifically Shakespearian) as a source of instruction about how we perceive what is real and how we can or cannot respond to what is in front of us, he says:

Now we are surrounded by inexplicable pain and death, no death is more mysterious or portentous than others, because every death which is not the fruit of a long life is now unaccounted for, since we cannot or will not account for it: not just because, taking local examples, we no longer know why a society may put its own people to death for breaking its rules, nor when it may intervene with death in a foreign place, nor because highway deaths need not happen, nor because poverty has become inflicted—but because we do not know our position with respect to such things. We are present at these events, and no one is present without making something



happen; everything which is happening is happening to me, and I do not know what is happening...the world did not become sad; it was always sad. Tragedy has moved into the world, and with it the world becomes theatrical.<sup>10</sup>

I woke up early the very next morning, April 22, 2018—a day after I finished the first draft of this chapter. I stumbled into my morning coffee and briefly clicked on the news to make sure the world hadn't ended, as I do most mornings. Checking the “theater,” so to speak. According to the news on National Public Radio, the world had not ended. There hadn't been another school shooting, not yet that week, at least. There hadn't been another mass shooting in the US that week, not yet, at least. There wasn't a horrid story about some depraved angry man dragging an unimaginably betrayed dog in a noose behind his truck over gravel until he was skinned, burned, and bled to his death. Of course, there would and will be all of those, but what I woke to on the front-page (screen) news was that Anthony Mele, 35-year-old father of a daughter aged five, was dining at the Aloha Steakhouse in California on April 18, 2018 (4 nights before). His daughter was on his lap and his wife was across from him when he was randomly stabbed to death by a complete stranger.<sup>11</sup> Also in the headline, from the same regular morning news source later on that same day, four people were shot dead by a naked man in Nashville, TN, while they were eating in a Waffle House on April 20.<sup>12</sup> That was the information in the headline stories when I woke up on April 22, 2018.

These are horrifying, confusing, and tragic realities. We have to say things like that; we have to respond that way. But that kind of grimace and shrug is shamefully glib from afar. It lacks the reality of the reality, not just because we weren't there, but also because the reality of the reality could lead us each to unrecoverable despair (see Chap. 2, Part One). Those events were what I read of that morning, that day, in this place, from the safe distance of my computer screen, while wondering if there might be anything I could do to influence gun regulation. Of course, I

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<sup>10</sup> Cavell, Stanley. *Must We Mean What We Say*. (Oxford. New York, 1969), P. 344.

<sup>11</sup> Accessed on 3/4/22: <https://beta.washingtonpost.com/news/true-crime/wp/2018/04/21/as-his-daughter-sat-on-his-lap-a-father-was-fatally-stabbed-by-a-homeless-stranger-police-said/>

<sup>12</sup> Accessed on 4/21/18: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nashville\\_Waffle\\_House\\_shooting](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nashville_Waffle_House_shooting)

can't, so that was simply flimsy passive avoidance. That day, after having also read the same news as I had, from an equal distance, a closer proximity, a further distance, millions of people headed out to their local chain restaurants, who ate with no trepidation that the couple at the table next to them would slaughter them or that the resident town angry-man would mow them down with a semi-automatic rifle at their local Waffle Houses.

For the above examples, we could, maybe, dismiss them as anomalies, out of the ordinary, bizarre instances (though, that's debatable). But if we do, I fear we miss something important about them. I don't know if Mele's daughter will ever go out again to eat at a restaurant; today (as of writing this), she would be only six, but I venture she will. I venture she may write a book. Have a child. Appear on the news like Elizabeth Smart and tell stories of forgiveness, of faith, of coping, of being defined by more than what shatters us. We remember and accept these multiple realities in tandem. What allows us to do it? Denial? Avoidance? Necessity? Faith? We will continue to devote much more time to that question in the next chapters. This chapter is about acknowledging the tightness of the bind we're in, not yet on how we release ourselves from that bind.

We are a mess of inflamed confusions. Fearlessly talking about cruelty invites scenes, scenarios, and a confounding challenge to our claim to rationality, decency, and sanity. When acknowledging the above seemingly conflicting realities, I am disturbed, flustered, and disoriented. If I'm even more honest: helpless. I find myself holding on to a little resentment toward the scholars (unfair? Maybe). I want to say they should've been more helpful to us, and sooner.

After reflection, however, this is also where I earnestly believe the academy needs *our* help. These ordinary moral and human occasions around which perceived cruelty casts a contrasting dye to the lives we live, belong to each one of us, each in our unadorned humanity, and all collectively. I am not sure the topics are ready to be sucked up into the pristine towers away from our tainted, pained, undisciplined, impulsive, unscripted, scrappy, and collective hands. If you are beginning to wish I would take a stand, either for academia and the scholarly or against it (since I seem to be playing them off each other), I don't blame you. I plead with you though to stay in the conversation with me, anyway. It is really that I am

not sure where the secret to understanding all of this is, and that I wish it were in at least one of the usual hiding spots. I am convinced it is wiler than that. And so we must be extraordinarily savvy and patient and make use of any insights wherever they come from and whatever their baggage.

The confusion is not just with the present, of course. And it is not just caused by the bizarre, by the anomalies. The trolls of our sense of helplessness—if we acknowledge that we are helpless—are behind us, with us, and in front of us. They surround us, gang up on us, in both space and time. And it gets worse because they also stymie us by dismantling our cognitive tools for navigating out, for moving forward, or claiming it. We are pressed in from all dimensions and directions, and there are tolls to pay at each turn.

Part of the confusion stirred up is how we go about living life, seeing what we *have* seen and *do* see about ourselves. How do we still trust? How can we possibly still expect to be trusted? How can we make sense of daily living when we are, when we know someone is if we are not, on the other end of the impossible: when we are the daughter sitting in our father's lap as he is eating and, randomly, brutally, killed. But another part feels more contemplative: what do we do with these oddities that distort what we need, know, and believe of reality?

Chapter 2 acknowledged that we have, each of us, anxiety about how we belong in the world as a whole, and the whole can be shattered and the world absent. This continues the part of the conversation, acknowledging the damage that anxiety can do when we face head on the plural “what(s)” of it.

## Round Two: One of Us, the Ordinary, the Banal

Many decades ago, there was a man in many ways not unlike you or me (I am assuming that you and I are alike in the sense that we are decent people and can claim to be considered mostly humane, to possess “humanity”). That is an assumption I make about me as well as about you. (Warning: blatant foreshadowing). This man was reverent. He was intelligent. He was utterly devoted and loyal to beliefs he shared with his

community. Like you and me, he would not be the sort to go mad and, with no reason, destroy the fabric of civil, social, communal life as in the examples in Round One.

In fact, he was a great leader in his community. He had a daughter, a wife, and even generously fostered a son. Of course, being just a human, and with flaws, he also had a mistress and another daughter, and though they felt neglected by his frequent absence, he made sure they wanted for nothing. We do our best to make up for our weaknesses, no? As importantly, he loved animals and treated them with the utmost respect: including—it is rumored—instructing his family to come in through the rear door of his house at night so as not to disturb his pet canary when it was asleep. He was sensitive, empathetic, and respectful that way. This man, this mensch, worried about his own decency at times, as one of decency does, and took solace that on occasion he even had to break a rule to remind himself of his own personal beliefs and needs—but that he should not. In short, he was imperfect, and he knew it. He was ordinary that way. He counseled others about that same gray area. And so, with false but not saccharine head-shaking, he occasionally acknowledged that even though we may know something is wrong collectively, or in the abstract, when called to task about it, shamefully we often try to justify ourselves and our intimacy with our own reasons and needs as an exception to the rule. Who among us is not guilty of this?

This man is on historic record for talking about the honor of his workers and the difficulty and bravery of their work, as well as fortifying them insistently on the distinct necessity, and therefore purpose, of their work. He gave elaborate, eloquent talks, peppered with the appropriate doses of self-effacement, as pep talks to keep his workers going, motivated, and not demoralized by the difficulty of their jobs.

As someone who picked up this book or who has been exposed to Western art, theory, or popular culture artifacts in the last century, and who has read the first two chapters of this book on cruelty, you will not even need to guess that there is a dark side to this man and it is not a secret, hidden, double life like the serial killer down the suburban cul-de-sac. He is not like the naked Waffle House shooter. His victims were not

like Mele and his family. Those are terrible and confounding, but they are contextualizable anomalies. Context is powerful, and the capacity to contextualize is a necessary mental and psychological Venus flytrap. These anomalies challenge us, but differently than this particular upstanding father, husband, and civil servant of which I'm talking should. I'm presenting him to you this way because he baffles me. I want you to be baffled, also.

This man of demonstrative civility orchestrated, called for, mercilessly and masterfully forced and encouraged the extermination of the vermin that he worried would wreck his people. There were a lot of vermin. He didn't, like the protagonist in *Hey, Little Ant*, hold his foot over the vermin and contemplate their worth. That had already been decided as not worth deliberating at all. However, he only managed to help arrange the brutal and cruel (but well-reasoned) kills of approximately four million people (the other few million who were exterminated alongside them can be attributed to the strategies of others he worked with). In this respect, he was not a resounding success, since many of the vermin survived. My distant vermin relatives somehow survived by escaping. Heinrich Himmler, the man of whom I am speaking, and the man who was the "Architect" of the Shoah, the mastermind of the extermination of the Jews and other non-Aryan, brown, minority, or queer beings, should cause us to shut down—he makes us turn desperately round and round seeking help in understanding ourselves, but who is there to come to the aid?

I have taken minor literary liberties in my description of him above, but they are based on direct quotes from his own work.

Quotes such as this one:

We shall never be rough or heartless where it is not necessary; that is clear. We Germans, who are the only people in the world who have a decent attitude to animals, will also adopt a decent attitude to these human animals...I mean the evacuation of the Jews, the extermination of the Jewish race.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Accessed on 6/5/22: <https://www.facinghistory.org/holocaust-human-behavior/himmler-speech-posen-1943>

How can a decent person not experience disabling confusion by this fellow human's maddeningly inhumane and perverse sense of in-decency, savagery, and barbarism, coupled with a direct and overt reverence for being neither heartless nor gutless? It is mind-wrenching and oppressive. If Himmler's statement, in which the virtue of compassion is hailed in the same thought as the extermination of an entire people for no other reason than that they are arbitrarily classified as less than fully human and called a certain name, does not bring on psychotic waves of idiocy, incompetence, and despair, then either you haven't read it right, you are a dangerous person, or the decades of instances like these, the ubiquity, have lulled you into believing they are not so difficult to understand.

In response to the Nazi genocide, in particular, and in response to what kind of response might even be possible in the face of such preposterous and enormous heinousness, to quote Vladimir Jankélévitch again:

Properly speaking, this grandiose massacre is not a crime on a human scale any more than are astronomical magnitudes and light years. Also, the reactions that it inspires are above all despair and a feeling of powerlessness before the irreparable. One can do nothing. One cannot give life back to that immense mountain of miserable ashes.<sup>14</sup>

I want us to pay cloyingly conscious attention to the big, cosmic, grand words we use around the big, cosmic, grand ideas we are bandying about (at my request, I accept) and that we are often in the habit of mentally swallowing without chewing. Notice that above, I said, "less than human"; Jankélévitch used the phrase "human scale." What do we each mean? Chew on it for a minute.

Genocides are difficult to understand, and though the above kind of instance is grandiose, instances and whole periods in history like them are also excruciatingly common. I try to slough off any false cynicism (as we will see more clearly in Chap. 4, we actually can't afford to live with too much of it) and try to untangle some of the threads in which we're caught. It is not easy, but it is important to shake out the threads in this knot, or to try to.

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<sup>14</sup>Jankélévitch, Vladimir. "Should We Pardon Them?" *Critical Inquiry*, (Spring, 1996), P. 569.

## Round Three: The Extreme

Respecting the complexities we are up against, I want to pause (It's okay to do a lot of that in this conversation) and run my fingers over the binding of this bind we're in. The banal humanity of evil men and the evil flicker in ordinarily human beings are well documented to the point of being humdrum. On what morning does one not see evidence of this? On February 23, 2020, the morning after editing another version of this chapter, I woke up to the news that Ahmaud Arbery, a 25-year-old black man, had just been shot and killed in a South Georgia neighborhood.<sup>15</sup> He was jogging. He was killed by a white father and son, Gregory McMichael (age 64) and Travis McMichael (age 34), because, according to the news report, Mr. Arbery “appeared like someone who had committed crimes recently nearby.” Mr. Arbery had not. The McMichaels claimed to be conducting a sort of citizen's arrest and protecting their neighborhood when they killed him.<sup>16</sup> According to the reports, father and son saw him jogging, went back home for their weapons, and shot and killed a man getting in his run for the day. If you still had doubt, people who we would consider good people commit bad and often tragic, inexplicable acts and explain them via perfectly rational as well as well-intentioned means. This should cause fissures in our veneers.

It is easy to “get” this part of it—unless it's someone good who is also a friend, someone we love, who, in a misguided, tragic, and over-fervent, nearly pathologically hero complex, murders an innocent person. Then the distance providing the buffer for “getting” it or accepting such things as inevitable can become more troublesome or insane-making. What about the piercing elements of humanity in inhuman, heinous human beings? Contrast the ways in which Himmler makes you uncomfortable versus how a man like Edmund Kemper, one of the most notorious modern serial killers, does. Do those strike you differently from Sarah and Jennifer Hart, the mothers of six foster children that they chose, that they

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<sup>15</sup>I mention the news reports on dates coinciding with work on certain chapters because it shockingly-not-shockingly and horribly, happened those ways, on those times.

<sup>16</sup>Accessed on 8/24/20: <https://www.cnn.com/2020/05/08/us/ahmaud-arbery-mcmichael-arrests-fruit/index.html>

took in, that they raised, and that they then drugged, starved, and then drove off a cliff to their deaths?<sup>17</sup>

The Hart family took family photos. They look normal in those photos, neither perfect nor suspicious. However, they acted differently or suspiciously, according to their neighbors and the detectives—but not so much so that anyone seemed to anticipate such a cruelly tragic outcome.<sup>18</sup>

John Wayne Gacy had friends, it is reported. He was not grossly suspicious. Ted Bundy was a notoriously sincere charmer. Hearing from the children, wives, husbands, acquaintances, and professionals on the cases of serial killers and mass murderers is always a strange thing. They tend to talk about the decisions a Bundy or someone like him made, wishing the circumstances were different, wishing there hadn't been a gun right there, wishing they "had been there," regretting this, that, or the other circumstantial thing, but they rarely talk about wishing the guilty family member or perpetrator had been a *different kind of person, been more humane*. It is a matter for wonder that that question gets lost so quickly. But, I think it is a fair judgment that most of us are not well-practiced in simultaneously holding seemingly polar contradictory experiences of an other in our relational orbit (a reason betrayal is nearly always cruel).

Hitler had, from most accounts, genuine lovers about whom he cared and who cared about him. But those exhibitions of reported humanity, or at least a capacity to care, feel different and need to be understood differently than they would if they were those of individuals who commit "random," singular, ordinary, or inevitable acts of cruelty. Context, where we are in the world, where our actions land, where and how our being matters, are always relevant for understanding the cruelty of something: Hitler wasn't just sociopathic, racist, anti-semitic, narcissistic, and so on—as plenty of studies validate, a large percentage of successful business people share this collection of traits—Hitler was also a genocidal maniac. That added distinction is important for us to understand, both the one and the other kinds of cruelties. I have to remind myself—to keep my confusion ripe—that at Kemper's trial for killing ten women and

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<sup>17</sup> Accessed on 8/24/20: <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2019/04/04/hart-mothers-drugged-killed-children-driving-off-cliff-jury/3372259002/>

<sup>18</sup> Accessed on 5/15/2022: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hart\\_family\\_murders](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hart_family_murders)



committing unspeakable sexual aggressions against their severed body parts, he says of his sexual use of the bodies: “There’s a lot left of a girl after the head is gone. Of course, the personality is not there.”<sup>19</sup>

I want to think that a case like Kemper’s is oddly, but also discomfortingly, clear. This man is not like us. He is not me. We are not him. That is not a gray line. That is not even a line in sight. Right? Why not? Because we wouldn’t sexually violate the head of the woman we just murdered, much less were it our mother’s severed head—which he did. It is shameful and intolerable and vile even to imagine those things happening in a horror movie that someone made up to blow out our adrenal responses. Most people would not even think up doing those things when they think of cruelty, much less think of doing them at all or wonder what someone else might think who thought of doing them. Kemper’s Being, his existence, the possibility of him, is appalling and horrible. Unthinkable. Un-everything. Without question, Kemper is inhuman.<sup>20</sup>

The relatively good news is that psychopaths, which, according to all definitions Kemper is one of, make up somewhere between one and two percent of the population. If one is comforted by medical technology and science, it is also well-established that their brains are, in fact, different from the majority of human beings. That is, they are physically, neurologically, unlike most of us—if you do an autopsy of their brains after death or happen to walk around with an MRI on hand, you can have visual evidence. Otherwise, their difference in degree of humanity—if it really is one—is not easy to discern from the outside.<sup>21</sup>

Pause.

If I push my repulsion as far aside as I can, and I let myself really think about what Kemper said (and I will combine this with what I know, and others can gather from his other transcripts as well), I am not sure if I am mortified or just irreparably confounded—again and more so—because I

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<sup>19</sup> Subsequent Parole Consideration Hearing State of California Board of Parole Hearings, in the matter of the life term parole consideration hearing of: Edmund Emil Kemper. *CDC Number: B-52453*, California Medical Facility, Vacaville, CA, July 25, 2017, 9:00 a.m.

<sup>20</sup> See: Stout, Martha. *The Sociopath Next Door*. Harmony (February 8, 2005), and Hare, Robert. *Without A Conscience*. (The Guilford Press, 1999).

<sup>21</sup> Ronson, John. *The Psychopath Test: A Journey Through the Madness Industry*, (Riverhead Books, New York, 2011).

see something of human understanding as well as something of real depth and feeling in Kemper's remark.

It is a sick feeling to acknowledge that. It makes me feel unwell. But his comment does contain an understanding of another full human being, an appreciation of another, even a hint of empathetic recognition of her. His victim, who he just decapitated, still contains for him a fresh incompleteness, which means he understands there had been a full completeness. At the same time, his remarks undermine and undo all these perceptions usually associated with something positive about being human. He perverts and devastates them. To toy with our confusion, recall that he was found sane at his trial. This man, this man who did these things, was determined to be legally of sound enough mind by the experts.<sup>22</sup> We will come back to this. If this fire escape of thinking from which we're dangling renders us desperate, and it should, better understanding how cruelty works and what it violates should help us. That's my commitment to this conversation.

Psychology, neuroscience, and law have relieved our exhausted thinking some: their structures give us categories so that we can place some people in the bunkers of "inhumane," "the sick and therefore possible healable," "The neurologically divergent, or, therefore, unfixable," "the crazy," "the abnormal," "the unlawful," "the ignorant," "the cruel." We can sort human actions on scales between minor violations of rule or law to menaces to society, and so on. Are we fixable? Are our acts repairable? Are we broken or are we bad (are those two categories distinct)? Are we redeemable? As it turns out, though, acts of cruelty cross-hatch our sorting categories and short-circuit our ability to make consistently coherent distinctions.

Examples like the ones I've offered gnarl our orientation, and when paired with our confusion about how we belong, make us want out of this carnival of helplessness that habitually confronts us with the task of explaining the inexplicableness of inhumanity and cruelty and makes us want to throw up our hands and say, "it is irrational!" And yet, what

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<sup>22</sup>Subsequent Parole Consideration Hearing State of California Board of Parole Hearings, in the matter of the life-term parole consideration hearing of: Edmund Emil Kemper. *CDC Number: B-52453*, California Medical Facility, Vacaville, CA, July 25, 2017, 9:00 a.m.

makes this even more unnerving is that it's hard to pinpoint how, exactly, it is irrational—or what exactly “it” is and certainly to communicate that in a way that is shareable. What set of reasons and joints of rationality does each example violate? How do each of those different sets of violations add up to the same category of thing: cruelty or inhumanity or both? Some of us give up and go on with a Teflon-like denial, and others of us are galvanized to action and want to do something, to act, to unravel the anxiety, frustration, and dig out from the quicksand. Often, this propels us to act by trying desperately to answer the “why” and the “how” of cruelty.

This book will frustrate you, I hope. It is natural and good that the instinct for most of us is to try to be brave, to take the horrible, and then try to self-moderate, demanding ourselves to ask “Why?” If we can ask “why?”—if that makes sense to do—then some things should follow: If we can ask “Why?” then that can reassure us that (1) we can justify that we need to answer why; we can justify that it wasn't normal. One needn't explain the ordinary; (2) we can say if there is a cause, there might be a way to intervene, to stop it from happening again; (3) we can focus on why the thing is what it is, that we can DO something. If, on the other hand, we focus on the “what” of what happened, of what made it cruel, then we are in a different and turbulent set of waters. We will return to the stormy night seas of the “what” in Chap. 5.

What Kemper did and who Himmler was, these are cruel inhumane things. But in being those beings and doing what they did, *what...what* did they violate, and what part of them made them the sort of thing that could? What makes what they did cruel? We must continue to discipline ourselves to asking not why did they do it, but what do we mean when we describe what they did as cruel?

Side note: extreme (and common) cases such as these, such as Mao, such as Dahmer, Gacy, Pol Pot, The Harts, and Devin Patrick Kelley,<sup>23</sup> create such a discomfort that we often toss them over the wall of both human and inhuman and call them “evil.” In our current age, “evil” in everyday usage still connotes something “over or exceeding”—which is

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<sup>23</sup> Accessed on 5/17/22: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sutherland\\_Springs\\_church\\_shooting](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sutherland_Springs_church_shooting)

part of its etymology—but because of its association to the supernatural (via various kinds of spiritualities, worldviews, or religions), its best fit is something over-human, beyond the human realm, not of the human realm, “not even ‘inhuman.’” Unfortunately, our reality, as has been said by many through the centuries, is that the kinds of actions we are speaking of were done by fully grown rational, sane (by legal-medical standards) humans; the actions are cruel, the humans are cruel. They are often “inhuman.” It would be dismissive to toss them over the boundary of human, which the inhuman limns, into the world of the supernatural and evil—the unhuman. “If it makes sense,” Cavell says, “to speak of seeing human beings as human beings, then it makes sense to imagine that a human being may lack the capacity to see human beings as human beings. It would make sense to ask whether someone may be soul-blind.”<sup>24</sup> I am making mercenary use of Cavell here to make the point that it also makes sense, though it is difficult, to ask again in all earnestness, what is it these acts and these inhuman humans violate? What would being soul-blind dishonor or violate? In the victim? What about in the perpetrator?

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<sup>24</sup>Cavell, Stanley. *The Claim of Reason*, (Cambridge University Press, 1969). p. 378.



# 4

## What Do We Say About Cruelty? Patterns of Responses to the Questions “What Is Cruelty?” or “What Causes Cruelty?”

Over the years that I’ve been fascinated, deeply troubled, and tossed about by cruelty, I have asked anyone and everyone what they think about it—annoying pretty much all of my family and friends, as well as a few chefs, car mechanics, mail carriers, and random strangers. I’ve discovered that there tend to be typical categories of responses when the subject of cruelty arises in both casual and academic conversations. Being familiar with this pattern might help steady us. Spoiler alert: not much new happens. I hate to say it, but most of us pretty much always say approximately the same range of things. I think of our responses like familiar characters, like archetypes, that may change heuristic costumes, but remain the same in essence for our purposes. They each have multiple ways of appearing (just like the hero archetype might appear as an ordinary savior, an unlikely savior, a flawed savior, or a divine savior). The boundaries of the categories are fluid, and the list is not exhaustive or comprehensive, but it is representative.

That we are on a merry-go-round of responses is in and of itself kind of interesting. Just as with one of those pesky dreams that keeps repeating and that you can’t get out of, it indicates that there’s something unconscious, something uncooked, and not fully thought through that we are circling. This pattern of responses often belies our beliefs, fears, and

convictions about not just what cruelty is, nor just why it happens, but also our beliefs, fears, and convictions that swirl underneath our very faith in any moral system at all—no matter which moral system each of us might think is the right one (religious, consequentialist, pragmatic, law-based, and so on).

Being aware of this pattern of responses might serve as guide in our labyrinthine discussion. Knowing they are coming, that each one lays somewhere around the bend in the conversation, soothes the anxiety and the anticipation a little bit. I lay them out for that purpose only; that is, don't make more out of them than you want to make use of them for.

Below are the eight categories of responses that we can reasonably expect when the subject of cruelty arises. Conventionally we challenge each other to define its nature or explain what it is. In disciplines and arts like philosophy, psychology, and even literature and story-crafting, it's part of the game to come up with the "what-ifs?"—alternative thoughts, exceptions, counter examples, to challenge and possibly defeat or at least rock the original. The same is true when talking about cruelty. Endlessly and aggravatingly so. Most any definition is slimy, squirrely, slippery, and completely vulnerable to counter-examples and exceptions. Begin with that—even your most sure answer is wiggly, and lest we think any single one in the pattern I will offer is immune: it's not. I offer categories of common responses and samples of their weakness—only samples. One can counter endlessly for each one of them.

Reminder: We are trying to discipline the conversation to ask "What is cruelty?" Keeping steady and focused requires effort. It is very easy to slide into trying to answer why an act was cruel, which, in turn, easily becomes conflated with explanations about what causes cruelty, all of which seem to be easier to gravitate toward. The pattern of responses I present reflects that slippery slope as I've encountered it over the years and contexts, but it won't be dealt with comprehensively here. It's for you to take each response, note which question(s) it is really attempting to answer, and also to take notice of any counter-examples or weaknesses in the explanations that matter to you.

For reference, the eight categories of typical responses are listed first and then offered with more commentary after.

Eight typical responses to questions about what makes cruelty distinct among bads, particularly reflective of the moral valence of “humanity,” and what we most often suggest defines cruelty or that acts of cruelty violate:

1. **Ill intent**
2. **Excessiveness, Extremity, Unreasonable Action**
3. **Indifference**
4. **Individually Directed (intentional), Personalized or Psychological Attack**
5. **Legal/Rule/Convention Violation**
6. **Pathological/psychologically aberrant explanation**
7. **Heresy or Blasphemy**
8. **Naturalistic Nihilism**

1. **Ill intent:** the cruelty of the act is defined by the offender’s malice, sadism, or other personal benefit to causing suffering. To quote two rational sentimentalists (Twain and Montaigne) and a Stoic (Seneca) for the same purpose: “Of all the Animals, man is the only one who is cruel, who inflicts pain for the pleasure of doing it” (Twain). And, according to Montaigne, the “utmost point that cruelty can attain” is, as he quotes Seneca, “That man should kill man not in anger, not in fear, but only to watch the sight.”<sup>1</sup>

Note: this leaves open the possibility that if it can be established that no malice was involved, neither was there cruelty—to which it is all too easy to find endless counter-examples. It also, and as importantly, without a tighter formulation, leaves open the possibility that there could’ve been sadistic or ill intent, but no cruelty. For an example of sadism coinciding with infliction of pain that is necessary and beneficial, consider the following:

A doctor must tell a couple that he has been unable to save their child’s life. This news will cause them unbearable pain, and one would expect the doctor to dread being the bearer of it. But imagine that for whatever reason (he is a sociopath, he is in a state of utter depression

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<sup>1</sup> Montaigne, Michel de. *The Complete Essays of Montaigne*. Trans. by Donald Frame. (Stanford University Press, CA, 1957), P. 316.

and consumed by misanthropy, and the horror of the news confirms his sense that the world is rotten), he enjoys, takes pleasure in, telling the parents this horrible news. By most accounts, his pleasure in inflicting suffering never could be classified as sadistic, no doubt. Not only was his act necessary, irrespective of his feelings about both the news and delivering it, it is a matter for question whether he was acting cruelly in telling the parents the truth they sought.<sup>2</sup>

2. **Excess, Extremity, Unreasonable Action:** the vice of cruelty is often defined as an excessiveness or extremity, or as beyond the reasonableness of another state of being or emotion in the perpetrator. It often shares attributes with ill intent and malice, since the state or emotion of going to the extreme is a negative one such as anger, hate, and jealousy. For instance, as partially referenced previously, Seneca describes it as a combination of “going beyond” and one of sadism:

Cruelty is utterly inhuman, an evil unworthy of a mind so mild as man's. It is bestial madness to rejoice in the wounds and blood, to cast off the man... what makes savagery especially loathsome is that it goes beyond the bounds first of custom and then of humanity.<sup>3</sup>

Note: there are two initial considerations I'd like to point to here. First, as in most attempts to define cruelty (other than those such as Randy's “kicking a good dog”), the cruelty is primarily defined in relation to the perpetrator of it, not in relation, necessarily, to the experiences of the victims. Second, the easy objections are cases of cruelties that don't involve extremity of any perceivable sort, that are justifiable, reasonable, ordinary, and that often occur in an effort to be virtuous or benevolent.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>Schein, Margaret. *Cruelty: On the limits of Humanity*. Dissertation for The University of Chicago's Committee on Social Thought, 2006. (footnote), P. 70. And Schein, Maggie. The DePauw University, DePauw Magazine. <https://www.DePauw.edu/stories/details/the-boulder-question-by-maggie-schein/>

<sup>3</sup>Seneca, *Moral and Political Essays*. (Cambridge University, 1995), P. 55.

<sup>4</sup>I refer again to historical instances such as those referred in *Americanizing the American Indians: Writings by Friends of the Indian, 1880–1900*, to manuals for slaveholders, and justifications of punishments such as scold's bridles, shackles, spiked collars, branding, de-identification, and public flogging.



3. **Indifference:** the cruelty of the act is defined by an active absence of response to perceived suffering, the expression of suffering, no affective or intellectual investment in the experience of another, or by the infliction of suffering for no apparent reason. As Coetzee expresses, in step with robust lineage from Montaigne to Primo Levi and Elie Wiesel, “The ‘cruel’ slaughterer is accused of being indifferent to the pain of the beast.”<sup>5</sup> In this context, he means that cruel slaughter can be distinguished from humane slaughter by the absence of affective engagement of the slaughterer with the experience of the slaughtered. It is important to make two notes here: first, according to extrapolations from the above, humane slaughter of a human would constitute a psycho-pathology beginning with disassociation and moving on to much more dire maladaptation. The transposition from humane to insane is based on the context and the motivation (the why?) of the slaughterer, but neither on the victim nor the action itself. And second, this is different from malice or malintent: it is, however, in many regards, an indication of the absence of what we often consider “humanity,” by virtue of the absence of any acknowledgment of the other’s experience of the interaction.

Indifference as a description of what makes cruelty inhuman is a resigned go-to for those like Coetzee, as well as many of those in both politics and psychology. The case of Kitty Genovese is a classic example used in introductory psychology and ethics education to demonstrate concepts such as “diffusion of responsibility” and “moral indifference.”<sup>6</sup> It has spawned countless efforts to interrogate the why and how of a callousness that is not only an affront to custom, but that also cuts far deeper than that to rattle our sense of a common humanity, of the moral valence of humanity. These stories and their antidotes are shared preciously and too often because they are that confounding. They should be that confounding. They are everywhere, and yet seem to be able to crack, if not break, us. On an afternoon I was working on this section of the book, 9/20/19, the headline in the news was of a 16 –

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<sup>5</sup> Email exchange between Schein and Coetzee, June 15th, 2019, 9:44 am.

<sup>6</sup> Manning, R. Levine, M., Collins, A. *The Kitty Genovese Murder and the Social Psychology of Helping*. (University of West England, Bristol Lancaster University, 2007).

year-old Khaseen Morris.<sup>7</sup> He was stabbed to death in the parking lot of a strip mall in Long Island in front of not 36 onlookers like Kitty Genovese (though that number is highly disputed anyway), but in front of multiple dozens of people, some of whom filmed the murder on their phones. Indifference, as Coetzee and I discussed in our emails, is ordinarily human and, most importantly, an ordinary part of our nature that we share with many other elements of nature. It might accompany some acts of cruelty and be said of many people who lack humanity, or fail to demonstrate humanity, but it doesn't, in my mind, hit the bull's-eye for either cruelty or inhumanity.

Note: this leaves open the possibility that a human being's being incapable of being responsible or responsive to an expression of suffering, or providing a rational explanation for causing suffering, mitigates the cruelty of the act. The unfortunate truth is that many acts of cruelty are committed by those and witnessed by those who are unaware of the extent of the suffering of the victim and those who may be incapable or unwilling of being made so aware. This definition discounts malice and benevolence, as well as the fact that in the natural world indifference is actually connected to peace and balance more than it is to cruelty. We will return to this; we have to. Repeatedly.

4. **Individually Directed (intentional), Personalized or Psychological Attack:** the use of what one does know about how a being ticks to undo it, harm it, or manipulate it in a damaging way (e.g., from playground bullying, "It's a dog, I knew he'd come to me even if I killed him"; "She is terrified of being alone, so threaten to leave her"; to all forms of gaslighting, torture, the use, for instance, of a tape of a captive's loved one being raped played in the next room to break him).

Note: although this particular definition might include intention, it relies on the offender's specific knowledge of the specific victim, which means if the perpetrator was unaware or lacking in specific knowledge of the specific victim, but still wished the victim harm, the cruelty of the act should count as mitigated with, essentially, an "I didn't know" variety of defense.

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<sup>7</sup> <https://abc7ny.com/tyler-flach-verdict-update-khaseen-morris-case-guilty/12405198/>

I will make use of Agee's novel, *A Death in the Family*, again and at length here because his sensitivity to cruelty comes through in so many shades of subtleties. For a brief setup, in the story, Victoria is the little boy, Rufus', the protagonist's, nanny. They live in the deep South in the early-mid-1900s. Rufus is white. Victoria is black. He adores her, and in many ways, she makes up his understanding of the world—her presence, her feel, her wisdom, her care, and her scent. The following is not a politically correct excerpt, but no time is usually a humane one. I use it because it demonstrates a sensitivity to what might give one—if one imagines the tensions of those times, or even the repressed persistence of them today—a small experience of what I might say could've been a mix of ordinary and benevolent cruelty. It demonstrates how the use of what should make a creature flourish as the kind of creature it is can be used to hurt it. Rufus is just a young boy, noticing what young children notice—what all humans register—and so though there is no demonstration of real cruelty in this specific incident, if he heard his mama, and if he retained her information and the explicitly inhumane times had remained the same, one could imagine him using that information, as an adult now, against someone like Victoria. Do imagine it. It would have been cruel, right?

Here are some bits from the gleamingly rich simplicity of the vignette:

*“Ah believe you do remembuh! Ah sweah ah believe you do! You do?” She shook her head at him in her happiness. “Do you remembuh y’old Victoria?” She shook him again, “Do you, honey?” And realizing at last that he was specifically being asked, he responded shyly, and she embraced him.*

But here's the part that could hurt. Here's the part that begins to set up the possibility for cruelty. This child remembered Victoria.

*She smelled so good that he could almost have leaned his head against her and gone to sleep then and there.*

*“Mama,” he said later, when she was out shopping, “Victoria smells awful good.”*

*“Hush, Rufus,” his mother said. “Now you listen very carefully to mama, do you hear? Say yes if you hear.”*

*“Now you be very careful that you never say anything about how she smells where Victoria can hear you. Will you? Say yes if you will.”*

*“Yes.”*

*“Because Victoria is—is colored, Rufus. That’s why her skin is so dark, and colored people are very sensitive about the way they smell. Do you know what sensitive means?”*

*He nodded cautiously.*

*“It means there are things that hurt your feelings so badly, things you can’t help, that you feel like crying, and nice colored people feel that way about the way they smell. So, you be very careful. Will you? Say you will?”*

*“Yes.”*

*“Now tell me what I’ve asked you to be careful about, Rufus.”*

*“Don’t tell Victoria how she smells.”*

*“Or say anything about it where she can hear.”*

*“And why not?”*

*“Because she might cry.”*

*“That’s right.”<sup>8</sup>*

Just this small vignette sets the stage for both the earnestness and ease by which most children inhabit the moral domain: “She might cry” is Rufus’ reason; not because there is a rule, not because there is an argument to be made, won, or lost, not because there will be a spanking to be had for punishment. No, because it will hurt her feelings, and the request is not for obedience or compliance, but for perception, awareness, and for Rufus to “be careful” of another.

Note: as with ill-intent, malice, and extremity, this formula or explanation of individual, personalized, or psychological attack is sequestered in what is or is assumed to be going on in the perpetrator’s head. It relies on the mental state or knowledge of the perpetrator, which is notoriously difficult to prove, as any passive-aggressive family member or well-adapted psychopath knows and takes advantage of. As importantly, and has been touched on in Chap. 1, many acts of cruelty are committed out of necessity or benevolence.

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<sup>8</sup> Agee, James. *A Death In The Family*. (New York: McDowell, Obolensky, 1957), P. 103–104.

5. **Legal/Rule/Convention Violation:** e.g., the cruelty of the act is defined by violating a law, rule, or convention, or is not in accordance with the legal definitions of it or established rules or conventions. See, for instance, The United States Supreme Court’s ruling on the 8th Amendment against cruel and unusual punishment, which involves descriptions not terribly more refined than “unnecessary and wanton infliction of pain.”<sup>9</sup>

Note: as much as one might like to hang fast to the objectivity and authority of this kind of reference, as will and has come up throughout this book, clearly cruel interventions such as scold’s bridles (the inhumane punitive device) were legal, as were quartering, and as is stoning (in certain communities). And slavery. And so on. Reliance on the law is not tenable.

6. **Pathological/Psychologically aberrant explanation:** this is a bit of an empty, but often paraded around, catch-all describing the cruelty of something in terms of the actor’s discernable mental status vis-à-vis his humanity, e.g., the offender of the cruel act is mentally ill (defined by whom?), sick, or damaged to the point of being inhuman or acting inhumanely, is “out of his mind,” disassociated from self. What might count as “intention” here should be highly fraught with tensions.

Note: this response is one example of how tempting it can be to substitute an explanation for **why** an act of cruelty was committed for a definition or explanation of **what** made the act cruel. We will come back to this slippery habit often. Although descriptively we might be able to legitimately offer an explanation like the one above for many acts of cruelty, certainly there are plenty committed in clear-headed moments by perfectly sane and normal individuals. Additionally, if cruelty is, indeed, born of pathology, then the supporter of this explanation is burdened with the corollary belief that it is the kind of thing that could possibly be healed managed.<sup>10</sup>

7. **Heresy or Blasphemy:** e.g., the cruel act is defined as being in violation of a divine edict or as corruption of something divine and there-

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<sup>9</sup> Accessed on 5/17/22: <https://supreme.justia.com/cases/federal/us/475/312/>

<sup>10</sup> This opens up ragged issues in the mental health and diagnostic industries about mental illnesses vs. personality or mental disorders. Though fascinating, such topics and attempts to wrangle them into clarity are a diversion from our current conversation.

fore good or under the design of an all mighty (including the soul of the victim). In these formulas, cruelty can often take on the supernatural abalone patina of “evil”; as discussed in the previous chapter, in contrast to many of the few fellow scholars who deal with investigating cruelty directly, I do make a very emphatic distinction between the earthliness of “cruelty” and the otherworldly implications of “Evil.”

Note: this explanation suffers from an over-tenderized, self-inflicted vulnerability to the retort that much cruelty has been sanctioned in the name of protecting the holy and divine. This response also contains a more interesting challenge in that it often recognizes the soul of both the perpetrator and the victim—or doesn’t—and then the speaker about it must answer how cruelty can be committed against that which may not have a soul, and/or wind up in a sticky defense about what counts as having a soul and when. (Is it okay to give an abortion to a pregnant dog, or do all dogs not go to heaven? Is it cruel not to, as the canine’s pet-parent, if the dog’s health is in danger or the puppies won’t be taken care of?).<sup>11</sup>

8. **Naturalistic Nihilism:** e.g., without the constructs of socialization, civilization, and society that keep our natures in check, human life would be, as we are told, nasty, brutish, and short. Cruelty happens and is part of all of nature (see Chap. 2 for more), and we are part of that nature and it is part of us—without, of course, something to combat it, repress it, punish it, subdue, control, cage, or tame it. Otherwise, the “natural” world is kill or be killed. It’s a cruel world. Survival of the fittest. Our—human—world would be a “Lord of the Flies,” Machiavellian force of chaos or chaotic, brutal power, or powerful brutality. For a particularly vivid and sobering example, or a plethora of them, revisit Charlotte Delbo’s work, in full, as well as the excerpts from *Auschwitz and After* provided in Chap. 2 and in Appendix A.

Note: It is important to register that “cruelty” in this last of the eight merry-go-round typical responses is not used as a moral term per se, rather, it’s used as a metaphorical or descriptive term of nature, like calling the thunder “angry” or a tornado “vicious,” or even saying that Venus flytraps are carnivorous or that some organisms self-reproduce.

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<sup>11</sup> Accessed on 5/17/22: <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/07/us/heartbeat-bill-georgia.html>

If this view is the case, though, what is that word, “cruelty,” describing about nature exactly? What work does it do to call anything cruel if everything is cruel?

The immature resignation represented in naturalistic nihilism isn’t tenable if one wants to scaffold degrees of wrong by anchoring whatever happened as the worst of its kind by calling it “cruelty.” The political theorist Judith Shklar points out: “Surely human prayers, curses, and justifications in the face of accidents and disasters testify to our refusal to resign ourselves to an endlessly cruel world.”<sup>12</sup>

As I was trying to express in the exchanges with Coetzee, I think that although metaphorically justifiable, submitting to the idea of an endlessly cruel world, or the totality of cruelty, trivializes the worst humans can do, the reality of what humans *do* do and are, and it can deprive both victims and perpetrators of an important way of articulating their experiences. As we know, it can also cast a shadow on insights into ourselves as having humanity, as being human. Tell a gang-rape victim that “that’s just nature,” for instance, when she is tackled by a drunken party of college boys who nearly kill her. Boys will be boys, after all. On the other side, tell a prideful, arrogant Edmund Kemper that he’s nothing special—that praying mantises are notorious for multiple slayings in a lifetime, and for the purpose of maintenance of their species, so really, he’s no different from a small, green bug. On yet another hand, tell the rape victim just to think about her experience as if she had been on safari and were sexually mauled (sexually?) by a pride of lions.

When discussing this part of the book with Coetzee, I realized, if it hasn’t become clear, that I think acknowledging our helplessness—which is something we must face when facing our humanity, cruelty, and our failed attempts at formulas for cruelty—is important. Here is an abbreviated section of our exchange:

Dear John, I am ending up restructuring the book around a rather psychological sequence (implicitly, not explicitly). It turns out helplessness needs to influence a chapter. Embarrassingly, I am at a bit of a loss as to where to

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<sup>12</sup> Shklar, J. *Faces of Injustice*, (Yale University Press, 1990), P. 58.

turn quickly. And I am impatient to get this chunk of chapters drafted before my surgery. I'm sure I have resources on it, but having not looked for it specifically before, I need help. So, asking if you might have quick thoughts to help guide me to a favorite text or thoughts on helplessness. I know it appears in your work—a quote from there would be great. But again, having never read for that concept explicitly, I'd have to go through and re-read everything for what I'm after. So, I'm wondering if you can offer me a short cut?

Many thanks, as always, and forgive me my impatience (could be worse, it could be laziness—but that's not a vice of mine, usually),

Be Well,

Maggie

PS: should make it clear: I'm not looking for positive psychology bits on how to overcome it or anything. I wouldn't be asking you if I were. I'm asking for insights and thoughts about the despair, the confusion, the stanching and stunning of it...how to describe what it does to us and how.

He replies. I have reinterpreted and edited the exchange for brevity, clarity, and copyright compliance.

He begins by acknowledging that he hadn't previously thought about the condition of helplessness. He did acknowledge, though, having been struck by learning about an uninhabited South Sea island used by sea birds as a nesting spot. He tells me that somehow mice had been introduced to this island and now crawl over and bite to death the baby chicks who are bigger than they, but who have no means of self-protection.<sup>13</sup>

None of our responses complete our understanding of the “what” of what cruelty is. Nor, unfortunately, do they round out our ability to comprehend what acts of cruelty that violate humanity really violate. How do we hold that there is a possibility of morality, based on our “humanity” at all—especially if there is no stable ethical barrier between the human and nonhuman worlds? What about those foreign mice Coetzee mentions...?

The questions bear repeating because they are nearly too large—or perhaps, indeed are too large—to see around. What is cruelty and what does it violate? Of what of us, of humanity does it violate?

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<sup>13</sup> Email exchange between Coetzee and Schein, Sept 16th, 2019, 9:12 pm



We are missing something. It is important to release this knot. Somewhere in it, hiding underneath the seemingly impenetrable barbs and brambles, is our heart: the kernel of humanity that makes us the kind of creature whose nature it is to still have faith that the man on the bench sitting next to us, while we read this, will not stab us with a steak knife he jacked from the restaurant across the street. The answer can't be just that he must not have reason to act on such violence, that civility and decency are our default only when we've no other pressing motive. And if it's divinity, whose?



# 5

## I'm a Good Person, Really!

Proficiency in doubting is not acquired in days or weeks...  
—Søren Kierkegaard.<sup>1</sup>

Proficiency in believing is not acquired either in days or weeks...  
—Søren Kierkegaard.<sup>2</sup>

Now that we are alert to the sharp and shifting edges of the sorts of helplessness that taunt us, and moving past our collective anxiety, we look around all the time for indicators of humanity, indicators of our goodness. Chapter 4 had the unpopular and clinical task of acknowledging the helplessness of openly facing the paradoxes and contradictions cruelty brings up, while also acknowledging that we can't even think our way out of most of those tangles long enough to sustain a thread across diverse examples and situations. Acknowledging that our (assuming the reader is not a psycho or sociopath) experiences of those like Kemper and Himmler are comforting (see, there is always a spark of humanity!) and

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<sup>1</sup>Kierkegaard, Søren. *Fear and Trembling/Repetition*. Trans. and Ed., Howard Hong and Edna Hong, (Princeton University Press, New Jersey, 1983), P. 7.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

both confounding and undoing at the same time, thus perfectly following the formula of cruelty as I have outlined it, so it can remain our launching point for now.

To remind the reader the structure of cruelty we are using, as a thought a lens, is: a human being using aspects of what should make a creature flourish *as one of its kind* against it for its harm, in essence perverting those aspects and traits. To reiterate, the actor's intention, the gravity of the cruelty, or the legalities or conventions under which the actor acts are left to the side in this rehearsal scaffolding for cruelty.

In cases of extreme or macro cruelty such as Kemper's or, for a different species, Himmler's, any assurance of what it means to be human at all is exactly what their actions, their cruelty perverts, if we are to flourish, if we want to be what we think humanity is. "Know thyself," Socrates said, and so goes the lineage of our Western attempts at becoming better at being human beings through psychology, creative and liberal arts, philosophy, and theories of moral development. Knowing, rationality, literacy are the things we strive for. We can quantify aspects of them. That means, again, we are in the realm of the shared-objectivity, the truth. These aspects we cultivate and measure with such dedication are supposed to lead us to "the good," often for both the secular and the religious. Having both knowledge of ourselves and the rationality to use that knowledge is supposed to save us from ourselves and each other. But incidences of cruelty such as the ones we have already discussed destabilize not only our confidence that knowing ourselves is attainable via the traditional indicators and routes or measured by the conventional metrics, but also that our faith that doing so actually produces anything of any significance, anything good. By all accounts, except for from the saved or spared (those being the only ones left to speak of the matter), Himmler was a good man. Kemper was a good man. Seligman was a good man and a great, influential scientist. So was Joseph Mengele. Unless you were a twin and a non-Aryan.

I have a good neighbor. He put his five (five scared and trusting individuals) puppies his Labrador bitch birthed in his garage into a plastic bag weighted with a stone to drown them in the South Carolina Battery Creek Intracoastal Waterway. He thought that was the humane thing to do. He didn't want them to die in a sterile veterinary surgical theater, and

he couldn't pay the fee for euthanasia. He is a good neighbor. Thoughtful and kind. He never fails to offer to help, to wave a warm hello, to surprise us by mowing the lawn when our mower broke and my husband hurt his back. However, he should never be allowed to be with, much less be responsible for, animals who are dependent on him—human or not. Expressions and interactions of ordinary conventions and civility can be as performative and self-guarding as making sure one has matching socks when going to the doctor; these are not the same as behaviors that exhibit the attributes of a creature whose “humanity” is trustworthy and thorough (what happens if we allow the gargantuan issue of Artificial Intelligences to enter the arena?)—though it is enough (again, enough of *what?*) to say my neighbor has enough humanity to have been said to have acted inhumanely.

The lives and actions of these specimens of our kind turn what were supposed to be good, useful aspects of their individual victims' (trust, some sense of community, fear, instinct for survival) against them. As humans, as social beings with structured social lives (civil lives), we rely on cultivating virtues that are mutually and individually necessary for our flourishing in human togetherness: virtues such as civility, decency, propriety, kindness, generosity, courage, compassion, selflessness, protection, love, self-awareness, awareness of others (again, not sure what unfurls out of that)—in short, the virtues that we suppose are included in the assumption of “humanity.” For philosophers such as the esteemed Hannah Arendt, this is a social aspect, and this expected aspect is also a public aspect (the two are distinct for her). This “human togetherness”<sup>3</sup> of our lives, Arendt says, is not detachable from the *What*<sup>4</sup> of what we are; rather, it is literally essential to both *Who* and *What* we are.<sup>5</sup> This strange essence of *Who* we are comes through in our actions in public and reveals the *What*, by which we may be identified by others. And that happens together, in the public space, the space of being with each other.

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<sup>3</sup> Arendt, Hannah. *The Human Condition*. (University of Chicago Press, 1958), P. 180.

<sup>4</sup> Arendt, Hannah. *The Human Condition*. (University of Chicago Press, 1958), P.181. The difference of the “what” and the “who” is important, if not also controversially understood, philosophical distinctions for Arendt. See The Reader's Guide, Appendix B, and commentaries or contributions on my website as they appear. <http://maggieschein.com/appendix-b-readers-guide/>

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

Arendt says, and I quote it because it's important, though complicated, I think, to think through it:

The manifestation of “who” the speaker and “doer” inextricably and essentially is, though it is plainly visible, retains a curious intangibility that confounds all efforts toward unequivocal verbal expression. The moment we want to say *who* somebody is, our very vocabulary leads us astray into saying *what* he is; we get entangled in a description of the qualities he necessarily shares with others like him; we begin to describe a “character,” in the old meaning of the word.

The importance of speech in the mix is critical, and Arendt prefaces the above with the following:

This revelatory quality of speech and action comes to the fore where people are *with* others and neither for nor against them—that is, in sheer human togetherness. Although nobody knows whom he reveals when he discloses himself in deed or word, he must be willing to risk the disclosure, and this is neither the doer of good works, who must be without self and preserve complete anonymity, nor the criminal, who must hide himself from others....<sup>6</sup>

Not surprisingly, this “togetherness” depends on practices and conventions we associate with being *with* people we may not know well or be intimate with: i.e., elements swirling in the vast and contested suitcase of “civility,” such as trust, promise-making and promise-keeping, reason, respectfulness, responsiveness to violations of law. None of these traits, as abstractions, were absent in Himmler or Kemper. The absence of these traits in actions like theirs doesn't explain the cruelty of what they did and who they were. That troubles our expectations of these traits and aspects for what work they do for our understanding of the inescapable “human togetherness”<sup>7</sup> that is part of our “humanity.”

Of course, it's not just “our kind” who harbor the questionable expectation of experiencing the goodness of humanity: those puppies of my

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<sup>6</sup> Arendt, Hannah. *The Human Condition*. (University of Chicago Press, 1958), P. 180.

<sup>7</sup> Arendt, Hannah. *The Human Condition*, (University of Chicago Press 1958), P. 181

neighbor's went into that plastic bag chirping expectant puppy chirps, wagging their tails, their bellies hanging under the scruff by which they were gently lifted, their eyes widely rounded in earnest trust. The lives and behaviors commonly exhibited by those who are supposed to be specimens of our kind compound the perversion of our understanding of ourselves as humans. Such (usually) supposed outlying occurrences compound our lack of understanding of cruelty by also challenging those of us who are not their immediate victims by how we, we on the periphery, we the audience (not the witness), might explain the horrors they are and have committed within our circle of humanity—how are they part of us or we of them? Simply put, such actions pervert what we might mean, in any morally meaningful sense, by “humanity”—whether we are victims or direct witnesses.

Kemper's actual crimes against his victims are clearly inhuman and cruel, but, as noted earlier, because his description of himself to us is remarkably human, his inhumanity, his cruelty, is well-tempered with inscrutable layers.<sup>8</sup> This is one of the diseased and depraved twists. He shows us the prized narratives of the elements of humanity we thought made us not only morally special, but also human. Belonging to the tribe of humanity may turn out not to help the story go as we planned. Kemper's very existence can, in fact, be used against our own understanding of our “humanity.”<sup>9</sup> Clearly I have suggested that we may be setting these previously privileged aspects of “humanity” to tasks for which they are unfit, and we may, therefore, be failing to see aspects of ourselves we need to cultivate to shore up our humanity. This is an aspect of the helplessness acknowledged in Chap. 4.

Let's talk about us for a bit more. It might seem like a diversion or excess, and you might be asking, “What in the world does all of this have to do with a definition of cruelty?” But really this whole endeavor is about understanding us and understanding how we understand us. In the end, that's what makes attention to this subject necessary, unnerving, and compelling. If we learn something, it also makes the endeavor redeeming—maybe.

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<sup>8</sup> Tempering is the process in metal work in which the metal is repeatedly softened by heat, stretched, and refolded to create layers that result in both uncanny strength and flexibility.

<sup>9</sup> Bloom, Paul. *Against Empathy: The Case for Rational Compassion*, (Ecco Books, 2016).

**To repeat:** “Of all the animals,” Mark Twain says, “Man is the only one that is cruel.”<sup>10</sup> Montaigne, Plutarch, and even our token stoic, Seneca, share this thought that humans are singular in this way. They don’t say we all are, but they do imply that we are the only ones who could be and who often are. To repeat Gaita’s direction, “It is sad but true that human kind understands itself partly by the crimes it knows itself to be capable of. We must therefore strive to give them their rightful names.”<sup>11</sup> We must also, therefore, strive to define what we mean in naming those crimes and naming what they are in violation of.

Experts, artists, writers, scholars, random friends of friends, and bartenders testify, in public, in published works, about the depravity of human nature.<sup>12</sup> We pride ourselves, it sometimes seems, on our collective reluctance to be good, and we pride ourselves on our ability to withstand, if not also display, this conviction.<sup>13</sup> However, a cursory sweep of our actual lives and our accounts of our lives in art and science also reveal that even the sophisticated, the academic, the worldly among us weights the good above the bad in human nature and behavior. We might not be proud of this innate naiveté, or it might make us feel vulnerable and insecure, but it appears we have to honor it. This faith is a condition of our existence as social creatures. Most of us can’t be educated or experienced out of knowing we can err on the side of bad, “beyond bad,” but we also believe that we will not be bad and others will not be horrible to us. Even the most radical dystopian fantasies and presentations of demons in human form rely on expectations of caring for shared values, groupings of care, and expectations of goodness (no matter how strangely defined).

*Lord of the Flies*,<sup>14</sup> the dystopian narrative displaying some of the most traumatizing truths about the vulnerability or sheerness of our goodness,

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<sup>10</sup> Twain, Mark. “Man’s Place in the Animal World” in *Collected tales, sketches, speeches, and essays 1891–1910*. Library of Congress, P. 211.

<sup>11</sup> Gaita, Raimond. *A Common Humanity: Thinking About Love and Truth and Justice*, Routledge, NY (2002), P. 263

<sup>12</sup> Accessed on 5/19/22: <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2018/10/the-cruelty-is-the-point/572104>

<sup>13</sup> See: the film *A Few Good Men* (Iconic scene “You Can’t Handle the Truth”), (Castle Rock Entertainment, 1992).

<sup>14</sup> Golding, William, and Edmund L. Epstein. *Lord of the Flies: A Novel*. (New York, Perigee, 1954).

also contains scenes such as the one in which Jack, the cruel, Caligula-like tyrant, retreats and defers to Ralph, who is a symbol of community, of democracy, of decency. This is how *Flies* concludes because we can't really have it any other way. This resolution is important: it is ingrained into us to build in the good.

The narratives and plot lines of the Klingons in the *Star Trek* film and television franchise,<sup>15</sup> despite their culture of glorified ruthlessness and savage brutality, are variations of “rescue and redemption” formulas—episodes in which elements of the Klingons’ “better nature” are appealed to and are the crux of the episodes’ narratives and the characters’ developments. Even in savagery, we write in “humanity” when we can. It seems nearly impossible to understand the world and us as part of it if we don’t. Assuming the virtues of a being that is something like the kind of being we can’t help but believe we are is a critical ingredient for us to make sense of the world (even if we have disguised our self-fantasy with science-fantasy, including donning a mountain range for a forehead and savagery as a badge of identity). Or, to paraphrase Simon from *Lord of the Flies*, “The Beast is only us”:<sup>16</sup> when we realize what it is to be or to become what is inhumane, we also realize what we fantasize it is to be or to become humane and what we import or at least overblow as “humanity.” We demarcate inhumanity to identify what we do not want to count as human. The operative word there is “want.”

And yet, here are bits of truth we can’t help but come back to: the vast majority of an entire nation participated in (by avoidance, passivity, mild engagement, or direct engagement) the Shoah. The majority of that population. We are appalled. And yet, there was little opposition to the systematic genocide of the native peoples of America by a people striving for goodness, humanity, and freedom. And yet, savage slavery across the globe persists and is tolerated in nearly every culture across the globe. There is opposition to gang rape and stoning as means of controlling those who disobey codes of law and decency in certain cultures, but these ancient practices of inhumanity for the sake of human culture and

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<sup>15</sup> Season 5, Episode 16. <https://www.tor.com/2012/07/31/star-trek-the-next-generation-qethicsq/> and [https://memory-alpha.fandom.com/wiki/Sins\\_of\\_the\\_Father\\_\(episode\)](https://memory-alpha.fandom.com/wiki/Sins_of_the_Father_(episode)) for descriptions of Star Trek episodes. Accessed on: 3/4/2021.

<sup>16</sup> Golding, William, and Edmund L. Epstein. *Lord of the Flies: A Novel*. (New York, Perigee, 1954).



tribalized values are too strong to be completely overthrown. That's right, these are done for culture. And values. And ethics. And law.<sup>17</sup> And purity. And divinity. And ... tell me what I am to think? Tell me what you think. How does not this vaporize your sanity? How do we understand ourselves? How do we hold that there is a possibility of morality, based on our nature, at all? In Delbo's wistfully mournful words, how does one "explain the inexplicable?" One might say, after reading her prose and poetry, that she is very much focused on the solitary, extremely impenetrable experience that they had as individuals in the camps, and that I, here, am talking about something much more general, vague, abstract. I bring in Delbo again to assure you I am not. Lest we make the same inhuman/inhumane error of those individuals who participated in the Nazi genocide, every thought and move we make when it comes to understanding cruelty or "humanity," no matter how disassociated it may seem or neutral one thinks one can be with regard to it, is personal. So, to me, we learn as much about our sense of a morally valenced "humanity" by reading those like Charlotte Delbo, Zalman Gradowski, Primo Levi, and Jean Améry, from St. Exupéry, Coetzee's novels, Agee, Flannery O'Connor, and so on, as we do from conventional scholars, thinkers, and writers on moral foundations, their disruption, and our corruption.

There are basic and often unanswerable existential questions that go along with or align with the eight types of responses to the question "What is cruelty?" as outlined in Chap. 4. In addition to the (previously discussed) anxieties that are often rooted in some sense that we don't fully belong in nature or that there are justifications that we do belong in nature, there is an equally earnest and primal question, akin to but different from those about how or if we belong. With crude honesty, it is: are we basically good or are we basically bad? And by "we," I mean you, me, him, her, they, us ... is this thing we are and share as a "kind of being" basically good or basically bad? And am I, you, they, etc. essentially good or bad? It's a less-than-sophisticated question. In fact, it is embarrassingly naïve. Didn't we get through these topics in religious study, girl and boy scouts, and grade school? Mama was supposed to teach us these things. But we aren't simple,

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<sup>17</sup> Semerdjian, Elyse. *"Off the Straight Path": Illicit Sex, Law, and Community in Ottoman Aleppo*, (Syracuse University Press, 2008), P. 22–23.

and Mama cannot protect us from the truth in this case. We can and should keep asking and refining these questions: are we innately good or innately bad? Put on that distant gaze that would rest on your face mid-play when you were 5, unable to cut out in a neat picture of what one was perceiving. That 5-year-old, I will wager, never really got an answer. You still hang there suspended and waiting. Are we neither good nor bad, but simply capable of actions that could be either good or bad or great or evil? If we make adulthood the playground on which it used to be okay to indulge honestly in these questions, what does it look like? In my explorations, it seems it can be a house of mirrors that could be frightening; or it can be one that shows us facets of our humanity we haven't seen before. Dropping pretense, it is important to acknowledge that is where we begin.

These questions have to do with our most basic trust in ourselves, or lack thereof. We can run around them, dissect them, soar above them, dig under them—anything a preposition is good for, otherwise known as, “anything a bee can do to a box,” as we commonly learn in grade school. The problem is, there is something rattling in this box, still, no matter how elaborately we try to skirt it or stomp on it.

The emphasis on intention that some use to define us or our specific actions as “good” or “bad” offers us a middle way through the cloyingly black and white question, “Are we basically good or are we basically bad?” It does so in the way the teacher might ask, “Johnny, did you mean to hurt Susie’s feelings?” to determine the appropriate kind of correction and judgment. Intention appears to give us a variable, a place of wobble between the “this or that” binary. It won’t surprise anyone that I think that binary paths, when talking about cruelty and humanity, can be deceptive, distracting roads to nowhere. And ill intent, as we’ve already seen, won’t guide us out of our labyrinth, since it accounts for only a percentage of actions we can call cruel.

What are you most afraid of recognizing yourself as? What are you most afraid of in yourself that your neighbor recognizes? Or is your primary fear one of what you might experience about someone else? Or of what you or another might be capable? Take a minute and ask yourself what you are most certain about concerning what kind of being or creature you are or about your aggregate intentions. Are you most certain that you are good or decent at heart? Are you most certain that, though you

are not always good, your soul is good (it can be handy to separate one's being into the astral, the temporal, and the primal) by virtue of a religious savior, by spiritual affinity? Perhaps you believe that you have a choice to be humane or cruel and that you are different from most of nature because you can make and follow rules—and break them!—or can understand divine commandments? Or are you most certain, deep down, that you are uniquely bad, damaged, unfixable, or *unsavable*?<sup>18</sup>

The subject of cruelty is a clever and often uninvited teacher for us about ourselves—it is the therapist's office we stumbled into by accident and can't escape. If I were you, I'd be annoyed with me just now in how I'm guiding this conversation because I am not distinguishing between understanding the nature of an act of cruelty or acts of cruelties and a verdict about what we think we are essentially as human beings. The first set is clearly different in kind from the second issue. Usually, I acknowledge that cruelties happen for all sorts of reasons, with ample variation, by both good people and bad people, and good people meaning well but doing bad, and bad people meaning bad, but possibly doing something necessary, good in a long run, or even simply ineffectual or unsuccessful. I doubt that any individual act of cruelty defines either the individual perpetrator or us as a member of this species or kind as essentially good or bad. So, I'm not trying to generalize from an incident to a whole. But it is inevitable when talking about cruelty that we return to what we think we are, what hope, if any, we have for ourselves. Mirrors have jagged edges.

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<sup>18</sup>When interviewing a job candidate or working with a particularly defensive client, I ask them, "What are you most certain of?" Try it. Whatever the answer is can direct you to find out what they most fear and worry about. Certainty is nearly always a reverse mirror. For instance, even if they answer, "I am most certain that  $2 + 2 = 4$ ," then you can bet they are most afraid of chaos, the unknown, and also that they likely resist creativity. It's revealing exercise in many ways.



# 6

## Thin Skin and Faith

While working out the previous chapter, I again sought out help from my fellow “Professor of Cruelty.” Honesty, terror, confusion, nihilism, depression, and, as we know, anxiety and helplessness are natural in this conversation. I was finding myself having a hard time, at that point, thinking through things I’d thought through for decades. Literally, I seemed unable to drag my eyes through even Primo Levi or Jean Améry. I could not watch silly videos of people pointing and laughing while making their pets do unnatural and distressing things. This was a departure for me. I used to sit and read piles of Amnesty International reports of torture; transcripts and court documents from those like Kemper and Dahmer, reports of genocides, war crimes, reports from slaughterhouse engineers and forepersons, animal-use laboratories, serial and taboo rapists and killers, sexual offenders, ritualistic torturers, and so on. But I found myself having become what felt to be less brave, or perhaps less *willing* is more accurate. I became concerned about the implications of such indifference, avoidance, or, god forbid, defensive callousness. And so I wrote to Coetzee, yet again.

Dear John,

Do you feel as though your skin has grown thicker or thinner over the years of thinking about cruelty?

That's probably the wrong question. If it is, please respond to whatever is the right one.

I used to be able to sit and read torture reports and science manuals (usually torture of animals and abnormal humans, really) and parse and think so I could see if I could articulate the "what" of the cruelty. That task seemed protective enough. I rehabbed fighting dogs and confronted their fighters. And on and on. And the purpose seemed protective enough.

And yet I find that I just spent an entire day yesterday completely screwing up a chapter because I was avoiding having to talk about Seligman ("Learned Helplessness" is what he researched. If you don't know of the studies, they are humanity at its most pathetic attempt to justify horror and prove what any actual human being already knows).

I was surprised at myself, at my thin skin.

I used to be either more callous or more brave. I am no longer sure what the difference is.

I couldn't even read the abstracts of Seligman's work out loud to my husband, which is something I usually could have done, a process of translation and filtering from the academic to general. Well, I did read them, but I choked up. Repeatedly. I couldn't get through the descriptions of such kinds of torture and cruelty with the depth of attention I used to have.

I wonder if I've just run out of adrenaline.

Have you stayed the same about it all or have you found your endurance of responsiveness to go in cycles?

Best,

MS

He responds with a strident "yes," confirming that not only has his skin grown thinner but also with something more cutting than that (<http://maggieschein.com/coetzee-and-schein/>).<sup>1</sup> I assume from his words that he means giving a purpose to cruelty, making any excuses for it, attending to it, are simply too much. Perhaps even studying it. And I agree (other than the studying it part), but from his willingness even to engage me in this, he also expresses the tension that these conversations,

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<sup>1</sup>To read Coetzee's email response in full, go to: <http://maggieschein.com/coetzee-and-schein/>.

not the carnivals around them, the *real* conversations, must be had. He responded by acknowledging my situation but saying he couldn't rescue me from it. He did exhort me, though, to try to make plainly clear that my hopelessness/helplessness is a necessary consequence of staring at the facts fully. I hope by now it is clear that I think our understanding of what kind of being we are, of our "kind," does begin with us acknowledging our anxiety at being and our uncertainty at belonging; acknowledging that there is a tension between the pressure to understand more (driven by a sense that that will alleviate our anxiety and uncertainty) and the utter fatigue and helplessness that such an endeavor entails.

What I am still after is what cruelty is itself. What the facets of it are and how they reflect us. Those are, basically, our initial queries. What about us, basically or essentially, are we looking at when we look ourselves through the lens of cruelty and us as the only creatures who can legitimately be guilty of it? And, though I hate to make this explicit because of all the demons it can unleash: if cruelty is specifically and intimately human, and to each of us our own, neither divine, nor fully sterilizable or isolatable through reason or objectivity, that is, it belongs to us, *who* is to judge and against what? These are the foci of questions I try to hold central. Coetzee's response comforted me and reminded me that it really is important that we look together, that we don't shield ourselves with abstractions, and that we allow ourselves to be vulnerable.

So, play this game with me a bit longer, taking cruelty as a whole lens compressing our vision of our kind. I am not sure we can understand what cruelty is, what the ingredients of cruel acts are, unless we also and in tandem look at what we are through the lens of the fact that we have a concept of cruelty at all, which do we through looking at acts that we call "cruel." It does seem that a sober take on cruelty pocks the smoothness of the territory we want "humanity" to possess as a morally valenced descriptor of a category or kind.

What we think of the kind of beings we are both individually and as part of a species called "human" are precursors to our actions. Those concerns often motivate and impact what we do and how we explain ourselves and our actions, as is evident in the eight merry-go-round responses to the question "What is cruelty?" Not everyone has been a victim of rape, genocide, enslavement, or torture. Everyone, however, has been a

victim of, a perpetrator of, witness to, and an audience to cruelty. We're all on the spectrum there because we are all humans, and we have each made some personal internal vow about what that designation means; our external assertions of "inhuman!" and "inhumane!" confirm this.

In *Faces of Injustice*, Shklar, very carefully and sensitively, dedicates herself to understanding how we try (and often fail) to explain ourselves collectively and to understand the bad things that happen to us and to others, i.e., misfortunes and injustices, natural bad (i.e., not-moralized) versus human-created suffering or bad (moralized). Our differing reactions to each reveal what we primitively hang on to: natural causes of suffering are not objects of blame because they can't be held responsible, they are not sentient, they are not rational, not autonomous, they are not in the image of god, they are slaves to their instincts or are instincts, are a slave to nature or are nature, and so on. Whereas, well, human-caused suffering has an object that is a subject. It can intake. It is capable of receiving input, evidence of the consequences of our behaviors. Shklar says that we believe that "Behind every disaster there must be ill-will and fault, and their consequences do not just happen. They are designed to occur, by ourselves and powerful others. Injustice makes sense, and we can cope with it and carry on."<sup>2</sup> In the broader context of her essay, she continues to make two key points: (1) most of us are remarkably defensive or unable to conclude that the world is a "mass of random evil or bad luck," and (2) therefore we want there to be fault, ill will, responsibility, because if there is, we are not helpless. If there is something of us to blame, we can at least identify, understand, point our finger and yell, punish, educate, correct, or eliminate. That is, blame is empowering and a source of sanity in the cruel, chaotic world. We need to, she means, identify what in us or them is responsible—for the horrible things that are "designed by ourselves."

My question is, to what do we owe this honor, burden, and anticipation of relief, and how does cruelty pervert what we consider the humane part of ourselves? If we don't, won't, or can't submit to the thought that the world is simply a mass of chaotic badness and we are just a part of

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<sup>2</sup> Shklar, Judith. *Faces of Injustice*, (Yale University Press, 1990), P. 62.

that, then *what are we such that we are an intervention—for better or for worse?*

The purpose of this chapter is to engage our stamina and continue to tussle with (not answer) four among the most annoying and simple sorts of questions we've already played with at some length: (1) What are we, you and I?—Are we, am I or you, basically good or are we, or is one of us, basically bad? (2) Do you and I mostly expect our fellow humans to *act* good or bad? Based on what? To *be* basically good or bad? Based on what? (3) Do things like intention or reason intervene and give you or me a choice about whether we are basically good or bad or expect others to be basically good or basically bad? That is, does our mood, or mind, or will color us morally relevant? And (4) What might we be overlooking and could we see it through all this debris? It is valuable debris, but a disorganized mess, still.

The above questions are a bit of a ruse. So as not to bury the lede, the above questions aren't up for grabs. No matter how you personally tried to answer them, the daily business of living involves an infinite number of situations and moments in which we would never engage or attempt to get through were we not guided by an attitude that good, and not harm, would be done to us: that you and they are going to try to do right. "Most of us are tame enough," the philosopher Annette Baier writes, "to take bread out of someone's hand. And we do thereby put ourselves in danger."<sup>3</sup> As if in an attempted answer to those questions some half century before Baier asks them, the nineteenth-century French philosopher, mystic, and influencer of sorts, Simone Weil, asks, "What is it exactly, that prevents me from putting that man's eyes out if I am allowed to do so and if it takes my fancy?" Weil's answer is not about her state of being, her intentions even, her malice or ignorance or depravity. Her answer is not about law, rules, civility, or reason. Rather her answer is because, "his soul would be lacerated by the thought that harm was being done to him."<sup>4</sup> That is very different from hesitance to violate external and

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<sup>3</sup> Baier, Annette, *Postures of the Mind: Essays on Mind and Morals*. (University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1985), P. 131.

<sup>4</sup> Weil, Simone. *An Anthology*. Ed. Sian Miles. (New York: Grove Press 1986), P. 51.



codified rules against such harm, or he took no pleasure in it, or to be indifferent to it, or to fear legal or religious reprimands.

Weil said the following in support of the faith in humanity with which we're grappling (even if we do so reluctantly):

At the bottom of the heart of every human being, from earliest infancy until the tomb, there is something that goes on indubitably expecting, in the teeth of all experiences of crimes committed, suffered, and witnessed, that good and not evil will be done to him. It is this above all else that is sacred in every human being. The good is the only source of the sacred. There is nothing sacred except the good and what pertains to it.<sup>5</sup>

My parents, unlike famous public intellectuals such as Weil, are veteran junior high school teachers turned writers and practitioners: my father turned into a writer and a counselor, and my mother turned into a clinical psychologist. Initially, they were in the business of Doing, of boots on the ground and mud from the trenches of the chaos and beauty that is middle school stuck in their hair. They had to get their hands dirty to find and establish what they needed to about learning and human flourishing and development. They taught to transform, to create circumstances of continuous learning, in live practice and as a practice of learning to *be*, to exist, together. They were not influential scholars, and also my parents, and so I hope that bringing them into the conversation is not off-putting or too unusual. However, they are part of this conversation, both because of my relationship with them and also completely irrespective of my relationship to them. They are expert practitioners and educational developers. They didn't necessarily teach patience, but they do continue to teach endurance and openness to contradictions and faith in resolutions (I'm not confident they were right about the resolutions; that will be up to each one of us). They both taught in junior high for decades in the progressive private school that they helped shape.<sup>6</sup>

The mention of junior high to most educators and parents results in a neck-muscle-clenching, white-eye-showing, fear response. Junior high is

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<sup>5</sup>Ibid.

<sup>6</sup>The Paideia School in Atlanta, Georgia was founded in 1971.

the age during which kids are chaotic masses of conflicting emotions. They exhaust themselves (and us) while fighting through constant growing pains of fumbling to express themselves and to understand others. At that age, we are often embarrassments to our species in our lack of judgment and both our conscious and unconscious habits of cruelty. My parents, because of (not despite) that, are optimists of the most beautiful and dangerous kind. Their experiences in their practices might help us move the needle a bit in this conversation.

Both of my parents,<sup>7</sup> because of their years in the classroom and in their offices with clients and patients, believe in the goodness of even the worst, most damaged and wounded kids and the most septic adults.<sup>8</sup> So do most kids—even teenagers, despite their existentially disturbing online presentations and what they write in the diaries they pretend no one will ever find; despite the plagues of shooting, suicides, and blatant, exhibitionist humiliations and cruelties. So do you. That's what Simone Weil and Annette Baier were saying, too: we have to.

My parents' experiences add nuance to the kind of faith Weil and Baier express. Perhaps it's because, in teaching day in and day out, they dealt with the adolescents so intimately. That is a stage in which we adults, and especially teachers, believe that growth is the currency: the debts of nearly all bad behavior, even cruelty, can be paid for with evidence of development or growth. Unfortunately, in the adult world, that currency loses its value quickly and almost always irrevocably. What teachers like my parents perpetually discover in their work is that most anger, bullying, nastiness, and cruelty are actually disguises for fear, need, and insecurity. Fear, need, and insecurity *in children* are traits that should ignite compassion in us adults, the desire to help, the need to heal and inspire growth, more so than it should activate derision.<sup>9</sup> Why? Because it is our job to help them grow up, and because when growth is the currency, it is much easier to see that what drives the fear, the need, and the insecurity are the desires

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<sup>7</sup> Schein, Martha. *Dialogic Processes and Themes adolescents use in Writing Stories About Personal Conflicts*. A dissertation successfully submitted to The Fielding Institute of psychology. (2001).

<sup>8</sup> Schein, Bernie. *If Holden Caulfield Were in My Classroom*, (Sentient Publications, 2008).

<sup>9</sup> Schein, Martha and Bernie. *Open Classrooms in the Middle School*, (Parker Publishing Company, 1975).

to be loved, to have value, and to be valued—to belong. That is, behind a person's expression of distancing by power, physical or psychological bullying, of vice and ugly are their calls for their longings to be seen, to feel that they belong, that they have value to others, for virtue and beauty. This becomes no less true, but much harder to both see and stomach in adults.

My mother (working with both adults and children in her practice) believes and has established in her practices' outcomes, just as does my father, that behind most anger, ferocity, and pain is accumulated failure at accepting, nurturing, and being nurtured by connections. That is, most acts of aggression are deep expressions of passivity and vulnerability. They are, in both children and adults, screams for connections that will need healing. Whatever else we are, we are not whole creatures, and we need each other. Perhaps there is something to the ancient Greek myth that Zeus split primordial beings that became humans in half to decentralize their power and importance. This is not soft and fuzzy sentimentalism; it's more of an evolutionary, biological, neurological, psychological set of truths describing the kind of creatures we are, in the same way we might describe wolves as pack animals or samurai fish as isolationists. Those like my parents have come to understand and believe that, at heart, displays of aggression, dominance, cruelty, and even manipulative victimhood are usually poorly played gambles to disguise and protect the fragility of the faith that we will be good, that we are good, and to guard our persistent hope that goodness might be done to us (these also being the evolutionary imperative for tribal, social, non-apex, herd creatures).

Again, this is not a *Chicken Soup for the Human Soul* type of book. It's a book about cruelty. I flinched writing the above few paragraphs because they could sound parochial or naïve at best. But no matter how wizened you fancy yourself to be or how salted you in fact are, you are an optimist about the kind of creature not only you are at heart, but also that I am, and that almost every stranger is. Really. Even if you are a psychopath. Even if you are a serial killer. Even if you are clinically depressed and a self-proclaimed pessimistic, nihilistic narcissist, even if you were one of the grinning men jostling to be in the performative, perverse picture in front of the dangling bodies of Abram Smith and Thomas Shipp, men

you just helped torture and lynch.<sup>10</sup> Even if you, many decades removed from the spectacle, wrote about the nauseating cruelty of those lynching trophy photos or report on war crimes from the front lines. I find this truth about us charming, provocative, dangerous, and often tragic. We simply can't help ourselves.

If we indulge and take our time with these lessons, their importance for two slightly different sorts of insights into ourselves emerges: the first is what psychology and philosophy may give us reasons or arguments to believe about our nature (maybe bad is a cover for good? Or good is a flimsy scrim we hang up to disguise). Those can come in handy. The second is what, in fact, we do believe about our nature (most of the time), no matter how unsupported it is by either experience or experts. The second can be more disconcerting, but equally important.

Both kinds of insights, those from the academic disciplines and scholars and those from lived life and practitioners, expose us to ourselves: we are committed to believing that we intend to be good—even when we are mean and even when others are mean to us. Each of the kinds of insights that emerge supports our shared instinct that even when we are terrible, the therapists, the street corner wise men and women, the educators, the writers, the poets, and the friends who help us clean up our messes, believe we didn't mean to be bad. We aren't necessarily good at not being bad, but even when we're angry, even when we lash out, even when we abandon those we should love, we either believe, or act as though we believe, that such infractions are usually caused by some kind of a failure of an attempt to be loving or to be loved. And that may be true and not at all mitigate the badness or the cruelty of an act.

Why is it important to register that we must believe this positive thing about ourselves—that we are straightjacketed into having “faith in humanity”? Unlike many who write about atrocities and cruelties, I am neither going to try to disabuse us of our faith nor try to reinforce it. I'm asking us to acknowledge that we live in this faith, to ask what is at stake

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<sup>10</sup>There are many reports and many attempts to explain the massacre, murder, cruelty-bonding, and the celebration of that via documentation (nearly always white men posing with the trophy of their kill, be that human or nonhuman). I reference the article and the book below because they are two particularly powerful examples. Adam Serwer, *The Atlantic Monthly*, Oct 3, 2018, and Janis Owens, *Hidden in Plain Sight*. Koehler Books; 1st edition (May 27, 2021).

in that faith, and what we can learn from the fact that we must fall into it, leap into it, be drug by it, obey it.

If you say out loud to yourself, “Okay, I do have faith in humanity,” do you feel righteous (against all odds and knowledge of our systemic cruelty and inhumanity)? Do you feel sheepish? Vulnerable or hesitant to admit it? Shameful or queasy that you believe it, still, knowing what you know about what our kind does all the time? Or do you just feel confused? If we accept that, if we accept the faith that we each have it, what does that imply and who does that implicate? That is, are some human beings or just beings, exempt, and why?

Note: it has taken me a long while to admit to myself (much less to anyone else), that we seem to use “faith” in the phrase “faith in humanity,” much the same way as we might use it for religious purposes. It’s easy to take that phrase as metaphor, or a throwaway, whether one is religious or not. But let’s not do that for a minute. I am not a theologian, so I beg pardon making cursory use of parts of those who are, so that we can borrow from their studies and meditations. It would be difficult to be a theologian, religious philosopher, or philosopher of religion without talking at length about the difficulty of talking about the difficulty that is talking about “faith.” There are plenty of differences between how this is pursued, within as well as out of the same faith, but one commonality among many of them is that the virtue of faith is the ability (or necessity) to revel in paradoxes, stilling oneself in the absurd without resignation or flight. Faith is what we aim for when the puzzle pieces are all there but don’t seem to match. We, and cruelty, are anything but neatly sorted puzzles.

This is an important vulnerability to wail against, to attempt to prove wrong, and then, finally, to embrace. And Repeat. Personally, I struggle with an approach-avoidance relationship to positive psychology and positive affirmations or mantras. I am not overly cheery about what it is to be human or what it means to experience life at the hands of a human, whether you are one or not (see Chap. 2 and the exchanges between Coetzee and me). But the truth of the matter is that although anyone old enough to sweat expects to be harmed by one of our own kind in multiple ways at some point in our lives, we also expect that when push comes to shove, we won’t be overly harmed. That’s one scary facet of this

conversation. If we accept that both can be true, we sound a little bipolar or suffering from dissociative disorder. It's not my intention to diagnose myself, you, or us as a species with some organic or psychological construct, but rather to suggest that we might do well if we examine why and how we hold potentially oppositional orientations about ourselves and each other's inner nature. So, assuming our faith in humanity is not just a psychological pathology, let's keep going. Another way of putting it is that all this chatter, discussion, theorizing, questioning, and interrogating may trickle down to some individually confined, decentralized, non-systematizable or thematizable aspect of our being. I don't believe we are made that way, to leave it at that, but I do believe that we are chipping away at the tools we have to distance ourselves from identifying completely as one with a moral source or authority, even if that authority is pure reason.

Who, what, and how we slide on the seesaw of certainty between belief in human benevolence (at heart) and wariness of it depends on our individual peculiarities, what we suffer, can suffer, and can be guilty of. You might be one among us who takes solace in stories such as *Schindler's List*, *It's A Beautiful Life*, or a biopic on Harriet Tubman, Jane Goodall, or news of the young man who stripped in winter and jumped off a bridge to save a woman's dog that had fallen in the icy waters. Or you may be among those who find those narrative and cinematic styles full of manipulative or hokey tropes that dishonor the gravity and raggedness of the reality they are playing off of. You might be one who remembers a time you saw a child, unprovoked, rescue and fight for an injured animal. What we share on our social media platforms—and what we purchase on the best seller lists, both fiction and nonfiction—indicates that many of us are thirsty for and moved by micro acts of unexpected or seemingly extraordinary kindness—perhaps these remind us of a shared tenderness in our souls.

Some are moved by individual acts that go above and beyond. These reinforce our faith that there are real heroes among us and may make us secretly have hope that we, too, could be one such hero for someone, or that someone might be one for us. Others have their faith restored by collective goodness, an eye of goodness in relief against a hurricane of

bad<sup>11</sup>—often, even if we do have a karambit in our pocket or a 0.45 in our holster while we read something like this, we still sit on that bench next to a stranger, or in that café, being poured our coffee by a stranger, and we still seek out and tell stories like those mentioned above to reinforce our faith in the good, in our goodness, which, as discussed, we nearly always call our “humanity.”

The question is not “Is our faith unwarranted?” Faith, by nature, defies that which can be concretely justified. But, am I, as the writer here, being irresponsible to the obvious and relentless truths of our sins, our barbarism, our cruelty? My question to myself is: to burst or not to burst that bubble right now, or rather, to rip the Band-Aid off quickly? First, that assumes I could burst it. But, assuming I could: I think the answer has to be a suspended contradictory both “yes and no.”

Before preparing this chapter, I had the curious fortune of going for lunch with a retired FBI profiler, as previously discussed. He specializes in serial rapists and murderers. He worked at Guantanamo. He trained future profilers at Quantico. He was a consultant on *The Silence of the Lambs* and the TV series *Mind Hunter*. Across from me was a man who is an expert in understanding, to an uncanny degree, human beings who compulsively and habitually do the worst of the worst to other human beings—and usually to particularly vulnerable ones. The overt civility between us was soothing to us both, I think. He takes a sip; I take a sip. I take a bite; he takes a bite. He puts his napkin down, then I adjust mine. I feign that I don’t know what to ask him with what I hope is a slight quiver to make my insecurity sound authentic and enables me to avoid the awkward honesty that I really do want to interrogate him. He honors my performance, as if it is convincing, though both he and I know it is not really. At the end of the conversation, he asks if he was helpful, because he wants to make sure, he says (and I believe he is very sincere), that he was helpful. It’s performative civility. But we both have faith—exposed to each other because of what we each do—that neither of us will harm the other. And that the drunk group of recent graduates at the next table will not knife each other, that none of them is carrying a gun and

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<sup>11</sup> Hallie, Phillip. *The Paradox of Cruelty*, First Edition. (Wesleyan University Press, Middletown, CT, 1969).

plans to unleash a hidden pent-up rage right then and there. My new friend and I comment on that out loud, agree on the unlikely possibility based on the insular and happy-go-lucky interactions of the other table. We clink our glasses. The question remains for each of us: why do we believe that? Why do they, those at the other table, not seem to wonder about *us*? Neither he nor I had a satisfying answer. What we did have was the shared truth and reality of the paradox we were and are in—and the desire to see what the mirror says. After lunch, he offered to drive me home. I hopped in what was still mostly a stranger's—and a forensic psychologist specializing in violent and sexual crimes—car, grateful for the conversation and the ride. And as I clicked my seatbelt, I was wondering if he was wondering if I was wondering if it would be appropriate or not to walk me to my door. What would be the unconscious signal that says I am indifferent, but not in a cold way? He chose not to, but rather to wait in the driveway for my husband to open the door.

Unlike the casual and ubiquitous kind of story above, here is a story of demonstrably robust faith in humanity, performative heroism, and selflessness associated with humanity. During the Shoah, there was a village in France's Haute-Loire called Le Chambon. It was a small, poor, village of around three thousand people primarily of the Huguenot faith (a minority Calvinist sect). Between 1940 and the end of the war, the people in that village, under the leadership of a fickle and often bad-tempered minister, saved approximately six thousand Jews, mostly children whose parents had been killed by Nazis. The reasons why this community bound together and took in so many, under such incomprehensibly dangerous circumstances and with few resources of their own, are both complicated and speculative. Stories such as these lead us to ask a question we ordinarily don't ask—not why people do bad things, but why we often risk ourselves to do what we think is good; why we do good things when it is clearly not to our material advantage, and in this case, very few will ever know about the incident, much less about the heroes and moment-by-moment investments in “humanity” involved. Both questions, why we do bad things and why we do good ones, are equally odd, but they are odd in different ways. When your child slaps his little sister and laughs as she cries in distress, you might ask him in a scolding tone, “Peter, why



would you do that?” However, when he reaches over to hold her hand on the sofa during the scary part of the movie, you probably notice; your heart warms a little, but also you probably *don't* ask him, “Peter, why did you do that?” And if you did, little Peter would likely look up at you, perplexed that you would not already know. Why the difference?

Those like the philosopher Philip Hallie, who also belongs to one of our small tribe obsessed with understanding cruelty, have spent much effort contemplating answers to the first sort of question, especially when discussing the events of Le Chambon. But Hallie points out something else that's interesting: there were many people and other communities who “saved” the persecuted refugees during that war. Geneva was one such state. Hallie uses Le Chambon to emphasize that saving people from death and caring for them until they were old enough and safe enough to leave, halving their last egg of the day for years on end with them, was more than saving: it was the *opposite* of cruelty, according to him. Not every attempt at refuge was so intimate, and this makes Le Chambon different for Hallie.

According to him, as demonstrated by those in Le Chambon, “hospitality” is the opposite of cruelty.<sup>12</sup> We will get back to thoughts like his. “We're all Firefly Kings and Queens” because we need to help each other think through thoughts like his, thoughts contrary to those like his, and our own. I will not argue against the intention of Hallie's claim because I imagine there are as many responses and antidotes to cruelty as there are ways of being cruel, but I will take issue with the idea that hospitality is cruelty's direct opposite or it's definitive opposite. For now, though, it should agitate something in us; it should make us think more.

I've become, as mentioned, the sort who is broken down by micro-instances of unexpected humanity, “soft” to some. Heroes like Schindler, like the villagers of the Le Chambon, are incredible contrasts to Kitty Genovese's bystanders, Dr. Mengele and Dr. Seligman's acts of cruelty. No matter their lack of fanfair, or because of its absence, they seem sometimes to be grand and out of reach to me. And so, my conversation with Coetzee continued:

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<sup>12</sup> Hallie, Phillip. *From Cruelty to Goodness*. Accessed on 3/4/2021: <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.2307/3561320>.

Monday, September 23, 2020

Dear John,

All right, again, my nearly sincere apologies for continuing to bother you.

In what I'm doing with this work, what we seem to not know, and why we don't know what we don't know, is reason for writing it. That is, I'm offering a few definitions for what they're worth, my thoughts of pre-digested work, and so on but I am not offering an answer. That would be stupid and silly—that is, I have the job of uncovering holes, mysteries and so on that have been covered up. This is not unusual work. But my former agent and the potential publishers want answers, solutions. Of course, I don't have those.

For whatever reason—whether it's the subject matter itself, me, how I'm approaching it—people are so desperate for the “money shot.” And they say so (quite explicitly and with that phrase—it is fun being female in this line of work). They want the answer. Where is the answer? I'm burying the lede, and so forth.

The point, to me, is that we haven't got one yet and we don't even know that.

I find that fact actually hopeful...it means there are spaces to discover and move in that we haven't yet. That is, there might be hope of some kind.

Have you any advice for me on how to seduce people into the idea that the unknown is the point—is a useful point? When teaching in a class, I have the authority and power to force students into accepting that fact. As an author, I am at the mercy of people who want the money shot.

The above, without question, is an idiotic question without more specificity. I do sincerely apologize for that. I wish I had it better articulated, but I don't, yet.

If what I've said at least makes sense, that would be good. If it doesn't, then I've got more work to do to even begin to ask what I'm trying to ask. So, does my concern register, or are you tucking your chin to the right, clenching jaws slightly, and going, “I have no idea what she's asking?” And if it's that, may I try again?

As ever,

MS

He responds with the sympathy that it is not possible to fix, or “rescue” me from this situation. But he does encourage the thought, carried

throughout this book, that we need to resolve the conversation with a serious look at ourselves and our place in the world—and how we might develop a better relationship with that (<http://maggieschein.com/coetzee-and-schein/>).

Dear John,

I don't intend to end on helplessness and hopelessness...but, still, nor do I end with a solution. I have the endurance and need to do this because part of me does still believe that if we can acknowledge the few bits about the kind of creature we are that are valuable—which involve profound and lifelong ignorance and the capacity to perceive better, but never fully—then there IS hope. Not resolution, but resolutions, potentials...

People do still stop traffic in their gas-guzzling SUVs to escort geese and their goslings cross the street during rush hour traffic across Lake Shore Drive in Chicago, IL—then they go get breakfast at Kentucky Fried Chicken. Or, they think they do well by relocating a Box Turtle from the street ignorant that it will starve to death and fail to mate if it is turned around or moved more than a mile from its home. Still, there is hope in the fact that the person who wants to rescue the turtle could, if he only knew what box turtles need and are, be a good human. But we, in our own ways, make the same mistake in our best efforts. So, we do make good efforts.

So, if I hear you correctly, I need to make sure the pathway away from a distinct solution needs to be laid such that there is no way of un-paving it...that is, care, logic, and a dose of stoicism?

Thank you as always,

MS

We've all seen inspirational memes and quotes that celebrate the sentiment to which we've already devoted significant space: that we, at least as individuals, are above the cruelty and savagery of the natural world—by virtue of reason or by divinity, as previously discussed. There are also the motivational ones that challenge us, saying we have a choice of one or the other. There are those that say yes, we are in it, but also above it, as stewards; there are those who believe the natural world is purer and more beautiful than we are, and we must earn our place in it—by acts of

goodwill, by sacrifice, by creating beauty, or reparation—or, as children, must learn from it. And, of course, there are plenty we've seen who mock any wisp of romanticism with ruthless and often a sort of schadenfreude effervescence born of souring. This chapter and the previous ones are by no means an attempt to deal with these issues comprehensively. Many others have participated in this effort. The purpose is to cockeye our perspective: to see what happens when we begin by acknowledging that we have anxiety about this (Chap. 2), exploring how we attempt to address that anxiety (Chap. 4), and to then acknowledge that we haven't got a choice but to have faith (this chapter), and then identify what moral commitments and what faiths that implies we believe in. Again, we won't get through all that together here, but it is a start.

There are many reasons humanity is special, whether or not that's because we are superior, inferior, or just different. We've been trying to understand this by telling ourselves stories about why and how since the beginning of telling stories. From campfires on the plains explaining our place in the natural order, Plato's cave, the Garden of Eden, to the Bhagavad Gita, we've been trying to understand some basic and yet deeply complicated truth of our nature—which, if I could articulate off the cuff, obviously, there wouldn't be a need to write a whole book and it wouldn't have been so complicated a truth after all. It is a very complicated truth (or maybe truths), though. And it, or they, are ours.

I want to understand this. And though I try to be thorough, I can also be impatient while I search for what I am after. I tackled this by plowing through all the genres of stories—the origin of humanity stories, and the origins of morality stories I could think of. I devoured stories about why being human matters, how we tell stories about why we are different because these are not just origin *stories* of the creation of human beings, they are also origin *explanations* of *humanity*, of our value in the world, of how we managed to land ourselves in the moral domain, and why we deserve that status (whether that's a punishment, a responsibility, or a privilege depends on one's world view).

When you are at a dinner party and one friend says, after enough libation to remember it's still a valid, unanswered, and convoluted question

on the adulted playground, “Well, what does make us different from beasts and why should we be held responsible for what someone else considers wrong?” What do you say? How many options could I arm myself with?

What I found in my search, as outlined in Chap. 4, is that most of our options can be undone with relative swiftness and discomfiting ease. This journey of realizations became distressing not just to me, but also to my students, who suffered me during my excavations in story, and who, probably not unlike the readers of this, were more eager for answers than a tangled unraveling. But that’s the rabbit hole we are spiraling down. If we’re honest here, the spiral down is slick and we can’t *un*-sand it.

So, after you have had a successful day of arranging the cattle cars, of instructing the SS soldiers in when and how to enforce order in the death camp population and how to choose who gets gassed first and who gets to die with whom and where and how the bones will pile up and crunch against one another (and if it matters if some are still breathing when they are heaped in the mass grave), your pet canary hears you come in—those black steel toe boots aren’t delicate, you know. The canary clicks his tiny delicate, golden fluffed foot, opens one eye with what is clearly annoyance, lets out a sharp peep, and you, you hear that and you realize you have disturbed his peace, and so you tuck in the corners of his cage-hood, and you remind your wife and child that the canary needs his rest. You worry for the delicate canary, but not for the skin, blood, eye-less and leg-less screams, and bones of the children you helped silence that day. What is important about you? It might be your goodness. It might be your vulnerability, your imperfection. It might be some combination of those, that’s true. But it can’t only be those, as we have seen.

Here is my point: we’ve spent this long establishing that we exist in a paradox of strained hope: we are not good. We must expect others to be good. We think we are good, most of the time. We hold a distinction between us and inhuman monsters, or between us and beasts. We can only be inhuman if we are human. We are learning creatures. We make other creatures (human and not) suffer for our learning, suffer for our experiences and needs. We are good. Mostly. Except that we aren’t. But we are moral agents. Except when we betray the rules of engagement. Do we know the rules of engagement?

We must talk more about what it might mean to be human. So, next, we will dig deeper and try to see what is on that ocean floor, what tectonic structures may be shifting under the ordinary heroes and villains that protagonize our story of how being human matters. We know that without a good story, reason, empathy, and divinity probably won't do the work we want them to. To rely on the famous Frenchman Montaigne again, "That I do not believe, nor what others have said, that knowledge is the mother of all virtue, and that all vice is produced by ignorance. If that is true, it is subject to a long interpretation."<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Montaigne, Michel de. "Apology for Raymond Sebond." *The Complete Essays of Montaigne*. Trans. Donald Frame. (Stanford University Press, 1965), P. 319.



# 7

## What's the Difference Between a Rutabaga and a Pig?

A dog starved at his master's gate: Predicts the ruin of the state. A horse  
misused upon the road Calls to heaven for human blood.

—William Blake<sup>1</sup>

For the plant, the entire world is a plant, for us, it is a human being.

—Friedrich Nietzsche<sup>2</sup>

In defense of the indifference of the animal world as contrasted with the human world, which is grounded in the idea that humans have a certain capacity for self-reflection that animals do not, which is based in a capacity to reason, that, in the end, makes us, or grants us the chance to be, superior to nonhumans, the philosopher Korsgaard says:

the natural world exists completely independently of our own interests; that it is the work of mechanical forces that operate with no regard for us or for the other animals; that is a world in which there is no guarantee that

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<sup>1</sup> Blake, William. *Auguries of the Innocents*. Copy 1, c. 1807, Morgan Library and Museum.

<sup>2</sup> Nietzsche, Friedrich. *The Complete Works of Nietzsche. Unpublished Writings from the period of Unfashionable Observations*. Trans. And Afterword, Gray. Richard, T. (Stanford University Press. Stanford, CA. 1995). P. 51.

things will turn out for ourselves or other human beings or for other animals or for life itself. This grasp of the independence of the natural world from our interests or any interests is absolutely essential for achieving a scientific outlook on the world—as for the other animals, they cannot view the world scientifically—in one way, we might think they are lucky. Because they do not experience themselves as living in an indifferent world of mechanical forces, they are more at home in the world, even if it is not a very happy home.<sup>3</sup>

In this moment, and it is one of very few, Korsgaard seems to align with thinkers like John Gray, who writes in *Feline Philosophy: Cats and the meaning of Life*<sup>4</sup>:

In regard to diversion, humans and cats are at opposite poles. Not having formed an image of themselves, cats do not need to divert themselves from the fact they will someday cease to exist.<sup>5</sup> As a consequence, they live without the fear of time passing too quickly or too slowly. When cats are not hunting or mating, eating or playing, they sleep. There is no inner anguish that forces them into constant activity...A time may come when they know they are about to die, but they do not spend their lives dreading its arrival.

NOTE: It may not *seem* to Gray that there is such an experience of “time” for felines, but how a cat experiences its time internally, dreading or not-dreading something, anticipating or not anticipating something, seems like a far cry from a declaration we should be prepared to defend. This is also a good example of how we simply trust that our calculations, our subjective interpretation of a particular mew or meow expresses what we assume it does. Rather presumptuous and dangerous, I’d say. Any cat parent will tell you their cats dread (the vet, say), anticipate (the vet, say, or when it is near feeding time), and so on. That is certainly what it looks like to us: the

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<sup>3</sup>Korsgaard, Christine. *Fellow Creatures: Kantian Ethics and Our Duties to Animals*, (Oxford University Press, 2018). Published to Oxford Scholarship Online: May 2018.

<sup>4</sup>Gray, John. *Feline Philosophy: Cats and the Meaning of life*, (Farrar Straus and Giroux, New York, 2020), P. 34.

<sup>5</sup>This claim is scientifically, for human standards, quite opaque and unclear. See articles such as this: Accessed via Chrome on 5/15/22: <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/the-inner-life-of-cats/>.



splayed legs, claws on circular saw mode, hissing fits to avoid the dreaded car or crate to the vet—it is like a child fighting going into school. How could we mistake that for anything other than dread? For another example, and perhaps one that is more immediately accessible and that I use frequently and have already used here: what about a dog who runs up to you with his tail wagging? That means, like a human waving and happy, the dog is also happy to see you, right? That is how it seems and feels---unless you have studied dog behavior and psychology by living with and observing both wild and domesticated canines to contextualize their communications. It turns out, no matter how excited you feel about a bounding dog running towards you with a vibrating lighting-rod-tail, it is, in general, not a good communication to react excitedly to. Counter-intuitive, but it really shouldn't be. There is more to say about the real and simply unfortunate dangers and cruelties that often stem from this kind of unconscious or even well-meaning presumption.<sup>6</sup>

There is another moment in which the two kinds of thinking between Gray and Korsgaard about human belonging and likeness in the world with other creatures differ significantly from what we want from this conversation. In the two excerpts provided above, a certain indifference that lends the creature a sense of beingness-that-is-belongingness is shared. One major difference between the two thinkers, and one that is important to me, is that in one kind of thinking, that such as Korsgaard's indifference is due to lack of reason. In the other kind of thinking, that such as Coetzee's (often) and Gray's, it is simply indifference due to a creature having an innate sense of being what they are, a sense of wholeness with the world, and what they lack for their significance is not reason, but rather an absence of anxiety about belonging and being—something we humans seem to be riddled with, or according to

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<sup>6</sup> This line of thoughts will be further explored and developed in a companion book to this one that is tentatively titled *The Lonely Species: Us, Cruelty, and Troubling our Moral Waters*, as well as in the conversation forum on my website. In both, there will be a section dedicated to interviews with, among other kind of experts of perception, awareness, and adaptiveness, an animal behaviorist who discusses practices of humility, observation, and respect for the internal integrity of various kinds of nonhumans, and so on. These are the sorts of sensual and perceptual facets that I think are important to begin to fold into our understanding of human belonging in the world and the relationship between those aspects of our being and our understanding of the moral valence of being human.

those like Gray (and myself), even born with, if not defined by: “In humans” he says, “discontent in[their] nature seems to be natural.”<sup>7</sup>

Why does being human matter for being moral, immoral, or amoral? Why is that our domain? We have been ricocheting off of this tricky, quick-footed question from multiple angles. Looking at us through the lens of cruelty offers us this chance. From these angles, some of the vantage points we have teetered on are anxieties about understanding our place in nature; our belongingness anywhere; a persistent but severely threadbare and tangled “faith” in “humanity,” a limping sense of confusion from attempts to explain our moral relevance by pointing to our possession of traits like reason or divinity; and a sense of helplessness to explain the core of humanity, what kind of creature we are, which should incrementally unveil itself if we understand its opposite, inhumanity.

Nearing the end of these rounds, we find ourselves in a bit of a hands-in-the-air moment of forced faith. We acknowledge that we know things about ourselves that are against the beliefs about ourselves that we often hold and tout as obviously rational, justifiable, and “knowable”; and we believe things about each other and ourselves, despite rational justifications, events, and practices, that appear to contradict those beliefs. And how do we, as Cavell asks, “learn that what we need is not more knowledge but the willingness to forgo knowing?”<sup>8</sup>

Inhumanity includes acts of cruelty (but not necessarily the other way around). That is for our purposes here, even before we have defined what we don’t yet know and therefore haven’t nailed down bits to agree or disagree on fully, let’s agree that the category of actions that might reasonably be called “inhuman” or demonstrating “inhumanity” is a larger category than those that count as “cruel.” In other words, something might be cruel, but not reach the threshold of inhumanity (e.g., Grandma’s passive aggressive dig at Christmas might be sharp enough to say it was “cruel” but it counts as all too human, as Nietzsche might say, not as “inhuman”). If the fact that we can be inhuman makes us different from other kinds of creatures who might be bad specimens of their kind but

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<sup>7</sup>Gray, John. *Feline Philosophy: Cats and the Meaning of Life*, (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York). 2020.

<sup>8</sup>Cavell, Stanley. *Must We Mean What We Say?* (Cambridge University Press, UK, 1976), P. 324.

who are not inversions or perversions of some important aspect about what their nature is, then what makes that so? How can we be “in” (by which we also mean, I think, “un”) what we are, i.e., human? That the categories of “humanity” and “inhumanity” offer the heights and depths of our morality or immorality shows that we have a moral investment when we think about an answer to the question: “What *are* we, morally speaking?” Tell me what a canine is in the moral domain? How about something simple and presumably non-sentient, like a rutabaga? How about the Antarctic glaciers? What is the difference? This insistence on defining ourselves by our differences from the rest of nature (for better or worse, but usually to establish our superiority or supplication) has been going on since long before Plutarch and Plato, and, of course, across the globe. And perhaps we might get a better, or at least different, grip on what is at hand by shifting the discussion from what is special about us to what is special about the creatures, or those, or that, who can *suffer* cruelty at our hands.

When we talk about cruelty, no matter where the conversation begins, whether with torture, school lunchroom bullying, child abuse, or con games, the talk inevitably cascades into talk about those who are often considered the most vulnerable (or the least vulnerable, depending on one's moral sensitivities): nonmoral agents, nonhumans—unless we are talking about possible moral agents like fetuses and babies, who, ironically, are often the most vigorously voiced for, despite having none of the qualities of at a least a secular and, in some cases religious, moral agent or subject.

The sparring escalates with the inevitable introduction of animals other than us. Before too long, we end up debating the sentience of vegetables or plant life. Case in point, despite most people's consideration that that is absurd, the researcher Matt Soniak, to paraphrase, notes that the “fresh smell of grass” one might enjoy when mowing the lawn is actually that of the grass “trying to defend itself.”<sup>9</sup> Perhaps Nietzsche was onto something (without electronic sensors set up to record frequencies humans can't hear). The grass' self-defense is not exactly personification.

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<sup>9</sup> Accessed via Chrome on 1/2/2021: <https://www.mentalfloss.com/article/30573/what-causes-fresh-cut-grass-smell>.

It is not exactly anthropomorphism. It is not, given what we now know about plant communication through painstaking and very slow science—as opposed to had we used our other senses for discovery—that they do communicate. It is not absurd. If they didn't have defenses and didn't use them, the fact is, they wouldn't be here, and my backyard would not resemble a Jurassic-era half acre. I doubt they shout to each other with tiny swords drawn, “The mower is coming! The mower is coming!” That is our language. That doesn't mean they don't have theirs or that, despite our differences, both they and we participate in this complicated practice called “communication” and all that entails.

After a while, and in brutishness born from frustration, I can confidently sum it by saying we go from friends to foes to fetuses to ferns very quickly. Trees do communicate,<sup>10</sup> and, apparently, carrots make noises that can be equated to a distress call when they are pulled from the ground and then chewed.<sup>11</sup>

Surely there are glaring differences between something clearly sentient (“clearly” to whom?), such as a human child, and something “merely” alive, like a cut flower; both differ from something that belongs in neither category, like a metal knife or a paper cup—or depending on your definition of “life” perhaps the cut flower might be cause for a page in a dissertation. Life and not-life seem about as cut and dry as possible. Maybe we are not so sure-footed here. We've come now to be able to provide answers to the question of what we mean by “thing”—that which can be neither a subject nor a perpetrator of moral concern, and that what falls in that category might conflict with what we think we know we mean by “sentience” itself: what it means to have beingness, that amorphous, mysterious thing—sentience, subjectivity—the attribution of which is how we often explain what or who matters (and the difference between a “who” and a “what”), how, and why. Right?

Debates about sentience, about being a perceiving, sensory, sentient being, are usually relegated to the domains of philosophy, neuroscience, psychology, theology, artificial intelligence conferences, and so on, mostly

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<sup>10</sup> Accessed on 3/4/2022: <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/science-nature/the-whispering-trees-180968084/>.

<sup>11</sup> Accessed on 3/4/2022: <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/sciencetech/article-2677858/Bad-news-vegetarians-Plants-hear-eaten.html>.

shaded by headiness, unpalatable and unnecessary jargon, sentences that appear to be constructed sincerely, but which also appear to be impenetrable. But asking *how we can explain and justify* our perceptions, which is the purview of those in cloaked and heady domains, is different from asking *what our more common and deployed shared perceptions are*.

In fact, I think many disciplinary or scholarly questions about “sentience” are, in fact, about how we “justify,” “prove,” or “reason” about sentience, as opposed to how we actually *perceive* sentience. But we *perceive* sentience all the time: think about the difference in our reactions to throwing a cup from the window of a moving car versus throwing a kitten. Our perception of sentience is largely involuntary, reactive, or instinctual. Except... philosophers often make it seem problematic, tangled, savage. At the most basic level, anything that can feel has sentience: butterflies do things (respond and can be responded to, seek the necessary, avoid pain, ignore that to which they are not relevant, and so on) that paper cups don't.<sup>12</sup> Philosophers and psychologists can, and often do, complicate this simple distinction by adding in things such as “subjectivity,” “subject-hood”—what those things are, who has them, and who or what doesn't have them. And therefore, who counts as a moral subject (potential victim) or moral agent (responsible). Or a “who,” or a “what.”

Privileging how we *justify* or rationalize what we consider “sentient” neglects that our own experience of sentience, our understanding of what we are justifying, is inextricably bound with how we perceive sentience. Tautological? If one prefers that description to simply saying I'm not sure we can escape ourselves on this one, then I think so, but still true; to pretend otherwise takes us each out of the equation, and doing that is, frankly, often a way of kicking the can about what we already know, even if we know that knowing is multifaceted fun house of mirrors. Claiming that such mysterious elements of being (having “beingness” or being sentient) are the sole purview of siloed disciplines who pride themselves on making clean distinctions and proofs, as opposed to holistic thoughts, are often flash-bang distractions in cases like these—and often not very clever

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<sup>12</sup>As mentioned previously, not surprisingly, the etymology of “sentient” is related to the Latin “sentire” and “sensus,” to perceive and to sense, respectively.

ones. They, those kinds of claims, are often products of the disciplines forged in ways quite disconnected from how we naturally behave and experience. We treasure cats, dogs, and even mice as pets, and yet have had no problem nailing them alive, spread eagle to a board, like Christ on the cross, dissecting their still pumping hearts in the public square, to “teach” and “learn” about how they work and that they have internal organs like us. They feel pain, even ours, and that is why we can love them and feel their love in return. That we need to see their live beating heart flutter its last flutter and hear their screams against the justifications provided by “reason” to “scientific validity and proof” that this is so—they are alive! They feel! Who knew?! —is absurd. It is not reason so much that is the culprit; it is how we use it and what that reveals about us.

Philosophers like Cora Diamond, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Stanley Cavell (and so many others) struggle in their distinct ways, and for very different purposes, with the issues that claw each other and bicker in this bucket. Our push for certainty, to know, to prove, comes from a necessary and good place: that innate drive to learn. The problems start to bubble up when we don't know that we begin with a fundamental deficit that, by our nature, will never be balanced, and are doomed to what is likely an infinitely ongoing engagement. To identify our deficit most bluntly: our understanding of “knowing.” That is, not only may we not know what we may not know but also one of the things we may be a little trigger-happy about assuming we know is what the orbital concepts around knowing are and what work we expect it and them to do. By “work” here I don't just mean something that satisfies a formula for validity or truth—will it get us from A to C—but also the more ineffable, amorphous, sensory work we invest in them for. The engagement is indefinite, I will venture but not argue for, not just because there is, as they say, “always more to learn,” but also because that is one of the fundamental mechanisms of being in the world (which is kind of alluded to in both Gray and Korsgaard's works). That is, we can't help it. And yet, we still have an intellectual, emotional, psychological, and, I would say, as importantly—a social—fantasy of completion. As a result, we can be blunt, brutal, rudimentary instruments.

I began this book with a dedication to a fictional character, the Little Prince, for many reasons. One of those is that, and I will try not to do it too much injustice by trying too hard to explain it, as the Little Prince himself is frequently quoted as having said, “It is only with the heart that one can see rightly.”<sup>13</sup> As with the Little Prince and his sheep in his box, it is most important that his perfect sheep is the one he cannot see and so can only imagine that “it is perfect!” We will resume a discussion about this in detail in Chap. 9—our respect for the impenetrability of another is tethered to our capacity to be morally relevant (moral agents, in the language of philosophy and law). Consequently, morality is, to its surprise, handcuffed to the unexpected, the unsee-insideable boxes and balloons of imagination. How imagination plays into this is not simple, and we will let the layers develop slowly. For now, this is very different from the demand for an explicit, exposed, linear world of argument and impeccable reasoning. “Ethics bowls,” “Ethics Competitions,” “Compliance Tests,” “Sensitivity Training,” legal reasoning, even therapy and/or punishment or discipline (Why do you think you/he/she/they did it? Can you explain yourself? Is she competent to stand trial? What are the justifications she is not?) are interesting exercises and good practices in reasoning and for a certain kind of civil interaction,<sup>14</sup> but how related are they to our moral mattering in real life? And what kinds of things might we count as displaying “moral mattering”? And how would we know? Don’t anticipate an answer here. I launch into the following to illustrate some of the approaches and some of the snares that track quite heavily in the worlds of philosophy, philosophy of mind, moral psychology, and psychology. These are questions that gravitate around other intimidating concepts such as public/private, personal/social, internal/external, shared

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<sup>13</sup> Saint-Exupéry, Antoine de. *The Little Prince*. Trans. Katherine Woods. Harcourt Brace and Company. (New York, 1971).

<sup>14</sup> Ethics Bowls and similar competitions, tests, and trainings rely explicitly on rational, logic-based arguments, the ability to create them, acquire the rules, recall and apply them, and so on. The assessment of performance is usually not explicitly based on the goodness or badness of the events in question, the moral quality of the actions being defended or proposed, a particular moral orientation being proposed, but rather on the quality of the argument. For more about the Ethics Bowl and educational tools like Ethics Unwrapped, please see the websites for the Association for Practical and Professional Ethics (APPE) at <https://www.appe-ethics.org/about-ethics-bowl>, and for Ethics Unwrapped on the University of Texas’ website at <https://ethicsunwrapped.utexas.edu/>, respectively. Accessed via Chrome on 7/9/23.

(shareable)/not-shared (shareable), or objective/subjective and real/imaginary, real/unreal. *The Velveteen Rabbit*<sup>15</sup> aside, that last is especially true now that our technology has at least caused stress fractures in the holy barricade between our sentience, my sentience, and, well, sentience or its sentience.

A junior philosophy student, or someone who reads too many memes and quotes on the internet, has at least heard of Wittgenstein's "Beetle in the Box" thought experiment. To radically oversimplify, it challenges the idea so delicately and valuably promoted by the Little Prince's perfect, but unseeable by anyone but him, sheep in a box, of what sensations can be called, how we can know, or what the grammar is for a private experience such as pain, ecstasy, or your own personal sheep in a box that only you can see. Questions that arise from disciplines and subdisciplines that are concerned with "theories of mind," who might wonder how one person can know another's, or understand another's being totally, might include what empathy is, is it anything at all, is it any single thing? What is it not? How to talk about it at all without either betraying one's own intimate feelings about it (most of us do think we are empathetic) or be called either irrational or sociopathic? These are valid concerns, and they highlight that we really don't quite know what work we need the concept of "empathy" to do, either.

Here's an excerpt from Wittgenstein:

If I say of myself that it is only from my own case that I know what the word "pain" means—must I not say the same of other people too? And how can I generalize the one case irresponsibly?

Now someone tells me he knows what pain his only from his own case!—Suppose everyone had a box with something in it: we call it a "beetle." No one can look into anyone else's box, and everyone says they know what a beetle is only by looking at his beetle.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Williams, Margery. *The Velveteen Rabbit*. Doubleday; Reissue edition (January 1, 1991). The moral of this rather deep children's story, as delivered by the wise, stuffed, toy rabbit, is that to be Real is to be loved by child. "Real...It's a thing that happens to you. When a child loves you for a long, long time, not just to play with, but REALLY loves you, then you become real." One point for us and others is the manifold aspects of how reality is created and sustained and what we look for as its proof.

<sup>16</sup> Wittgenstein, Ludwig. *Philosophical Investigations*. Third Ed. Trans. G.E.M. Anscombe. (Prentice Hall, Englewood Cliffs, NJ, 2009), P.100.



Of Wittgenstein's insistence, Philippa Foot says, "he insists that 'pain' is not the name of a private object which each person knows only in his own case."<sup>17</sup> This is relevant for us in terms of what we can and can't know of another, and why or how and why not, when not. It is relevant to Paul Bloom's rejection of most understandings of empathy as feeling-with or overemotionalized identification, or presumption of intimacy. It is relevant to established practices we have in for ethical regulations in experimentation in labs of all sorts; it is relevant to how we respond to causing pain, to respond as the victim of pain caused by another; to how we even establish a system of responses and responsibility to others.

Foot continues, "What Wittgenstein is denying here is that the meaning of the word 'pain' is determined even in part by a connexion set up by private ostensive between the word and something it stands for, as the word 'red' is connected, but publicly, with red things. To construe the language of pain in this model of object and designation is to construe it as being like e.g. the language of colours in a way that it is not."<sup>18</sup> These lines of thoughts and their trailers are important and are relevant to who and what counts as a victim or an agent of a moral violation, and, therefore, of a perpetrator of cruelty as well. An often overlooked essay by Cora Diamond, who is often read when studying analytic philosophy and is a master of logic, language, and argument, expresses her concern for where nonhumans intrude into our conversations. In her essays on this, the rational, which is supposed to stand for "objective," "shared" conversation, comes under scrutiny—it seems to be analogous to the red object in the world we can all see (assuming we aren't color-blind) to which Foot refers. That is one of the important aspects of ethics, of moral-agent status: if based in reason, then the assumption is morality can hang on this object in the world and its designation; it can be "objective." This hope, this desire to get all the way to the internal existence of another to get past that they are, as Gaita says, "limits to our wills," is born because, if true, what we are talking about could be shared: we could see each other's "beetles!" I could tell if you are essentially good or bad, and my

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<sup>17</sup>Foot, Philippa. "Peacocke on Wittgenstein and Experience." *The Philosophical Quarterly*, Vol. 33 No. 131.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid.

neighbor could confirm my findings. And we would need then to also point in the world to what good is, what bad is, and so on.

In an effort that is considered in “conversation” with other scholars who care about nonhuman welfare, moral psychology, and ethics in general, Diamond wrote an essay provocatively titled “Anything But Argument?”<sup>19</sup> Some points in it are the kind I think are conventionally scholarly, are necessary in the sequestered vaults of academia, but for the sacrificial uses of them I want to make, I want the support from her work when she argues that sometimes, *sometimes*, and *sometimes about most important things*, we have to rely on what is, as she titles it, “Beyond Argument.” That is, no matters suitable to the swinging and clanking of rhetorical swords. We have, according to this devotee to logic, language, and rationality, in morality, in our care about each other, a basis for moral significance that sometimes *can't be justified, argued for, or proven*. Reason, provability, may not be what makes something right, and our ability to make pretty reason may not make it right, persuasive, or compelling.

In graduate school, my cohort of philosophy students and I worked for hours into the wee mornings, as grad students are wont to do. We talked with each other so long, the coffee in the pot would become so evaporated and strong a spoon would stand up in it. We had too much scotch with our professors at two in the morning, testing each other and ourselves, as one is wont to do in grad school. Finally, as the only vegetarian in the room, the gauntlet of logic was turned on me to defend my convictions. I was the only one who wouldn't wear leather, who wouldn't even want to pick peperoni off a much needed communal pizza, even though I would take Advil and Aspirin, and therefore, in some way, benefit from the torture of animals (I would wear Revlon, but not use L'Oréal or Gillette—one has to draw the line somewhere). I was pressed over and over for the “why,” about my reasons regarding my views on animal welfare. My cohorts wanted my arguments. They wanted me to prove I was right, to line up the logic like in an elegant poetic syllogism that would move their rational minds and convince their heart of the “rightness” of ways of “The Vegetarian.” Obviously, I am and was a hypocrite. It is easy to be one, or, rather, impossible not to be one. In fact, I would say such

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<sup>19</sup> Diamond, Cora. *The Realistic Spirit. Wittgenstein, Philosophy, and the Mind*. (MIT Press, 1996).

commitments are as much a matter of faith as not, and, as such, subject to the same certain-uncertainties and other paradoxes.

As Gray remarks in a comparison of a kind of being whose integration into the world is not so fraught with some of our cloudy illusions, misdirections, fundamental naivete, neediness, and self-deception, “Much of the history of philosophy consists of the worship of linguistic fictions. Relying on what they can touch, smell, and see, cats are not ruled by words. Philosophy testifies to the frailty of the human mind. Humans philosophize for the same reason they pray.”<sup>20</sup>

We may be praying to have faith (ironically) in the sanctity of the work reason can do in our moral domain, or we may be praying that we can rely on the intimate, personal, private practice that is one of faith in some of our most critical moral orientations and behaviors.

Back to my cohorts and I deliriously trying to study logical arguments for class while also engaging me with teasing forcefulness to argue logically for something that may be a matter of faith, of imagination, of what is in my personal box, perhaps. But with this topic, there isn't the usual mythical land for my friends and I to mentally gather—that place reason, logic, grammar, and meaning are supposed to set up their podiums for us each to speak from behind and be able to understand each other. Again, in some effort to put to bed the demand to prove the difference between a rutabaga and a pig, I finally said to the people I respected most at the time and to the people who taught me to argue till three in the morning before logic finals, “There are some things when thinking about how to be, how to be better, about morality that just are more important than argument. More important than whether I can convince you or produce a compelling argument. I can't. Even if I could produce a beautiful argument for you, I sincerely doubt it would sway you to never eat meat again. It would not convince you or transform you, would it—because your belief that eating meat is good is also a matter of faith, not logic.”

“So, we can't then be wrong by eating a steak?” one of my best friends, challenges.

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<sup>20</sup> Gray, John. *Feline Philosophy: Cats and The Meaning of Life*. (Farrar, Straus and Giroux. New York, 2020).

My response feels inadequate at best. Again, to quote Gray (and narrowly echo Coelho), “The source of philosophy is anxiety.”<sup>21</sup> I wish I had read Coetzee’s *The Lives of Animals* at that point so I could’ve quoted his character, Elizabeth Costello, and in answer to why I don’t eat meat, say as she did, “It’s a matter of saving my own soul,”<sup>22</sup> and about-faced authoritatively and ended the conversation. But that book hadn’t been completed yet. So, all I knew to say was, “I think certain things are matters for argument and others are not. There is no debate about if you are to change your baby’s diaper. You are simply wrong if it is dirty and you don’t. One needn’t have a pretty argument for that.”

Can I prove that? Probably. Should I need to? No. Imagining what my baby feels like, hearing his cries, should inspire my imagination about what the beetle or sheep is in his box, about his immediate need, his helplessness, his feeling already as an infant, not just discomfort, but possibly also a depreciation of something like dignity. If you are the primary caretaker of the said baby, you may even have the cipher to the subtle shifts in tone in the baby’s vocalizations.

To rely on Diamond again:

We develop the capacity to make such judgments through habits of awareness, responsiveness, observation, reflection, and discrimination. That is, we come across all sorts of things which invite emotional response, or invite the taking up of an attitude or a mode of thought—including here, as ‘issuers’ of such invitations, works of literature and philosophy.

In the same piece, she goes on to talk about this more holistic development of our senses of our orientation to our being in the world. Note the emphasis on the importance of engagement, learning, not on proving:

This is a kind of learning to think; it plays an essential role in the education of the emotions and in the development of sensibility. I have spoken of literary and non-literary works which invite us to respond emotionally or to take up some moral attitude view of life, what I need to add is that such

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Coetzee, J. M., and Amy Gutmann. *The lives of animals*, (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2001).

works may include the “invitation” an invitation to just the kind of awareness and critical reflection that I have described.<sup>23</sup>

Diamond, like many others, calls this moral “sensibility.” She says: “Like any judgment worth bothering with, I will call it more than the capacities of the head.”<sup>24</sup>

When I explain, or attempt to justify, how I came to study cruelty, I tell a true story—I don't have an argument for why. For me, it started when I was very young, when reason was a wispy play thing to placate and amuse adults at best and rarely called upon. My parents were walking me to the car to take me to day care one morning, and I found a litter of three-week-old kittens in a garbage bag in the bottom of a trash can set out in front of our house on the morning of trash pickup. My three-year-old self, like most three-year-olds, did not need to read a study on the difference between the bag and the kittens or the kittens and the crumpled-up trash to comprehend that one of those items was different from the others: it needed help to live, and that it was alive apparently needed no proof. It was calling out for help, and the other items were not and did not, nor would they respond to the distress sounds. But I was standing right there, and I could hear it. No matter what I did or didn't do, I was responding. That's where it starts for me.

My cruelty portfolio diversified significantly as life went on, as it does for all of us. It starts for each of us differently. Some, like me, are lucky it didn't start against them or even against their “kind.” Too many are not so fortunate. No matter where we start, nonhumans insert themselves into the conversation at some point. Heads up: as we've already seen more than once, when the subject of nonhuman animals enters any conversation about ethics, it appears to confuse the living daylights out of us, scholars and lay people alike. Our usual moral reasoning go-to's lead us into quite personal contradictions and logical insufficiencies almost instantaneously. Another heads-up that is not news at this point: any time the subject of nonhumans enters a conversation about ethics, a

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<sup>23</sup>Diamond, Cora. *The Realistic Spirit: Wittgenstein, Philosophy, and The Mind*, MIT Press, 1991. P. 306. [http://cognet.mit.edu/sites/default/files/u111/CogNet\\_Complete\\_Booklist.pdf](http://cognet.mit.edu/sites/default/files/u111/CogNet_Complete_Booklist.pdf), P. 303.

<sup>24</sup>Diamond, Cora. *The Realistic Spirit: Wittgenstein, Philosophy, and The Mind*, MIT Press, 1991. [http://cognet.mit.edu/sites/default/files/u111/CogNet\\_Complete\\_Booklist.pdf](http://cognet.mit.edu/sites/default/files/u111/CogNet_Complete_Booklist.pdf), P. 304.

myriad of questions about what it means to be a human being torpedo swarm the field. Therefore, so does significant insecurity for all involved. Ask the Bonobos being tested for life, or one could say, “doing life,” at Yerkes.<sup>25</sup>

Diamond’s essay reminds us:

...the arguments I have given are in a sense quite useless. For if someone takes a view of the relation between human nature and morality from which it follows that only argument can convince, you cannot convince him by examples that convincing *does* not need to go by arguments, nor can you show such a person by examples that assessment of a moral view does not rest on its argumentative elaboration.<sup>26</sup>

Conversations about cruelty bring us to some of the most difficult and central moral dilemmas with turbo speed by bringing into immediate view those who traditionally don’t count as moral agents (those who can’t do it wrong), and who may or may not count as moral subjects or victims (those to whom wrongs don’t really count the same as they do to other kinds of creatures). The antsy line-up in the second category is as familiar as it is viciously and heatedly debated.<sup>27</sup> It is as confused and confusing as our attempts to pin down what makes an act cruel. No surprises here.

Where is the flashing moral line between human and animal? Or, as I have been characterizing it, between human and nonhuman creatures? Where is the line (and what’s it made of?) between a flea’s life, a sea urchin’s, a dog’s, cat’s, horse’s, or an ape’s—how about Happy, the elephant, who passes our bizarrely anthropomorphized-with-a-touch-of-narcissism “mirror test,” or the dolphins and octopuses? How about a fully deformed and, likely to live only hours, human-born baby? A human fetus? The severely mentally disabled? Who counts? This is the question, still, because we keep counting. Nietzsche leads us down the following:

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<sup>25</sup> Accessed via Chrome on 3/4/22: <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/sciencetech/article-2677858/Bad-news-vegetarians-Plants-hear-eaten.html>.

<sup>26</sup> Diamond, Cora. *The Realistic Spirit: Wittgenstein, Philosophy, and The Mind*. MIT Press, 1991. P. 306. [http://cognet.mit.edu/sites/default/files/u111/CogNet\\_Complete\\_Booklist.pdf](http://cognet.mit.edu/sites/default/files/u111/CogNet_Complete_Booklist.pdf).

<sup>27</sup> Coetzee, J. M., and Amy Gutmann. *The lives of animals*. (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2001).

“We can prove what things *are* only by means of a measuring subject placed alongside them. Their properties in themselves are of no concern to us; they matter only in so far as they have an effect on us.

Now, the question is: How did such a measuring being come about?

The plant is also a *measuring being*.”<sup>28</sup>

The famous philosopher Jeremy Bentham gave us a good rule, since all of this is so complicated. We need rules. He said, in contrast to the traditional attempts to prove the extent of a creature's worth in terms of how intellectually valuable or morally important they were in terms of their capacity to reason or in being a child of god, he simplified the challenge by saying: “The question is not can they reason, nor can they talk, but can they suffer?”<sup>29</sup>

That is not the question by which my formula/scaffolding of cruelty is necessarily bound. The understanding of cruelty we are working with as a moral gage here does not just circle around whether or not something can suffer mental or physical pain; it is grounded in the integral commitment to aiming to perceive (holistically) whatever counts as the kind of creature in front of us is, as a kind of being whose flourishing as that of its kind is possible, and if our behavior or interactions impact its flourishing (may or may not be cruel), inhibit its being as a flourishing one of the kinds of creature it is (more likely just bad as opposed to cruel), or perverting what should make it flourish as one of its kind, turning that aspect or capacity or trait against it (always cruel). Of course, in the end, what we see and respond to here is that to which we can be relevant. That is, the potential victim of cruelty is not reduced either to the capacity to suffer itself, nor the absence of suffering, nor simply the potential to suffer, but rather to how we see the experience of that other being reflecting on us—are we relevant to it or not? We are the ones reduced in this reflection. In this fun house of mirrors, we tend to try to concentrate ourselves in an attempt to make ourselves seem to matter more, to increase our potency. And then, I am suggesting, we fail to see our own shadows as they dovetail with our soles on the ground.

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<sup>28</sup>Nietzsche, Friedrich. *The Complete Works of Nietzsche. Unpublished Writings from the period of Unfashionable Observations*. Trans. And Afterword, Gray. Richard, T. (Stanford University Press. Stanford, CA. 1995). P. 50.

<sup>29</sup>Bentham, Jeremy. *Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*. (Clarendon Press, 1823).

Bentham's formulation and his attempt to correct the questions (that are not just of his day but are also still prevalent in ours) is starkly and stridently powerful as well as deceptively demanding of us. We should note that he was not nearly the first in this lineage of changing up the criteria for moral relevance. A corollary question to those like Bentham's, and one to which we will return in more detail in the remaining chapters is: what does it mean to answer his question? What knowledge or perceptive capacities does the creature who can both ask and answer that question need to have, and are we that sort of creature? To quote Plutarch's *Autobulous*:

As for those who foolishly affirm that animals do not feel pleasure or anger or fear or make preparations or remember, but that the bee "as it were" remembers and the swallow "as it were" prepares her nest and the lion "as it were" grows angry and the deer "as it were" is frightened—I don't know what they will do about those who say that beasts do not see or hear but "as it were" hear and see; that they have no cry but "as it were." For these last statements (or so I believe) are no more contrary to plain evidence than those that they have made.<sup>30</sup>

For a contemporary example that eerily echoes Plutarch's from ancient years, see Gaita's chapters "Racism: The Denial of a Common Humanity," and the concluding chapter, in *A Common Humanity*. He speaks of a character named "M." She does not believe she is racist. In speaking of Vietnamese mothers who have lost their children and family members to violence and war, she says dismissively, according to him, "They can just have more." His point, I take it, is that there is what he calls a "soul-blindness" to the depth of the Vietnamese women's interiority for M. To her, they feel "as it were." They lose their children in quotation marks, whereas "M" genuinely, more deeply, more humanly, can lose them for *real*. Gaita brilliantly connects Wittgenstein's thoughts on pain, to past and current denials of the "fullness of another's being"—whether human,

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<sup>30</sup> Plutarch. *Moralia*. Trans. Cherniss and C. Hembold. (Harvard University Press, 1957). P. 335.



nonhuman, or in sorting through those very determinations and judgments of kind and category.<sup>31</sup>

So, which fools are we? To what foolishness or soul-blindness have we succumbed? Talking about cruelty, and therefore about what counts not only as cruelty, but also about what creatures can be cruel and can count as legitimate victims of cruelty, strong-arms us back into what makes us different from other creatures in nature—and this is critical: also, what makes us different from each other—more forcefully than do debates about ethical or moral systems in general, or than can be accomplished through vague conversations that gesture to false understandings of good and bad. Why? Answering the question “why?” highlights one of cruelty’s special attributes as our subject. As we have seen, cruelty doesn’t behave the way other kinds of “bad” do: acts of cruelty bleed across, in, around, and through attempts to explain a wrong as (only) violations of law, religious dictates, explicit rules, duties, reason, failures of empathy, “natural goodness,” or calculations of suffering and pain. Cruelty penetrates through any singular moral, ethical, or legal orientation. It is ours. Collectively. As part of the kind of being we are.

Cruelty can be marked by any single or multiples of these kinds of ethical reflections and moral convictions, but none of them, not even all together, is truly sufficient. Acts of cruelty taunt us with that. Acts of cruelty and our attempts to understand them reveal situations that violate something about something we understand about ourselves, about what we believe being human and having humanity is. So, let’s try again: what is that something?

Back to the stories we tell ourselves and each other about how we are different from the rest of nature/whatever-is-not-us, and why that matters. To add flourish to those we’ve already gestured to, in one ancient Mayan story, humans are explained as the sore thumb of nature because we lack a unified soul; however, we can speak and therefore we can praise the gods and nurture the earth, so it was worth keeping us around. In the ancient Greek myths referenced earlier of Zeus and Apollo, humans are incomplete and have lost ourselves in the world because we were split in

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<sup>31</sup> Gaita, Raimond. *A Common Humanity: Thinking about Love, and Truth, And Justice*. (Routledge, NY 2002).

half<sup>32</sup>—the short version is: that was because we got uppity. But, again, we were worth keeping around because we can speak and therefore praise the gods.

The origin explanation stories repeatedly return us to the idea that we are defined by some form of hubris, of course, the Scarlet Letter of buffoonery and self-ignorance. I bring our attention to this now and will return to it in the next chapter, in a different kind of story about what might help us be less cruel. In many formalized religious traditions, one interpretation of our difference from nature itself is that we alone are in the image of a Divinity. We share, at least in some way, an affinity with and access to the divine—of course, then we shamed ourselves out of that simple status with our hubristic disobedience, but we were still given stewardship over the creatures of the Earth, and therefore, a sense of both superiority and, of course, our infamous shame.

As we've seen, through stories like these, we also reveal that we often understand ourselves as essentially good or as essentially bad. As partially divine, or as fallen; of nature but not one with nature; supernatural, innately good, or innately bad; special because we have reason, free will, or both, along with autonomy, full-selfhood, sovereignty, and so on. As it happens, the values we attribute to what kind of beings we are have a remarkable impact on how we understand what is good or bad in general, that is, on our respective moral zeitgeists. And that is, or that impacts, with whom we play, against whom we fight, who we punish and how, against whom violence may be just or unjust, and who we kill for sport, who for honor, who for a pastime, who we eat, and who we are intimate with. Let's let loose some of the fire-sparking questions we have all encountered and frequently fail to field when cruelty dominates the conversation: these are questions about who, what kinds of beings, can be cruel; what kinds of creatures can count as victims of cruelty, and what kinds of actions, just as importantly, don't meet the threshold for cruelty. Of course, there are other kinds of bad, such as those that can be sufficiently described as "mean," "rude," "wrong," or inappropriate" (a social secular side); "evil," "sick," "tainted," "misfortunate," "heretical," or

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<sup>32</sup>Plato, Seth Benardete, and Allan Bloom. *Plato's Symposium*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001).

“sinning” (a religious-psychological side); or “illegal,” and “unjust” (a legal orientation), from which we are differentiating.

What does peering into who or what can count as a *victim* of cruelty—if we say *only we can commit it*—reflect about what in us or what about our concept of ourselves is violated when we—since only we—commit it? This sounds like a complicated thought, but it's actually quite ordinary. We judge someone or some act as inhumane or humane, based as much on what counts as a potential victim of cruelty as we do the characteristics of the perpetrator. But if only we can be cruel. What does that lead us to accept as unique in us that is violated? We are unpeeling the onion.

Prohibitions and taboos around eating—what we eat or think is okay to kill and consume and how—though not the heart of our inquiries here, are habits notorious for harboring some of our most primal, often deeply unconscious, moral considerations.<sup>33</sup> With these prohibitions and taboos, we outline what does not count morally and who or what is neither a full moral agent nor subject, and we accomplish that by excluding them from the category of those who are and do count: namely, us. In fact, it may be too far off the mark to call these kinds of thoughts “considerations” at all. They are often agitatedly irrational when considered, and they are deeply contentious.

Understandably, it's more comfortable just *not* to consider them. We are—consciously or unconsciously—influenced by our habits though, as they become symbiotic with what is normal (for those who like to separate beast from man based on the capacity to reason, I'm accusing us of acting on base instinct here, on imperfect reason at best, in application precisely to the subject about what separates man from beast, such that we are elevated. That is, I'm suggesting we tend to be pathologically irrational about this topic.)

In most modern cultures, it is not okay to chop up and boil your pet dog for dinner. It is also not okay to eat your uncle or neighbor. When picking out Spot at the shelter, it is not okay to contemplate if there's enough meat on his tail to use for a stew. Likewise, though, there are

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<sup>33</sup>Plutarch, *Septem sapientium convivium*. Frank Cole Babbitt, Ed., (Harvard University Press, 1928), P. 571.

versions of classic children's stories in the modern Western culture that involve hints or direct references to humans being eaten, rarely are they a) eaten by other humans and b) descriptive or educational for our young homemakers on how best to prepare the flesh of one's portly neighbor (satire, cautionary moral, and fairy-tales aside).

Pause.

Why not?

When shopping for a good root vegetable, unlike a shelter dog or a pet mini-pot-bellied pig, we do need to think about the chopping and boiling.<sup>34</sup> How do we understand the difference between the rutabaga and the pig then, and the bacon? The pig and the dog, then? How do we understand ourselves—back to the point: each other—in relation to how we each understand these differences? For instance, if your dinner companion stares in horror at his plate of greens, holding his fork in midair, refusing to eat and ranting about screaming carrots and, with wild-eyed distress says that he fears for his soul because he is decapitating broccoli, we'd be fair to consider him to be either speaking in jest or on the far end of the spectrum of the insane—so far to the mad end it might disqualify him from counting as one with full humanity. We judge this companion, this professor (in the dinner scenario I had been referencing), according to some shared, and mostly unspoken, variety of common sense, right?

On the other hand, if he turns his face in distaste at the bloody liquid swirling from a rare steak, or vomits at the sight of a roast pig's head, that can be justified more easily because of the explicit evidence of both violence and the dead renderings of life leaking out. You might disagree with the reasoning behind his refusal or disgust, think he is a stodgy, self-righteous ass—or worse, a hypocrite—but you question his character, not his sanity. This difference is important. It is possible to argue that dropping a live crustacean in boiling water is cruel, or that fattening a duck to the point of immobility to harvest her liver for the most precious foie gras is cruel; it is not as easy, not even if you believe the science that claims plants communicate, plants can feel, and can, actually, even

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<sup>34</sup> Rational and counter arguments for the use of “pets” or domestics breeds for scientific research can be found in countless sources. See Appendix B: The Reader's Guide, also see books, summaries, and references provided in anthologies and compilations such as this one: <https://1000wordphilosophy.com/2022/03/18/bentham-on-animals/> (accessed 7/19/23).

scream, to make a case that we should cry or pray or feel remorse when we cut into a potato.<sup>35</sup> Why not?

When the subject of non-humans enters into most any conversation about humanity and morality, with most any sort of person from any walk of life, I encounter the most absurd, ridiculous, creative, and downright nutty responses. I have asked the trajectory of questions (e.g., why is it okay to eat a dog but not a pig) to as many kinds of people as I can. I have been asked the corollary question (e.g., why can I take offense at eating a pig when often pigs, and even monkeys, are needlessly and horrifically tortured in medical tests for the mascara I like or medicine I take).

American children who had the rare occasion to, like me, turn vegetarian in the 1970s, are usually well versed in the accusations of hypocrisy and in the aftermath of absurd reactions to our choice by the time we are 10. From the fact that those who are not vegetarians, and even many who are, have questions, I understand vegetarianism is a minority position. As mentioned before, there is no escape from hypocrisy in this conversation (and, as a side note, therefore, no need for virtue-signaling). It is the absurdity of the questions, and the impossible struggle to answer them, that rile me. So, I keep tracing and asking the trajectory of questions.

Eventually, I became desperate enough that I did try for an answer, which we will get to in the next chapter. I am not at all sure it's the right answer, but it is an attempt; it's my imagined oasis from the absurd glare I find myself blinded by when I am asked, "Well, if you are right, and this silken duck pate is cruel, then we should all just starve to death, because, you know, science has proven that plants also communicate and feel pain." I hope my attempt at a partial answer will spawn interpretations, better answers, more complete answers, or at least a different angle in these conversations. Mine is not an attempt to be a complete answer.

Here's another personal example to bring home that even the scholars are having difficulties with the subject of cruelty and its court of issues. When I was giving my final "job talk" on cruelty for a postdoctoral

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<sup>35</sup> Many naturalistic worldviews do pray for plant life (prayers to the earth itself, to the plant itself, and often to the human or nonhuman animal who interacts with them), as well as, of course, prayers to sentient beings—or is it to gods? To whom is one thankful and to whom does one apologize, and when is apology part of the prayer? Are prayers for food sources and apologies for food sources different from those concerning the murder of a human being or a careless slaughter?

position at the University of Georgia, I was asked by a tenured philosophy professor on the search committee the following question, in a room full of thirty tenured or tenure-track professors, “Well, you’ve offered a definition of cruelty. That’s fine. But it is dependent on the nature of things, right?” That he recognized this, albeit crudely, gave me a sigh of relief. Until the fellow, who I will quote directly but not name here, continued, “But can you prove the difference between a butterfly and a paper cup?”

Pause.

I’m sorry, can I do what? Can prove it? Prove what? The difference between something of nature or God or something of man? The difference between something alive and something manufactured? Something that can die versus something that can be taken apart? Something that bleeds bodily fluid versus something that can only hold fluid and express small amounts of moisture under extreme pressure? What is the target of the proof I am being asked to generate? I suppose we are back now to the philosophies of endless circles concerning sentient/non-sentient and argument to convince when neither convincing nor arguing to convince is appropriate for the subject.

I didn’t answer well. I choked. The chair of the philosophy department at that time (the late Professor Victoria Davion), who was sympathetic to my vulnerable paralysis, jumped in and chastised the offending professor, saying he was missing the point. After I recovered from that rather humiliating experience and paralysis of thought, I wasn’t so sure he was totally missing the point. I mean, clearly, he was intending to be a downright dismissive ass, and, clearly, he was missing something (other than decency toward a nervous junior scholar). So, he was missing some point, but *which* point?

After much consternation and fury about this, I settled on the fact that our conversations about morality center around our conversations around humanity, and that our conversations around humanity are really, really confused, confusing, and tricky. In the middle of my dissertation defense (months after that horrible job talk),<sup>36</sup> I finally yelled out of desperation

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<sup>36</sup>At the Committee on Social Thought at the University of Chicago, in the equivalent place of a “dissertation defense” or trial, students give a “public lecture” attended by faculty, students, and anyone who cares to attend. My public lecture on was at the end of the winter quarter of 2006.

to the attending audience which was being properly tough on me: “if you don’t know the difference between a rutabaga and a pig, then I can’t have this conversation with you!” That got a laugh, but we still haven’t crawled our way out from the rubble of absurdity yet.

We have been trapping ourselves in this strange quicksand since the ancients: even Plutarch, in 340 BC, gave ample voice to Autobulous: “Why,” he has him say, “moreover, do we not say that one tree is less intelligent than another, as a sheep is by comparison with a dog; or one vegetable more cowardly than another, as a stag is by comparison with a lion?”<sup>37</sup>

As mentioned, most accounts (stories) of our emergence on the earthly stage as human beings orbit around an explanation of our differences from everything else. In direct and repelling contrast, many instructions (as opposed to explanations) for ourselves and our children’s moral behavior appeal to our likeness to things that are apparently unlike us in kind. These are the very kinds of things in contrast to which we like to define ourselves. When teaching basics of human decency, we might say things such as: “Don’t squish the caterpillar, Bobby Joe—he has a family just like you do.” Or: “How do you think that would feel if you only had a ‘meow’ to communicate? Would you appreciate being smacked for just trying to say you needed something?” Or, “Just like us, your bird needs rest, relaxation, things that are fun and engaging, food and a playmate. If you can take care of that parakeet like you would your little brother, okay, you can get one.” We do it with each other as well, of course: “We all bleed red,” or “Just because she’s homeless and dirty, doesn’t mean she’s not a good person who is loved by someone, just like you.”

My point is that we humanize, dehumanize, and anthropomorphize, according to what models of reasonings, exactly? Which needs? What realities? Whose? We are inconsistent to the point of being anti-sensical. The capacity to adapt “izes” and “isms” to each pet cause or pet moment is obviously a powerful set of mental and political medicines, but I am not sure we understand fully the side effects and even how or when or why we use them as we do.

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<sup>37</sup>Plutarch’s *Moralia*, on the “*Cleverness of Animals*.” Plutarch, *Septem sapientium convivium*. Frank Cole Babbitt, Ed., (Harvard University Press, 1928).

No wonder we get easily confused.<sup>38</sup> Let me mention again that I am focusing on questions that orbit around our humanity and that I mean “humanity” less in terms of our biological designation as an organism, and more in terms of what the qualities of it are that we are pointing to when we say we are morally different, that we are moral agents, that we have “humanity,” and that we can fail to have it despite being humans. As it happens, these qualities are not completely dissociable from the fact that we are, biologically, also designated as *Homo sapiens*.

Returning to the main subject: what is there to say to the dinner companion who asks what makes us different as *H. sapiens*, order of primates, kingdom of animalia? As a recovering philosopher, I begin with the practical: free will.

Let’s test out the opaque, but hackneyed, “free will.” We in the West are usually first either titillated or terrified when we hear of the offer and consequence of choice in stories like the Garden of Eden, or those of the fabulist trials of Abraham and Isaac. To eat of the bitter fruit? To sacrifice a son for a God or for trembling faith? Are these fables showing us that we have, originally as part of our make-up, a gift or a curse in having those questions? Or, as said previously, a false choice of choices? In magician’s terms, a “forced choice”?

In most of these Judeo-Christian talks, we have lost our purity and our innocence and discovered shame and guilt—or our loss is given to us by the offer of choice or we are gaslighted into it, because, either way, it is our choice. Those of us in the Judeo-Christian tradition ate the apple, after all. But we could choose, or could have chosen, not to. And both are the point. Why is the Garden of Eden story so compelling? I’m not a scholar of it, like most of us, so I will just speak for myself for now. In its most simple form, I expect the story is compelling because it means that we can disobey—ourselves, our gods, each other, nature, and our nature. We can go against not only what *should be*, but also what is. That is, we can be inhuman—we can be something other than what we are, and this is one story about how that strange designation came to be.

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<sup>38</sup> Paul Bloom discusses, in many of his works, the idea that humanity is required for dehumanization, a position that I believe introduces important perspectives and challenges, but one that ultimately results in his misuse/misunderstanding of empathy.



Though there are hubristic elements to this origin story, it is not a story primarily about what we are capable of generating (as a god might), but, rather, it is one in which we are, unlike all other aspects of nature, capable of not following our nature. This story tells us we cannot only disobey a rule the “creator” made, but we can also disobey what defines us as us. For comparison, there is no mollusk on the planet who can fail to be a mollusk or follow the rules that define what a mollusk is. He might not be a good mollusk, but, unlike humanity, there is no un- or in- or sinful mollusk-ness. There was no pure and divine mollusk who has now, by being naughty, by disagreeing with his nature, stopped being a real or full mollusk.<sup>39</sup>

Then there is rationality. Let's give that small idea another quick spin. The idea that if one can explain logically what one has done, what should be done, what and why what was done was done, is a slightly different beast from free will, but they are related. With reason we should be able to plan our choices and anticipate outcomes, not just be free from the puppeteer's strings. In some ways, it is the secular mortal's compensation for both being moral and possibly having no god. Rationality takes off from the ability to choose and moves to the ability to choose according to linear cognitive functions. That is, from decision-making to being able to calculate ends and to strategize, and reason through those calculations and plans.

As previously mentioned, one of the distinguishing features of reason is that it is supposed to be able to be shared, to allow us to share our thinking, to have a common thinking, because how and what we are thinking can't belong to any single one of us—it is *objective* or can be seen by the outside, by someone else. I should be able to give you the map of my thinking and you should be able to follow the pathways. Free will, however, not only does not demand such sociability, it often is counterpoised to it.

Pairing free will with rationality boils down to describing agents, subjects (not objects), autonomous to some degree, able to do this or that,

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<sup>39</sup> See references to Philippa Foot, Rosalind Hursthouse, or Cora Diamond for more on both virtue ethics and the complications of rationality-heavy versions of virtue ethics and human and nonhuman relations.

and able to leave logical bread crumbs that lead us to how, why we will or have done this or that and to train others to do the same or to provide rationale for correcting them when they don't. One cat may choose to hunt one mouse or the next, but we don't consider that a morally significant ability: in the case of the cat and mouse, we call that instinct, and thus something humans are capable of overcoming—by reason.<sup>40</sup> Reason is its own strange god,<sup>41</sup> with its own set of bickering, proselytizing, and devoted prophets, disciples, and critics.<sup>42</sup>

The not-so-secret secret is that this special rational facility does not only belong to humans. It isn't so special. This is as well-observed, verified, talked about, shared, known, tested, and acknowledged as that human babies are vulnerable, and yet we continue our arguments and discussions in the moral domains as if the opposite were true and this special rational facility differentiates humans from "animals." Again, we've been mired in this territory since Plutarch, to Montaigne, to Jane Goodall, Sue Savage-Rumbaugh, Cora Diamond, Philippa Foot, Franz de Wall, and others. Plutarch, when comparing humans to "beasts" and nature, devotes extensive time to the perfection of nature, the reasoning, sense-making of nature, in comparison to the vice and "imperfect reason" of man. Montaigne cleverly recuses himself from certainty, saying, "When I play with my cat, who knows if I am not a pastime to her more than she is to me?"<sup>43</sup>

From the experts on crows, we know with our crude, anthropomorphizing, and scientific devices that even crows think through time (diachronically). They tell stories, remember, plan, and of course what goes with those capacities is that they also mourn tragedy, predict danger, and pass that knowledge amongst their Murder and to their offspring. Like us.

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<sup>40</sup> In most Western cultures, we often distinguish instinct from free-will with the first ideally subservient to the second, and yet then we turn around and rely on guts or instinct for moral development and self-trust. Again, we are radically confused, and our confusion exposes how we try to juggle our multiple hypocrisies.

<sup>41</sup> See Kant's *Groundwork for Metaphysics of Morals* and Plutarch on the feasibility of the "perfectibility" of reason as the aspirational apex (page 341 in Plutarch's *Moralia*).

<sup>42</sup> See Appendix B: Reader's <http://maggieschein.com/appendix-b-readers-guide/>.

<sup>43</sup> Montaigne, Michel de: *The Complete Essays*. M. A. Screech (Editor, Translator, Introduction). (Penguin Classics, 1993).

But we had to study the crows to suss out their complexities and depth—their “fullness of being,” as Gaita would likely say. In contrast, they just tell each other stories about us, and broadcast those stories among their Murder, generation after generation. They don't need a peer-reviewed study for them to make judgments, to adjust and to trust their perceptions of the world around them, the subjects in it, and to choose their actions accordingly. They have, as we would now call it in both psychology and philosophy, a “theory of mind.”

Naturalists or mystics might call such things “sight” or “oneness” or as characterized by the opposite of the sense of lack of belonging that most humans are motivated by. The spiritual human might see it is as an indication not just that they are special because they can reason, nor because they, like us, can suffer, but also because they, too, have souls and are part of the divine—like us.<sup>44</sup>

Now we are left with the weird thought that anything we can name or identify to make us morally special doesn't actually do the work we think it does when the topic of cruelty comes up. These supposedly precious traits might be shared with other creatures, despite the fact that we do not always attribute to nonhumans the possibility of them failing to be what they are in the same way we do to ourselves.

Keeping in mind that cruelty forces us to explain a difference in ourselves, and our purpose is to better see ourselves, I'd like to explore a two-pronged supposition. One is that perhaps our difference from other elements of nature is, gently put, “imperfect reason,” or, more accurately, that we are profoundly ignorant. Uniquely so. The second is that born from that ignorance, we are in a unique state of perpetual learning (or we *should* be), and that puts us in a different relationship to the rest of nature than other aspects of nature are in relation to the rest of nature—and there is a profound responsibility somewhere in that. I don't mean that as a moral injunction or directive; I mean that responsibility is our nature, it is part of what makes us flourish as the kind of creatures we are. My cat learns about me, but doesn't think about learning about being a cat (why would she? She can't not be a cat or go to cat-boot-camp). If she does think about these things, I don't know how to perceive that she does.

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<sup>44</sup>Jeremy Bentham, *Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*. (1780).

What she can learn about me depends on her being what she is: a cat. But it also depends on whether or not I can meet her somewhere in the middle by learning how she learns about me and communicating that way. We are not like the cat or the cat is not like us in that we have to learn what we are to even learn what we can learn of what other humans, and other entities, are.

For the first point, we may blame our lack of having good reason, or we may blame reason's incompetence to do the work toward the good and virtue that we want it to. Montaigne through Bertrand Russell and their ilk, and in their vastly differing ways, have no trouble reason-bashing and shaming us for our arrogance; for instance, in one of Montaigne's rants, he challenges:

Let us consider for the moment man alone, without outside assistance, armed solely with his own weapons, and deprived of divine grace and knowledge, which is his whole honor, his strength, and the foundation of his being. Let us see how much presence he has in this fine array. Let him help me to understand, by the force of his reason, on what foundations he has built these great advantages that he thinks he has over other creatures. Who has persuaded him that that admirable motion of the celestial vault, the eternal light of those torches rolling so proudly above his head, the fearful movements of that infinite sea, were established and have lasted so many centuries for his convenience and his service?

And he continues:

Is it possible to imagine anything so ridiculous as that this miserable and puny creature, who is not even master of himself, exposed to the attacks of all things, should call himself master and emperor of the universe, the least part of which is not in his power to know, much less to command?<sup>45</sup>

It will be no surprise that I am suggesting that we listen to those like Montaigne, Twain, Plutarch, Coetzee, Diamond, and Nietzsche in the conversation who challenge the superiority of humanity based on human

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<sup>45</sup>Montaigne, Michel de: *The Complete Essays*. M. A. Screech (Editor, Translator, Introduction). (Penguin Classics, 1993), p. 329.

reason, and, consequently, that I question that the root of morality is in our superiority because of either reason or divinity. It is that last turn of the screw, that neither reason nor superiority of even a divine sort, is sufficient to explain the moral status of human beings—such that we can be guilty of inhumanity—which is most interesting. Cruelty's lens brings our moral importance back down to just us and asks us to explain ourselves.

The second prong concerns ignorance and imperfect reason: what I will offer (not argue for) in the following chapters is that the common denominator among the elements of the stories we tell ourselves about why we are special is that each implicitly points to the fact that not only can we learn, but also that we *have* to and that this is not a straightforward endeavor, nor one to be subjugated to the rationally intellectual faculties. The experts don't usually say so that bluntly, but that's what seems to quietly undergird much of the anxiety about our belonging in the world and our attempts to address that anxiety. This destabilizing of the grounding of "morality" from forms of accountability to knowing to responsiveness to what is not known, is in that sense, a truer or more honest responsibility. Part of what makes us human is not what we know or come to know. It's not even how we come to gain knowledge, necessarily; rather, it is that we must always be learning that makes us unique and uniquely capable of cruelty. This perspective also provides a foundation for how we might talk about how to learn better not to be cruel; to be better at being ourselves, better at being human and appreciating the distinct designation of having "humanity."

Here is my point said in another way: we've spent this long establishing that we exist in a paradox of strained hope; we are not good. We must expect others to be good. We think we are good, most of the time. We hold a mostly stable distinction between us and inhuman monsters, or at least between us and inhuman acts. We like to think these lines are held by divinity or reason. We are learning creatures, and we have facilities to learn that go far beyond the instrument of reason. What can we say acts of cruelty violate? How do we answer this? Could we say acts of cruelty reveal something about our need and capacity to learn as a defining feature of ourselves? If we say it, then we still have to figure out what that means—both for us and for our victims of cruelty.

Could we say that what makes us moral agents is that we must continually learn, and we learn because we don't yet know, and that *not knowing is not something that we need to overcome*—in fact, it is often the attempts to overcome it, to pretend to overcome it, the stress to prove that we are certain and can be, that most often, lead to cruelty?

Neither empathy nor compassion is about knowing for sure, acquiring verified or verifiable knowledge or rational proof; rather, if we give up the red herrings and wildly gesticulating straw men, both are about learning. Being human is not about being powerful—we may be a bit out of luck if that were the case—it is about being sensitive, perceptive, responsive, and adaptive. Reason is not an end in itself, but a tool, and one among many. Humanity and moral significance are not about reason or goodness; they are about responsiveness—that is often the register of how we belong.

We are going to look next at what responsiveness might mean, stories about how we get it wrong, about why that is important, and about redemption.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> *Philosophy Talks* pod cast: Accessed on 6/6/2022: <https://www.philosophytalk.org/shows/psychology-cruelty>.



# 8

## Kaleidoscope Mirrors: Response and Responsiveness

Wear life like a loose garment.

—Anonymous<sup>1</sup>

The Stars are beautiful because of a flower that cannot be seen.

—Antoine de Saint-Exupéry<sup>2</sup>

Once we accept both the obvious and possibly less obvious expressions in the many below quotations and the two epigraphs above, we can allow ourselves room for the capacity for new sensory and perceptual capacities and deeper perceptions—and, we are hopeful, a map to a better sense of belonging in the world. Openness to our suspicion that we don't belong, of wearing the wrong coat (being in the wrong world), or the possibility of the world, of reality, being “unmade,” as Elaine Scary puts it, is part of what defines us as human and humane—i.e., less cruel. The antidote to cruelty is the same, unfortunately, as the method one would use to teach how to execute it. In learning how to identify it, how to avoid it, prevent

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<sup>1</sup> A friend of my friend's mother who refuses to be cited.

<sup>2</sup> Saint-Exupéry, Antoine de. *The Little Prince*. Trans. Katherine Woods. Harcourt Brace and Company. (New York, 1971). P. 92.

it, probably also how some might heal from it, one inevitably then also learns how to execute it better. I do get asked if that is true, if in learning how to not be cruel one can learn better how to be cruel—if the remedy and the illness are, like a vaccine, made of the same components. And I cringe, because the answer is, without hesitation, “Yes.” If we are being honest, it has to be.

From the author, Dorothy Allison on being estranged from the abusive world she was born in:

Two or three things I know for sure and one is that I would rather go naked than wear the coat the world has made for me.<sup>3</sup>

From the author Elaine Scary on torture:

Beside the overwhelming fact that a human being is being severely hurt, the exact nature of the weapon or the miming of the deconstruction of civilization is at most secondary. But it is also crucial to see that the two are here forced into being expressions and amplifications of one another: the de-objectification of the objects, the unmaking of the made, is a process externalizing the way in which the person's pain causes his world to disintegrate; and at the same time, the disintegration of the world is here, in the most literal way possible, made.<sup>4</sup>

My mother challenged me when I was having difficulty writing this chapter by asking: “What is the first sentence or question and what is your last? Don't call me until you have those.” She thought the chapter lacked a “map.” I am sharing that so that the reader understands why I am laying out, as carefully as I can, what I'm trying to do even if it seems redundant, and so I might be forgiven for any repetition here, and/or for a beginning that seems plodding. Her ask was difficult because this chapter is going to try to make very intricate weaves between things not often intertwined, and then it's going to offer criticisms of what I believe often inhibits our making those connections, and, in the end, I hope, show up

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<sup>3</sup>Allison, Dorothy. *Two or Three Things I know for Sure*, (Penguin, 1996).

<sup>4</sup>Scary, Elaine. *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*, (Oxford University Press, New York, 1985).



some of the problems with our understanding of cruelty with more clarity. Hence the title of the chapter.

My first sentence, or rather beginning idea, was about openness to learning, yes, but also to its unwelcome kin, “obscured,” “rigid,” “closed,” “stuck.” I will get back to that and, as philosophers are inclined to say, “unpack” its relationship to both the (potential) antidote and the means to cruelty a bit later. The second, but not last, thought is that there is an important but persistent mistake in our habits of thinking about moral development. I would say it is even an important mistake that tragically impacts how we understand ourselves. It catches me in the throat that we make versions of it so often—as philosophers, psychologists, and as laymen in ordinary life—whether that is by official vocation, or as Hadot references such practices, just the way people live and think through their actions and make habit of living their lives.<sup>5</sup>

What mistake is it that I am talking about? Here’s an example, and for all the incredible work Professor Christine Korsgaard does, I am sorry to make use of her thinking for our purposes, but I am going to because she provides a good example of the mistake we make so often, so prevalently, that it’s nearly unnoticeable. Here’s an example: “Animals,” Professor Korsgaard says, “cannot laugh at their pains; we do it all the time.”<sup>6</sup>

Korsgaard is a prestigious scholar, and she is in historically solid company from Plato to Peter Singer, Thomas Nagel, to Thomas Reagan in her views of how to differentiate the morality, the humanity in humans versus the non-morality, the animalness, of nonhumans. For those in that company, the answers, though they differ, are usually grounded in “reason” or “rationality.” Korsgaard seems at first unusual in using “laughter at our own pain” as the differentiating feature—as though that might distinguish her from the popular company she shares in this business of saying how we as humans are different from the rest of nature and why that matters morally.

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<sup>5</sup>Hadot, Pierre. *Philosophy as a way of Life*. Trans. Arnold I. Davidson. (Wiley-Blackwell, 1995), P. 27.

<sup>6</sup>Korsgaard, Christine. *Fellow Creatures: Kantian Ethics and Our Duties to Animals*. (Oxford University Press, 2018). Published to Oxford Scholarship Online: May 2018. P. 62.

In fact, she is in such popular company in this field (filled with yet to be exploded or disarmed landmines) that it is nearly impossible to overlook that statements like hers, those innocuous ones—often said in efforts to defend the welfare, rights, and humane (i.e., considerate or compassionate) treatment of animals—are some of the most arrogant, self-revealing sorts of statements that damn us humans to continue in our easy cruelties. That is a strong sentiment, but it is one I stand by, and I hope the explanations for that are becoming clearer and clearer as we spiral further and further in.

They (nonhumans or every entity we designate as not belonging as one of us—whatever that may mean at a given time and place) don't reason as we do, we have said that it is said. In works such as Korsgaard's, our ability to "laugh at our own pain" is evidence of our prestige, somehow. Think for a moment about the use of a reflexive, often involuntary physical response as evidence for a Kantian that we are different from *animals*. And when such thinkers proceed along trajectories such as these, they, as mentioned, privilege thinking over feeling and being—even when they are based, as many are, in some form of Neo-Aristotelean naturalism or other such theories that do not make a mortal and contentious binary between what counts as "reason" and what counts as, well, "not-reason," or emotions, sensations, perceptions, faith. As discussed, Bentham cursorily scolded us so many years ago for this. "The question is not," he insisted, "Can they reason? Nor Can they talk? But, can they suffer?"<sup>7</sup> Our question is why is it different when *we make* them suffer?

He didn't scold us for prioritizing the *measuring* of feelings of different kinds, or of feeling itself as a kind of a measure in itself (as Nietzsche plays with in his *Unpublished Writings*). When answering whose feeling, whose life, whose pain, counts or matters the most, again, we tend to conflate meaning and mattering with calculation, with something that can be counted and quantified. We might say that they (the nonhumans) don't feel as much as we do. We might say, like Nietzsche indicates, like Gaita's "M" indicates about the Vietnamese mothers, that theirs is *only* pain; their pain is in a moment that then is let go—like one in Nietzsche's dei

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<sup>7</sup> Bentham, Jeremy. *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*. (1789).

herd (see excerpt below). Or perhaps evidence of their inferiority or shallow being that they lack the ability to engage in the inversion of *schadenfreude*.<sup>8</sup>

Whereas, in contrast, and to fill the greedy wells of our despair, we tell stories about our pain, we amplify our pain, we invest in our pain, in the pain others who we perceive are like us, we inhabit our pain or it inhabits us.<sup>9</sup> And therefore, our cup runneth over, and our lives, as they are measurable and thus measured, have more matter and matter more.

Nietzsche expresses a sympathy and a moral imagination that may surprise those who don't read the musing and notes that lead up to his more well-known works. I am taking the liberty to quote the following excerpt at length because I think it illustrates something that is easy to not think this hard about:

Consider the cattle, grazing as they pass you buy: they do not know what is meant by yesterday or today, they leap about, eat, rest, ingest, leap about again, and so from morn till night and from day to day, and fettered to the moment and its pleasure or displeasure, and thus neither melancholy nor bored. This is a hard sight for man to see: for, though he thinks himself better than the animals because he is human, he cannot help envying them their happiness—what they have, a life neither bored nor painful, is precisely what he wants, yet he cannot have it because he refuses to be like an animal.<sup>10</sup>

We can pause there for a moment, but I'll ask your indulgence as we finish Nietzsche's thought in a minute. Reread it. Take in what you think true or not. Take in how we extend, amplify, and dramatize our own pain. We may immortalize it in various ways: something to be treated as art, in some cases as punishment; in some as injustice; in some as tragedy, as accident, as divine comedy, a natural misfortune, or, if there is such a

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<sup>8</sup> There are many studies linking suicidal tendencies and homicidal ones. I would not be surprised if there were not a similar linkage found between laughter about one's own pain and laughter at another's.

<sup>9</sup> Self, Will. *A Posthumous Shock*. (Harpers Magazine, December 2021).

<sup>10</sup> Nietzsche, Friedrich. *Untimely Meditations*. Ed. By Daniel Breazeale. (Cambridge University Press, 1997). P. 60–61.

thing, a natural comedy. Does the fact that we can and do transliterate our pain, that we do do that, make my loss, your broken leg, your grandmother's hip break worth more, of more value, than Koko's loss of the kitten she "adopted?"<sup>11</sup> The other side of the coin is that their suffering matters less because they can't anticipate, or don't anticipate, their deaths (again, we are certain of this how?). I wish the spacing of paragraphs, that typography itself, demanded of us the writer's and reader's time. Which is ironic in this case.

I spoke with both Coetzee and the editor of the translated Nietzsche edition I am using, Dr. Dan Breazeal, about this passage for the edition I cited. I've bolded the words that concerned me: *Cattle* and *runs with*. For the first word, according to both Coetzee and Breazeal, the original German term, "*dei herd*," Nietzsche uses refers to "a herd," which is common as a general concept that appears frequently in Nietzsche's philosophy, and often used with extreme negative connotations—as in the follower nature of Lemmings. The weak. The prey, like the lamb. But I don't think that's how he really means that in the passage below. I think it's worth our pause to listen to it deeply, either way, because it is about time, happiness, and belonging.

Here is a summary from the email exchange about this between Coetzee and me from 12/30/19.<sup>12</sup> Coetzee notes in his response that the translator's choice of the "cattle" is perhaps a bit orthogonal to the imagery in the text. In the original, Coetzee points out during our exchange, Nietzsche describes the herd as "leaping about," being genuine, and experiencing an authentic, nonexistentially corrupted way of being. He also observes that the Cambridge translation calls these animals cattle, but in using "*dei herd*" Nietzsche does not specify what kind of animal they really are: in the German language, there is no clear distinction between a herd and a flock. Does it make a difference for our reading and interpretation of this text and our understanding if Nietzsche is using "cattle" or "sheep" or "goats" for his metaphor? I think it does.

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<sup>11</sup> Accessed on 6/6/2022: <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1985-01-10-mn-9038-story.html>.

<sup>12</sup> Email exchange between Coetzee and Schein: <http://maggieschein.com/coetzee-and-schein/>.

Given Nietzsche's concentration on religion, and the prominence of the figure of "the shepherd" in Judeo-Christian religions, this translator's choice here seems relevant to our understanding of Nietzsche, but, unfortunately, not immediately obviously relevant to the purpose of this book on cruelty. But it will be, I hope.

So, let's let Nietzsche continue:

A human being may well ask an animal: "Why do you not speak to me of your happiness and only stand and gaze at me?" The animal would like to answer, and say, "The reason is that I always forget what I was going to say"—but the he forgot this answer, too, and stayed silent: so that the human was left wondering.

But he also wonders at himself, that he cannot learn to forget but clings relentlessly to the past: however far and fast he may run, this chain runs with him. And it is a matter for wonder: a moment, now here and then gone, nothing before it came, again nothing after it has gone, nonetheless, returns as a ghost and disturbs the peace of a later moment. A leaf flutters from the scroll of time, floats away—and suddenly floats back again and falls into the man's lap. Then the man says, "I remember" and he envies the animal, who at once forgets and for whom every moment really dies. Thus, the animal lives *un-historically*: for it is contained in the present, like a number without any awkward fractions left over ... it conceals nothing and at every instant appears wholly as what it is; it can never be anything but honest.<sup>13</sup>

He goes on to poetically refer to man (human beings) as an "imperfect tense" and one that can never become a perfect one.

When I wrote Coetzee about the translation and the meaning of words like "herd," "cattle," "run," or "imperfect tense," he challenged me again, offering the complex thoughts that grammatical terms can be used, and in Nietzsche's case, are being used, in a metaphorical way. To summarize the exchange, in most languages verbs can have two modes or moods: the imperfect and the perfect. The examples he gives are "Caesar conquered Gaul" (perfect), the action of subjugating Gaul is complete; "Caesar was

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<sup>13</sup>Nietzsche, Friedrich. *Untimely Meditations*. Ed. By Daniel Breazeale. (Cambridge University Press, 1997), P. 60–61.

conquering Gaul” (imperfect), the action was, at the moment when I speak, still ongoing, not yet completed.<sup>14</sup>

Yes, I want to say, that’s why I asked. Why should that grammatical tense, or our imperfection of tense as a state of being, be important in a conversation about cruelty—other than the sheer poetry of it?

Because tense is about how and with what we understand time (as a verb): we react, respond, and adapt to others right now, and then also later. Timing, of which tense is the master, is an element of how we engage with any other sentient being we encounter. The tense in which we think about our behavior, and the timing that tense dictates, controls that to which we attend, what matters, and not just “when.” That is, timing as mattering, matters. I am asking us to consider, it, timing, tense, an ethical element. This should be no surprise, since life doesn’t happen, begin, and end with sentences with a capital letter at the start and ending in a period. That is, Being is not so neatly ruled and wrapped for us. And therefore cruelty, the violation, the perversion of what make us morally important, happens in real time, in our, *each of our*, imperfect tenses. This is important not because of what is obvious about it. It is important because timing is an element of reaction, response, and fallibility—and, therefore, also, as we might see later, of reconciliation, atonement, reparation, redemption, making amends; making it right, or making it worse. Timing is one of our mechanical moral controls, and from those horrible “Enhanced Interrogation Technique” manuals to Nietzsche’s observations on nature, this idea of timing and responsiveness is critical to what we mean by our being the kind of being that is of moral importance. We do have control over that, sometimes, even if we don’t always over laughter or tears..

Rutabagas and apples rot if we don’t take care of them in time, but they can’t control if one rots and the other does not. If we don’t respond to evidence of their disease or eat them up, whether done by a human or a pig, *in time*, they “die.” Of course, if no creature takes care of them in time, the same transformation happens. Sentient beings have the same relationship to everything, but unlike a rutabaga, we charge ourselves, morally accuse or recuse ourselves, for doing so—or we can. And we say

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<sup>14</sup> Email exchange between Coetzee and Schein: <http://maggieschein.com/coetzee-and-schein/>.

we should. Why? We can see the fruit about to turn, if you do not act in time, if you make that choice, you will have wasted food and been disrespectful to the earth that provided it. Or if you want to stay with our friend from dinner who is trembling and crying murder over beheading his broccoli, you can hold a memorial for the rutabaga and sit shiva for the apple. Absurd snark aside, the point is that we do have, not just choices, not just rationales and perhaps social or spiritual conventions, but also the possibility of an awareness of our actions on other things in relationship to our reactions in time to them. This is important because it is an element of our senses, our perception, our response to what we experience ourselves as relevant to, and that will be step one on our journey toward conditioning ourselves to, well, try to get along better in the world. For one very simple demonstration of time's moral inflection: if you step on my foot now and apologize three years later, your apology has less emotional and moral impact than if you had apologized immediately, right then, with almost an instantaneous delay between your action and my reaction of pain, and with a responsive and genuine, "I'm sorry!"

Neither this chapter nor this book is an exposition or treatise on time, and there are many other elements of Nietzsche's musing toward which one could (and many do) tend. However, this is a conversation about responsiveness, partly (and then adaptability—but we will get to that), in addition to all the other things on the list of what makes us morally important as human beings. When you and I interact, the timing is an important factor, but I would argue potentially only an edge or partial defining ingredient in our responsiveness. I'm suggesting that we need to more dedicatedly consider the moral implications of timing in how we think about when we react to what we or someone else has done. Although it is often a neglected feature by scholars, Nietzsche has an uncanny sensitivity to timing and responsiveness. So, too, do those who are often called "empaths," but ironically, I'm not sure any of us know what any other of us means by that term. Well-trained, legally legitimized torturers (those who implement "enhanced interrogation techniques"), and also or in conjunction with, psychopaths, sadists, and the like, are very sensitive about the sensitivities we usually include with empathy, including response and reaction times.

It is now quite clear that we don't always talk enough about how important timing is in responsiveness—and that the tango between those two is morally fundamental. Unfortunately, that dance is taught far more explicitly in teaching how to torture, how to be cruel, and often inhumane, than it is in how to be less cruel, and more humane. Cruelty, we have to remember, is not always the same as barbarism or savagery. It may be subtle, well-cultivated, and yet still “instinctual” or immediately receivable instead of going through the gatekeepers of rational explanation or intellectualized perception—which, I want to reiterate, does not mean rationality, cognitive processing, and critical thinking are not or may not be involved. Quite the contrary, they can be instinctual, too. But let's return to our collective knowledge that timing is critical to the moral and persuasive effects of our responses to another.

The United States' government, as most do and as we have touched on, has created many documents on enhanced interrogation techniques, i.e., torture. These excerpts make my points above painfully clear:

## Coercive Techniques

“**A. Arrest:** The manner and timing of arrest should be planned to achieve surprise and the maximum amount of mental discomfort. He should therefore be arrested at a moment when he least expects it and his mental and physical resistance is at its lowest, ideally in the early hours of the morning. When arrested at this time, most subjects experience intense feelings of shock, insecurity, and psychological stress and for the most part have great difficulty adjusting to the situation. It is also important that the arresting party behave in such a manner as to impress the subject with their efficiency.”

Sadists, from the amateur to the trained psychopathic, are experts at the importance of time for morality, or, if they choose inhumanity or cruelty. Ransom holders. Kidnappers. Tried and documented “Enhanced Interrogation Techniques” (EITs) often use a nuanced version of the power of the “how long?” depending on the need and target.”

From the same CIA manual under the section, “**E. Pain**”: “For example, if he is required to maintain rigid positions such as standing at



attention or sitting on a stool for long periods of time. The immediate source of pain discomfort is not the “questioner” but the subject himself. His conflict is then an internal struggle. As long as he maintains this position, he is attributing to the “questioner” the ability to do something worse. But there is never a showdown where the “questioner” demonstrates this ability. After a period of time, the subject is likely to exhaust his internal emotional strength. This technique may only be used for periods of time that are not long enough to induce pain or physical damage.”<sup>15</sup>

And yet, (1) The second sentence describes the practices as causing pain and the last prohibits using the technique if it causes pain, (2) two pages later, also under the section titled “Pain”:

The following is a list of these noncoercive techniques which require great care because of their susceptibility to abuse:

- A. Persistent manipulation of time
- B. Retarding and advancing clocks
- C. Serving meals at odd times
- D. Disrupting sleep schedules
- E. Disorientation regarding day and night
- F. Unpatterned “questioning” sessions....”

There’s a reason that time—nature’s organic organizing system—is so pervasively important in what we want to get from our fellows and from our responsiveness: our manipulation of it in torture (and in care, as well—as any trained nurse or therapist is well aware) exposes our knowledge of what makes people tick or not tick. Our *ability* to respond, our *timing*, and the *manipulation* of the relationship between the two and in response to the reactions of “the subject” are not just of moral importance: they are critical to *our being morally important as human beings qua being humans*. And this means so is our *sensation*, *imagination*, and our capacities for *perception*. Nonhuman animals did not design, manufacture, sell or wear watches, have clocks, or check their PR run (crawl, swim, attach to a coral reef or the belly of a whale) times. They don’t need to.

Not only do some of us laugh at our own pain, according to Korsgaard, but for most of us, certain kinds of actions and experiences (she associates them with “pain,” but I think it can be far more nuanced than that) can

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<sup>15</sup>United States CIA, *Human Resources: Exploitation Training Manual*, 1983.

undo us. As we've read, when talking about torture, about the psychophysiology of what happens in torture, in *The Body in Pain*, Elaine Scary uses the phrase the “unmaking of the made”<sup>16</sup> to describe how torture does what it does. That means our world is one we “make” or construct and that can be demolished. That is perhaps a real difference between us and other kinds of creatures—and unlike ritual, religion, law, or reason, *is* a real difference. They (nonhumans, we tend to think) just *react*<sup>17</sup> to and exist in their worlds, in the world. We, however, can be “unmade.” Making takes time. It takes skill. It takes perception and learning.

If we believe Améry and Scary—and we'd be hard-pressed to doubt either one, but him especially:

You do not observe dehumanized man committing his deeds and misdeeds without having all of your notions of inherent human dignity placed in doubt. We emerged from the camp stripped, robbed, emptied out, disoriented—and it was a long time before we were able even to learn the ordinary language of freedom. Still today, incidentally, we speak it with discomfort and without real trust in its validity.<sup>18</sup>

These observations don't just mean we can be made or unmade, nor tell us what that would even mean in our contexts. Guide dogs' (or “seeing eye dogs”) worlds can be and are created, constructed.<sup>19</sup> We make it for them. And when they retire, we retire them from that world we made them see or guide us in. Their world can become different, but it is not unmade; it is remade—I would guess—but guess and imagine are all I can do. And I certainly feel differently about retiring and changing the world of a seeing guide dog than I would about kicking a good dog. How are these different, and what do those differences mean in terms of thinking of ourselves as a different kind of creature because we can “laugh at

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<sup>16</sup> Scary, Elaine, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), P. 41.

<sup>17</sup> The words “**react, respond, perceive, and adapt**” are in bold because those are, I believe, some of the most important aspects and concepts we will be exploring.

<sup>18</sup> Améry, Jean: *At the Mind's Limits: Contemplations by a Survivor on Auschwitz and Its Realities*. (New York: Schocken, 1986), Trans. Sidney and Stella Rosenfeld, (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1980). P. 20.

<sup>19</sup> Elliot, Deni. *The Harness Effect*. (under review for publication as of January, 2021).

our own pain” and our worlds can be *unmade* by each other? It is probably curious to note that along these lines, as far as we can discern, other animals don’t laugh at each other. Can a nonhuman “unmake” or pervert to the point of a spectrum of intimate destruction another nonhuman? How about a human?

We might get clever and say that they, nonhumans, don’t even have a sense of humor, especially about their own pain, much less that of others—whereas we, we certainly can and do. Right? According to those multitudes in Korsgaard’s company, perhaps a morbid, perhaps healing, perhaps a cruel sense of humor comes to us naturally and frequently.

Korsgaard, as so many others do, tries to offer guide rails for “mattering,” as has been established. But even those, no matter their reasoning, shiver and scoot back at a certain point because to answer why one life matters more than another, much less based on kind, and who of that kind, or how to weigh the worth of pain and joy, would be acts of such glaring arrogance, hubris, and improbability that it simply isn’t acceptable. For instance, I have a bird feeder. The squirrels and the birds navigate the territory on their own. They navigate the trees, berries, and whatever is yummy in my yard with no problem, so why would I police the feeder, which is just basically a branch of a tree with all the yummy stuff in one place. It is not for me to decide who needs or gets what or whose life matters more as winter sneaks in and resources get scarcer: this squirrel’s life matters more than that one’s does because why? To whom? To which squirrel or the owl who needs dinner? This person matters more than that one to whom? This baby’s pain matters more than his parents’ pain because? This mother’s life and autonomy are worth less, matters less, than her genetically unviable unborn fetus. Where are the scales for these? I would like to see the factory and manual for who engineers them.

Religion can come in as a much needed tool here, as can science, but we know there is no agreement on the materials, much less the system of weighing. Law officiates here, whether we choose for it to do so or not, but again, with which scales? Whose? At what point in history?

So instead of engineering the scales that measure the mattering of a life, let’s return to the common-sense fact that there is a difference in saying “they” *are* different from “us” and saying we *know how* “they” are different from “us.” The difference between those two can be the difference

between an approach that leads to compassion and one that leads to genocide. It can also be the difference between indifference and responsiveness.

They do. They don't. They have. They don't have. They are like us. They are not like us. They are worthy of our consideration, of experiencing their full internal life. They are not. One of the important things that is clear from our history of talking about how we should or should not treat and understand those we consider "animals" or those we consider different from human as less than humans because of some difference (pick one), is that we can be arrogant asses who fail to see that even in many of our attempts to be just or moral or compassionate, we often violate the very first principle, the very first reason to be moral at all.

The basic staples of morality are something most children recognize and act on easily and also find as a source for love and the curiosity to care: "I am not you" and "you are not me." From that state of being, of mind, of *curiosity*, the eight-month-old in front of you on the plane turns over his mother's shoulder, as she pats him on the back to make sure he doesn't start a tantrum. He is curious, and he wants to see what he can see of you, what you might *be*. His cocked, curious, mouth invites the question, "*Who* might you be?" And then comes the invitation: "What are you?" "*Who* are you?" "What am I to you?" "*What* are you to me?" As the Little Prince says, "The stars are beautiful, because of a flower we cannot see."<sup>20</sup> You are of interest to the young human, a source of the environment that makes up his world, because he doesn't have the answers. Any other animated entity is a curiosity, a mystery, a wholeness on its own. And so the woman, who you don't know, and who is sitting in that seat in front of you, who can't see what is infinitely interesting to her son is not just intriguing but also a source of our moral of mattering at all. We don't know each other or how we belong, and that little child is displaying the importance of that in terms of our orientation to our interactions with each other.

The still-green, toughly immature acorn, having just hit the ground and attracted the attention of the nearby squirrel, does not, at least not in

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<sup>20</sup> Saint-Exupéry. Antoine. *The Little Prince*. Trans. Katherine Woods. (Harcourt Brace and Company, New York, 1978), p. 92.

a way evident to us—and probably not to the squirrel—have such wonder about itself or the ground on which it lands. But we are different that way. We hit the ground and wonder not only what it is, but also *what we* are and *what it is* to us and us to it.

How is this approach, this sensibility and awe of the unknown, shushed, locked out of the classroom, excluded from the playground? Should it be? Why is it? Thinkers like Stanley Cavell, Pierre Hadot, Raimond Gaita, Arnold I. Davidson, Cora Diamond, Ludwig Wittgenstein, novelists and poets of all sorts (too many to even gesture toward a sampling), register the importance of the impenetrability of another—of the limits of our knowledge of another. Rather than mark or vilify this as ignorance, they speak of it as a way of acknowledging the fullness of another's being; the fascination that one (me, him, you, her, they, or whoever) is not like the being of another of its kind or another of a different kind. And that difference, that independence, allows for the possibility of the acknowledgment of their inner-life.

This is the stuff (as in the stuffing, the matter of the mattering) of fictional characters. This is why we make and watch movies, write books, create curious and mystical narratives—because not knowing matters. Who was Javert in *Les Misérables*? What was his obsession? We watch or read, in part, because we can't be certain. What do we need to know about him to understand his pathological obsession with a man who stole bread to feed his family to the point that he resorts to suicide? Isn't that mystery what makes us not just have a sense of injustice about parts of what Javert did but also, just as importantly, to have conflicted sympathy for him? We can't know him all the way, only the clues the author and/or the performers drop about his internal states---and that is what compels us to stay with him.

Why did Toni Morrison's Sethe, in *Beloved*, slit her infant baby girl's throat in an effort to avoid her child suffering the inhumanity, the cruelty, of the slavery that she and everyone around her suffered? Why do we both understand and not understand when she says, "BELOVED, she my daughter. She mine. See. She come back to me of her own free will and I don't have to explain a thing. It had to be done quick. Quick. She had to be safe and I put her where she would be. She was tough and she

back now. I knew she would be.”<sup>21</sup> But we can't fully know, and because it is fiction, we know we can't fully know, and the consequences of our commitments or lack thereof are only as real as our mental playgrounds, and so we can live in uncertainties on these stages in a level of comfort that we often can't in our own life, lived in real time.

Yet still, despite our clear fascination and curiosity, passion and compulsion with the unknown, we make authoritative, or at least mostly unquestioned, statements such as “animals don't laugh at their own pain,” unlike the “we” who do, who may, without pause, without question, without even considering that a qualification might be in order, declare such things. To boot, we often do this with little thought about what such assumptions and presumptions reveal about us, and on top of that we must assume that laughing at our own pain is somehow a sign of self-reflection or meta-aware sophistication.<sup>22</sup> Korsgaard, I think, means that we both understand and also that we don't. What we wonder about and can't solve is that Sethe slit her infant baby girl's throat. Burnings babies, nearly all professors say in any introductory ethics class is uncontroversially bad. We cannot disagree with that. But what about Toni Morrison's scenario and the wonder it generates?

Some may say, and some may believe, that we know that animals don't laugh at their pain. But that can only be our presumption. How do we know this? We can, stripped of humility and draped in shame, make this claim on what basis? Even if we were to explain how, what would that have explained? We have certainly explained something about how *we* think and feel, about how *we* measure feelings and attitudes, how *we* judge others, that *we* rely on and value responses such as smiles (primates), large round eyes, cocked heads, or lifted front paws (dogs or other mammals); voluntary engagement (dolphins initiating play, or in both verified and unverified cases, saving drowning divers) as indicators of an internal world *we* can understand. But we haven't explained what those

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<sup>21</sup> Morrison, Toni. *Beloved*. (Random House, NY, 1987), P. 201.

<sup>22</sup> Not to mention that “laughing” here itself is clearly not a stable ring on which to dangle the rest of Korsgaard's argument. What, for instance, might be the difference between an act of good-willed schadenfreude and an example like the character “Dr. Evil” from *Austin Powers: International Man of Mystery* (New Line Cinema; Warner Bros. Pictures, 1997) and his famous finger to lip-corner sadistic cackle, or the child who laughs when he lights his cat on fire?

behaviors actually mean inside the creature who exhibits them—any more than can we answer, as the much-quoted philosopher, Thomas Nagel, famously asked: “What is it Like to be a Bat?”<sup>23</sup>

I am not arguing that we can or that we can't be certain when, if, or why other creatures, even those such as ourselves, may or may not laugh at either our own pain or the pain of others. Even if we did, how would we determine what that laughter might indicate, reveal, and who gets the say-so in that. If a client laughs at his own pain, I could interpret that as a sort of Buddhist elevation, or I could interpret it as psychopathy. I want us to avoid “philosophy of mind” types of entanglements here—they have their important work and devotees, but we have other business with these questions to attend to. Although intoxicating or alluring to many, and terribly important to scholarly research, most of us don't consult Thomas Nagel, Ned Block, Daniele Dennett, Frans de Waal, Hillary Putnam, David Chalmers, or Descartes for our daily choices.

When a child cries (ours or someone else's), when we hear the gasps of a dying dog, or the screeches of a baby raccoon being tenderized by a cat's play before dinner, even if we have studied philosophy of mind, cringing is all we might do. Or turning away. Or intervening (which, sometimes comes as a surprise, for reasons that I hope come up in the next chapter). But we *react* because there is something happening in those moments that is being communicated and shared by temporal, physical lives and creatures during their living and their dying. And we respond to that in real time. It's less that we must that I mean to point out—it's that we do. No matter what we do, it is a reaction, at least. By doing or not doing. It's not even a command, nor has it a normative husk, a should or shouldn't. Rather, it's built into what we mean by being “human.”

Like the good philosophers say, we can develop excellence at explaining, at justifying, at reasoning—but my conjecture is that when it comes to our perception of the “matteringness” of other creatures, what we often demonstrate is how we explain things, how we justify that an apple is different from a pig; we are not, necessarily, explaining anything of substance about the *other* creature—rather, we are revealing ourselves and what we can see or not. Sometimes we may see with 20/20, sometimes we

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<sup>23</sup>Nagel, Thomas. *The View from Nowhere*. (Oxford University Press: New York, 1986).

may be blind as Australian mole rats, and sometimes, the other seems so impenetrable, we try to see what is inside, how it ticks, no matter the cost. I'm not even sure Korsgaard and her ilk can justify that I, or "we," do laugh at our own pain. Maybe *she* does?

I might laugh at what caused me pain, but she will never know if I laugh at my own pain, or if I mean it when I do. It is critical to note that I am not pointing this out in some kind of petulant "You can't know this" or "How dare she?" sort of way. I am pointing it out because I think our awareness of our inability to completely know or feel or perceive another is critical to what makes us morally relevant—not as a philosophical point to be argued for, but rather as an important fact that concerns what makes morality something that matters to us, and our understanding that we are moral creatures. Our ignorance is something precious, something special. Imagine the way a child approaches an animal it is unfamiliar with. That singular moment when she already is or has become the kind of child who is curious about it, but is neither threatened nor assumptive about the differences between encountering a gardener snake and a rattler, and who then discovers with the gentle nudge of a frond of rosemary what she needs to know and responds as needed, versus the child who immediately runs (avoiding the unknown), axes the snake without awareness of its nature or her safety (destroying the unknown), or the child who yells to his guardians for guidance.

These differences in how we react, how we respond, can be the difference between being human in a morally important way, demonstrating what we call "humanity," and not. It is import that we don't always, and we often don't, get it right—in both how we react and how we judge how we react. When squirrels "get it"—what defines them, what makes them a "good" squirrel—they get it right or they die or suffer. Unlike us, they don't have a chance to make the something right that they might have gotten wrong. Thus, there is no possibility of moral responsibility. And that is a consideration for our moral response. A child learning about snakes, the one who gets it wrong, and who suffers from the mistake, is not the one to be worried about—except perhaps when in a hospital bed and recovered. The one who doesn't wonder at all, the one who neither



got bitten nor discovered that the snake had no interest in her at all, is the child we must worry about the most and, also, likely the one we can't heal. At least not in our conventional ways. This seems to introduce a different mood to the indifference we have previously discussed.

Respect, curiosity—ignorance that is active, if you want to call it that—above all, the compassionate kind of query of healthy children, are basics of our moral importance. That is not some kind of Rockwellian fantasy in cornflower blue. On the contrary, it is in some ways absolutely terrifying, and it is true whether we are three or four or sixty-four. It is just that it is more accepted at 3 or 4, when “growth” is often still the moral currency between child and adult. There are reasons stories such as “Hey Little Ant”<sup>24</sup> and “The Ugly Duckling”<sup>25</sup> are written and read to millions of children. There is a reason adults can, and often are compelled, to write such stories; to teach, and also, hopefully, to remember or recover their initial comfort in a state of unknowing. For those few minutes we have when we have to reread or to write these stories, at night or in the morning, exhausted from our day,<sup>26</sup> or when we give them to the child to digest them independently, we activate the mechanisms that make us morally important: curiosity, imagination, patience, and even joy in the experience of the unknown.

Obviously, one of the stories (“Hey, Little Ant”) uses identification through anthropomorphism to encourage humans to not cause harm, to develop the virtue of what we call humanity: “Come down close,” the ant says to the little boy. “I think you'll see that you are very much like me,” says the ant to the little boy whose foot is suspended over him while he contemplates squishing the speaking ant for no reason other than that he is there and the other kids are doing it. Stories, talks, fables like these—like almost all children's literature—are about the hopes we adults have, the techniques we try to use to encourage our offspring to not become bad humans. They tell a strong story about what we most fear through

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<sup>24</sup>Hoose, P. M., Hoose, H., & Tilley, D. *Hey, Little Ant*. (Tricycle Press: Berkeley, CA, 1998).

<sup>25</sup>Dobbs, Rose. *The Ugly Duckling*. (Random House, New York, 1958).

<sup>26</sup>Bennett, William, Ed. *The Book of Virtues: A Treasury of Great Moral Stories*. (Simon and Schuster, 1993). P. “The stories, poems, essays and other writing presented here are intended to help children achieve moral literacy.”

what they most concentrate on: identification (sameness), inclusion, belonging, awareness, reward for goodness, strength, virtue or good, acceptance, learning, friendship, trust, and so on. By the way, it is important to think for oneself about the differences between using or teaching identification, sameness, inclusion, and/or belonging. Much goes wrong when we take all of those for being the same.

It is also possible to look at the adults writing these stories as Dr. Claudia Mills does in *Ethics and Children's Literature*,<sup>27</sup> with a psychoanalytic perspective—but that is one I confess that I neglect for now because from the psychoanalytic perspective, stories about children, anthropomorphizing, talking animals are usually stories that are interpreted as revealing something about the wounded child in the adult who reads or writes them. In partial contrast, I think they often reveal something true about human grown-ups' nature qua human being in general—in particular, about the children—not just a wound—that remains in them. That is, the child in us, the wonderer that pretends to stop wondering at some point because we are afraid or certain—or afraid that we should be certain because we are not. These stories, when well done, should reveal in us, as St. Exupéry poignantly delivers in one of the most heartbreaking dedications ever written, that there is wonder in the perpetual unknown and that from acknowledging that that often come the habits and practices that we associate with the positive moral valance of “humanity”:

#### TO LEON WERTH

I ask children to forgive me for dedicating this book to a grown-up. I have a serious excuse: this grown-up is the best friend I have in the world. I have another excuse: this grown-up can understand everything, even books for children. I have a third excuse: he lives in France where he is hungry and cold. He needs to be comforted. If all these excuses are not enough, then I want to dedicate this book to the child whom this grown-up once was. All grown-ups were children first. (But few of them remember it.) So, I correct my dedication:

#### TO LEON WERTH

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<sup>27</sup>Fraustino, Lisa. R. *The Rights and Wrongs of Anthropomorphism in Picture books*. (University of Colorado, Ashgate Publishing, 2014).

When he was a little boy.<sup>28</sup>

Or, for a different, but related, angle, Nietzsche says, “A man’s maturity consists in having found again the seriousness of a child at play.”<sup>29</sup>

The lessons of these kinds of stories, from Hans Christian Anderson’s tales, St. Exupéry, or Jean Améry, are also about the suffering of those who perceive themselves as not “the same,” in whatever criteria a group uses to define itself—the individual who lacks that set of criteria or some subset of it (too ugly, too different, too alone, too small, too big). Most of these stories are also about what the “group” does in response to such a strange being among their ranks. Do they correct them? “Kid,” says the boy with the ever-suspended foot above to the pleading ant below it, “But...all my friends squish ants each day. Squishing ants is a game we play. They’re looking at me, they’re listening too. They all say I should squish you.”<sup>30</sup>

So, the obvious question is not just which choice the boy will make, but which social group that choice will put the boy in. Again, which tribe, which club, to which collective will he discover a sense belong? What is the cost of being one of the ones laughing or the one who killed a good, tiny worker trying to get food to his colony? I am asking if there are other questions that should be considered here. The first set are good questions. But they are also confusing. The ant is an ant. He is small. His existence seems to matter only in so far as his not being stepped on is a threat to the protagonists’ belonging to the group to whom his badge as a human says he belongs. But what if there are other questions to be asked? What might those be?

To start with, one reason I love “Hey, Little Ant” is because it lays out the unabashed hypocrisy in how we teach ourselves moral development. Let’s take some of it in slow motion.

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<sup>28</sup> Saint-Exupéry, Antoine de. *The Little Prince*. (Harcourt Brace & Co., 1971).

<sup>29</sup> Nietzsche, Friedrich. *Beyond Good And Evil*. Trans. Walter Kaufmann. (1989).

<sup>30</sup> Hoose, P. M., Hoose, H., & Tilley, D. *Hey, Little Ant*. (Tricycle Press: Berkeley, CA, 1998). Special thanks to my sister, Lara Alexander, a veteran lead kindergarten teacher, for her wise suggestion to include “Hey, Little Ant.”

“You’re a giant” our ant says, “and giants can’t know how it feels to be an ant.”

“You’ll see that you are very much like me.”

Just take those statements alone. You can and you also can’t reconcile them. Why? What is as work, what work gets done, what damage or risk is there in committing to the “sameness” of the little boy and the ant, the sameness of the little boy and the group of other boys, or the potential unknowability or impenetrability of both. The rest of “Hey, Little Ant” sustains the same tense contradiction that we tell our children in daily life and through our moral tales all the time. There are also so many good things to pull from these stories. There is grit and humility, and there are all sorts of character traits we wish to grow into and that we wish our children to develop, but there is also a core to this valiant and varied effort at being better, at being good: we can say we are hypocrites in these exercises—and there’s simply no denying that. And we can also say the core is that we actually don’t know fully what makes an ant, what makes this ant, either something to feel with and for, be indifferent to, carry home in a matchbox (cruel), or observe as he works and communicates with his fellows. Because if we don’t know that we know, then we question, and have to always orient ourselves in the world as questioning, as questioners, as the little eight-month-old boy turning round in his mother’s arm on the plane seat in front of you to inquire what of you he might discern. Our lack of certainty is part of us, part of how we fit in the world, and what makes us morally possible, morally significant. That shoe, hovering above that ant—what if that is us, *always*? What if that shoe hovering above that ant is the conversation of every moral encounter and is what defines it as such, and us as who we are?

We exercise reason, maybe, in that moment forever sustained by the cover illustration of “Hey, Little Ant,” with that little boy’s boot suspended above the pleading ant. What might we be reasoning about? We are asked, as the readers, to reason about likeness as like-able-ness and to conclude that being a bully just because we can is bad, or that our friends are no more important than the ant’s friends, so we might as well kill

him, since if we don't we might lose *our* friends, and so on. We might certainly reason after the fact of whatever we decide (again, what does that reasoning look like?), but it is not reason that grants us moral importance, stalls our foot in humility, or enables us to actually change if we make the "wrong" decision that hurts at least our own soul, if not also the ant and his colony. It is that we hold our foot up, that we don't know, "that is the crack"—in Leonard Cohen's famous words—"where the light gets in."<sup>31</sup>

What that light reveals, what I am trying to say, is that the child holding his foot up, not necessarily seeing or knowing the interior of the beingness of that ant, is what makes him and us morally important.<sup>32</sup> And this is the other important bit that I hope I have hammered home, but not to the point of beating a dead horse: it is radically critical to acknowledge our fundamental ignorance, instability, possibility of failure, infinite spiral of uncertainties, as our beginning, as the basic foundations of our moral intelligence. We are always that child holding one foot up over that ant, looking uncertainly between him and our "friends."

We may never be certain how we belong in this world. What I hope we will come to in the rest of the conversation is that to develop or to practice (because it is ongoing) a sense of belonging, we have to develop a sense of those that do, who have that innately; for that pursuit, we must take seriously that developing our senses *is* part of developing our capacities for moral engagement and belonging. It is necessary for being better at being what we are.

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<sup>31</sup> Cohen, Leonard "Democracy," *The Future*, Leonard Cohen, Columbia, (1992).

<sup>32</sup> Saint-Exupéry, Antoine de. *The Little Prince*. (Harcourt Brace & Co., 1971), P. 15.



# 9

## The Perfect Sheep

Everyone carries a room inside him. This fact can even be proved by means of the sense of hearing. If someone walks fast and one pricks up one's ears and listens, say in the night, when everything round about is quiet, one hears, for instance, the rattling of a mirror not quite firmly fastened to the wall.

He stands with chest sunken, shoulders forward, arms dangling, feet that can scarcely be picked up, his gaze fixed in a stare on one spot. A stoker. He shovels up coal and flings it into the furnace, the opening full of flames. A child has come stealing through the twenty courtyards of the factory and tugs at his apron. "Father," it says, "I've brought you your soup."

—Franz Kafka<sup>1</sup>

When a mystery is too overpowering, one dare not disobey.

—Antoine de St. Exupéry<sup>2</sup>

If it has not become obvious, I believe Saint-Exupéry words in *The Little Prince*, "what is most important is not visible to the eye," express a

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<sup>1</sup> Kafka, Franz. *The Blue Octavio Notebooks*. Ed. Max Brod. Trans. Ernst Kaiser and Eithne Wilkines. (Exact Exchange: Cambridge, 1991), P. 5.

<sup>2</sup> Saint-Exupéry, Antoine de. *The Little Prince*. (Harcourt Brace & Co., 1971).

thought, a normative thought, that is morally and educationally profound. The bond formed between strangers in this “child’s” tale, in terms of both belonging and kinds of beings, is met with love, and love that is not grown from certainty, but rather in loyalty, and loyalty based precisely on a shared, but not for identical reasons, sense of uncertainty and responsibility that ends in mutual independence, creating an experience of connected joy supported by the sustainable range of distance. The small alien prince asks a very occupied and stranded human pilot for a sheep to protect the love of his life: a tiny single rose on a tiny planet. To make a short story even shorter, the little, in love, very conscientious, alien from Asteroid B-612, asks this frantic and near-death pilot to draw him a sheep to protect this flower who he loves. He does not ask for the pilot to give him a live sheep. He doesn’t ask him to prove that sheep might even be of help. He rejects every consumingly frustrated attempt to draw the “right” sheep the pilot offers. One is too old. Another is just not right. Another is not a proper sheep but is more like a ram, one looks weak and sickly, and so on.

So, what does the pilot do and what does this strange, demanding, peculiar being in a yellow cape really need? Most importantly, what can this fable reveal to us? Reveal about us? The pilot, in his final gasp of exasperation, draws a cardboard-looking box with air-holes and says to the Little Prince: “This is only a box. The sheep you asked for is inside.” The Little Prince responds with completion: “That is exactly the way I wanted it!”

What we need to start absorbing is that both the symbols and actions of connection, love, survival, and therefor belonging that were preeminent were provided by an acknowledgment of that which *can’t* be seen. They were displayed by their distance, their shadows, their impressions, and their felt consequences.

I am suggesting that the more we integrate the messages from fables such as *The little Prince* and children’s stories, the more likely we are to learn how to be better at being, at belonging, and at living in presentness with the anxieties those such as Paulo Coelho, Kierkegaard, Kafka, or Coetzee reflect in their very adult, very sophisticated, and also intently tenderly beautiful ways.

The experience of *belonging*, as civil rights advocates who often fought to their deaths might attest if they could, is in large part about acknowledgment. What I mean is so simple it seems to disperse like a melting film over most of human life. One is admitted to a group, and one, say, belongs to a club. In the case of civil rights, humanity is that club. Those in the club acknowledge—i.e., are the gatekeepers—for beings or creatures that do or do not belong. This gate and these gatekeepers have control over matters of life and death or living life, or living a life where you are the eating or eaten, worn or wearing the skin of the exquisite or warm or edible, or the skinned, tortured, and simply counted.

There is a purpose, a reason, that *The Little Prince* comes in a fast pace close finish to the Judeo-Christian bible and to Lao Tzu's works as the most read in the world. I would no longer pretend to be an expert in it than I would in why the book of Thomas is missing from certain versions of the bible. I will say, though, that one probably not need be an expert. There is a fragile love (what love is not?); expectant faith (what faith is not?); there is a demanding trust (what trust is not demanding?) that *The Little Prince* reminds us of as part of his insistent radiance. And what is more antithetical to cruelty and more nourishing to existence than love that is recognized as fragile, faith that is acknowledged as contradictory, and trust that nestles, but unsteadily, within the aforementioned?

That the timing of the writing, conception, and publication of *The Little Prince* was toward the end of World War II is not irrelevant to its significance in this conversation. During that period, during the time in the story of the fictional flight that crashed in a fictional desert where an impossible little alien-man who insisted on triggering what is human in one of us, many real people were not just referred to as inhuman, but also as alien, and thought of and treated as pests or vermin---things that were a threat to humanity. Threatening how? Dangerous because of why? There is a difference in wars between tribes, between disputes over territorial boundaries, those over resources, and wars of humanity. WWII was a war about humanity.

There are contentious and famous psychological studies that serve up conflicting thoughts about the importance of "sameness/homogeneity of group/in-group" versus "diversity/heterogeneity of group/out-group" for



the development and sustenance of civility, trust, and compassion or the opposite.<sup>3</sup> The Prince in *The Little Prince* felt quite alone. He was afraid for his beloved rose, his only real loving company, but he felt quite alone even with her. He went to investigate, in response to this sense of concern and curiosity, how to protect her and also out of a desire to explore and try to understand his loneliness better. He did not feel as though he belonged, despite searching seven planets. In *Ethics and Children's Literature*, Claudia Mills argues that one of the most important elements of children's literature is the use of imagination as "a vehicle for transmitting values to young readers."<sup>4</sup> This is something similar to what we adults experience in fiction, which we often welcome and recognize as a "suspension of belief" and a register of "escape" from reality (from what?) that helps us understand things in a less immediate and intimidating way. But what happens in much of great children's literature isn't exactly that. Often, the narrative mechanism is built across a moat of which the reader may have never conceived, much less believed in enough to suspend that need for belief.

Rather, such stories offer the child reader a hesitation, just as our little boy in "Hey, Little Ant" hesitates with his foot, allowing him the time and space to question and to imagine. This matter is something other than the rational versus the irrational, and therein often lies part of its virtue or the lesson, the thing that is supposed to make us better.

When reading *The Little Prince*, I suspect most of us don't ask why the Little Prince appeared when the pilot's plane crashed. It is important to note the differences between happening to be in a state of wondering, being wondered about, or being put into wonder, and asking "Why was I?" Those distinctions are critical to this conversation. If we did actually mean to ask why this little prince appeared, why he appeared in need of a sheep he could not see, for a rose whose existence not even the most imaginative botanist could justify, we would miss that even the pilot

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<sup>3</sup> *Neighborhood Diversity and Social Identity Complexity: Implications for Intergroup Relations* by Katharina Schmid, Miles Hewstone, and Ananthi Al Ramiah Abstract, *Social Psychological and Personality Science* 4(2) 135–142, The Author(s) 2012 Reprints and permission: <https://us.sagepub.com/en-us/nam/journals-permissions> DOI: 10.1177/1948550612446972 <https://journals.sagepub.com/home/SPP>

<sup>4</sup> Mills, Claudia. *Ethics and Children's Literature*, (Ashgate Publishing, 2014).

ignores that there is no answer to these questions. And would answers to those questions not ruin the story? What would they ruin about it? That's where we find the satchel of gems.

"But—what are you doing here?" The pilot asks his new visitor.

"And in answer, he" the Little Prince, "replied very slowly, as if he were speaking of a matter of great consequence, 'If you please, draw me a sheep.'"<sup>5</sup>

We are swept into wonders, plural, not bound to the linear demands of a rational "why is he there, then?" Before we have time to question the absurdity of it all, Baobabs, a demanding rose, and why the Little Prince needs a drawn sheep so terribly badly, and one with a muzzle to boot, are occupying our perceptions. And then we wonder why no drawing of a sheep is the right drawing for our new little friend—for he has now become ours, as well—and he says, "You are forever responsible for that which you have tamed." In this case, it is the reader who is being tamed, but it is to the story that the reader is responsible. It is our wonder in not being able to know that is the importance of the occasion and that to which we should be present.

The answer to the Little Prince's problem for his isolated planet turned out to be, after some effort on the pilot's part, something no one could see. And we readers don't suspend our belief there; the child reading this story does not find the drawing of the non-sheep in a box to be a moral answer because he needs to justify why the pilot should've drawn a sheep to save a single rose on Asteroid B-612<sup>6</sup> (what sense would that make?). The moral relief (not belief) is in an acknowledgment of the shared unknown. The Little Prince's exclamation, "That is exactly the sort of sheep I wanted!" resolves the pilot's moral conflict (do this or that? Care, don't care?) not with rational justifications, not with clarity of explanations, but rather with imaginative possibilities for which only the unknown breathes.

The Little Prince was frustrated because he was insistent on loving and on being worthy of love, which is what made him feel like he mattered, like he belonged, and also which is what makes him matter to us. To

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<sup>5</sup> Saint-Exupéry, Antoine de. *The Little Prince*. (Harcourt Brace & Co., 1971), P. 8.

<sup>6</sup> Saint-Exupéry, Antoine de. *The Little Prince*. (Harcourt Brace & Co., 1971), P. 15.

retain that, he needed a sheep, the *perfect* sheep, in order to protect his only real companion, his beloved rose; in order to fulfill his love. That part is clear, and it is easy to be flippant about the fact that for many adults, imagination may have become something unimaginable. Though that should often be painful, we tragically become unconscious of it. We adults are notorious for this. But *The Little Prince* is a little different in the nuance of truth it spurs. It prods us at each turn and expects of us, just as innocently defiantly as the Little Prince does of the pilot, to question in order to imagine, not to question in order to answer.

It's not just that adults lack imagination to the point that not only can they have trouble connecting with others, with the world, with anything different or scary. Some might also say that the message of *The Little Prince* is about the consumption and corruption of the adult mind by temporal, superficial, and often useless fatal fetishes of the power and role of rationality, a deficit of appreciation for the consequences of the lack of imagination, which requires what psychologists call "intellectual humility."<sup>7</sup> These are elements of what most of us call being human, or, as I said above, the possibilities of the unknown—mentally and emotionally skipping stones—that the imagination allows for. I am proposing that imagination and intellectual humility are necessary for the good of humanity, for the moral importance of being human, and for our understanding of how to belong in the world.

In *The Little Prince*, trust is not easy to come by. The pilot attempts to draw multiple sheep for the Little Prince to save the Little Prince's precious and singular rose on his absurd planet, where time goes by so quickly it nearly stands still. Despite failing repeatedly in his efforts to satisfy this tiny, scrupulous, impressive, strange alien, the pilot doesn't give up because, "When a mystery is too overpowering, one dare not disobey." The pilot is a fallible creature; he is one who has crashed in his own brave responsibility to do what was only about four decades prior

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<sup>7</sup> *Cognitive and Interpersonal Features of Intellectual Humility: Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 1–21 © 2017 by the Society for Personality and Social Psychology, Inc. Reprints and permissions: <https://us.sagepub.com/en-us/nam/journals-permissions> DOI: 10.1177/0146167217697695 <https://journals.sagepub.com/home/SPP> Mark R. Leary, Kate J. Diebels, Erin K. Davisson, Katrina P. Jongman-Sereno, Jennifer C. Isherwood, Kaitlin T. Raimi, Samantha A. Deffler, and Rick H. Hoyle.

impossible to even imagine for most: to fly a fighter plane! The pilot is not insensitive, of course. He is curious. He is perceptive. Being unable to satisfy the Prince with the perfect sheep, he says, "By this time my patience was exhausted...so I tossed off this drawing. And I threw out an explanation with it. This is only a box. The sheep you asked for inside." Not surprisingly, he was surprised at the Little Prince's satisfaction.

The heroic and moral instruction for humanity is not just that the Little Prince represents a humility generated by a childlike combination of trust, determination, grit, brilliance, faith, love, and adaptability, but also because the pilot, and in some way the reader, shares in that brew as well. And so we trust the pilot, too. And isn't that incredible? *He solved the mystery—one with life or death consequences—by making a mystery.* The pilot responded to the prince's love, a virtue in this case for sure, not by giving him a little sheep that was certainly perfect and would protect what the Little Prince loved. Rather, he solved the mystery, exercised the virtue, by giving the Little Prince confidence in his *own beliefs* in what is unprovable in the abstract, and also, iffy or flickering at best in the concrete.

I think most teachers, most students of students, most parents, baby sitters, siblings, and old men and women rocking from their porches watching the neighborhood who try to live life better than they had before, would agree that the perfect sheep can't be seen. To beat it all the way home: *The Little Prince* offers us that which can help save us; what can help save that which or whom we love, is not what we can rest in certainty on; it is not necessarily what we can prove, but rather it involves faith in what we cannot see and verify, or own as a truth, about each other. *What we don't know is not necessarily a threat, it is not a project to be completed; it is what is possibly beautiful.* It is not just an aesthetic vantage point, but also moral attitude, an ethical orientation. If there were anything that could be distinguished without contention among the multitude of ways of being "good," from Judaism, Mormonism, Islam, Animism, Naturalism, Hinduism, Atheism, and other systems of belief, it is to be better, to be good, to discover whatever is good and creates flourishing (at least for some). That is the purpose of these practices,

right? And what is that “better” that is in common, if we take all of these as one and not as attempts to define divisive markers of goodness (I wear the hijab, and so I am good. I stone the rape victim of my cousin so that he can be good, and therefore I can be good. I pray and light candles at sundown, and I am good. I confess my sins; I am saved by the son of God, if I go on my vision quest I will discover how I am to be of use, to be good with and in the world)? If we take away the various kinds of rote practices that notch us as “good,” the earned or granted “whys” of the “better” (I know, that is controversial), and just focus on the *attempt* to be better, it is mysterious.

There is a reason that what “is a matter of great consequence” is something that can’t be seen. This is not only about imagination; it is also about faith-based trust. It is not only what can’t be seen that is the important bit to treasure, but also that the trust that that-which-can’t-be-seen will serve the purpose it should, and that we recognize this is a matter of faith, trust’s chimerical brother.

“Here, then,” the pilot says, as I near the end of this attempt at a book with the near end of quotes from *The Little Prince*, “is a great mystery. For you who also love the Little Prince, and for me, nothing in the universe can be the same if somewhere, we do not know where, a sheep that we never saw has—yes or no?—eaten a rose?...

Look up at the sky. Ask yourselves: Is it yes or no? Has the sheep eaten the Rose? And you will see how everything changes.”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Saint-Exupéry, Antoine de. *The Little Prince*. Trans. Katherine Woods. (Harcourt Brace & Co., 1971), p. 15.



# 10

## A Mistake

To what indifference people may come, to what profound conviction of having lost the right track forever.

—Franz Kafka<sup>1</sup>

A mistake. It was not my door, up there in the long corridor, that I opened.

—Franz Kafka<sup>2</sup>

Do not let Evil make you believe you can have secrets from it. Leopards break into the temple and drink to the dregs what is in the sacrificial pitchers; this is repeated over and over again; finally, it can be calculated in advance, and it becomes part of the ceremony.

—Franz Kafka<sup>3</sup>

Look up at the sky. Is it yes? Or is it no? Does a sheep, on Asteroid B-612, eat the irascible love of the life of a little prince who is the caretaker of that planet?

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<sup>1</sup> Kafka, Franz. *The Blue Octavio Notebooks*. Ed. Max Brod. Trans. Ernst Kaiser and Eithne Wilkines. (Exact Exchange: Cambridge, 1991), P. 5.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Kafka, Franz. *The Blue Octavio Notebooks*. Ed. Max Brod. Trans. Ernst Kaiser and Eithne Wilkines. Exact Exchange: Cambridge, (1991).

Cruelty is about control. Morality is also about control. What I am saying out loud is that in exhibiting and practicing the morally positive valence of “humanity,” mystery, lack of control, acknowledgment of the unknown must be factored in and valued. Mystery is the nemesis of control and, I am insisting, is also the condition of our being morally important and different from the rest of the natural world. I don’t know if spiders laugh at themselves or at others, but I’d bet they are not distracted, shamed, nor made prideful by that question—they don’t need to be.

There are some things we can hang on to with white knuckle grips in moral discussions. “Burning babies is bad,” as mentioned previously, is a quintessential example from any beginning ethics class. Whether or not only humans can laugh at each other or themselves, and what that means, is not.

Long ago, I was at a pool party. All the women came with boyfriends. There were kids running around and dead things of various kinds burning on a grill. Some children were with genetic parents and some were accompanied by some other adult. There was beer, concoctions most of us should not survive, and one middle-aged man on the far side of the pool almost didn’t survive. I don’t even know his name. He was a friend of a friend. But one of the girlfriends rolled him over and made him vomit. He insisted he was fine. He insisted, as they do, that he wasn’t drunk. I told him the water I was giving him was vodka so he would drink it. And so he drank water through a straw till he could sit upright. We didn’t call Emergency Medical Services. We got it right that time. Luck, common sense, or a combination of those and practical knowledge saved the gentleman. We perceived the creature in front of us and how to respond to him so he would respond to us—that includes the socio-psychological subtleties of getting him to comply, to swallow, to keep his eyes open and his tongue wagging. And we got it right. That was a good ending. But, that it also might go horribly wrong; that we might do horribly wrong when trying to be right, is one of the truths we must master if we are to understand ourselves. That is the projectile of humility I am advocating and the exposure of humanity in the dark room. I am not saying that is a safe pill to swallow.

If cruelty is, as I have said, a capable human being taking some aspect of a creature that should make it flourish as one of the kind of creature it

is, and perverting that aspect against it to do it harm, intended or otherwise, then it is fair enough to agree that kicking a good dog is cruel. We've been grasping at cruelty by gripping on to the arms of those who can be said to perpetrate it—and I've insisted those arms belong exclusively to us. When we start testing the murky waters of those who we think count as potential sufferers of cruelty, we can see that we can quickly become distracted by waste bobbing around us, the things we can't see and that feel dangerously unidentifiable. And we flail as we slide down the slippery rocks of who counts as a recipient of our failings as moral agents: in the ranks of these whack-a-mole-style resisters are subjects as diverse as impetuous gods, rational adults, embryos, fetuses, bonobos, crows, rutabagas, and if you are the poor fellow professional philosopher at my first job talk, also paper cups. What determines, and who decides what determines who can suffer our cruelties, is mental plough mud: even if you don't drown before high tide, you'll be stuck choking on the awareness that you will.

It is natural to take a prohibitively restrictive view, one that allows you to put the skids on down the slippery slope from burning babies to cutting the hearts out of artichokes and mowing and putting weedkiller on your lawn. Teachers of introductory ethics classes or even more advanced classes have in their pedagogical tool kit what they think of as a game changer, the checkmate, the stop to the idea that anything can be justified, or the relativism, stalemate, neutralizer. Even if the class is a required one and the student is mostly absent despite his attendance, we are all human (even when we are not), and something like burning live babies alive is bad and cruel. It's hard to argue against that or say it somehow "depends" or the badness of it is up for interpretation. It's accepted that this is one kind of case in which there is no moral justification (usually deployed in a freshman class when the one student insists on the coherency of relativism. For what it is worth, see Professor Thomas Nagel's *The View From Nowhere* for efficient unraveling of relativism). So let's leave it at that.

The relevant features of those who may suffer cruelties, and how they suffer them, may be less about the intrinsic qualities defining of the victim—can they speak? Can they reason? Can they worry about their children and their lives? Can they imagine and anticipate their deaths? And



far more, again, about us humans qua human beings. As Jefferey Masson says—with proper reserve, “I do not want to overstate my case, but I am suggesting that certain kinds of violence exist only in our species.”<sup>4</sup>

Let’s swivel this mirror back to us, back to kicking that good dog. What if I say it doesn’t matter to me, for our considerations right now, what the dog thinks? If it can think? What if it doesn’t matter to me if the dog is confused, uncertain, or even hurt? The fact is, I may never know these things—he is a dog, he communicates in the way dogs and creatures like them do. Who am I to presume what goes on in his canine head, heart, or gut? Does he have a gut in the way we mean it? Who am I to presume what should happen to him or should not? What he should suffer? What we should make him suffer or not? It’s that I may lose my uncertainty about these things that is important. What if what we can learn about cruelty or, conversely, the humanity of my kicking the good dog has far more to do with me than with the “good dog”? And, remember, uncomfortable as the thought may be, not being certain is crucial to our embracing our humanity, and either being better at being cruel, or being better at not being cruel.

I’m asking us to experiment. Of course, I care about what the dog feels. But I am asking about us, about what acts such as kicking a good dog show us about us, and so I’m asking if we can skim the cruelty of an action from the damage it may do, from its impact on a particular kind of victim—that is what defines each instance of it, but not what defines the fact of cruelty, the essence of cruelty. This may be a strange request. It is very specifically about our response—not just our abilities, our acquired knowledge, our capacity to abstractly reason, our actions inspired by unprocessed or self-oriented reactions: it is about our response to the existence, presence, and aliveness of another being. As the novelist Barbara Kingsolver writes in *Prodigal summer*, “Solitude is only a human presumption.”<sup>5</sup>

All creatures react to that which is not good for them, to that which is painful, in myriads of ways each of which reflects each one of us and what

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<sup>4</sup>Masson, Jeffery. *Beasts: What Animals can Teach us About Human Nature*. (Bloomsbury, USA, 2014), P. 38.

<sup>5</sup>Kingsolver, Barbara. *Prodigal Summer: A Novel*. (New York, HarperCollins Publishers, 2000).

we think of the recipient of our reactions, *if* we think there is a recipient at all that matters. If crabs do scream when poached live in boiling water, is that different or the same as when you yell, “Ow!” and start crying when you are alone and slam your finger in the car door? There are some people, sometimes, who suffer in silence—but let’s face it, their silence is not an absence of substance; rather, it is often the presence of an absence. We are here. There are some who cry out. There are some who cry out because that is the only place the pain can go: out. It’s not to anyone or anywhere, it’s just *out*. There are some who cry out because the cry is supposed to reach someone, something, else. We are never alone; we are always in a tumultuous, dynamic relation to myriads of things. Most of our moral systems are oriented around trying to address or tidy up that puzzle.

We all know the story of the little shepherd boy alone, save for the sheep, who was responsible for the sheep on the hill when he cried “Wolf!” Why was he crying? To whom was he crying? Townspeople apparently heard, because they came running and there was no wolf. The boy cried “Wolf!” again. Why? To whom? Again, the townspeople came running, and again there was no wolf. Why did they come when the boy called? We know what happened when the boy cried out again, and we know he was very upset because this time, since there really was a wolf, his words now meant something. And by meaning something, we mean that they were to create a connection, a currency, between the boy and the townspeople. But how could the townspeople have known that, since he had violated the unspoken rules of engagement about crying out in distress. Those unspoken rules reveal an underbelly of what we need from “humanity,” and the boy violated those unspoken rules that “we” or “they” will come help us in distress if we call, that we will be responded to because our making sense of his crying out at all is dependent on our believing the cry will be responded to. The townspeople essentially punished him for betraying that unspoken rule by refusing to honor, respond, or recognize the boy’s cues of belonging and mattering.

This deceptively simple cautionary tale is about more than lying. We know lying erodes the foundations of shared reality and communication. Our game here is not to join the well-worn and fascinating conversations with those such as Kant or Sissela Bok on lying, truth, private realities,

objective truths, categorical imperatives, and so on. Pardon me for asking a really dense collection of questions here, one that is neither about the foundations of trust nor the erosion that can be caused by lying, nor the ethics of lying or truth-telling (whatever that means in any one context). Children cry out for all different reasons. If our shepherd boy were lonely, he could've been calling out to hear his own voice echoing back at him. My questions are why did the boy cry "wolf!" at all? To whom? What reaction from the world was a reasonable one to expect? No doubt, to repeat Kingsolver, "Solitude is only a human presumption and every quiet step is thunder to beetle life underfoot, a tug of impalpable thread on the web pulling mate to mate and predator to prey, a beginning or an end." But that doesn't mean we recognize this presence of belonging or how to be in it.

Bad things happen to everything. As we heard from Shklar, there is a difference between natural misfortune and injustice. We don't, I don't believe, map the distinctions with nuance. Every creature experiences suffering. Every suffering has a cause. In the most mature animistic cultures as well as in the wild, infinite, and kaleidoscopic landscapes of children's minds and stories, where the wind, the draping of the moss on the trees are jury and judge, the lava core of the earth pulses as blood, and the clouds as cosmetics for the gods, the suffering of temporal lives can not only be attributed to a cause, but also to a cause that can be blamed, animated, personified, or not, and varieties of responsibility can be assigned. Why do we do that? Why is everything that is bad not treated like a hurricane or a fish mistaking your finger for a worm?

These are worlds or states of mind in which, because the rest of the world is like us and we are like it, we might say that we are not the only creatures that can be cruel—volcanoes can be described as "deceptive" and "vengeful." The rain can be petty, capricious, stingy, or come down in annihilating torrents despite knowing we often pray on our knees, dance our feet raw for it, or let the blood out of someone we love for its gifts. These narrations are not the ones most of us share these days in modern culture—unless we are religious, in which case, we often do and pretend we do not notice. These days, life is shot-gun-straight and quick; blame and responsibility are cogs dutifully rolling, their teeth linking in agreed-upon realities, sharpened by identifiable explanations for the "bad

things,” and nicked by our responses to the bad things we suffer, we see, and of which we are simply part. How do we respond to suffering, and how does how we respond to suffering unveil what we think are actors in this world, and why are they the actors? When the desert sand is blasting into our eyes and our hands are too chafed to shield them and we scream into the wind, do we expect a response? Do we expect it to wrap itself up like some suddenly remorseful Disney creation? Why in God’s name would we? Was the boy who cried wolf really crying into the wind whether the townspeople came or not?

From a different angle: What’s the difference between being hit on the head by a falling rock that got dislodged by a stray dog’s paw and being hit by a falling rock because a man threw it at you? Well, in the second case, a man threw it at you. So what? You still got hit on the head by a falling rock. What’s the difference if you are being pelted by sand by an angry lover versus a randomly vicious windstorm?

What’s the difference in our responses to a sweet dog tentatively approaching your fading camp fire to beg for leftovers, one that gets hit on the head by a rock that got dislodged by your careless foot, and a sweet dog tentatively approaching your campground for leftovers being hit on the head by a rock because your friend threw it directly at him?

Well, in the second case, your friend threw it at him. Many would venture that your friend was at least inappropriate toward the dog, who was just doing what dogs have done for thousands of years with humans, and is something that dogs are and do to flourish. They use us. We use them. They need us. We need them. Some people, myself included, would consider your rock-throwing-happy friend here bordering on cruelty because of that. But without more to the story (did your friends laugh at the whining, retreating dog? Was the rock thrown in anger? Fear? Does any of that matter? Why?), the point is, there *are* differences.

If your friend threw the rock at the dog while the dog is doing what a dog is supposed to do, while your friend was also doing what he thought he was supposed to do, then not only was your friend cruel to the dog, he was also sabotaging his own being or at least his own trajectory toward flourishing. Our flourishing or the perversion of that is inextricably symbiotic—even when the recipient of our inhumanity or cruelty doesn’t have a concept of our existence that we know of.

Having now been force-fed at least a few nibbles of humble pie about our humanity as a superiority of some kind, we still need to pick it apart like team of cooking competition panelists with crack palates. Here's a basic description of our humble pie: we are in a unique state of perpetual learning (or we should be), and that makes our relationship to nature differ from nature's relationship to itself—or so we presume. Korsgaard is of the mind that “as for the other animals...in one way, we might think they are lucky. Because they do not experience themselves as living in an indifferent world of mechanical forces, they are more at home in the world, even if it is not a very happy home.” What she means is that they don't contemplate their place in the world. They are in the world more intimately, more comfortably than we are, and they do not suffer more when the cause is indifferent to them. Leaves don't fawn over the prettiest squirrel or the most attractive caterpillar's weave. We are less comfortable, and we are fundamentally questioning because we are fundamentally incomplete in our knowledge. We are fundamentally incomplete in our knowing. The tea cup of our knowledge will always be leaking. It will never be full. That is our design.

In many Native American and American Indigenous teachings, everything in the universe is considered a related totality, a holism in which individual parts are suspended separately and as part of the whole, and mostly, each thing reverberates in knowing its relational place. These are philosophies of cycles of harmony and belonging, of collective connectedness and, therefore, responsiveness. Despite the controversies surrounding the self-proclaimed Cheyenne shaman, Hyemeyohsts Storm, he is worth quoting for this alternative perspective<sup>6</sup>:

Our teachers tell us that all things within this Universe Wheel know of their harmony with every other thing, and know how to give-away one to the other, expect more . Of all the Universe's creatures, it is we alone who do not begin our lives with knowledge of this great harmony...Our determining spirit can be made whole only through the learning of our har-

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<sup>6</sup>Hyemeyohsts (Wolf) Storm was denounced repeatedly as falsely assuming to be Native American, appropriating and profiting from Native American lore and traditions and also misrepresenting them.

mony with all our brothers and sisters...To do this we must learn to seek and to perceive.

Whether we align with those of the more holistic spiritual path or the more conventional Western path, we are being herded into believing we have a responsibility intrinsic to our ignorance—I don't mean we are responsible just because we “should be,” as a moral injunction or a directive: I mean we literally are responsive and responsible because it is our nature to be. It *is*, just as communication *is*, as raising our young *is*, as developing languages *is*, as always being a teacup half empty: our ignorance is part of what makes us flourish as the kind of creatures we are, as is the ability of the Pearlfish to survive in the bum of the Sea Cucumber (and the Sea Cucumber to tolerate that). A consequence of our ignorance is that it makes us responsible. Being responsive and responsible is not something we aim, for it is something we simply are. In responding to the world, and as it responds with us, we learn. As perpetual learning machines, we are always responding and responsible. This is a significant departure from what we are often taught by our parents, in our schools, in our courtrooms that often conflate learning, response, and responsibility, with culpability and disciplinary reaction as corrective action—wherein the latter two outweigh, overshadow, and tragically redefine the first two. “Didn't you know better?”

THWACK!

If only that question and its physical punctuation were meant, were used as an intervention, as a teaching tool, instead of only a confused and confusing punitive one.

Again, it is difficult, because the word “responsible,” and the act of being responsible, drag morally deliberate and heavy trains with them like an ancient loggerhead carries generations of parasitic sea creatures on its back—but it would be a mistake to think the loggerhead and its hitchhikers are the same creature, as it would to think that responsibility and right or good action are inextricable. For an easy and throwaway cliché, take your pick, or just leave it at “there is honor among thieves.” Such movie-worthy thieves and villains carry responsibility, can be held

responsible (usually by their own kind), but their system of responsibility is often in contrast to what we consider to be in the domain of the dominant personal, legal, public, shared morality.

Many dissect the body of the mystery creature we are working with here according to their own philosophical and moral orientations. The problem can be that we often only perceive what we are already familiar with, and *sometimes* add an extra something—something we can't quite put our fingers on. It's the umami we are after here, the moral or normative umami.

How do we understand how we are different from other creatures such that the difference makes us morally meaningful and others not? Let's go back to Korsgaard for minute. She is remarkably clear in her rendition of an answer. She sums up what Western philosophers have been saying for millennia about our confusion in terms of what we are, so we needn't take my clumsy words for it.

Science and ethics are the twin products of rationality, with a common source in a fragile intellectual achievement that rationality makes possible—the ability to grasp that the world and its other inhabitants do not exist in relation to you and your needs and interests. Knowledge and action are common to the human and animal worlds, but science and ethics are specifically human, rational modes of knowledge and action, both expressions of this conception of an independent world.<sup>7</sup>

Korsgaard is interesting for our discussion here because though she attributes rationality and learning to humans in a way that differentiates them from other animals, she breaks from much of the tradition in moral philosophy in that she doesn't do so to establish our superiority from the rest of the natural world. She does, however, root our moral capacity and our moral importance in our rationality. One interesting turn here is that she is suggesting that morality doesn't necessarily make us superior to other animals.

As someone who studies cruelty and who understands that the conditions for being cruel are uncomfortably akin to those that can make us

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<sup>7</sup>Korsgaard, Christine. *Fellow Creatures: Kantian Ethics and Our Duties to Animals*. (Oxford University Press, 2018). Published to Oxford Scholarship Online: May 2018, P. 52.

compassionate, and are the same, in the end, that make us morally valanced at all, I am appreciative of Korsgaard's acknowledgment that being morally important or valanced does not necessarily make us morally good. Pardon my sarcasm here, but the fact that is obvious to most of us who live life out in the open appears to have eluded many of the scholars. The light in library stacks often gets dim.

Korsgaard is very useful to us in that she says out loud and with pride a thought that drives the majority of Western philosophies ("continental," "analytic," and "Oxford" styles). The thought is that reasoning is the root of human morality, and that is what makes us humans different from the rest of nature, special—but does it help us belong? Or, rather, does it alienate us?

To quote Primo Levi:

After the planet becomes theirs, many millions of years will have to pass before a beetle particularly loved by God, at the end of its calculations will find written on a sheet of paper in letters of fire that energy is equal to the mass multiplied by the square of the velocity of light. The new kings of the world will live tranquilly for a long time, confining themselves to devouring each other and being parasites among each other on a cottage industry scale.<sup>8</sup>

Korsgaard very well may be right about what makes us different, and she is right that there is something about the seeming indifference of the world to itself and to us that is important, but where she is not correct, I think, is that that objectivity and reason are what create the foundations we need to be morally relevant.

For welcome companionship in my crude hesitancy about the work "reason" and "rationality" are most often meant to do morally speaking, here is James again:

Men are once for all so made that they prefer a rational world to believe in and to live in. But rationality has at least four dimensions, intellectual, aesthetical, moral, and practical; and to find a world rational to the maximal degree *in all these respects simultaneously* is no easy matter. Intellectually,

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<sup>8</sup> Levi, Primo. *The Periodic Table*. (Schocken Books, 1975, 1984), P. 178.



the world of mechanical materialism is the most rational, for we subject its events to mathematical calculation. But the mechanical world is ugly, as arithmetic is ugly, and it is non-moral. Morally, the theistic world is rational enough, but full of intellectual frustrations.<sup>9</sup>

To return to and make use of part of what Korsgaard's line of thinking suggests, I do believe that something like "distance" (which may be seen as orthogonal to something like James' "intimacy") is critical, while also maintaining that objectivity via reason, via rationality, both falsely separates us and inauthentically makes us feel as if we have a connection to each other and the world. That is, we are gaslighting ourselves with it in the end. Rationality is a young, immature, anxious (always needing to justify itself) god. And to add to that, it is governed by the youngest, least developed, part of our physical brain.

Rationality, ethical reasoning, the supposed objectivity those capacities and activities create, do offer us space away from other entities we can use to explain how we have been and are morally relevant, just not the way we usually think about it. So, one of our objectives is to accept that there is a gap of understanding here that we are trying to sustainably pry open and inhabit. The goal is not the objectivity or the absence of sense/feeling/perception that technical, verifiable, rehearsable, reliable, rational, and replicable advances are exceptional at; rather, our chimerical goal is the space in-between that can respect the expansiveness of the interiority of another entity; two, there's a difference between the substance of how we, as humans, are morally relevant and how we explain how we are morally relevant—that we matter in the world and have a choice in how we do and how we communicate that. This sounds as though it is getting heady, and it is, but no more so than when your friend rails at you because you are being too subjective when she cautions you against picking up a screaming toddler alone in the middle of a department store by saying, "You really shouldn't pick up someone else's kid!" And then you might say, "The kid was screaming. What was I supposed to do? Just leave her in the middle of the store all alone?" "But why did you pick her up? You

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<sup>9</sup>James, William. *A Pluralistic Universe*. Intro. Levinson, H. (University of Nebraska Press; Reprinted from the original 1909 Ed), P.112.

could've gotten in trouble," your friend says, and you can answer. You can explain your reasons; you might even be able justify and share them—that magic of rationality. You might say, for instance, "It is the responsibility of the community to care for those who are unable to care for themselves, or it is my duty or...." In this way, your rationality allows you to explain what you did, your reasons for doing it, but it does not go all the way to describing the substance of what you did. The sparrow that accidentally flew into the department store and was watching the scene from the rafters didn't do anything wrong by doing nothing at all other than scanning for the seed bag she already ripped open. What you did was respond to expressions of distress—that was your expression of responsibility. The shoppers who carried on with their shopping also responded. Their indifference was their responsiveness. How you explain how your responsiveness was different, can be called "ethical reasoning." It is the ability to explain via reason why an act is right or wrong, correct or incorrect. You responded to distress. You explain how or why or what.

When we respond, what are we responding to? Are we responding to something we know or something we don't know? Talk focused on rationality and reason as the sole criteria for who counts and who doesn't, about what we can know and can't, often deceptively reinforces that we are talking about something known or discoverable, something penetrable by reason and backed by research or logic. It will be no surprise that I think this is dangerous. To make use of Gaita again:

Our sense of ourselves and others is partly moral conditioned because our ways of responding to others—our joys, our sorrows, and the many forms of our attachments—are answerable to the requirement that we are responsive to their independent reality, which means that we must acknowledge them as limits to our wills of the kind we record in concepts of obligation and moral necessity.<sup>10</sup>

What we want to take from this is that "obligation and moral necessity record" something about our responsiveness to the independent reality of the other. That is, in consideration of our moral importance, our

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<sup>10</sup>Raimond Gaita, *A Common Humanity: Thinking About Love, Truth, and Justice*. (New York, Routledge, 2002), p. 52.

incompleteness of knowledge, our perforated rationality, it is not necessarily filled up by the acquisition of more information or more knowledge, it is prompted by the reality of the independence of another, the impenetrability of the other, that it is a full being that is a limit to our will and to our knowledge.

In philosophy and certain branches of psychology, this is called “having a theory of mind.” In other words, you recognize you can’t possibly know what my inner being is like but you still assume that I do have one—that there is something me, fundamentally impenetrable to you, that is me. Subjectivity. Soul. These are words that poets, scholars, and most of us use. This ineffable substance, an other, the fullness of being of an *other*, where that fullness is outside, inside, beyond, or, in other words, separate from my fullness of being, is what we are responding to when we respond to the expressions of another living thing.

I’m no more going to try to discuss here what a “theory of mind” might be nor how to get one than I am going to try to argue that paper clips feel pain. The point is that our moral importance as human beings depends on this insatiable curiosity, on this idea that as Stanley Cavell says so elegantly: “We are endlessly separate for no reason...The truth is that we are separate, but not necessarily separated (by something); that we are each of us, bodies, i.e., embodied; each is this one and not that, each here and not there, each now and not then.”<sup>11</sup>

To also rely on Gray again: “For the Greeks, the good life was living in accordance with Dike –your nature and its place in scheme of things. For the Chinese, it meant living according Tao—the way of the universe, as manifest in your own nature.”<sup>12</sup>

What do we do with all this not knowing? Scholars love their reason, we do. Ethics bowls, debates, model UN, political debates, parliaments, and courtrooms and judges. We love our arguments and rationality, and we know that no matter what branch of scholarship we are in, morality, humanity, excellence, will be on display and our work will probably not have much of an impact, but it will have normative and theoretical

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<sup>11</sup> Cavell, Stanley. *Must We Mean What We Say*. (Cambridge University Press, 1976).

<sup>12</sup> Gray, John. *Feline Philosophy and The Way of Life*. (Macmillan USA, 2020).

implications. We began with these tools because what they do can be measured and judged more easily, with uniformity, with a sense of certainty. But those of us so invested also secretly love wisdom, and we often rely on the poets, on imagination—which might include not knowing; an imperfect sheep in a box that is perfect because one can't see the imperfections, or because one can imagine the perfections.

And what in the world does all of this have to do with cruelty?

Once we accept that our vulnerability, our imagination, our perception, and the possibility of the trembling unknowable are the origins of our possibly being good, and we begin to experience that openness, then it becomes inevitable to also agree with what I've suggested earlier, that the antidote to cruelty is the same, unfortunately, as how to teach one to be better at being cruel or behave inhumanely.

According to Coetzee, I am asking—or rather, as he is quoted calling it in Chap. 2, my “problem”—is that for us to believe both that we are morally to be distinguished and also that we are obligated or motivated to exhibit this special trait with others because we are, in important ways, not different from others (human or not, how does one even approach that question without giving oneself away?). In some ways, I am having that “problem,” but that makes my point of view seem contradictory, which is a trick of superficial logic in this case: the question is not are we different or aren't we different. The question is, if we conceded only we can commit cruelty, and we conceded that cruelty is X, then what about us makes us such that that is true?

For the visually inclined, here's a kind of visualization you can play with: kaleidoscope mirrors: response and responsiveness, or, again, as Hadot says: “fencing in front of mirrors.”

Per the wisdom of the Little Prince, again:

If you were to say to the grown-ups: “I saw a beautiful house made of rosy brick, with geraniums in the windows and doves on the roof,” they would not be able to get any idea of that house at all. You would have to say to them: “I saw a house that cost \$20,000.” Then they would cry out “What a pretty house that is!”

Just so, you might say to them: “The proof that the little prince existed is that he was charming, that he laughed, and that he was looking for a sheep. If anybody wants a sheep, that is proof that he exists.” And what good would it do to tell them that?<sup>13</sup>

Mystery. Mistakes. Intellectual humility does not mean simply that we do not and may not know. There is no resignation for us in this. It means, on the contrary, there is no rest for the weary, and we are nearly always both wickedly good and wickedly bad or on the precipice of both—and maybe also cruel. We are constantly aiming to learn, brushing between the *goods* and *bads*—by any and all means necessary. Look at any child or any scientific lab for proof. We don’t need to read *The Scalpel and The Butterfly*,<sup>14</sup> a well-told and responsibly researched history of abuse and misuse of animals with the valiant excuse that we are learning how things work and don’t. This confusion is our moral landscape. I suggest that we approach it not as a problem to be completed, but as an environment to navigate.

We, like the pilot from *The Little Prince*, downed somewhere unfamiliar, maintain that there is “a great mystery. Look up at the sky. Ask yourselves: Is it yes or no? Has the sheep eaten the flower? And you will see how everything changes...”<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Saint-Exupéry, Antoine de. *The Little Prince*. Trans. Katherine Woods. (Harcourt Brace & Co., 1971), P. 17.

<sup>14</sup> Rudacille, Deborah. *The Scalpel and The Butterfly*. (University of California Press, 2001).

<sup>15</sup> Saint-Exupéry, Antoine de. *The Little Prince*. Trans. Katherine Woods. (Harcourt Brace & Co., 1971), P. 111.



# 11

## A Proposal: Learning to Perceive

*Originality*--What is Originality? To see something that has no name as yet and hence cannot be mentioned although it stares us all of us in the face. The way men usually are, it takes a name to make something visible for them.  
—Friedrich Nietzsche<sup>1</sup>

Is it yes? Or is it no? Does a sheep on a tiny planet eat the love of the life of the Little Prince of Asteroid B-612?

This is the last chapter (for now). It is not an easy one. It's my last contribution to the conversation until others join in.

Let's play it all in the magic of rewind. Let's go back to the beginning (of this book, to the preface, which is a true story). What if that firefly necklace and what it stands for had not been made? What forces or courses would have caused it to not be made? Or, if it were still made, what would have caused that to alarm all of us and strip handsome, sweet Ian of his charm and deprive me of being the queen of the fireflies for those few flickering instants?

These questions are the little siblings in a large family of questions about what we mean when we try to describe the sort of humans like the Ted

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<sup>1</sup> Nietzsche, Friedrich. *The Gay Science*. Trans. Walter Kaufmann. (Vintage Books: New York, 1974).

Bundys of our world as inhuman, and how we can call them inhuman at all. How could they not be human? Is “humanity” a spectrum? If so, why aren’t there terms for degrees between humanity and inhumanity? What remains human enough in those we can call inhuman that we can do so? That we expect, demand, or see, that they get to still belong in the domain of humanity, such that they can be charged for failing to be human because they are human? It is mindboggling. In World War II, how did those millions of ordinary humans not fight for the flickering light of their Jewish, Gay, Gypsy neighbors who were screaming and dying? Why can we not stamp them with the virtue seal of “humanity” if they had? Could we count those as human who did not participate, but who closed their windows against the putrid smell of mass deaths, who bathed off the black ashes with lavender soap? This is also the babysister question to those such as: how did we sell and still sell other humans for different kinds of slavery and beat them or kill them if they ask their captive to acknowledge his perception of their pain when they cried out against the barbs, the whips, the gags, and blows; to the questions swirling around children, teenagers that participate in killing their friends as a game. How might we address and peer through this lens of cruelty to see humanity, whether we accept cruelty as clear glass or as opaque, or perhaps cracked. The following are taboo-related: our cruelty, our ideal of humanity, and our expressions of inhumanity. They are incestuous ideas. And we, whether you are reading this and are a psychopath, sociopath, lack humanity, have humanity, are an angel of goodness, or an empath, you are all caught up in this storm of humanity. That’s why it is important to continue the conversation and hear more voices that smooth out the knots and cut through the tangles.

I want to make it clear that I am strongly suggesting that we don’t ask how not to be cruel for two reasons. Here are my reasons: first, sometimes cruelty is necessary, and second, we aren’t that good. We can’t avoid, as was pointed out in Chap. 10, making mistakes. Lots of them—and absurd ones at that. The man who stabbed a stranger eating breakfast with his daughter in his lap—an absurd scenario, but it happened. Something similar is happening now. That may sound like a strange suggestion for a book aiming toward helping us develop humanity. I get that. But I am not the judge of whether we are really the only creatures who can be cruel. To me, that’s part of the point. What we, what I, don’t know, is the

galvanizing force of our moral importance. After decades of discussion with philosophers, psychologists, comedians, magicians/con-artists, casting directors, profilers, and animal behaviorists, again I am using cruelty as a lens through which to help us understand what we innately, implicitly, and overtly claim: that being human has moral import and that we understand “humanity” as a virtuous quality—and that to do so, we need to reclaim our ignorance (as distinct from our innocence).

What we *can* do, and what I *am* suggesting, is that we seriously ask how do we become less cruel when cruelty is not a necessity? And the corollaries: first, what do we mean by the virtue of humanity? Second, how do we become better at it? We begin with acknowledging an insecurity about our belonging, a fundamental ignorance and desire to learn, and by shaking out our hands from our sweaty grip on certainty about our own knowledge of ourselves or of other creatures. I am not so rash as to propose an answer, especially after that last statement. I am, however, so ambitious, so moved by both our capacity for cruelties and our heartbreaking responses to stopping or healing them, that I have a proposition for us to bat about.

Before we engage our rationality as the head magistrate, the sovereign governor—the often-supposed king of morality, that which separates beast from man, and other such well-accompanied misinformed fantasies—before we can even act irrationally, before rationality comes into play at all, we are separate from what is in front of us, and may not know if it is good, bad, with us, against us, or none of the above. Let’s assume what is in front of us is harmful. Right before we see harm or are harmed, we:

- Feel, sense, or perceive
- React
- Respond

And then, hopefully, we

- Adapt

Perhaps you must believe we (you, me, him, her, they) don’t naturally mean harm. And the truth, shown by studies like Larry Nucci’s, establish that our instinct (when healthy) *is, indeed, not to hurt*—fantasies about villains and heroes among us aside, atomic bombs, spaceships, AKs, and



even the scalpel, the fork, the wars, and so on. I am sorry to disappoint by saying what we already know and yet continue to pretend we don't: human beings, we, as a species, are not apex predators. Siberian tigers and alligators, when attacked, don't usually run from an attack, and they rarely freeze, unless it is strategic. The same can't be said of us in the aggregate. Our vulnerabilities or weaknesses—from the psychological, intellectual, to the physical—are important to understand so that we might not get trapped in self-deception and might learn how we might do better at moral development, at beginning to develop what we are. To reference a work not yet published that both my parents and I worked on about bullying and other forms of peer-peer “soft” or “social” cruelty (no matter the age), it is always the bully's weakness or need that causes her, him, or they, to be the assholes, not solely, as it often appears, a weakness of the victim. Yes, walk and talk with confidence, as our guardians and others concerned with our safety from other humans' violence say. Don't present yourself like a victim, and you are less likely to be targeted. That is what is said in nearly every self-defense or self-rebuilding workshop there is, and I don't disagree with it at all. I do, however, want to emphasize that despite that performative truth—or perhaps because of it—bullies bully because of their insecurity about themselves, their inability to understand how to belong, and their inability to control their belonging, to get the relationships they want or need. It is also possible, and needs to be acknowledged, of course, that a victim might be using the bullies' weaknesses, to invite the poor behavior of the bully—a clever manipulation, so to speak, a perversion of an attempt at perversion.<sup>2</sup>

That kind of con or whiplash above is quite interesting because it is possibly a form of both self-preservation and cruelty and therefore an example of when cruelty is not necessarily bad. Martial arts of all sorts capitalize on the weakness of the attacker—of what should make them “good” at being a martial artist. Forensic psychology does as well. We look for the

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<sup>2</sup>This is a dangerous thing to say in the times of #me-too and in the times of Black Lives Matter movements 2018—in the times when victims who had been silenced are now speaking—and, on occasion, being heard. Nonetheless, this is a possible scenario, and comics such as Bill Burr, Mat Rife, Dave Chapelle, and others often make explicitly so. For reference, see Burr's bit on “reasons” to and not to hit a woman, available on YouTube and in his standup full performance: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4vMcGyJYves>.

weakness not because we are strong, but because someone or something else has an unknown—either we don't know something, or they don't know something, and we want to know. When put that way, it sounds like a fight. In reality, I am proposing that how we learn how to belong happens in acknowledging what we don't and can't know about the other—that is often why we fight to begin with. (“The cracks are where the light gets in.”)<sup>3</sup> As Cavell observes, “there are special problems about our knowledge of another.... Certainty is not enough.”<sup>4</sup>

Let's end as we began, by being honest. The propositions, provocations, suggestions, and observations that I have tried to offer are both difficult and simple at the same time. Much of the emphasis has been on our *sensory* and *perceptual capacities*, the means through which we *learn*, our *adaptive capacities*, and how these four aspects of our nature need to work together for humane character development.

NOTE: Please be aware that in many tribes of philosophy, social psychology, and other fields where the body's response and the body and brain's processing of input and registering of output is central, the distinctions between sensations and perceptions can be contested territory. It is not our business right here to go into that, but as a central thread left hanging, it is one of the many that needs to be addressed head on.

I am not suggesting that we need to be superheroes, or develop a seventh or twelfth or X sense—though all of that could be nice, of course, but we'll leave that to DC Comics and Disney. We need to start engaging and developing the learning capacities we already identify and agree that most healthy (note: I did not say “normal,” since what is healthy is also diverse) adults share, can deploy, and connect that to the moral valence we attribute to “humanity.” We have to push ourselves out of the hackneyed habit of restricting ourselves to “fencing in front of mirrors,” with reason as the referee. This restriction is squeezing us out on insights into how we react, with what tools, how to sharpen those tools, how to get to know the world, and therefore how we belong, to what we are relevant or not, how we respond, how we practice being human, as well as an impact on our understanding of the virtue of humanity.

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<sup>3</sup> Cohen, Leonard “Democracy.” *The Future*, Leonard Cohen, (Columbia, 1992), 6.

<sup>4</sup> Cavell, Stanley. *Must We Mean What We Say*. (Cambridge University Press, 1976). P. 258.

Including those qualities like responsiveness, listed above, what else? And what shape might our questioning look like? And importantly, what impact will it have on how we think of ourselves as moral, as responsible (responsive), and then, of course, then—do we change? What is the impact of that change—on each of us and on others?

I worked with two dog behaviorists (and one specializing in wolf-dogs, in particular, and the other in pit bulls who had been abused, neglected, or “taught to fight”) The translation of the last on that list, and the reason I put it in quotes, is because one of the things I learned is that usually what we mean is that kind of dog would usually be classified as a “dangerous” animal. However, dog aggression can very often be a result of miscommunication—of our failure to perceive what the dog is trying to communicate, what he/she means, and not helping socialize them to help them understand other dogs and other nonhumans. That is, this is a case not of a dangerous nonhuman so much as dangerous human, ignorant of the full being of the creature in front of them.

Here are two simple but possibly deadly examples of how our lack of perception (and our lack of our understanding of perception itself) can result in cruelty. Each incidence may seem mundane at first. When you see a cute dog wagging its tail high in the air, it is natural for most of us to interpret that as welcoming, as in a “happy to see me!” (see note in Chap. 7). We are likely, at least in the affluent Western world, especially the United States and places that often treat pets as accessories, or status symbols, to perceive a dog’s high-wagging tail as indicating positive excitement. Affirmation of our own value. And it *may* be just so. But it also may be a sign of overexcitement, of challenge, an indication of anxiety, insecurity, or dominance.<sup>5</sup> Our ability to pick up on and appreciate those differences in the dog’s communication can lead to a jump-up licking love fest, a bite to the face, or a “dangerous dog” designation that often gets the dog essentially tortured and killed. In this case, as in many, the danger would be us because we didn’t recognize our own ignorance. Rather than being trained toward such mines of possible insights, we are usually trained away from them. We didn’t allow space for the possibility that our immediate

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<sup>5</sup> Accessed on 6/6/2022: <https://www.vanislevet.com/over-excitement-and-exercise/>.

perception was hopeful, but likely not accurate and always carries with it the possibility of being tragic.

Our relative weakness in perceptiveness combined with our tendency to rush toward and grab at knowledge before we recognize what we are really equipped to digest and what of the other might be not so intuitive, might take a learning curve, but is important. This distance is important not just to sustain respect so that neither we nor our metaphorical “innocent dog” gets hurt; it also gives us the necessary time to remember that what appears to our relatively un-schooled primate-self to be a “happy-looking” dog may be communicating something we haven’t perceived and—this is the important part—this means that the other has a complex internal life of its own. He is a “limit to our will,” to return to Gaita’ phrase. The dog has his own language. For us to be humane, human, good to him, and to get along with him, share a world with him, we must understand that we can’t assume we understand. Our ignorance is what allows the openness that we may not be sure of ourselves in reading the dog as a happy-go-lucky, domesticated, socialized Labrador, or as an abandoned puppy-mill dog who has been in a pack, on the street, with other dogs and issuing a warning, not an invitation. Unless you don’t realize that you may not know, there is no opening to learn to perceive and then adapt to the difference and there is no real space in your world for a full Other. The result can be not just painful on many levels but also alienating, and thus is against our natural need and instinct. Recall, the children in Dr. Larry Nucci’s work communicating why it is wrong to hit another child, even if there is a rule that says you are permitted to. “Because it would hurt him,”<sup>6</sup> they say. In the child’s answer lies the rather uncomplicated virtue of our humanity. And it helps us to understand how we belong. This 4-year-old who answered “because it would hurt him” didn’t need a scalpel, a series of fancy machines, an Ethics Bowl trophy, or a successful series of articles based on studies done on primates at Emory University.

Here is a way of thinking about the logic: if we hurt him (the dog or the man on the bench next to you while you read this), we violate the ideal of our humanity (which, again, children aged four to seven years tend to demonstrate naturally, no matter the local rules and societal conventions);

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<sup>6</sup>Nucci, Larry. *Nice is not Enough: Facilitating Moral Development*. (Pearson, 2008).

if we violate the virtue of humanity by hurting or undermining him in certain ways, we alienate ourselves from him; if we alienate ourselves from him, we amplify the sense that we need to belong but keep slipping off the edge and not getting it right. According to psychologists like Nucci, this sense of belonging or not belonging is then encouraged and fostered by the reactions of whoever is around us, human or not, and<sup>7</sup> our reaction, then, must be responsive to that.

When Nucci talks about “moral domains,” he gives us breathing room to devote to expanding our perceptions, which we should take him up on. We can interpret him as talking not just about young children, as his studies focus on, but also about the progression from the sort of base-yet-profoundly accurate “don’t hurt,” as a childlike reflex, through adulthood versions of that reflex and the need it fulfills. It’s a fascinating journey. I am proposing that it is one through which we need to step with more care. We need to look for additional nuances, crumbs caught in complications, and ruthlessly take advantage of them. I rely on Nucci quite a bit because, though in the lineage of those like the foundational modern developmental psychologists, Jean Piaget, and reliant on, though at the same time radically deviating from, those like Lawrence Kohlberg, his observations welcome us to question what is on our calling card for morality beyond, or perhaps before, rationality. It is unnecessary to have a degree in psychology or to know the lineages I am referring to here, but this is the last chapter, and, by this point in the conversation, we are untying some knots, getting strung up in others, and opening up Alice in Wonderland sorts of rabbit holes.<sup>8</sup>

Approximately just between ages seven and nine, a productive discord usually takes place in flourishing human children (of most studied cultures). It is made up of that mystical space where the false-bottom floors upon which adults have agreed have emerged as the preemptive, or pre-fabricated, and self-deceiving codified markers of reality. Imagination and

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<sup>7</sup>Nucci does not deal with nonhumans in this piece, but he is often cited by those who discuss the nearly universal negative reaction to harm-based “violations,” at least among primates. See scholars such as Claudia Rudolf von Rohr, Judith M. Burkart, and C. P. van Schaik for links between E. Turiel and L. Nucci’s work on “domain theory” as applied to nonhuman primates.

<sup>8</sup>For more about the moral development research lineage I am talking about, please refer to Appendix B: Readers Guide’s section on “Moral Development.”

reason play well together to create the unimaginable (since now there are rules to provide structure)—and the burgeoning of that in which we ground most varieties of morality: we are separate from the other mysterious beings, and that, in turn, leads to a foundational concept for a morality that is not based in certainty, but in mystery, and therefore responsiveness and learning. According to Nucci:

By approximately six to eight years of age, children begin to construct a set of moral understandings that compellingly tie the actions of one person to the reaction or responses of the other. By age ten, these notions of reciprocity are generally consolidated into notions of more “necessity,” resulting from a moral logic that requires equal treatment of persons.<sup>9</sup>

Granted, this understating can be reduced, especially by the end of the quote, to a transactional or “tit for tat” sort of rudimentary, exchange-based, but unstable, stiffness. I use it to backlight the importance of organic and adaptable responsiveness, of guidelines that are in a shifting and perpetual state of emergence because those are what we can honestly keep in common with one another. That we need to create something to keep in common—as we tried to make work with religious devotion and salvation to reason-based-certainty—indicates, I am suggesting that there is a lot we *don't* have or don't recognize as having in common; there is a puzzle and it is not to be solved, but explored, respected, and never finished. Learning to respond better, to see, feel, touch, be touched, to hear, to be aware one is being heard and to register how that might sound to another, to discover the senses about the world to which each of us is attuned, and those to which each of us is not or may be less or more so; understanding the fullness of the singularity and wholeness of being of another is what I am after here. We won't get there. And that's kind of the point. But I think we need to think of moral systems as always *trying*, not as tidy, peer-reviewed, double-blind tested prescriptions. There are too many moving parts for that. The first aim is to create or to discover common ground, which begins easily enough since one thing we have in common as human beings is that we all need to learn to find ways of belonging

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<sup>9</sup>Nucci, Larry. *Education in the Moral Domain*. (Cambridge University Press, UK, 2001), P. 87.

in the world such that we can move forward, adapt and learn collectively, and support our native imperfection and uncertainty; second, respect the wholeness, the limit to our will of another entity, human or not; third, develop capacities of perception that we already acknowledge are in our tool kits, and, finally, acknowledge that rationality, objectivity, as the fall-backs are often reductive and demoralizing to each one of us, to other creatures, human or nonhuman, with whom we interact and against which we measure ourselves and trace our reflections. If we can only feel a sense of belonging in our world by creating false narratives in which a codified “moral logic” and false-bottomed certainties are the mechanism for belonging, then we have already given up our humanity, our chance to belong more authentically.

In the kind of human-all-too-human mistake we have all made, my friend “rescued” an orphaned wood duck. She fed it, gave it toys that bobbed in the bathtub, let her five-year-old daughter name it. It died within seventy-two hours. It died because she fed it when it chirped, thinking it was hungry. It died because it needed to eliminate and could not without stimulation; she fed it the wrong food and in the wrong amounts. Her intentions were gracious. They were loving. But her senses about what she thought she should do, what she thought she knew of what she knew and of this creature, blinded her and clashed with what the reality was—the *duck's* reality. My suggestion is that we take what senses we have, that we do not confuse certainty or objectivity with full knowledge, that we learn to learn better, and that, most importantly, we learn that our moral value, the virtue of humanity, is that we are always learning.

I'll end this part of the conversation with a quote from Cavell, with the hope that all of this inspires more conversation and more learning.

You can train someone to read complex poems with sufficient complexity, there is always something to say about them. But it is not clear what would count as training someone to read a lyric. You will have to demonstrate how it resonates in the voice, or hauls at it, and you perhaps will not be able to do that without undergoing the spiritual instant or passage for which it discovers release (that is, unable to say what it means without meaning it then and there); and you may or may not be able to do that during a given

morning's class, and either eventuality is likely to be inopportune in that place.<sup>10</sup>

So, what I mean to begin the next part of the conversation with is that learning involves being present, being adaptable, and being willing to respect the fullness of being, the internal labyrinth, of another and oneself, and yet to still connect. And our moral development, as human beings, I propose is dependent on that understanding of belonging.

To almost end with that long passage from Nietzsche's *Untimely Meditations*:

A human being may well ask an animal: 'why do you not speak to me of your happiness but only stand and gaze at me?' The animal would like to answer and say: "the reason is I always forget what I was going to say"--but then he forgot this answer too, and stayed silent: so that the human was left wondering. ...But he also wonders at himself, that he cannot learn to forget but clings relentlessly to the past...and it is a matter for wonder: a moment now here and then gone...nonetheless returns as a ghost and disturbs the peace of a later moment. A leaf flutters from the scroll of time, floats away--and suddenly floats back again and falls to the man's lap. Then the man says, 'I remember!' and envies the animal, who at once forgets and for whom every moment really dies."<sup>11</sup>

We are learning creatures, and we value humanity. I urge us to value that the roots of that humanity continue to reach because we don't quite know how or when or where or to whom or what we belong, and those are things we are privileged to be able to learn. A sparrow cannot come to my aid if I have fallen. I, however, can learn to come to its aid. Or, I can get it wrong and learn more about both my hubris, myself, and the sparrow. That's the price of being a learning creature.

**End Note:** I am often criticized for not having an answer, for provoking questions and not providing enough explanation. I have tried to justify that approach as best I can, for those who are dissatisfied. And so, at the end of editing this final version, I again expressed my worry of to one of

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<sup>10</sup> Cavell, Stanley. *Must We Mean What We Say*. (Cambridge University Press, 1976).

<sup>11</sup> Nietzsche, Friedrich W, and R J. Hollingdale. *Human, All Too Human*, (Cambridge University Press, 1996).



my dearest friends and mentors, Arnold Davidson. I will quote what he said directly because he says it far better than I could: “There *is* a big payoff---this should help people learn how to ask new questions. And the value of philosophy lies more in its questions than in its answers. That is one of the things I like about Talmudists; they always say that a new question is more valuable than a new answer.” My biggest dream for this strange, unconventional conversation is that he is right, and that this book, those referenced in it, the subjects that come up in it, do provoke new questions, publicly and privately. If those questions lead to more questions, to transformative and evolving practices, and in those journeys and those conversations we find some quelling of our anxieties and what harm they can motivate us to commit, some nuances in what we are to each other, to the world, and if we are inspired to ask, to seek, to be present—to allow for collaborative imagination, private intuitions, giddiness in infinite unknowns and possibilities, like approaching a glittering pristine sandbox on the first day of school, then that is all I can hope for.

# Appendix A: Poems and Prose—Cruelty Through the Lyrical, Visceral, and Metaphorical

In the originally intended version of this manuscript, each chapter was preceded by a poem, poetry excerpt, or prose excerpt that was carefully chosen to reflect, challenge, or otherwise resonate with the themes of that chapter. This appendix provides the poem, poetry excerpt, or prose excerpt that was originally designed to come before its chapter. Current standards and conventions in scholarly and commercial work prohibit the placing of them prior to a chapter for both printing-quality control and the fear they are a distraction. This last is real and important to mention, given the riptide of questions about the choices made in the scholarly world concerning which tools are appropriate for which projects that run throughout our discussion.

According to the dictates of cautionary convention, using works from arts or disciplines not deemed scholarly enough may dull, not sharpen, the audience's critical analysis (or may be considered amateurish tactics by the author)—even if, as said is true of this work—much of said work's purpose is to question some of the standards and conventions of what graces one effort with the title “scholarly” and not another, and, as importantly, is to question whether or not such standards and conventions are appropriate for all topics. Our approaches to some topics, and some of the “big” ones in particular, need to be enriched by challenges from

seemingly far afield, and we need to be able to yell to each other from the theaters of the stage to those of the ivory towers, laboratories, and sometimes to capture in pictures what one was trying to express through words: such multidimensional angles might inspire richer experiences for us.<sup>1</sup>

This is an unconventional book because its topics are unconventional. I very seriously ask a favor of the reader: take this into consideration. In that effort, please read the preface (not everyone does!), and please read the poem/excerpt prior to or immediately after reading the chapter to which it belongs (or preferably, both).

## Chapter 1

### Excerpt from “The Wreck of Time: Taking Our Century’s Measure”

—Annie Dillard

*II*

*On April 30, 1991*

--

*on that one day*

--

*138,000 people drowned in Bangladesh. At dinner I mentioned it to my daughter, who was then seven years old, that is was hard to imagine 138,000 people drowning. “No,” it’s easy,” she said. “Lots and lots of dots, in blue water.”*

*Who were the people Ted Bundy killed?...*

*The Trojans likely thought well of themselves, one by one; their last settlement died out by 1,100 B.C.E. Who were the people Stalin killed, or any of*

*the 79.2 billion of us now dead, and who are the 5.8 billion of us now alive?*

*“God speaks succinctly,” said the rabbis.*

*Is it important if you have yet died your death, or I? Your father? Your child? It is only a matter*

---

<sup>1</sup> Please note that some excerpts are followed by questions or cursory commentary.

*of time, after all. Why do we find it so supremely pertinent, during any moment of any century on earth, which among us is topsides? Why do we concern ourselves over which side of the membrane of topsoil our feet poke? “A single death is a tragedy, a million is a statistic.” Joseph Stalin, that connoisseur, gave words to this disquieting and possibly universal sentiment. How can an individual count? Do we individuals count only to us other suckers, who love and grieve like elephants, bless their hearts? Of Allah, the Koran says, “Not so much as the weight of an ant in earth or heaven escapes from the Lord.” That is touching, that Allah, God, and their ilk care when one ant dismembers another, or note when a sparrow falls, but I strain to see the use of it...<sup>2</sup>*

## Chapter 2

### Excerpt from “The Measure of our Days,” the Third Volume of *Auschwitz and After*, Charlotte Delbo’s Memoir on Surviving Auschwitz

*You’d like to know  
Ask questions  
But you don’t know what questions  
And don’t know how to ask them  
So, you inquire  
About simple things  
Hunger  
Fear*

---

<sup>2</sup>©Dillard, Annie. “The Wreck of Time: Taking Our Century’s Measure.” Harper’s. 296, no. 1772. (January 1998).

*Death*

*And we don't know how to answer  
Not with the words you use  
Our own words  
You can't understand  
So, you ask simpler things  
Tell us for example  
How a day was spent  
A day goes by so slowly  
You'd run out of patience listening  
But if we gave you an answer  
You still don't know how a day was spent  
And assume we don't know how to answer*

*You don't believe what we say*

*Because  
If what we say were true  
We wouldn't be here to say it.  
We'd have to explain  
The inexplicable  
explain  
why Vivian who was so strong  
died  
and I did not.  
Why Mounette  
So passionate and proud  
Died  
And I did not  
Why Yvonne  
The undaunted  
And not Lulu  
Why Rosie  
Who was innocent and had no idea  
Why one lived  
Or died  
Why Rosie  
And not Lucie*

*Why Mariette*  
*And not Poupette*  
*Her younger sister*  
*A wisp of a girl*  
*Why Madeline*  
*And not Helene*  
*Who slept by her side*  
*Why why*  
*Because Everything there is inexplicable...*  
 —Charlotte Delbo<sup>3</sup>

## Chapter 3

### Musee des Beaux Arts

*About suffering they were never wrong,*

*The old Masters: how well they understood Its human position: how it takes place/While someone else is eating or opening a window or just walking dully along;*

*How, when the aged are reverently, passionately waiting/ For the miraculous birth, there always must be/ Children who did not specially want it to happen... /Breughel's Icarus, for instance: how everything turns away quite leisurely from the disaster; the ploughman may /Have heard the splash, the forsaken cry, But for him it was not an important failure; the sun shone As it had to on the white legs disappearing into the green /Water, and the expensive delicate ship that must have seen/ Something amazing, a boy falling out of the sky, /Had somewhere to get to and sailed calmly on.*

—W.H. Auden<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>Delbo, Charlotte. *Auschwitz And After*. Trans. Rosette Lamont. Yale University Press. © 1995, P. 277.

<sup>4</sup>Auden, W.H. "Musée des Beaux Arts" (1938) in *Collected Poems*, E. Mendelson ed. (Random House, 1940), P. 179.

**Cursory Commentary:** There are different ways of being indifferent (please also see Coetzee’s commentary on the topic in our exchanges both in this manuscript and continued on my website under the “Coetzee and Schein” tab). The chapters so far touch on some of them, as do the paired poems, but each has a distinct perspective. There are different consequences for each kind of indifference, different judgments, implied or overtly expressed by the references, different language, style, and movement of the poetry that can be made, and different reasons for interacting with indifference. See endnote about Kitty Genovese and the “bystander” syndrome or “diffusion of responsibility.” On the website, your questions about what questions we need to ask about indifference, what kinds we can identify, and any other thoughts would be most welcome. Please see the comments section under <https://maggieschein.com/coetzee-and-schein/> to contribute to the conversation. Please also feel free to add any other sources that you think offer new insights into how to sense, perceive, feel, think, discern, and judge about indifference and its relationship to cruelty and to our understanding of our place in the world—from sources such as visual arts, music, reports of tragedies, and experimentation that causes suffering but is justified for the greater good.

## Chapter 5

### Me viene, hay días, una gana ubérrima

*There are days an exuberant political need to love  
comes over me, to kiss affection on its two cheeks,  
And from afar comes a demonstrative desire,  
Another desire to love, willingly or by force,  
The one who hates me, the one who tears up his paper,  
The little boy, the one who cries for the man who was crying,  
The king of wine, the slave to water,  
The one who hid in his wrath,  
The one who sweats, the one who shakes his person in my soul.  
And I want, therefore, to adjust  
The braid of the one who speaks to me; the hair of the soldier; the light of the great  
one; the greatness of the little one.*

*I want to iron directly  
A handkerchief for the one who cannot cry  
And, when I am sad or happiness hurts me,  
To mend the children and the geniuses.*

*I want to help the good one be a little bit bad,  
And I must be seated  
To the right of the left-handed, and to respond to the mute  
Trying to be useful to him  
Where I can, and I also really want  
To wash the lame man's foot,  
And to help the nearby one-eyed man sleep.*

*Oh love, this one, mine, this one, the world's,  
Interhuman and parochial, advanced in age.*

*It comes to me in time,  
From the foundation, from the public groin,  
And, coming from afar, makes me want to kiss  
The singer's scarf  
And the one who suffers, to kiss him on his frying pan,  
The deaf man, on his cranial murmur, undaunted;  
The one who gives me what I forgot in my breast,  
On his Dante, on his Chaplin, on his shoulders.*

*I want, finally,  
When I am at the celebrated edge of violence,  
Or my heart full of chest, I should like  
To help the one who smiles laugh,  
To put a little bird on the back of the wicked man's neck,  
To take care of the sick by angering them,  
To buy from the vendor,  
To help the matador kill—terrible thing—  
And I would like to be kind to myself  
In everything.*

—Cesar Vallejo<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Vallejo, César. *Poesía Completa*. (University of California Press, 1978). (Trans. Corrin Tanner © 2022. Trans. Unpublished as of Oct 3, 2023).



**Cursory Commentary:** In the face of not just absurdity, but emotionally, personally, privately laden absurdity, decision-making is impossible, no? And it is also unavoidable, or at least we can always be accused of it. So, when so much is at stake, your own humanity, your sense of your tribe or lone-wolf nature, what are the options of response in the face of the paradoxes, contradictions, surreal absurdities and the desire for solid ground, for certainty, for answer.

## Chapter 7

### The Tyger

Tyger! Tyger! Burning bright  
 In the forests of the night,  
 What immortal hand or eye,  
 Could frame thy fearful symmetry?  
 In what distant deeps or skies,  
 Burnt the fire of thine eyes?  
 On what wings dare he aspire?  
 What the hand, dry see the fire?  
 And what shoulder, and what art,  
 Could what the sinews of thy heart?  
 And when thy heart began to beat,  
 What dread hand? And what dread feat?  
 What the hammer? What the chain?  
 In what furnace was thy brain?  
 What the anvil? What dread grasp?  
 Dare its deadly terrors clasp?  
 When the stars threw down their spears,  
 And water'd heaven with their tears,  
 Did he smile his work to see?  
 Did he who made the Lamb make thee?

Tyger! Tyger! Burning bright  
 In the forests of the nights,

What immortal hand or eye,  
Dare frame thy fearful symmetry?  
—William Blake<sup>6</sup>

## Chapter 10

### Excerpt from “Keaton”

[...] I was made at right angles to the world  
And I see it so. I can only see it so.  
I do not find all this absurdity people talk about.  
Perhaps a paradise...a serious paradise where loves hold  
Hand and everything works.  
I am not sentimental—  
—Elizabeth Bishop<sup>7</sup>

## Chapter 11

### Excerpt from *Matthew 13*

Though seeing, they do not see; though hearing, they do not hear or understand.  
**14** In them is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah: ‘You will be ever hearing but never understanding; you will be ever seeing but never perceiving.  
**15** For this people’s heart has become calloused;  
they hardly hear with their ears,  
and they have closed their eyes.  
Otherwise they might see with their eyes,  
hear with their ears,  
understand with their hearts

---

<sup>6</sup> Blake, William. *Songs of Innocence and of Experience: The Tyger*. ca. 1825. (The Metropolitan Museum of Art: Rogers Fund, 1917).

<sup>7</sup> Bishop, Elizabeth. *The Collected Prose: Elizabeth Bishop. Edgar Allan Poe and The Jukebox*; “Keaton.” (©Ferrari, Straus, and Giroux. 1984).

and turn, and I would heal them.

**16** But blessed are your eyes because they see, and your ears because they hear.

**17** For truly I tell you, many prophets and righteous people longed to see what you see but did *not see it, and to hear what you hear but did not hear it...*<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> *Bible, King James*. Mathew: Chapter 13, Isiah: “You will be ever hearing but never understanding; you will be ever seeing but never perceiving. For this people’s heart has become calloused; they hardly hear with their ears, and they have closed their eyes.”

## Appendix B<sup>1</sup>: The Reader's Guide: Some Basics, Some Notes, and Where to Look Next.

PLEASE SEE: <http://maggieschein.com/appendix-b-readers-guide/>

**Note:** This is meant to be an **incomplete, evolving, online**, set of resources and notes. There is no finalized print or online version of this that exists as of 10/10/2023. What appears here (whether you are viewing this in the first print or online editions) is a small, separate, sampling of a component of a companion project to *Cruelty: A Book About Us*, involving resources for research, practices, and more conversations. Part of the conversation will continue on my website, including contributions from others, and part will continue in a follow-up practical companion book, tentatively titled, *The Lonely Species: Us, Cruelty, and Troubling our Moral Waters* (under review as of 12/24). This is intended to help readers interested in going down many of the rabbit holes or areas of investigation that are brought up over the course of the conversation.

This section includes references to works and authors loosely generalized into categories of scholarly disciplines and themes as they appear in or relate to those in *Cruelty: A Book About Us*. The sections are intended to serve as basic gestures to the subjects, themes, and scholars in their

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<sup>1</sup> Special gratitude to Arnold I. Davidson, Sheena Kang, David C. Kidd, and Edmund Meinhardt, who each contributed to much of the information in this section.

academic homes as they are relevant to the subjects that orbit around the idea of “cruelty.” This addition to the book is meant to serve as a general reference, to help guide the reader or any instructor who uses the book but might not be familiar with all the tendrils it reaches out towards. It is not intended to serve as a comprehensive or ordinary literature review, as one might find in a more traditional scholarly paper or academic book. Though fundamentally grounded in scholarly research, *Cruelty: A Book About Us* braids many disciplines from literature, philosophy, ethics, moral psychology, developmental psychology, social psychology, law, history, and the humanities in general. It is a book that is meant for us all, and so for those curious about particular avenues that are brought up, the Reader's Guide attempts to provide brief, editorial, introductions. I've chosen authors, themes, and works that I think were particularly influential for this book and that also represent important aspects of the subject that extend beyond and differ from the book.

**—Please see my website for additions, corrections, notes, and more resources regarding the relevant subjects, disciplines, and thinkers.**

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