

Cruelty may be a self-control device against sympathy

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Abstract:

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

Text

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

I doubt if many human hunters are rewarded by evidence that their prey is suffering. In the television show *Northern Exposure* the protagonist was introduced to bird hunting, and said afterwards, "I loved the shooting; it was the dying I couldn't stand." Habitual

hunters can obviously stand the dying more, but there is little evidence that they glory in it. Primitive Amerindian hunters were not necessarily any more sadistic. Sometimes they would perform ceremonies before a hunt to apologize to the spirits of the intended quarry. On the other hand, their enjoyment of torturing captives was clearly on a par with that of the ancient Roman mobs at the Coliseum (Adair, 1736/2005). My point is that the urge to do injurious things while disregarding or actively avoiding attention to the suffering of victims is different from the urge to seek out and even enhance this suffering—although the disregarding might sometimes be a reaction against the latter urge. Killing in war can be intensely pleasurable (Bourke, 1999, pp.1-31; Grossman, 1995, p. 115) and is more apt than killing in hunting to intentionally inflict suffering, but most infantrymen throughout history have not even fired their weapons at the enemy (Grossman, pp. 17-39). Even in the euphoria of combat the thrill is not usually that of cruelty but of winning a mortal contest or of the power of wielding a “magic sword... all you do is move the finger so imperceptibly, just a wish flashing across your mind... and poof! In a blast of sound and energy and light a truck or a house or even people disappear (William Broyles, quoted in Bourke, 1999, p. 2).” The simultaneous perception that the “mutilated and dead [are] sad and beastly (Bourke, 1999, p. 21)” does not enhance the high for most soldiers, and indeed soon spoils it.

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

I have argued elsewhere that empathy, the exercise of your TOM, is itself rewarding (Ainslie, 2001, pp. 161-186, and 2005; see also my other commentary in this issue [listed as “Ainslie, 2006”]). My basic argument is that emotion is a goal-directed (rather than conditioned) process that largely serves as its own reward, but that entertaining emotions at will attenuates them into daydreams because the urge to anticipate the high points undermines any longing or suspense that might make them even moderately intense. You therefore learn to make adequately rare and surprising external events the occasions for emotions. Events interpreted through the models of other people built by your TOM usually turn out to be the most satisfactory ones for occasioning emotions.

Emotions cannot be divided strictly into positive and negative, because all emotions must have a fast-paying reward component in order to have their characteristic vividness. Some emotions are usually aversive because initial attention to them leads to longer term inhibition of reward, but even fear and grief can be cultivated in ways that make them pleasurable, for instance in horror movies and tear-jerkers. Anger is often called

negative, but it shares many psychometric and neurophysiological properties with the more obviously positive emotions (Lerner *et.al.*, in press). I agree with Nell that cruelty need not involve anger (sect. 3.4), but I have argued that, like anger, it often becomes preferred despite its spoiling effect on other rewards because it repairs a felt vulnerability (Ainslie, 2001, pp. 183-186). As with anger, there are people who cultivate cruelty habitually, presumably in default of richer sources of reward, but occasional cruelty seems to be common to everyone. It is the commonplace examples that best differentiate negative empathy from Nell's examples of predation: the pleasures of seeing the boor get his comeuppance, the driver who cut us off stopped by the police, and the pretensions of the poseur punctured, as well as less respectable examples like *schadenfreude* and our minor persecution of people whom we hope we do not resemble.

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

Notes

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

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