

Cruel Intentions: An exploration of cruelty in Nietzsche's model of human psychology

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Abstract

Cruelty as an expression of the 'will to power' is discussed in relation to an opposing theory of human motivations, which states that the ultimate goal of all human endeavours is the pursuit of pleasure and the avoidance of pain. The battle line is drawn between Nietzsche and the psychological hedonists and consists of an analysis of sadomasochistic subjectivity. Based on the superior explanatory prowess of Nietzsche's will to power, I argue that although the hedonists are not wrong in their model of sadomasochism, their model fails to explain *why* people derive enjoyment from the infliction of pain either upon themselves or others. The will to power is Nietzsche's answer to why people enjoy pain and for this reason, his psychology is deemed more inclusive than the hedonist's.

Keywords: Cruelty, Nietzsche, psychology.

Introduction

As part of his philosophical project Nietzsche prescribes the controversial thesis of a 'will to power' as the universal and psychological principle underlying *all* human motivation and behaviour. Scholars vary widely in their interpretations of the will to power, but for the purposes of this paper, I am working under the assumption that it is a central tenet of Nietzsche's psychological theory of

man. The will to power is defined by Nietzsche as 'the truly basic life-instinct, which aims at *the expansion of power* and in so doing...risks and sacrifices self-preservation...the will to power...is simply the will to life.' (Nietzsche, 1882, §349) The concomitant notion of cruelty implicit in Nietzsche's theory elevates the will to power above and beyond the major opposing theory of human strivings that captivated the nineteenth century imagination and still beguiles the minds of psychologists today; the theory of psychological hedonism.

Psychological hedonism purports that all action is motivated by the pursuit of pleasure and the avoidance of pain. Jeremy Bentham, an eighteenth century Utilitarian philosopher and hedonist, proposed that nature governed mankind with two sovereign masters, *pain* and *pleasure* (Gregory, 1998, p. 308). In Bentham, we find a precursor to the Freudian division of the human instincts into *Eros* and *Thanatos*.¹ Nietzsche, however, confronts the hedonists with an inadequacy in their account: positing the pursuit and enjoyment of pleasure alongside the avoidance of pain does not allow for the many instances where people actually enjoy inflicting pain upon themselves or others.

Nietzsche goes to great lengths to reveal examples of human relations that first and foremost typify his notion of the will to power, and that highlight the shortfalls of peering through a purely hedonistic lens when analyzing the human psyche. We can trace the development of these observations back to Nietzsche's early philologico-philosophical writings, such as *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872), evolving through his middle works *Human All-too-Human*, (1878), *Daybreak*, (1881), and *Beyond Good and Evil*, (1886) and into his later writings, of which *On the Genealogy of Morality* (1887) features prominently. Principally, I will consider the dispute between Nietzsche and the hedonists; the battle-lines will be drawn around the notion of sadomasochistic subjectivity. The character studies in Nietzsche's portrayal of man's psychology will be examined in relation to the phenomenon of cruelty, which is strongly reinforced by classical Freudianism. Such an overview of the role of cruelty in Nietzsche's psychology is unlikely to remain true to the complexity of his thought. Nevertheless, what Nietzsche has to say on the matter is too important to neglect on that basis. That we are inherently cruel, either to ourselves or to others is for Nietzsche an

¹ In classical psychoanalytic terminology, man is beset by the fundamental conflict of the *life* and *death* instincts, which can be seen in the earliest libidinal strivings of the infant (exquisitely portrayed by Melanie Klein) and was thought to be the root problematic in the various manifestations of psychopathology.

expression of an innate will to power, which we therefore ought to harness in the service of our own self-expression and the expression of higher cultural goals. Freud coined this 'sublimation', though Nietzsche emphasised the ascetic ideal: the necessary deprivation of the individual by the individual himself, a kind of self-directed cruelty that looks like masochism, through a psychological lens.

Essentially, Nietzsche is questioning an Epicurean claim: that the avoidance of pain is the *highest* motive of human endeavours. The hedonist's second claim, that human beings concurrently seek pleasure as well as avoiding pain, would seem to be intuitively coherent: pain is not pleasurable, *unless* it is someone else's pain and not my own. Pleasure is sought after and may well result from my infliction of pain on someone else, but Nietzsche also questions this. The primacy of the 'pleasure-principle', does not rule out the possibility that someone may enjoy seeing, or making another suffer: as long as pain is avoided, pleasure may prevail, but this account fails to explain the principle that Nietzsche so expertly identifies.

Sadomasochistic Subjectivity

Self-inflicted cruelty is the definition of the 'ascetic ideal' for Nietzsche. Initially we are faced with a paradox: how can something be both painful *and* pleasurable? With an analysis of the paradox embodied in the characterology of the ascetic priest, Nietzsche manages to do something that the hedonists cannot. He tells us that the avoidance of pain is not primary in the psychology of sadomasochism where pain is actively sought as a source of pleasure. Although this is accounted for by the hedonists under the programme of the pleasure-principle, they cannot explain *why* it is so pleasurable to be cruel. To say that beating another person in the head is pleasurable or that abusing oneself can be pleasurable does not explain *why* these cruelties are pleasurable. This is where Nietzsche's theory of the will to power surpasses the hedonistic account: it tells us *why* people enjoy being cruel. According to Nietzsche, the deepest motive of all human behaviour is the primary pleasure resulting from the acquisition, increase and exertion of one's power over and above the power of the other and/or oneself.

The phenomena of cruelty do not represent a challenge to psychological hedonism *per se* but they do beg the question as to *why* people take pleasure in cruelty in the first place. No one will deny

the existence of cruelty, but from a hedonistic viewpoint, cruelty is seen as an aberration or perversion; a deviation from the norm in which the desire for one's own happiness comes at the expense of causing pain to others. As long as we can avoid these disruptions, we may return to a benign existence where cruelty and pain can be banished and pleasure will reign. Nietzsche takes an opposing viewpoint and tries to convey that cruelty is not an aberration, but *a derivative of a central human drive*, rooted in the most primary impulses of human nature: the will to power.

Ressentiment/Resentment

The vicissitudes of the instincts and their expression in human nature is not a homogenous state of affairs for Nietzsche and there are at least six characters that can be deciphered in his *Genealogy* (1887). Ridley (1998) offers a valuable study of these characters, most pertinently, the 'Noble', the 'Slave', the 'Philosopher' and the 'Priest'. The dynamic interrelations between these characters are complex and sometimes contradictory, the noble types are stronger than the slaves, powerful, dominant and good. The slaves on the other hand are traumatized as their instincts and freedom are denied: what is repressed, i.e. the aggression underlying the resentment felt towards their captors, turns inward and becomes a source of unassailable suffering. This burgeoning subjectivity of '*ressentiment*' felt by the ignoble types culminates in the 'slave-insurrection', which sets an important precedent in Nietzsche's thematization of morality and the will to power, and could be viewed as a prototype of the sort of re-evaluational project he attempts with his *Genealogy* (1887). Ridley (1998) called this slave-revolt in morality the verbal revenge against the powerful, which, he adds, does not resolve the core problem of the slave's suffering. The priest seizes the opportunity to exploit the slaves' *ressentiment* by convincing them of their sinfulness and reminding them of the possibility of their redemption in the eyes of God and by virtue of his humility. There is an allusion here to the prospective divine-retribution to be dealt against the proud and noble types who are responsible for the suffering of the slaves. The question of what to do about this inescapable suffering, however, invokes many responses other than the asceticism of the priest.

The prescription of the philosopher and arguably of Nietzsche himself is that we must attempt to hold our suffering to account and value ourselves, and our lives, *because of it*. With this move, Nietzsche performs an ascendant revaluation of cruelty within the libidinal economy of man's

psyche. Exposing the tensions in the libidinal economies of a diverse ensemble of characters, Nietzsche offers a more powerful explanatory theory of human strivings than the hedonists. Nietzsche recognized that there is no singular configuration of the human personality, and demonstrated how people, in varying socio-historical circumstances, have different ways of managing the will to power. He nonetheless implies that cruelty is something of a ubiquitous phenomenon, common to all types, only exacted or experienced uniquely according to the limitations of each character's position in the rank order of society. We can conceive of the cruelty of the noble types in enslaving the weak; the thwarted cruelty of the resentful slaves that the ascetic priest cruelly subverts to his cause; or the cruel realisation of the philosopher's prescription to exonerate our suffering. It is of course, the self-directed cruelty, resorted to by the ignoble types and prescribed by the ascetic priest, that stands out as the most interesting example that Nietzsche gives of a manifestation of cruelty within human psychology. This sets his analysis in contradistinction to that of the hedonists.

The Metaphysics of Tragedy

Paying close attention to the second and third treatises in the *Genealogy* (1887), which deal with guilt and bad conscience, and the ascetic ideal respectively, we are able to elucidate the notion of inwardly directed cruelty as it is employed by Nietzsche. These treatises explain how and for what purpose a physiological quantum of affect, i.e. cruelty, can be turned against oneself. Nietzsche establishes a sense of guilt and a bad conscience, which can later function as the agent of one's suffering. David Owen (2007) points out that the second treatise constitutes a psychology whereby cruelty is found in an archaic substratum of the psyche, indelible to human culture and where conscience is expressed as the instinct for cruelty turned back on itself, once it can no longer find exogenous satisfaction. Within the contractual relationship of the creditor and the debtor, Nietzsche ventures to offer a genealogy of the sense of guilt and the need for punishment:

these relationships...will be a place where one finds things that are...cruel. In order to instil trust in his promise of repayment...the

debtor...pledges to the creditor in the case of non-payment something else...for example his body...his wife...his freedom or even his life...the creditor could subject

the body of the debtor to all manner of ignominy and torture, for example cutting as much from it as appeared commensurate to the magnitude of the debt...“*si plus minuse secuerunt, ne fraude esto.*”² (Nietzsche, 1887, II §5)

Nietzsche uses the creditor's participation in the 'right of the lords' to literally carve away at their debtors' flesh, as evidence of there being a 'warrant to cruelty', as seen in the carnal delight of another's suffering. It is the *suffering* of the debtor that satisfies the creditor as compensation. The will to power is expressed in the creditor's inclination to punish and bask in the punishment of his indebted subjects. Critically, society endorsed the creditor's right to hold his debtors in contempt and to forcibly retrieve compensation through cruelty. According to Nietzsche, it is the internalisation of this social value judgment that creates a feeling of guilt in man. Owen interprets Nietzsche's portrayal of 'the spectacular economy of punishment' as a suggestion that punishment in ancient societies was based on: 'a logic of equivalence between damage and pain that (i) emerges in the basic creditor-debtor relationships...and (ii) expresses the basic human instinct for cruelty.' (Owen, 2007, pp. 93-96) It is important to clarify that it is only the noble types who may enjoy this compensatory function of cruelty whereas the priests, slaves and philosophers may resort only to asceticism, i.e. to venting their cruelty on themselves.

Henry Staten draws a sharp distinction between the earlier Dionysian and later 'tyrannophilic' metaphysics in Nietzsche's economy of the will, noting 'the profound continuity...of the transcendent will...beyond either power or suffering.' (Staten, 1990, p. 88) Self-enjoyment, Staten proposes, is a central problematic in Nietzsche's thought, and he recognizes that for Nietzsche, 'pleasure in the deepest sense includes displeasure [and that]...power [is]...the essence of pleasure.' (Ibid. p. 89) A further exemplification of the evolution of Nietzsche's thought around the notion of self-enjoyment and sadomasochistic subjectivity is mapped out in Staten's text. He identifies Nietzsche's 'protomasochism' in *The Birth of Tragedy* (Nietzsche, 1872), where pain begets joy and ecstasy wrings sounds of agony, as a representative of the Dionysian metaphysics of tragedy, which Nietzsche celebrated in his earlier writings. A passage from a later work *Daybreak* is quoted at length and an 'unspeakable happiness' at the sight of torment is seen as an ironic distancing 'from the type of self-enjoyment that transforms pain into pleasure' (Staten, 1990, p. 101), which could be

² '*si plus minuse secuerunt, ne fraude esto*' – if they secured more or less, let that be no crime.

construed as a hedonistic conception, but we already know that Nietzsche opposes this view. By the time Nietzsche's *Genealogy* had been written, Staten says that 'this ironic distance has split into a condemnation of ascetic masochism and a celebration of barbarian cruelty.' (Ibid)

Nietzsche's formula thus becomes: self-enjoyment *qua* the feeling of power and power *qua* cruelty *sine* masochism. This ascendant cruelty somewhat contradicts Nietzsche's earlier 'glorification of Dionysian martyrdom.' (Staten, 1990, p. 102). Staten understands the Nietzschean notion of 'self-enjoyment' – which includes the ascetic-masochistic enjoyment of self-directed cruelty – as a description of a 'primitive form of affect' *within* the will to power itself, which is thus identical with the feeling of power: 'whenever we see power, we know there must be self-enjoyment, by the collocation of the two.' (Ibid, p. 90) Furthermore, Staten conceives of 'the inward turn of the ascetic [as]...a type of will to power [even though]...it seems to be a perversion or pathology...self-overcoming...self-domination.' (Ibid, p. 91) Nietzsche can thereby be seen to be constructing a pre-Freudian 'profound analysis of sadomasochistic subjectivity and transcendental resentment' (Ibid, p. 92).

Nietzsche and Freud: A Hybrid Model of Sadomasochism

Sadomasochistic subjectivity is not only a critical point whereby Nietzsche's analysis supersedes the explanatory prowess of the hedonist's, but it is also a point of intersection whereby the closest isomorphism with Freud can be illuminated. Freud is often thought of as an exemplar of the hedonistic theory, though this somewhat ignores his ineluctable pessimism. What, for Freud, were sadism and masochism, correspond to Nietzsche's cruelty and asceticism respectively. It is through his use of the notions of cruelty and asceticism that Nietzsche achieves his goal of highlighting a critical failing of the hedonist's 'avoidance of pain at all costs' account; where sadomasochism is confined within the programme of the pleasure-principle. If human beings are innately averse to any expression of cruelty, save for hedonistic outbursts at other peoples' misfortune, how can we explain the ubiquity of not only cruel acts in the world, but the pervasive enjoyment by a sizeable portion of the species, in inflicting cruelty upon themselves? This is where the battle line is drawn between Nietzsche's will to power and the hedonist's exclusive appeal to the pleasure-principle. How can we conceive of such pleasure-in-cruelty, without engaging with some kind of exegesis, as

Nietzsche does, of the power dynamics at play in all such perpetrated cruelty? For the hedonists, cruelty is merely sadistic satisfaction in the suffering of others. Nietzsche on the other hand, manages to show that the will to power allows for a more complete account of the different forms of cruelty that can be observed as constitutive of human existence: in so doing, he appeals to an even more primary and ontological drive.

Adopting the Freudian mien for a moment, we can say that in his positing of the primacy of the will to power, Nietzsche is discovering the fundamental mechanism of the pleasure-principle (*Eros*), which has in its service what Freud would later institute as the counterpart to the erotic drive: the death instinct. Nietzsche's will to power, has a close affinity with Freud's death instinct (*Thanatos*) – the impulse toward the expression of aggression and destruction, originally directed at objects and parental authorities in the external world and later internalized and introjected. Psychoanalytically, this inversion of the aggressive drive is a function of the superego and is relative (in its severity towards the ego) to the intensity of the original levels of aggression felt *and* prohibited towards external objects. Freud therefore establishes the masochistic agent of human suffering *qua* the superego, which develops out of a primary sadistic-egoism, and this ties in neatly with what Nietzsche says about the transcendence of the will beyond power and suffering, and towards the less objectionable pleasure of asceticism.

Nietzsche's anatomisation of cruelty in his lesser known middle work *Human All-too-Human* (1878), along with his crucial remark in *Daybreak* (1881), which both touch on the unfolding of sadism, and form a 'genetic sequence of self-reflections by which sadomasochistic subjectivity is elaborated' (Staten, 1990, p. 97), are mirrored in Freud's investigation into the 'Instincts and Their Vicissitudes' (1915). Freud can be seen as exploring sadomasochistic subjectivity, whereby an: 'original non-erotic heteroaggression [evolves into]...a phase of reflective- or auto-aggression [such as]...self-torment and self-punishment [which then seeks]...an external agent...as the inflicter of torment [and finally]...a reversal of this structure, in which the subject becomes sadistic inflicter of pain, which he nevertheless enjoys masochistically.' (Staten, 1990, pp. 95-96)

Staten admits, however, that whereas Freud is concerned with the genesis of erotic sadomasochism in childhood, Nietzsche explores the more Hegelian 'quasi-historical phenomenology of sadomasochistic spirit.' (Ibid, pp. 98-99) There is also reason to believe that both thinkers were

attempting 'a redefinition of the roots of subjectivity...that replaces the moral problematic of selfishness with the economic problematic of what Freud would call narcissism.' (Ibid) A crucial difference being that Nietzsche's will to power omits an analysis of the erotic nature of the libido, whereas Freud focuses primarily on this psychosexual dimension.

In the introduction to *Civilisation and its Discontents* (Freud, 1930), Leo Bersani summarises Freud's thesis that man suffers because of the libidinal prohibitions placed on him by civilization, which suppress his ontological necessity to satisfy his aggression. This surely lends support to the efficacy of Nietzsche's will to power account. Freud too, believed that the 'conscience' is internalized, in order to be attacked; whereas this is the priestly doctrine fed to the ignoble types in Nietzsche, Freud universalizes this sense of guilt as the price we all pay for cultural progress. We can decipher a putative psychoanalysis of the ascetic priest in Freud's genealogy of discontent, when he discusses the economic task of human existence as the sublimation and satisfaction of our drives. What for Freud then, is the anal character, whose pre-Oedipal interest in excretory processes has evolved into excessive thriftiness and obsessive fixations with order and cleanliness, has an affinity with Nietzsche's characterology of the ascetic priest. There are many uncanny resemblances in the metaphors used by Nietzsche and later by Freud. Aside from instigating a debate about the originality of Freud's ideas, this suggests that with the Nietzsche-Freud hybrid model of sadomasochism, we are compelled, to an extent, to entertain the more complex ideas about human nature than either author would have achieved so illuminatingly in isolation.

Both thinkers appeal to the ontological aggressiveness of man as evidence of his unavoidably cruel nature, and both see religion as one of the most successful methods by which man can renounce his drives for a higher goal. One final difference between these two post-enlightenment thinkers, who mutually posited the necessary plight of man, is that Freud's inquiry reveals a lot less about the role of cruelty in the psychology of man than Nietzsche's. Beyond its function as a representative of the death instinct, Freud delineates little variation in the role of cruelty in man's psyche, whereas with Nietzsche it is possible to examine the operational minutiae of cruelty not only in man *per se* (as in Freud), but in several different types of historical man.

Insensible Nostalgic Naturalism

In *Beyond Good and Evil*, Nietzsche refers to the festive joys in the cruelty of the Greek *agon*³, the glorification of violence in the Roman arena and the bloody tragedies of the Parisian revolutions, thus further pursuing his mission to naturalise cruelty within the psychology of man:

One ought to learn anew about cruelty, and open one's eyes...Almost everything we call higher culture is based upon the spiritualizing and intensifying of cruelty – this is my thesis...That which constitutes the painful delight of tragedy is cruelty; that which operates agreeably in so called tragic sympathy, and at the basis even of everything sublime, up to the highest and most delicate thrills of metaphysics, obtains its sweetness solely from the intermingling ingredient of cruelty (Nietzsche, 1886, §229, pp. 97-98)

We are hereby presented with a further requisite for the positive analysis of cruelty in the pre-sublimated history of mankind, and the indivisible link between man's cruel psychology and the development of his morality. Nietzsche wants us to recognize the essential nature of cruelty and appreciate it as a valuable outlet for the immanent will to power. But, he says, man is ashamed of his harsh nature, which is why the ascetic turn has become so painfully necessary: 'man has grown ashamed of man.' (Nietzsche, 1887, §7, p. 43).

In *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche says 'pain always raises the question about its origin while pleasure is inclined to stop without looking back' (1882, §13). If we take the idea that a will to power is central to human psychology and consider the ways in which people may impress their power upon others, it is reasonable to say that from an economical perspective, being cruel is a better investment than being kind, in terms of how violently one impresses oneself upon the other. At the same time, one can almost hear the outraged response to this statement in that many would prefer to think in terms of an economy of love and affection. Staten see the 'pathos of distance and the distinction of rank order in Nietzsche as 'variants of this striving to impress one's being violently on the substance of the other' (Staten, 1990, p. 103). Clearly, for Nietzsche, and for his philosophical project, cruelty is the preferred mode of satisfaction for the will to power. With this affirmation of cruelty, Nietzsche 'slides insensibly into a nostalgic naturalism' (Ibid, p. 105); he tries to erect the drive to dominate and acquire power as a normative model, that pre-dates civilization and is thereby

³ *agon* – contest

unconvincingly unique or singular to our modern existence. Ivan Soll, however, is at pains to say that Nietzsche's psychological account is in no way a justification 'but rather an explanation of the attraction of cruelty, and consequently of its prevalence in human life.' (Soll, 1994, p. 108) It is easy to see how Nietzsche's attempt to demonstrate the ontological necessity of cruelty could be construed as a vindication of cruel phenomena. Notwithstanding, Nietzsche's analysis of cruelty is far from wholly approving.

To say that Nietzsche sanctioned cruelty, outright would do violence to the complexity of his thought. His ideas about the notions of pain, pleasure, cruelty, asceticism, and the will to power, along with the place these concepts take in his psychology, can be read in any number of ways. By tracing the linear themes through the corpus of his work and referring to some classic secondary sources, I hope to have outlined Nietzsche's valuable contribution to the long-standing debate about the primacy of the pleasure-principle or the primacy of the will to power. I conclude that Nietzsche succeeds in discrediting the completeness of the hedonistic account of human striving; that cruelty takes a central place in Nietzsche's psychology; and that the isomorphism between Nietzsche's thought and classical Freudianism lends credence to Nietzsche's complex and at times contradictory philosophical meditations. It is not that the hedonists are wrong, but that Nietzsche convinces us that they do owe us an explanation if they are to dispute the Nietzschean thesis that a will to power better explains the basis of human motivation than the pleasure-principle. The hedonists have a long way to go in order to supersede either Nietzsche or the more powerful Nietzsche-Freud hybrid model of sadomasochistic subjectivity. The pleasure-principle may well be at work within man's psyche, but for Nietzsche, an accurate analysis of the various manifestations of cruelty in human existence demands an appeal to a more fundamental mechanism than merely the avoidance of pain. In so many ways man looks for and creates his pain. Paradoxically, man also enjoys his pain and thus, the will to exert power, even over oneself is a primary tenet of Nietzsche's psychology. Cruelty can therefore be conceived of as one of the major vehicles through which we begin to understand the truth, as Nietzsche conceives it, behind man's deepest strivings.

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