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A Potential in Us All

Review of: Kathleen Taylor, *Cruelty: Human Evil and the Human Brain* (Oxford University Press, 2009), 337 pages

Kathleen Taylor's accessible and wide-ranging book on cruelty is a search for the origins of violence in human nature. The answers to the question why people are cruel are sought in the prehistorical processes of evolution; in how evolution shaped the human mind, or more fundamentally, the human brain.

Taylor, a neuroscientist trained in philosophy, does not intend to reduce the complexities of cruelty to a wholly cerebral matter. Rather, she is an open-minded researcher who wishes to bring neuroscience into a larger interdisciplinary framework for understanding violence. The story she tells is a welcome antidote to those social-constructionist accounts of behavior that wholly subordinate the role of human nature to the impact of social forces. Taylor convincingly shows us that human nature is not as malleable as some would have it; that we are born with a number of behavioral and psychological tendencies. This has certain undeniable benefits—morality, for instance, is not a mere construct—but our human nature also carries with it certain dangers, such as the potential for cruelty. Taylor's book provides a fascinating account of this potential, and offers a tentative explanation of how it came to be.

Cruelty, as Taylor is well aware, is a complicated concept to define because it is intrinsically a normative one. Describing cruelty as "unjustified

voluntary behavior which causes foreseeable suffering to an undeserving victim or victims" (29) presents the phenomenon from our, the supposedly moral readers', point of view—it does not capture the psychological qualities of the cruel actors themselves. The perpetrators, by contrast, typically feel justified in their violent actions. They often feel compelled by authoritative forces outside themselves, and they are likely to believe that the victims deserve what is being done to them. For this reason, I was somewhat confused by Taylor's question: "Why do people act cruelly when they know cruelty is morally wrong?" (184). The question that really seems to occupy her is: Why do people act cruelly when we know cruelty is morally wrong? How do perpetrators of atrocity come to adopt a position so morally different from our own? Taylor's answer: otherization.

The concept of *otherization* denotes the process whereby perpetrators create "an increasingly impassable social gulf" (7) between themselves and their victims. Cruel behavior, Taylor argues, exists on a continuum from verbal abuse to genocide, and the movement toward more violent excesses is characterized by a gradual transformation of the victim from a fellow human being into a qualitatively different other. The author prefers the concept of otherization to the more extreme *dehumanization*; yet, by emphasizing the need to dramatically transform the victim into an Other, she slips into the well-rehearsed argument that extreme violence becomes possible only when the perpetrators perceive that their victims "aren't really people" (154). To illustrate her point, Taylor relates an episode in which an SS man, after having demanded that a one-year-old baby be handed over to him and having been denied this by its mother, seizes the baby by the ankles and tears it in two before the mother's eyes. In Taylor's view, the SS man—"taught to see Jews as repulsive, subhuman, dirty, and disgusting creatures" (166)—aims to transform the baby into precisely such a disgusting object, an "other" that conforms to the Nazi image of the Jew. This act of transformation is Taylor's version of power: the ability to shape the world in the image of one's own perceptions. It is an ability that has evolved, Taylor claims, because being able to predict and control one's environment made our ancestors more likely to survive. Indeed, the need to predict events has become so strongly ingrained

in the human brain that we find it outright painful when central predictions are proven wrong—so painful that we will go to great lengths to make the world conform to our beliefs. The SS man’s behavior is an example of such world-shaping.

What is left unexplored in this analysis is the potential sadistic pleasure spawned by the SS man’s sense of absolute control, and later Taylor expands upon her discussion of cruelty by making the plausible distinction between callousness and sadism. Callous cruelty comprises all those actions that the perpetrator might term “necessary evils”: the violence is unfortunate but required in order to obtain a greater goal, such as the purification of the race, victory in war, or the need to bring the world in line with one’s beliefs. Sadistic cruelty, on the other hand, aims at inflicting suffering for its own sake. Sadism, Taylor argues, expresses a need for control that has run wild: by transgressing the moral boundaries set by other people, the perpetrator feels increasingly unbound and powerful. According to the author, this form of cruelty grows out of callous violence and relies on the same mechanisms, including otherization. The problem with such an argument, as I see it, is that it renders us unable to see cruelty as something done by an individual who sometimes perceives his victim as a fellow human being. Cruelty, in other words, is no longer an inter-human event.

Yet Taylor is no doubt right to emphasize the role of psychological distance in much cruelty. In this context, her discussion of disgust is particularly informative. Taylor tells us that humans have evolved three types of responses to three kinds of threats. First, there are fear-responses to immediate threats to our existence; then there are anger-responses to threats to status and power; and, finally, we have evolved disgust-responses to *potentially* dangerous situations. Disgust-responses signal the intrusion of a threat that is not immediate, that is invisible, and whose danger does not rely on its physical strength (think of a viral infection, for instance). “Disgust says: they [i.e., the targeted individuals] may look harmless and trustworthy, but so can a meal which gives you violent food-poisoning. Lack of power, in other words, is no indication of inability to harm” (197). It is the veiled quality of

the danger that makes disgust-threats so susceptible to social manipulation and therefore so useful in the hands of genocidal leaders.

The fear of contamination, expressed as disgust, is a fundamental human quality. This brings us to another of Taylor's basic assumptions; namely, that cruelty is a normal part of human nature. It is an assumption that places her account squarely within the tradition that sees mass violence and cruelty as ordinary, if not banal, behavior. But all hope is not lost. If cruelty is natural, says Taylor, so is moral sensibility. A basic morality has evolved in humans because protecting, caring for, and sharing resources with members of their own kin increased the likelihood that they would propagate their genes. Humans are also likely to cooperate with a small group of individuals in their immediate vicinity, since in the past this conferred benefits in terms of mutual protection and concerted efforts of problem-solving. This basic morality, Taylor argues, has laid the foundation for a more elaborate constructed morality, where the moral circle of one's nearest kin has been increasingly expanded to include members of one's ethnic group, fellow citizens of the nation-state, or even all of humankind. Cruelty, we are told, becomes a possibility when conditions arise that shrink the circle again, once more excluding individuals and groups from the moral domain. And since cruel actions are aimed at outsiders, such actions can also become a source of positive emotions, "praised as courage or self-sacrifice," increasing the perpetrator's sense of belonging, "which at its strongest becomes the overwhelming power of love" (201).

But we are not to think that murder is easy. Because humans have evolved as social beings, Taylor continues, they are also equipped with empathy, able to infer the beliefs, goals, and intentions of other people from their behavior. As a result, the victim's pain and terror activate uncomfortable echoes in the perpetrator's own brain. This unease must be overcome. Taylor believes that otherization serves this purpose by obstructing the psychological identification with the victim. Routinization takes care of the rest, for "brains habituate: a frequently repeated stimulus, behavior, or emotion evokes less intense neuronal activity than its predecessor" (183). During military training, endlessly repeated drills are intended to render killing techniques automatic.

From Taylor's perspective, this strengthens violence-generating neural patterns that enable soldiers to act almost instinctively on orders to kill. Consequently, in the midst of combat, the "motivating signals" that would normally generate moral behavior often succumb to these more forceful neural patterns established through military training.

This emphasis on otherization and routinization has repeatedly been made by psychologists trying to explain atrocious behavior, but Taylor cloaks the old argument in the language of neuroscience. The question is where this neurological story leaves us. What are we to make of Taylor's claim, on page seventy, that it is "only in the brain" that "we find the common currency we need: the neural codes into which everything else can be translated"? A radical interpretation of this claim would turn neuroscience into a form of biologized psychologism, the thesis that all laws of social life must be reducible to the regularities of human nature. In this view, the sociological dimensions of cruelty would be reducible to the psychological ones, which in turn would be ultimately reducible to the neurological circuitry of the brain. The crucial issue is whether these levels are of the same order and thereby connected in a harmonious chain of causation, or whether there exist qualitative gaps between them—say, between the social reality of institutions and the individual brain—that make it pointless to reduce one to the other. Taylor is honest about the limitations she sees in her approach:

The more we learn about brains, the more we are ... awed by their capacity to ground human uniqueness. But that is all they are—the raw material which allows a baby to transform itself into Gandhi, or Stalin, or you. To speak a message you need a voice; but that does not mean the message "is just" the sound waves, or the neurons firing. It is a thank you, a curse, or a goodbye. Which of these it is depends on you and your circumstances—that is, on factors both within and beyond the brain. (117; emphasis in original)

In the words of psychologist Steven Pinker: "if the brain is equipped with strategies for violence, they are *contingent* strategies, connected to complicat-

ed circuitry that computes when and where they should be deployed.”¹ Discovering the brain’s potential for cruelty no doubt contributes to a better understanding of human violence. But if cruelty is a potential in us all, it is its social *contingency* that seems most urgently in need of explanation. And if we are to grasp how and why our violent potentials are expressed or inhibited, and how they are in turn affected by the world—if we want to comprehend how cruelty emerges as a social phenomenon—we need to understand historical conditions and interpersonal dynamics. As Taylor knows, references to neural functions will not suffice. After all, the brain is not cruel; people are.

¹ The Blank Slate: *The Modern Denial of Human Nature* (New York: Penguin, 2002), p. 315; emphasis in original.