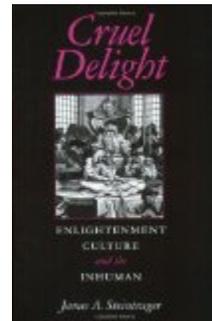


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

James A. Steintrager. *Cruel Delight: Enlightenment Culture and the Inhuman*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004. xviii + 208 pp. \$49.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-253-34367-3; \$19.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-253-21649-6.

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Sentimental Ethics Deconstructed

This book, based upon a considerable body of British and French, and a certain number of German texts, is a valuable contribution to an underexplored topic. Its thesis is that the facts of cruelty—of the taking of pleasure in the spectacle of the suffering of humans and animals—presented a deep and ultimately insuperable problem for a naturalistic eighteenth-century ethic based on sympathy. Such an ethic had immense cultural power at this time, sustained by its imbrication with a dominant physiology and aesthetics of sensibility. But if not everyone is spontaneously moved to pity the dying lamb and the starving shepherd—if on the contrary there are those who delight in inflicting pain—then how can it be contended that a largely utilitarian morality of promoting pleasure and minimizing pain has a natural basis? Pity would have to be a universal response, or overridden only in specific circumstances, as for example when contemplating the punishment of a brutal murderer. Steintrager contends that a “solution” to this problem was to label those who delighted in cruelty as “inhuman.” So pity was a human universal. But such a solution is in fact no solution at all: it is a trick, a tautology which dodges the issue. Growing realization of this problem led to the eventual dissolution or deconstruction—this is a postmodern reading—of an ethic based on sympathy, resulting, for example, in the proposal of non-natural moralities such as that of Immanuel Kant.

Certain contexts are identified as impacting on the evolution of these ideas. The principal one is the development of science, especially physiology and anatomy.

There is some reference also to professional specialization with a view to a systems analysis relating social and intellectual change in the manner of Niklas Luhmann. The book is divided into three parts. The first concerns theories of morality based on sentiment, in for example Lord Shaftesbury (Anthony Ashley Cooper), David Hume, Joseph Butler, Francis Hutcheson, Adam Smith, Denis Diderot, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau. The second is an exploration of William Hogarth’s *Four Stages of Cruelty*. The four prints are reproduced, but curiously, the captions to the prints are nowhere quoted in full. The third discusses the Marquis de Sade, and vivisection. A running theme is the physiology, symbolism, and meaning of sight. Pity is grounded in the immediate perception of another’s pain, in which as it were the optic nerves of the observer transmit the sensations and sufferings observed in the victim. By contrast the possibility of not pitying requires detached observation, like that of a camera obscura. Here the Luhmann-inspired thesis of social specialization, specifically medical professionalization, is invoked.

This study is considerably indebted to theory—Sigmund Freud, Jacques Lacan, Michel Foucault, Luhmann. It is postmodernist and deconstructionist, but there is an overarching narrative here, derived from deconstruction itself. Steintrager’s history of eighteenth-century thinking about cruelty is selective, inevitably; but the selection he makes and in particular the culmination in the thought of Sade, eventuates in a particular conclusion. His contention is that a naturalistic moral-

ity based on sympathy was ultimately unsustainable, but that this was not a loss. For its dissolution meant a release from nature, and therefore a liberation, which can be discerned in different forms in the fantasies of de Sade and in the categorical imperative and noumenal freedom of Kant. The detachment of the medical professional, the anatomist, the dissector, the vivisectionist, a guise assumed by the Sadean literary protagonist, made this liberation possible: “Nonetheless, it is precisely self-reflection and distance—observing that one is using language to observe natural response from afar—that eventually explodes the grounding of morality in human nature” (p. 120).

Yoking Kant and Sade together in this way is questionable. For Kant’s categorical imperative requires a universalization which is utterly alien to Sadean freedom to follow desire, no matter how harmful to others. Most ethical systems proposing liberty as the key value have insisted upon reciprocity. Among “classic” philosophers, only Friedrich Nietzsche celebrates the liberty of the strong to oppress the weak (and indeed associates cruelty and joy). Furthermore, it is not definitive that a naturalistic, sentimental ethics was a dead end and unsustainable. Hume theorized a more sophisticated

account of how fellow feeling is selected and universalized in moral discourse than is reflected here. And after Sade and Kant, a powerful philosophy of morality having a basis in natural sympathy was developed by John Stuart Mill. Steintrager is right to argue that cruelty was a problem for sentimental theory, and his revelation of the difficulties theorists experienced in confronting it is valuable, making his book well worth reading. His contention that perceptions of ordinary and scientific curiosity, and the validation of the detached gaze of the professional anatomist as socially useful, offered ways in which eighteenth-century thinkers could solve this problem, is surely part of the answer. But he might also have paid attention to theories of the sublime, and the aesthetic of the gothic, which get a mention only in his short epilogue. Finally, I am not convinced that the Hogarth prints should be read as a critique of science. Did Hogarth really intend viewers of the first engraving in the series to see in the various cruelties being inflicted on animals an analogy with scientific experiment? The practitioners and the audience in the fourth print, in which Tom Nero’s hanged body is being dissected, are not presented as attractive persons: but did Hogarth mean us to perceive in them a further stage or form of cruelty? It is not easy to be cruel to the dead.

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