

Montaigne's "On Cruelty"

Text	Vocabulary/Notes
<p>[1]... Amongst other vices, I cruelly hate cruelty, both by nature and judgment, as the very extreme of all vices: nay, with so much tenderness that I cannot see a chicken's neck pulled off without trouble, and cannot without impatience endure the cry of a hare in my dog's teeth, though the chase be a violent pleasure...</p> <p>[2]...I am tenderly compassionate of others' afflictions, and should readily cry for company, if, upon any occasion whatever, I could cry at all. Nothing tempts my tears but tears, and not only those that are real and true, but whatever they are, feigned or painted. I do not much lament the dead, and should envy them rather; but I very much lament the dying. The savages do not so much offend me, in roasting and eating the bodies of the dead, as they do who torment and persecute the living. Nay, I cannot look so much as upon the ordinary executions of justice, how reasonable so ever, with a steady eye. Someone having to give testimony of Julius Caesar's clemency; "he was," says he, "mild in his revenges. Having compelled the pirates to yield by whom he had before been taken prisoner and put to ransom; forasmuch as he had threatened them with the cross, he indeed condemned them to it, but it was after they had been first strangled. He punished his secretary Philemon, who had attempted to poison him, with no greater severity than mere death." Without naming that Latin author, who thus dares to allege as a testimony of mercy the killing only of those by whom we have been offended, it is easy to guess that he was struck with the horrid and inhuman examples of cruelty practiced by the Roman tyrants.</p> <p>[3] For my part, even in justice itself, all that exceeds a simple death appears to me pure cruelty; especially in us who ought, having regard to their souls, to dismiss them in a good and calm condition; which cannot be, when we have agitated them by insufferable torments. Not long since, a soldier who was a prisoner, perceiving from a tower where he was shut up, that the people began to assemble to the place of execution, and that the carpenters were busy erecting a scaffold, he presently concluded that the preparation was for him, and therefore entered into a resolution to kill himself, but could find no instrument to assist him in his design except an old rusty cart-nail that</p>	

fortune presented to him; with this he first gave himself two great wounds about his throat, but finding these would not do, he presently afterwards gave himself a third in the belly, where he left the nail sticking up to the head. The first of his keepers who came in found him in this condition: yet alive, but sunk down and exhausted by his wounds. To make use of time, therefore, before he should die, they made haste to read his sentence; which having done, and he hearing that he was only condemned to be **beheaded**, he seemed to take new courage, accepted wine which he had before refused, and thanked his judges for the unhoped-for mildness of their sentence; saying, that he had taken a resolution to dispatch himself for fear of a more severe and insupportable death, having entertained an opinion, by the preparations he had seen in the place, that they were resolved to torment him with some horrible execution, and seemed to be delivered from death in having it changed from what he apprehended.

[4] I should advise that those examples of severity by which 'tis designed to retain the people in their duty, might be exercised upon the dead bodies of criminals; for to see them deprived of **sepulture [burial]**, to see them boiled and divided into quarters, **would almost work as much upon the vulgar**, as the pain they make the living endure; though that in effect be little or nothing, as God himself says [Luke 12:14], "Who kill the body, and after that have no more that they can do;" and the poets singularly dwell upon the horrors of this picture, as something worse than death:—
"Alas! that the half-burnt remains of the king, exposing his bones, should be foully dragged along the ground besmeared with gore."

I happened to come by one day accidentally at Rome, just as they were upon executing Catena, a notorious robber: he was strangled without any emotion of the spectators, but when they came to cut him in quarters, the hangman gave not a blow that the people did not follow with a doleful cry and exclamation, as if every one had lent his sense of feeling to the miserable carcass. Those inhuman excesses ought to be exercised upon the bark, and not upon the quick.

Artaxerxes, in almost a like case, **moderated** the severity of the ancient laws of Persia, ordaining that the nobility who had committed a fault, instead of being whipped, as they were used to be, should be stripped only and their clothes whipped for them; and that whereas they were wont to tear off their hair, they should only take off their high-crowned tiara. The so devout Egyptians thought they sufficiently satisfied the divine justice by sacrificing hogs in **effigy** and representation; a bold invention to pay God so essential a

impress the people

Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations*,
i. 44

King of Persia, 465-422 BC

substance in picture only and in show.

[5] I live in a time wherein we abound in incredible examples of this vice, through the **license** of our civil wars; and we see nothing in ancient histories more extreme than what we have proof of every day, but I cannot, any the more, get used to it. I could hardly persuade myself, before I saw it with my eyes, that there could be found souls so cruel and fell, who, for the sole pleasure of murder, would commit it; would hack and lop off the limbs of others; sharpen their wits to invent unusual torments and new kinds of death, without hatred, without profit, and for no other end but only to enjoy the pleasant spectacle of the gestures and motions, the lamentable groans and cries of a man dying in anguish. For this is the utmost point to which cruelty can arrive:—

“That a man should kill a man, not being angry, not in fear, only for the sake of the spectacle.”

For my own part, I cannot without grief see so much as an innocent beast pursued and killed that has no defense, and from which we have received no offence at all; and that which frequently happens, that the stag we hunt, finding himself weak and out of breath, and seeing no other remedy, surrenders himself to us who pursue him, imploring mercy by his tears:—

“Who, bleeding, by his tears seems to crave mercy,” has ever been to me a very displeasing sight; and I hardly ever take a beast alive that I do not presently turn out again. Pythagoras bought them of fishermen and fowlers to do the same:—

“I think ’twas slaughter of wild beasts that first stained the steel of man with blood.”

Those natures that are **sanguinary** towards beasts discover a natural proneness to cruelty. After they had accustomed themselves at Rome to spectacles of the slaughter of animals, they proceeded to those of the slaughter of men, of gladiators. Nature has herself, I fear, imprinted in man a kind of instinct to inhumanity; nobody takes pleasure in seeing beasts play with and caress one another, but everyone is delighted with seeing them dismember, and tear one another to pieces. And that I may not be laughed at for the sympathy I have with them, theology itself enjoins us some favor in their behalf; and considering that one and the same master has lodged us together in this palace for his service, and that they, as well as we, are of his family, it has reason to enjoin us some affection and regard to them. Pythagoras borrowed the **metempsychosis** from the Egyptians, but it has since

Seneca, *Letters*. 90

Aeneid vii, 501.

been received by several nations, and particularly by our **Druids**:—

“Souls never die, but, having left their former seat, live and are received into new homes.”

The religion of our ancient **Gauls** maintained that souls, being eternal, never ceased to remove and shift their places from one body to another; mixing moreover with this fancy some consideration of divine justice; for according to the departments of the soul, whilst [189] it had been in Alexander, they said that God assigned it another body to inhabit, more or less painful, and proper for its condition:—

“He makes them wear the silent chains of brutes, the bloodthirsty souls he encloses in bears, the thieves in wolves, the deceivers in foxes; where, after successive years and a thousand forms, man had spent his life, and after purgation in Lethe’s flood, at last he restores them to the primordial human shapes.”

If it had been valiant, he lodged it in the body of a lion; if voluptuous, in that of a hog; if timorous, in that of a hart or hare; if malicious, in that of a fox, and so of the rest, till having purified it by this chastisement, it again entered into the body of some other man:—

“For I myself remember that, in the days of the Trojan war, I was Euphorbus, son of Pantheus.”

As to the relationship betwixt us and beasts, I do not much admit of it; nor of that which several nations, and those among the most ancient and most noble, have practiced, who have not only received brutes into their society and companionship, but have given them a rank infinitely above themselves, esteeming them one while familiars and favorites of the gods, and having them in more than human reverence and respect; others acknowledged no other god or divinity than they:—

“Beasts, out of opinion of some benefit received by them, were consecrated by **barbarians**.”

“This place adores the crocodile; another dreads the ibis, feeder on serpents; here shines the golden image of the sacred ape; here men venerate the fish of the river; there whole towns worship a dog.”

And the very interpretation that **Plutarch** gives to this error, which is very well conceived, is advantageous to them: for he says that it was not the cat or the ox, for example, that the Egyptians **adored**: but that they, in those beasts, adored some image of the divine **faculties**; in this, patience and

Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, xv. 158

Claudian, *Against Rufinus*, ii, 482

Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, xv, 1060 Euphorbus was a Trojan hero in the Iliad who wounded Achilles’ friend, Patroclus. Pantheus was his father.

Cicero, *On the Nature of the Gods*, i. 36.

Classical Greek historian who wrote on morals and politics. Montaigne cites him more than any other author and finds in his work a precedent for his

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utility: in that, **vivacity**, or, as with our neighbors the [191] Burgundians and all the Germans, impatient to see themselves shut up; by which they represented liberty, which they loved and adored above all other godlike attributes, and so of the rest. But when, amongst the more moderate opinions, I meet with arguments that endeavor to demonstrate the near resemblance betwixt us and animals, how large a share they have in our greatest privileges, and with how much probability they compare us together, truly I abate a great deal of our **presumption**, and willingly resign that imaginary **sovereignty** that is attributed to us over other creatures.

[6] But supposing all this were not true, there is nevertheless a certain respect, a general duty of humanity, not only to beasts that have life and sense, but even to trees and plants. We owe justice to men, and graciousness and **benignity** to other creatures that are capable of it; there is a certain commerce and mutual obligation betwixt them and us. Nor shall I be afraid to confess the tenderness of my nature so childish, that I cannot well refuse to play with my dog, when he the most unseasonably importunes me so to do...

own essays.

Questions for Analysis

1. In [2], the author combines a statement of his own feelings with examples from ancient history. Is this effective? Why or why not?
2. In [2], in what way are the “savages” superior to Europeans? What does the author mean by “ordinary executions of justice”?
3. In [3], how does the author argue against the use of excessive punishment/ torture?
4. In [4], how does the quote from the New Testament serve the purpose of the argument?
5. In [5], by comparing his own time with ancient history, what point about his times is the author making?
6. In [5], beginning with “those natures that are sanguinary,” what is the sequence of ideas under discussion? How would you describe it?
7. In the same paragraph, why does the author think nature has implanted an instinct for “inhumanity”? What is meant by “inhumanity”?
8. In [5], what does the author accomplish by bringing in the practices of other nations in regard to the animals?
9. Put the thought of [6] into your own words.
10. If cruelty is the worst vice, what would the opposite virtue be?
11. Compare Montaigne’s essay to an op-ed piece in a recent newspaper. How does Montaigne’s essay differ? Are there ways in which they are similar?
12. Consider your own position on the morality of capital punishment, torture, or the humane treatment of animals. What similarities are there between your own views and those of Montaigne?
13. Can one learn anything valuable from this essay and Montaigne? Defend your position in a short well-argued essay.