



# Cruelty and Oxytocin. On the Origin of Somatic Disintegration from Psycho-Somatic Dualism

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## Abstract

Somatic disintegration is the removal of body parts or the forceful introduction of objects into the body. If considered a medical treatment, no connections to psycho-somatic dualism can be made, but when it is an act of malignant violence, both phenomena correlate. The following paper aims to explore a new hypothesis on the origin of cruelty. It sheds light on the correlation between inflicting physical cruelty, especially somatic disintegration, and a predominant belief in psycho-somatic dualism and explains various techniques that break the integrity of the body through the prism of their symbolism. Its purpose is also to set out cultural elements connected to ontological dualism as factors fostering the use of excessive violence. The argumentation is based on atrocities committed during armed conflicts or as a result of rebellions. It turns out that the so-called oxytocin paradox plays an important role in connecting the dots.

**Keywords:** somatic disintegration; cruelty; oxytocin; ontological dualism; atrocity; armed conflict; war

Once the soul looked contemptuously on the body,  
and that contempt was supreme:  
the soul wished the body thin, hideous, and starved.  
Thus, it thought to escape from the body and the earth.  
Oh, that soul was itself thin, hideous, and starved;  
and cruelty was the desire of that soul!

(Nietzsche, 2016, p. 14)

## 1. Introduction

Times of turmoil have often led to tragic consequences. Not only do population groups involved in conflict lose their feeling of security and well-being and are pushed to the limits to provide the existential minimum for themselves and their fellow group members, but they also suffer casualties. Humanity will never get used to conflicts between two groups, whether they end up being physically violent or not; we had to accept that this human trait might never

disappear. So, we tried to set rules for conflicts and establish laws that would keep us from going too far. Nevertheless, atrocities continue to be perpetrated regardless of their possible legal consequences. Whether those armed conflicts are wars, gang wars or rebellions does not change the proneness – a semblance of necessity – to commit atrocities. It appears that cruelty did not need to find its way into the concept of war as it has always been there. It only seems to be interpreted differently: in some cases, it is defined in terms of natural, innate aggression, and in others as planned, strategic aggression, the latter being what can be called an excessive mean of warfare. This mean was present from the dawn of civilization and has survived until the present day, most commonly in the form of somatic disintegration – the forceful and harmful breaking of the integrity of the human body. This paper focuses on this phenomenon that is often used for either deterrence or punishment. Many different techniques have been invented to achieve the intended effect. It is interesting how, despite morality, religious commandments and laws, cruelty and somatic disintegration are still present in armed conflicts. It is the chaos and the lack of law and order during wartime that lulls perpetrators into a false sense of security, giving them the opportunity to carry out their atrocities. In a paper on wartime human experimentation Howard Brody and his colleagues wrote:

In peacetime, people who have strong cruel, sadistic impulses chafe at the moral constraints that forbid them from acting upon these impulses. People who have such impulses are often poorly equipped to engage in careful moral reasoning, so they may also be frustrated when, better fitted for casuistical reasoning, appear to get away with shady moral behavior. Wartime loosens unwelcome constraint for such individuals. They act out their impulses, citing the highest of motives -- patriotism. They feel free to thwart anyone who questions their morality, since “Don’t you know there’s a war going on?” cuts off all moral debate at the outset. Finally, should any guilt feelings arise, they can comfort themselves with the illusion that all this is only temporary--soon the war will be won, peace will ensue, and the normal moral order can be restored (Brody, Leonard, Nie, Weindling, 2014).

“Higher motifs” sanction somatic disintegration; otherwise acts of cruelty would not be morally sustainable. But what does this say about (the perpetrator’s) morality, or the perception of right and wrong, if factors such as common laws and ethics can only constrain actions taken on behalf of divine order, patriotism or this specific, uncoded moral concept that sanctions cruelty during wartime? In the following paragraphs cruelty in armed conflicts will be discussed based on the sole example of somatic disintegration. After a general review of the so-called philosophy of cruelty (Barden Dowling, 2009, p. 169), the term *cruelty* will be used mostly in regard to somatic disintegration. Atrocities and war crimes, such as genocide, rape or torture shall not be the subject of investigation here. Other acts of excessive violence, such as sadism, juvenile cruelty to animals or self-aggression are also left out of consideration but might be related to the presented concept. The main aim of this paper is to find the source for the act of human body disintegration within the realm of social evolution. Various perversions resulting in acts of cruelty, especially somatic disintegration, might have originated from wartime somatic disintegration and henceforth served as a kind of historic inspiration for cruelty. Thus, the conclusions of this paper might reach beyond somatic disintegration to other forms of violence and cruelty, but this hypothesis would require further exploration.

## 2. The correlation

There are different approaches in psychopathology and philosophy towards the complex problem of cruelty. According to Lev Shestov's (2005a) interpretation of Anaximander, the emergence of the individual is always the consequence of a forceful, destructive impact that disrupts what is whole and in itself perfect. It is what "Anaximander believes," he wrote, "that 'things,' by being born, i.e., by detaching themselves from the original 'universal' and 'divine' unity in order to attain their present particular being, have committed an act that is impious to the highest degree, an act for which they must in all justice undergo the supreme punishment - death and destruction." This idea has been inherited by Greek philosophy and, later, Christianity. Most famously, it manifested in asceticism, as "the destruction [...] of the 'hateful I' which had rashly escaped from the lap of universal, supreme being in order to reach the realm of incomprehensible, painful, terrible and, consequently, unacceptable freedom." (Shestov, 2005a, pp. 93–106). This concept reflected in the *destruction of the 'hateful I'* – a spiritual struggle – is mirrored not only by asceticism, but also by somatic pain (for example the crucifixion of Christ). It illustrates the gravity of disruption that disintegration symbolically constitutes. *Symbolically* – because it alludes to the ever-present conviction of wholeness as the absolute. Aristotle, who in his idea of *catharsis* has already noticed the redeeming effect of psychological distress (of the audience) (Nelson, 2011, p. 8), did not mention the somatic damage suffered by Oedipus. Apart from the allegory with Tiresias, the Theban's self-mutilation is primarily a symbol for the lostness in his life that has been present until the very moment of the *peripateia*. Instead of redeeming, he dooms himself. Oedipus' *psyche* (soul) shall never find peace again – how could it anyway, blind and wandering without a destination in *sight*? His memory cursed, his children struggling with the fate they inherited.

Philosophers and historians, who dealt with the concept of cruelty, have been troubled with the question whether it was a part of human nature, or rather acquired as a by-product of civilization. Later the same question was shifted away from cruelty to the Christian problem of evil. Titus Livius (*inhumana crudelitas – Ab urbe condita* XX 4,9), Seneca the Younger (*hominine in silvestre animal transire – De clementia* I 1, 25) and, following them, Thomas Aquinas (*crudelitas est idem quod saevitia – Summa Theologiae* 2a2ae 159 2, a.2, 1) all tended towards the idea of animalistic cruelty. To a certain extent Sigmund Freud would have agreed with that as in his thought cruelty is derived from the primordial instinct called *Todestrieb* (Freud, 1994, pp. 82–94; Fromm, 1976, pp. 34–36). Erich Fromm and the neurobiologist Kathleen Taylor, on the other hand, argued for a human factor as a condition for cruelty. In Fromm's thought it was anchored in his dichotomy of benign-defensive aggression (present in both men and beasts) and malignant-destructive aggression, exclusively present in humans, the latter being understood in terms of Freudian pleasure or a selfish benefit from committing acts of cruelty (Fromm 1973, pp. 23–26). Taylor has defined cruelty in terms of free will, placing the category of cruelty within human morality or ideology (Taylor, 2009, p. 7). Long before that, Seneca had already introduced the concept of intemperance (*crudelitas inclinatio anime ad asperiora – De clementia* II 4,3), which strengthens Taylor's definition of cruelty, because morality and ideology temper human behavior. While wickedness and evil are matters of perspective, cruelty is a mindset, which by its definition suppresses empathy and therefore preconditions excessive harming. Exceedance presupposes that cruelty is inseparable from human, subjective moral judgment (Taylor, 2009, pp. 22–41; 90–93) – it is a side effect of the ability to judge

(the inflicted harm). Cruelty is thus also a side effect of morality itself. By this definition, it appears as a consequence of the constraints of morality, which also means that without morality, cruelty would not have emerged.

There are some circumstances which we can consider as being close (or close enough) to a state without morality: war and the threat or fear of death. In armed conflicts cruelty finds three general applications: it can be used in order to gain military benefits (as in psychological warfare), to reward (as in trophy hunting or soldier's pay – *cf.* ancient Assyrian soldiers who took body parts from the battle field to the officials to get rewarded) and to keep order (*cf.* public executions). But all three can be just as well achieved without acts of cruelty. From this perspective, cruelty is an exceedance and is not motivated by existential necessity. Hence, when seen through the lenses of temperance and existential pragmatics, cruelty needs to be defined as dispensable.

If there is no pragmatic, existential necessity then what need or urge does committing acts of cruelty satisfy? Considering the case of somatic disintegration in armed conflicts only, it is possible to work with the hypothesis that in war, war-like and life-or-death situations societies engaged in conflict temporarily lose their attachment to morality and legal systems, survival being the main priority. They lapse into a brief, provisory state of savageness or wildness in the sense of moving away from the rules of civilization. In these circumstances, civilizational conditions for cruelty (such as Friedrich Nietzsche's (Nietzsche, 2008, p. 41; Schulze, 2009, pp. 41–51) *Paradox der Grausamkeit*) can be ignored, because the will to survive reduces the governing rules of society to a minimum. However, the underlying structure of society does not disappear, hence acts of cruelty committed by its members are still to be considered a social phenomenon. Seeking an explanation for cruelty within such temporarily "uncivilized" societies, one may either look for the individual reasons of every perpetrator or consider the cruel acts as a social phenomenon. As mentioned in the introduction, this paper explores the latter.

The individualistic approach has in my opinion not given satisfying answers to the question at hand. Erich Fromm's (1973, p. 26) reasoning is neat and accurate in his dichotomy of benign and malignant aggression, but it does not explain the origin of the pleasure perpetrators find in carrying out acts of cruelty. Freudian theories were not complete either. The *Todestrieb*, as he called the destructive energy running through every one of us (Fromm, 1975, pp. 34–36), does not explain a carefully thought-through exhibition of body parts. Even the discharging effect of cruelty that Nietzsche (2008, p. 41) and Canetti (1996, pp. 56–60) described does not explain somatic disintegration *per se*, but only the need for violence as a social phenomenon. Not explaining the act, itself, disconnects it from the need it is meant to satisfy. Neither can exhaustive answers be found in modern psychology. It identifies triggering events and circumstantial factors that can anesthetize empathy and precondition future perpetrators to their acts, but that only covers the mechanics. When James Gilligan started publishing his findings on the origin of violence, drawing attention to ideology, he adduced convincing evidence that demonstrated statistically how some moral concepts are more dangerous than others, arguing that violence was the consequence of shame. Shame ethics (as opposed to guilt ethics) provides the foundation for society's proneness to cruelty and excessive violence (Gilligan, 2011). Re-

turning to the question about the need or urge in a society that cruelty might satisfy, considering there is no existential, *real* necessity for it – the answer must lay beyond the real world and within the world of ideas. Most commonly, ideas are expressed through symbols. In order to find the origin of cruelty (somatic disintegration) in armed conflicts, it is thus necessary to understand the symbolism of the cruel act and consider its ideology as the source of the act.

Oedipus' removal of his own eyes is an attempt to cast himself into eternal damnation, and his self-mutilation did indeed result from the feeling of *shame*. Sophocles illustrated the essence of what cruelty, and somatic disintegration in particular, had already represented for ages: the display of inner ugliness and eternal damnation by figuratively mutilating the soul, "the hateful I" that has drifted away from morality. Hence, the link between somatic disintegration (cruelty) and morality must be the ever-prevalent concept of ontological dualism which can shape interpersonal relations even in laic societies. As it appears, cruelty aimed against the body works through the connection between the physical and the psychological. I cannot find an explanation as to how the perpetrator may account for the act of torture other than by his intention to break the victim's will (*psyche*) by inflicting physical pain. In this regard, physical violence clearly correlates with the ontological claim. This should in fact suggest to the torturer that there is no mind-body dualism, but a monism. The problem is that there is no way of proving this insight is gained by the perpetrator, or indeed that it was ever gained in the first historic acts of torture which this practice derives from. It would seem as if the monistic observation has passed unnoticed, unidentified by the human observer. How could this be possible? The ontological claim as a meme appears too prevalent and impactful to disappear on its own. In addition, it was reinforced by evolutionary and ideological factors. As they waged war, various civilizations from all around the world have resorted to violence to either reject or integrate what is or was alien to them. All those civilizations had – and some still have – a belief system that is based on the idea of a mind-body dualism. To understand the quiddity of those violent practices, it is necessary to look at them as symbols that are not meant for the eye of a human observer, but rather an observer like Lacan's *le Grande Autre* – the great, understanding and decoding Other for whom the real intention of any action is always clear. It would not even matter whether this Great Other really exists, because the action is performed anyway, as if it existed (Žižek, 2016, pp. 19–24). The example of Oedipus' physical self-mutilation is to be understood as such an ontologically driven, symbolic act.

### **3. A blind passenger**

The propensity for cruel behavior can result from a wide range of factors. Genetics and psychological disorders (to describe the latter Simon Baron-Cohen (2011) has recently introduced the term „empathy disorders“) are those that can be called permanent. On the other hand, there are phenomena such as ideology or hormones that might influence patients only temporarily. Both of these work together, strengthening one another. There are many hormones that can be held responsible for acts of violence, such as testosterone, cortisol or adrenaline. A curious example, which is not very often taken into consideration, is the so-called "bonding hormone" oxytocin (OXT). OXT allows individuals to include others in their own "circle of care". As such, it is of fundamental value for the evolution of humans as social beings. Patricia S. Churchland argued in her book *Braintrust: What Tells Us about Morality* (2013) that OXT

(and other hormones) was a key element in the evolution of human morality. But along with the bonding function of OXT comes a xenophobic effect. Anyone who gets excluded from our circle of care is distrusted as a potential enemy. This ambiguity is called the OXT paradox (Bethlehem, Baron-Cohen, van Honk, Auyeung, Bos, 2014). In societies that are already formed, OXT bonds are strengthened by cultural or circumstantial factors, such as religious belief or war. These can influence the secretion of OXT of in-group members, pushing OXT levels up to the point where the “natural drug”, as it is sometimes referred to, can have a stronger effect on the patient than alcohol or cocaine. It is then that defending the in-group turns into proneness to hostility and readiness to hurt out-group members (Robertson, 2014). Due to this paradox, OXT constitutes the most fundamental reason for hostility.

Ideology has a very strong nurturing and bonding effect and is often complex and entangled. Burial rites illustrate how societies deal with the deceased, mirroring and explaining beliefs about what happens after death. Death is what all armed conflicts have in common and it is death that awaits the victims at the end of excessive violence, especially of the kind considered here, i.e. somatic disintegration. All kinds of religions, throughout time and space, have included a cozying vision of salvation in their belief systems. By its definition, such eschatology must be based on a belief in life after death and is therefore dualistic. Hence, it manifests a mandatory split of body and spirit. Whether the splitting results in reincarnation or the soul’s existence beyond physicality upon death is of no consequence for the matter at hand. According to Bill Lauritzen (2012, pp. 95–122), the split is the conceptualized distinction between the breathing, living body and the lifeless, dead corpse. He argues that humans have noticed the invisible, life-giving element, that is oxygen, which “departs” upon death. Identifying oxygen as the invisible difference between the living and the dead was crucial for early humanity and resulted in a divinization of oxygen. All early concepts of an asomatic spirit are oxygen cults.

The list of religions with dualistic concepts could go on and on: the Japanese had *reiki*, the Christians have their soul, the Akkadians had *etemmu*,<sup>1</sup> but even more interesting are those dualistic views that do not involve transcendence. In such concepts, the position opposing physicality is inherited by consciousness, identity, the self, will or memory. However, to grasp the cruel goal of harming the “soul”, we first need to understand where the idea of hurting the asomatic comes from. It seems that, with the divinization and conceptualization of oxygen, a new layer has been added to human self-perception. In primal conflicts, where ethnicity did not play any important role, opponent societies must have looked for reasons why they and their enemies were fighting each other. It probably did even occur to them that bigger societies could provide more security and ensure survival, but the conflict with the opposing group continued nevertheless. While ethnicity, alimentation, technology and cultural habits were very similar between opponent tribes, the distinction must have been made on an invisible level. Aversion to the other side resulted from the differentness beneath the visible – a layer underneath the shell of physicality and an antonym of the somatic. This leads to a very intriguing conclusion: morality, built on the foundation of the OXT paradox (and the like), picked up a blind passenger on its way to shape human interactions in times of turmoil, times that

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<sup>1</sup> According to their myth of creation, men were made of earth and divine blood – blood, which, as we know today, serves the oxygen transport in our bodies.

require people to abandon reason and ethical progress. This blind passenger would someday reveal itself as hostility towards the asomatic. Is the eradication of the enemy's "invisible hostility" – which was believed to be carried by the invisible, asomatic subject – that we call cruelty.<sup>2</sup>

#### 4. Symbolism of cruelty

Today we can draw on all the ancient and modern ideas mentioned above to define cruelty. From the philosophy of cruelty, we may extract the condition of the necessity of a moral category which defines an act as cruel. We may also take from it the exceedance that cruelty constitutes. As such it lacks necessity as regards both its intended purpose and its very existence. From a medical point of view, we must be aware of the ideological and endocrine factors acting as anesthetics of empathy. Defined this way, cruelty (somatic disintegration) allows one to investigate the symbolism of atrocities in order to explain the origin of the phenomenon. A correlation between the infliction of physical cruelty, especially somatic disintegration, and a predominant belief in psycho-somatic dualism comes forward when different techniques that break the integrity of the body are analyzed on a symbolic level. Alongside the correlation between psycho-somatic dualism and somatic disintegration, morality might have carried the meme of the mind-body dualism into historical and modern warfare. The ontological claim is manifested in armed conflicts as hostility towards the asomatic and present in cruel warfare techniques. Considered a symbol, somatic disintegration reveals itself as an attack at what is beneath the physical, an attempt to exterminate or punish the metaphysical. While flaying or scalping symbolically exposes the evil and wickedness inside (for example in the case of Marsyas being flayed by Apollo it is the *hybris* that is being exposed), disembowelment disposes it. The Assyrian used flayed enemies in their iconoclastic warfare. Ideologically, every war was a sacred war and every enemy was a rebel against their chief god. Exposing disbelievers was a mean to visually out them as such (Radner, 2014, p. 103–128). Skinning is therefore the symbolic exposure of a lie, secret scheming, intrigues or alternative ideologies that are hidden from sight (*cf.* Jung, 2007, p. 67–71). The same function was served by the disembowelment of the martyr Saint Erasmus, according to his hagiography. Another example of disembowelment is the Japanese *seppuku* or *harakiri*, a method of suicide brought about by dishonor (wickedness) which is also related to military failure (Pierre, 2015, pp. 4–14). The unpleasant smell of the human digestive system uncovered by the belly cut might have suggested that it was in the stomach where the invisible and asomatic wickedness resided. The idea of an asomatic subject residing in certain parts of the body was, for instance, argued for in both Greek and Chinese philosophy (Dharmananda, 2005). In Christian thought, Augustine and Thomas Aquinas believed in a spatially omnipresent soul located within the body (Goetz, Tagliaferro, 2012, pp. 31–64). Further, cannibalism is perceived to endow the cannibal with the enemy's vital force (Lebeuf, 2012, pp. 255–265; Pineda 2003, pp. 38–51) and amputations, dismemberment, beheading, other mutilations and impalement disfigure the invisible with the intention to either eliminate or disable it eternally. Both dismemberment and beheadings are a symbolic attempt to exterminate the soul by trapping it in a state of futile eternal wandering

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<sup>2</sup> For a different approach on the definition of cruelty, see Jagiełło, 2020.

due to immobility (quartering, dismemberment) (*cf.* Adelman, 1997, p. 20) or blindness (beheading). Like Ahasverus, the soul would be locked between two worlds, neither dead, nor alive. The point about dismemberment can be illustrated by the example of *lingchi*, a law in Imperial China, the so-called death by a thousand cuts, to which traitors, rebels and other agitators were subjected (Bourgon, Erismann, 2014; Brook, Bourgon, Blue, 2008). A similarly agonizing death penalty is said to have been imposed in Ancient Rome on those condemned for parricide (*petty* treason). The *poena cullei* (punishment of the sack) was a method of execution that consisted in being sewn up in a sack (or nailed into a coffin/ sarcophagus) along with animals, such as monkeys, rats, mice, dogs, snakes etc., and thrown into the Tiber river. Before drowning the condemned had to endure several bites and scratches from the irritated animals. It was the highest punishment for a similar ideological crime, but unlike *lingchi*, it neither included somatic disintegration nor was it a punishment for real treason, i.e. treason against the punishing institution. Following the same logic of ideologically conditioned acts of cruelty where somatic disintegration is the symbolic mutilation of a spirit, castration would no longer amount to sexual humiliation, but to the rupture of inheritance as Howard Adelman hinted in his studies on genocide (see below).

The responsibility for these kinds of atrocities does not fall solely on religious doctrines, but also on politics and even morality. Concepts like the soul, (national) identity, collective memory and legacy are responsible for cruelty. Nevertheless, it is obviously unclear whether atheist societies or laic states, which have discarded the ontological claim, would restrain themselves from the practice of somatic disintegration.

## 5. Conclusion

Shestov (2005b) believed that “man forgave every crime—cruelty, violence, murder; but he never forgave the unmotivated love of death and the seeking of its secret ” (p. 19). I hope this poetic statement is not true because it is only by seeking the secret of death that humanity can find a remedy for violence and cruelty. The correlation which is the subject of this paper could help to find a new, more efficient approach to studies on cruelty. Even if the mind-body problem keeps troubling philosophers and human hostility continues, unable to transcend politics and religion, it must at least be possible to eliminate cruelty. Maybe it is not only ideology that needs to be adjusted in order to eradicate cruelty. Perhaps what is called for is a healthier respect for hormones (such as OXT) that might have brought humanity to develop dangerous ideologies in the first place. The OXT paradox is a good candidate for one of the first and most grave impulses that gave birth to cruelty. I do not claim it achieved this directly. More likely, its influence was indirect, as it triggered the development of the necessary ideology which underpins cruelty in the form of somatic disintegration. By allowing humans to build groups in order to defend themselves, it unwillingly provided the recipe for disaster: hostility and conflicts brought causalities, and, alongside those, the human experience of the departure of an invisible element upon death. Finally, the idea arose that evil could lurk beyond visibility and physicality. Since there was little physical difference between the enemy and oneself and no outward signs of hostility, whatever was evil in the enemy had to reside in the realm of the invisible. Adelman (1997) calls genocide a religious act and picks up somatic disintegration



as a critical aspect of his thoughts on the Rwandan genocide where he talks of the projection of the divided (psycho-physical) self:

So we project our division onto the other as a mode of integrating the self. This is the root of ethnic hatred and racism. 'The ethnicity of the body is built into its dismemberment and disfigurement. Violence constructs the ethnic body as the metonym of sectarian social space.' That is why we disfigure those we do not want to figure or count as part of the body politic. We want to strike at their soul through their corporeal being. We want to ex-communicate the communicative body. (Adelman, 1997, p. 20)

He speaks of constructing ethnicity from violence, which is a substratum of the OXT paradox. But ethnicity is important only in genocide studies, whereas the phenomenon is more general: hostility (not only violence) generated by biological factors begets inter-human divisiveness (not only racial or ethnic division), which is explained by an ontological claim. The psycho-somatic dualism points towards the eradication of hostility by focusing violence on the asomatic rather than the physical, because it is the metaphysical, not the physical, that is the source of hostility. Cruelty is only a symptom that appears in an advanced stadium of the ontological malady that is "transmitted" via paradox hormones like OXT.

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