Cruelty and morality seem like polar opposites – until they join forces. Beware those who persecute in the name of principle

**Vice dressed as virtue**

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*The Inquisition Scene* (1808-1812), by Francisco Goya. *Courtesy the Royal Academy of Fine Arts of San Fernando, Madrid*

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The corruption of the best things begets the worst.  
– From *The Natural History of Religion* (1757) by David Hume

Following in the steps of Michel de Montaigne, the distinguished political philosopher Judith Shklar has argued that cruelty should be considered the supreme evil and that we should put it first among the vices. The essence of cruelty is to wilfully and needlessly inflict pain and suffering on another creature – be it an animal or a human being. Closely related to this vice are malice and sadism, both of which involve taking pleasure or delight in the suffering of others. Although cruelty might not be peculiar to human beings, it is a familiar and pronounced feature of human nature and social life. One important feature of human cruelty is the way that it varies, both with respect to its instruments and when it is occasioned, depending on our particular cultural and social circumstances. With this in mind, we can ask: what is the relationship between cruelty and morality?

On the face of it, cruelty and morality are opposites. Just as morality stands as a check or constraint on our cruel impulses, so these impulses propel us away from morality. On closer examination, however, the relationship between them is more complex and much messier. One way of appreciating this is to consider our retributive propensities and dispositions, which certainly encourage causing pain and suffering to those we find objectionable or threatening. It would, nevertheless, be a mistake to consider the relationship between morality and cruelty entirely in terms of our largescale social and legal institutions and practices, such as prisons, and the forms of punishment associated with them. For one thing, these institutions and practices might or might not be cruel in terms of the definition provided. Beyond this, we shouldn’t overlook or ignore the way in which morality is frequently misused at a much more personal or everyday level, one that need not involve our legal institutions and practices at all. The particular form of cruelty that I am concerned with is a mode of *moralism*.

When I speak of moralism, in this context, what I am concerned with, in general terms, is the *misuse* of morality for ends and purposes that are themselves vicious or corrupt. Moralisers present the facade of genuine moral concern but their real motivations rest with interests and satisfactions of a very different character. When these motivations are unmasked, they are shown to be tainted and considerably less attractive than we suppose. Among these motivations are cruelty, malice and sadism. Not all forms of moralism, however, are motivated in this way. On the contrary, it could be argued that the most familiar and common form of moralism is rooted not in cruelty but in *vanity*.

The basic idea behind vain moralism is that the agents’ (moral) conduct and conversation is motivated with a view to inflating their social and moral standing in the eyes of others. This is achieved by way of flaunting their moral virtues for others to praise and admire. Any number of moralists through the ages – reaching back to the likes of François de La Rochefoucauld (1613-80) and Bernard Mandeville (1670-1733) – have attempted to show that it is vanity that lies behind most, if not all, of our moral conduct and activity. While theories of this kind no doubt exaggerate and distort the truth, they do make sense of much of what troubles us about moralism.

One feature of vain moralism that is especially troubling is that an excessive or misplaced concern with our moral reputation and standing suggests that moralisers of this kind lack any deep or sincere commitment to the values, principles and ideals that they want others to believe animates their conduct and character. Moralisers of this kind are essentially superficial and fraudulent. We have, of course, countless examples of this sort of moral personality, ranging from Evangelical preachers caught in airport motels taking drugs with male prostitutes, to any number of highly paid professors wining and dining on the lecture circuit while explaining the need for social justice and advocating extreme forms of egalitarianism. For the most part, these characters and their activities – whatever their doctrine – are a matter of ridicule rather than of grave moral concern. Over time, the motivations behind their ‘[grandstanding](https://aeon.co/ideas/moral-grandstanding-theres-a-lot-of-it-about-all-of-it-bad)’ and ‘[virtue signalling](https://aeon.co/ideas/is-virtue-signalling-a-perversion-of-morality)’ will be exposed for what it is, and the moralisers’ shallow commitment to their professed ideals and values becomes apparent to all. While we shouldn’t dismiss the vain moraliser as simply innocuous, there is no essential connection between moralism of this kind and cruelty or sadism.

The particular motivations behind vain moralism largely account for the cluster of vices associated with it. This includes hypocrisy, sanctimoniousness, pomposity, pretension and conformism. These vices are all evidence that vain moralism is at work. Cruel moralism involves a very different set of motivations and a different cluster of vices. Although vain moralisers might adopt cruel attitudes and practices if they serve their (vain and shallow) ends, there is no satisfaction or pleasure taken in the suffering and humiliation of others for its own sake. With cruel moralism, things are different. What gives cruel moralisers satisfaction is not enhancing their moral standing in the eyes of others but rather the suffering and humiliation of others as a means to achieve power and domination over them. Achieving this confirms the moralisers’ sense of superiority over others and provides further validation for their ideals and values. It is self-validation – not validation to others – that cruel moralisers care about and seek to confirm. Imposing suffering and humiliation on the guilty and morally flawed provides this validation, and this becomes a deep source of motivation in their own ethical conduct and responses. In the hands of the cruel moraliser, morality lends itself to misrepresentation and misuse, and is liable to become cruel and sadistic.

Just as the motivation of the cruel moraliser is very different from that of the vain moraliser, so too is the principal set of vices associated with it. What comes with cruel moralism are vices such as severity, vindictiveness, dogmatism and authoritarianism. Cruel moralisers take a stance of excessive confidence and self-assertion, where this confirms their power and domination over the guilty or sinful. This might well be a pose that masks insecurities and doubts but it serves to sustain and support the cruel moralisers’ need to confirm their own moral standing and significance in the moral order. It is this need that demands satisfaction, and causing suffering and humiliation through the instrument of morality is the means by which it’s achieved.

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When we think about cruel moralism, what sort of examples come to mind? What’s likely to come to most people’s mind are examples of largescale world-historical events involving public ‘show trials’ of some kind. This might cover the ideological and historical range, running from the trial of Socrates or the crucifixion of Christ, to the Spanish Inquisition, to the ‘Tribunals’ of the French Revolution, and on to the farce of the Moscow show trials in the 1930s, the Nazis’ ‘People’s Court’, the McCarthy hearings in the US senate in the 1950s, and the countless public humiliations and cruelties of the Chinese ‘Cultural Revolution’ during the 1960s. It might also include the endless public humiliations and bullying of atheists, adulterers and homosexuals and other such ‘miscreants’ – forms of cruelty inflicted by the (apparently) morally motivated that continue to this day all around the globe.

There are certainly important features of cruel moralism at work in all these examples. A parading of the accused before judges and the uncritical mob; their various faults and vices reviewed and described; and harsh penalties and sanctions meted out on this basis. The use and abuse of morality to satisfy the sadistic cravings of those involved and their audience is evident in all these cases. At the same time, however, examples of this general kind are also unhelpful and misleading from a number of points of view.

One reason for not relying entirely on examples of this kind is that it’s a mistake to think that cruel moralism operates only at the level of largescale or world-historical events. On the contrary, cruel moralism typically manifests itself in countless minor everyday interpersonal exchanges that pass largely unnoticed by all but those directly involved. They are, nevertheless, cruel and morally damaging. Another, more important reason for avoiding examples of the sort mentioned above is that they confuse and conflate a number of distinct issues. In the cases cited, the principles, values and ideology of the moralisers (ie, the Church, the Party, the state, etc) are all highly questionable. Beyond that, the process and procedure by which ‘guilt’ is determined is no less suspect and flawed. We are, in almost all these cases, left with the thought that the accused is entirely innocent from any relevant ethical point of view (they might, indeed, be ethical, admirable and brave figures who are simply subject to groundless persecution). In these circumstances, the victims of moral cruelty know that neither those who condemn them, nor what they are being condemned for, have the slightest moral standing or credibility – however cruel they might still be.

One further concern about these examples is that in any social environment that’s highly coercive and manipulative, we have every reason to doubt or question the sincerity of those who are persecuting and humiliating the condemned. They too might be performing these actions in the name of a ‘morality’ that they are also not free to challenge or repudiate. To this extent, both the persecutor and the persecuted are victims of a wholly corrupt ethical system in which only the facade but none of the substance of morality and law survives. These are all, of course, matters of great moral concern but they obscure certain features of cruel moralism that don’t depend on conditions or motivations of this kind. I will call these cases of *impure* cruel moralism.

What, then, does a case of *pure* cruel moralism look like? In 2017, Michael Marrus, an emeritus professor of history and a distinguished scholar of the Holocaust, sat down with three graduate students in a college affiliated with the University of Toronto. The ‘master’ of the college, as he was then titled, came over to join them. At this point, Marrus turned to one of the graduate students, who was black, and said: ‘You know this is your master, eh? Do you feel the lash?’ His attempt at a ‘joke’ was plainly foolish, insensitive, offensive and hurtful. Marrus acknowledged this himself in his resignation letter, which was submitted a few days later. What distinguishes such a case from the impure cases discussed before is that Marrus had indeed violated perfectly reasonable and sensible moral standards (ie, principles of antiracism). He was obviously not innocent in these circumstances – as his own apology made clear. Nor would it be correct to assume that those who held him to these standards were adhering to some sort of pernicious ideology. Similarly, we have no reason to suppose that those who objected to Marrus’s effort at a ‘joke’ were motivated by moral vanity or ‘grandstanding’ in some way – much less that they weren’t sincerely committed to the values and principles of antiracism.

What encourages this is the pleasure of becoming intoxicated by a sense of one’s moral superiority

If this is all correct, then it might be thought that the circumstances of this case don’t display any features of cruel moralism. Let’s consider, then, what actually happened in this case. As described in the Canadian media, Marrus’s ‘joke’ produced a ‘firestorm of “profound outrage”’. Within days, before he resigned, a letter was drafted and signed by almost 200 faculty and students who gave voice to this ‘profound outrage’. Their letter also made a number of demands, such as that the college should sever all ties with Marrus and that an apology should be provided by the college and its ‘master’. In response, an apology was subsequently provided, and the college went on to drop the title of ‘master’. A series of steps were also taken to address the ‘systemic racism’ that was said to be prevalent at the college and university. Marrus’s name, along with a brief description of this episode, is now permanently posted on the website Rate My Racist Professor. The relevant website says that its mission ‘is to expose and raise awareness of incidences of racism, bigotry, intolerance and abuse of position within the academic community in North America’. Marrus is assigned a ‘racism score’ of 2.3 (on a 1 to 5 scale, based on a survey provided). This ‘score’, one assumes, is supposed to confer both scientific credibility and democratic legitimacy to the final verdict being pronounced on Marrus and those listed along with him.

What sense can be made of this, or lessons drawn from it, as concerns cruel moralism? Let’s begin by emphasising that the standards of antiracism are completely legitimate and credible, and that Marrus’s remark (‘joke’) clearly failed these standards. Let’s also agree that those who took this view, including the signatories of the letter expressing ‘profound outrage’, were entirely sincere in their commitment to these standards and their insistence that they be properly respected and followed. Finally, let’s also note that not only did Marrus accept all this himself, he tried to apologise directly to the student concerned, who refused to accept his apology. For all these reasons, it is evident that such a case plainly doesn’t fit the impure (‘show trial’) model of cruel moralism. There are no illegitimate or corrupt moral or political standards at play here. Nor is the condemned party innocent of the charges made against him. How, then can he be a victim of cruel moralism?

What matters for identifying cases of *pure* cruel moralism is the motivation of those who set upon the guilty party. Evidence that their motivation is suspect is provided by the amplified and intense ‘outrage’ that was provoked – producing ‘boiling’ tensions around the campus and a ‘firestorm’ of controversy well beyond it. What fuel would be left in the moral tank of those who signed the letter expressing ‘profound outrage’ at Marrus’s remark when faced with the likes of Heinrich Himmler or racists of that kind and calibre? While no one should deny that there are many cases of racism (in Toronto and elsewhere) that merit ‘profound outrage’, the case of Marrus is not one of them. The excesses and extremes of cruel moralism depend on confusing and conflating cases of these kinds. What encourages all this is not necessarily moral vanity – although that too might play a role here – but rather the plain and familiar pleasure of becoming intoxicated by a sense of one’s moral superiority in these circumstances.

It might be useful to contrast the case of Marrus with some other high-profile cases of moralism that have also occurred on university campuses in recent years. One notorious case involves the moral hounding of a Yale University faculty member in 2015 because she had the temerity to suggest that, perhaps, it was not within the right of the university to police what costumes its students could wear for the purpose of Halloween. Students – attending an elite institution that is a bastion of privilege where many, if not most, come from wealthy, advantaged backgrounds of every kind – pounced on this case. They too expressed outrage and demanded that the professor concerned should resign, on the ground that she was failing to create a ‘safe space’ for those in the university community.

Without going into the details of this case (which was widely covered by international media outlets), it will suffice for our purposes to show that, despite apparent similarities, this is a case of *impure* cruel moralism – or, at least, so I take it to be. It is impure because the moral and political standards of those who humiliated and hounded the professor, and eventually drove her out, were far from unproblematic or uncontroversial. Moreover, the conduct of many of the students involved and the modes of harassment that they adopted strongly suggests that this was a prime example of *vain* moralism. What is especially significant here is that the professor concerned had every reason to protest her innocence and could insist that the charges against her were groundless and themselves ethically suspect and pernicious. This is a stance and position that Marrus could not take. Moreover, those who condemned Marrus in Toronto could not be so easily dismissed as patently misguided and self-indulgent. It is, however, this very feature of *pure* cruel moralism that makes it even more difficult to identify, respond to, and call out.

These observations about cases of both pure and impure cruel moralism draw our attention to another of its significant features: the way that cruel moralism can attach itself to moral perfectionism and idealism of various kinds. A casual review of history shows that moralism and moralisers find a natural home in religion and political movements and ideologies that encourage moral optimism and utopian hopes. Those who fail the standards and ideals in question are a particular source of disappointment and frustration for those who are devoted to them. The further irony of this dynamic is that those ideologies and movements that promise perfection and utopia are themselves especially prone to forms of moral cruelty and sadism. Their adherents, of whatever stripe or orientation, find particular satisfaction in the humiliation and suffering of their opponents, whom they perceive as ‘moral enemies’. The suffering of their ‘enemies’ offers them further evidence of their domination, superiority and hopes for a perfect future. Religions and political movements that are founded on a gospel of love and justice rank among the most frequent and flagrant practitioners of draconian, authoritarian and dogmatic policies and practices – all of which is well-concealed in the language of their higher and nobler ideals and motivations.

This disposition to moral idealism and utopian goals is itself closely allied with a Manichean world view that divides the moral community into the good and the evil, the innocent and the guilty, victims and oppressors, exploited and exploiters, friends and enemies, saints and sinners, and so on. This becomes another dynamic for cruel moralism. Moral practitioners who live in a world that is ethically polarised in this way are especially vulnerable to the satisfactions of cruel moralism. A world governed by such simple and crude moral divisions and polarities is one where it becomes easy to lose all sympathetic feeling and affinity for those who fall on the wrong side of the divide. Whatever restraints and moderation might be encouraged by kinder motivations will be lost, and the pleasures of watching the wicked suffer will be amplified. In many religions, this becomes part of an ‘inspiring’ picture of our moral future – a form of moral sickness that has worked its way deeply into those political ideologies that developed out of them (including ideologies that claim to have repudiated their own religious sources and origins).

We might ask, in light of this understanding of cruel moralism, what steps can be taken to contain and curtail its influence in human life? Perhaps the most obvious and significant sphere in which cruel moralism operates is within our retributive attitudes and practices. For reasons already mentioned, it is a mistake to assume that cruel moralism and retributivism amount to the same thing. Some forms of retributivism might well be called for and required for any viable form of moral and social life. It is clearly untrue to suggest that these attitudes and practices have no rationale or point other than satisfying sadistic or malicious cravings. Nor would it be true to suggest that all forms of *excessive* retribution can be laid at the door of cruel moralism and its sadistic motivations. On the contrary, apart from simple faulty judgments about what measures might be needed to secure and preserve a safe and stable community, there are other problematic motivations that also encourage excessive and extreme forms of retribution – most notably fear. Having said all this, there can be no doubt that cruel moralism does indeed play a significant role in propelling and providing (moral) cover for excessive retributivism throughout society and its institutions, including its legal institutions and practices. The disturbing truth about cruel moralism is that it is a propensity that’s deeply rooted in morality itself, and that plays out and displays itself in public as well as private life. In both spheres, its pernicious motivation and destructive effects remain largely concealed.

Every morally outraged Facebook contributor is provided with a bottomless source of support for their moral vanity

While there is no simple or easy cure for any form of moralism, there are, nevertheless, means and methods available for curtailing and curbing its influence. We might begin, for example, by encouraging those forms of moral education and development that promote virtues that oppose and limit moral cruelty and sadism. The most obvious of these are kindness and sympathy – both of which tend to promote forms of forgiveness that facilitate reconciliation rather than retribution. At the level of our political and social institutions, liberal-democratic structures promote forms of transparency and accountability that make it more difficult for moralisers to mask and conceal their motivations – including cruelty – as ethically legitimate. At the cultural level, every form of art can be marshalled to expose the forms of concealment and corruption that cruel moralism involves. To cite just one example, many of the paintings and etchings by Francisco Goya (1746-1828) present a powerful exposé of the dark motivations and practices of cruel moralism and invite us to sympathise with the fate of its victims.

Finally, we might also turn to the comedian. Suffice it to say that both cruel and vain moralisers alike particularly fear having their motivations exposed this way, through [ridicule](https://aeon.co/ideas/the-jokes-always-saved-us-humour-in-the-time-of-stalin) and [mockery](https://aeon.co/ideas/the-only-line-comedy-shouldnt-cross-is-the-no-laughter-line). This explains why the vice of earnest humourlessness – and the various forms of suppression that go with it – is another common feature of their personalities and style.

While steps can be taken to curb and curtail cruel moralism, there are powerful forces working against this. Technology, in the form of the internet and social media, now provides a massive platform for the spread and reach of pernicious moralism and moralisers. It might well be true that vain moralism particularly thrives in this environment, given that every morally outraged Facebook and blog contributor is provided with a bottomless source of support for their moral vanity and the numerous validating pleasures that go with it (eg, the number of ‘likes’ that they receive, etc). However, we shouldn’t underestimate these platforms as a venue for the *cruel* moraliser. Many of the most cruel and cutting posts, as directed at those who are found to fail in some moral dimension or other, are entirely *anonymous*. Clearly there is no vanity being fed here, since there is no name or person attached to the post. There is only the simple pleasure and satisfaction of watching someone else, a transgressor of some kind, suffer and be humiliated in a manner from which the anonymous contributor receives some sadistic satisfaction. The internet has provided this human propensity with a massive platform, all of which serves as clear evidence of the power and attractions of cruel moralism.

It might be said that there is an (obvious) irony involved in writing about and condemning moralism, and we should, no doubt, be conscious of this. Among other things, if we are too quick to condemn moralism and moralisers, we might cease to take morality itself seriously enough. That will happen, however, only if we fail to distinguish moralism and morality and the different motivations that are at play. Perhaps the deeper irony here is that if we take morality seriously, as we must, then we have good reason to take moralism – especially in its cruellest forms – *very* seriously. The fundamental irony, inherent in the human predicament, is that morality is itself both an occasion and instrument for many of the most severe and cruel forms of immorality.

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