

One such leader was Abraham Lincoln. During the Civil War, the Southern army insisted that arming black soldiers was illegal and that they would execute white officers who led black troops. They did in fact carry out a few executions of officers they captured, and the Northern military command requested permission to execute some captured Rebel officers in what seemed to them a fair reprisal. Lincoln said no, because he foresaw a downward spiral that would lead to ever more killing of prisoners.<sup>51</sup> By unilaterally refraining from such a reprisal, he prevented that downward spiral, and he also saved his cause from the moral damage that would have resulted from such measures.

But leaders like Abraham Lincoln are exceptional. The temptation to resort to violent means in the service of a good cause is common, and many a good cause has suffered contamination and worse by yielding to it.

CHAPTER

7

## Can Evil Be Fun? The Joy of Hurting

In 1941, a young German journalist was stationed as a naval correspondent in Liepaja, one of the territories overrun by the Germans. One day the journalist received a pass that enabled him to witness the shooting of Jewish civilians. Writing about the event later, he passed over the plight of the Jews and the killing procedures, because he said those had already been sufficiently described elsewhere.

What interested him was the behavior of the killers, or as he more delicately put it, "the people who had to carry out such an action." He said there was no single pattern of response, but a broad range. At one extreme, some of the security policemen were crying during the killings because they could not cope with the horrible reality. These later spoke to him of suicidal despair and the hopeless feeling of being unable either to disobey the orders or to carry them out. Others, however, seemed to have a more positive attitude, to the point that they kept a score sheet with the number of people they had shot. The journalist reflected that it was hard to tell the two extremes apart in any other way than their actions at the time. "Who today can determine which were

those who wept as they carried out their duties and which the ones who kept a score-sheet?"<sup>1</sup>

Certainly one must think that those who made a game out of killing people are the clearest examples of evil. Victims' accounts sometimes even refer to the perpetrators laughing and enjoying themselves as they beat and shoot helpless people. The perpetrators themselves, at least the ones who later write about the experience, tend to emphasize the disgust, guilt, and depression that attend it.

Enjoyment of hurting others is one of the central features of the myth of pure evil. It is repeated in countless movies and other entertainments. Indeed, the James Bond novels and movies depend on it, for most of them include a sequence in which Bond is captured by the villain, who devises some clever and entertaining way to kill him, except that Bond manages to escape. The James Bond fan cannot help but reflect that if Bond were ever to fall into the hands of a less sadistic and more practical villain, who would shoot him on the spot, the series would end abruptly. Yet somehow writers (and presumably audiences) continue to find it plausible that each new villain ends up being thwarted by his own sadism.

If people could widely and commonly derive pleasure from hurting others, there might be little need for the rest of this book. The myth of pure evil would be essentially correct in its notion that bad people hurt others for the sheer pleasure of doing so. Why look further for explanations? Some people are violent and cruel for the fun of it. End of story.

This explanation is plausible. In fact, it has ardent supporters. The idea that human nature includes an aggressive instinct, or the similar idea that aggressive impulses are based on an innate genetic factor, is essentially an assertion that people are programmed by nature to want to inflict harm. That presumably implies that they get some kind of pleasure or satisfaction out of doing so, just as satisfying any of the other innate appetites (such as for food, drink, and sex) brings good feelings. These views have been asserted by some of the finest minds of the twentieth century, including Sigmund Freud and Konrad Lorenz.

Yet do people really enjoy killing? We know that it is not safe to rely solely on either victim accounts or fictional depictions for insight into the minds of evildoers. It will be necessary to consider the perpetrators' perspectives and accounts and to look very closely at the evidence before concluding that people enjoy inflicting pain on others. Of course, the perpetrators' accounts are also unreliable, especially when they are

trying to rationalize their actions or reduce their blame after the fact. Perpetrators know the myth of pure evil, too, and they know that to admit to having enjoyed torturing or killing someone will put them in a very bad light. Most of them know that they'd better say they were reluctant and upset and that they didn't believe in it and are sorry they were forced to participate.

Still, there are some who will speak frankly and describe what it was like at the time, even to the point of whether it was fun. At this point, another problem emerges: Victims and bystanders will seize on such accounts and emphasize them, possibly overgeneralizing or overinterpreting what is said. Even the journalist's quotation that started this chapter deserves a second look. He didn't say the men actually enjoyed the killings, only that they kept a score sheet. It could be that they were simply keeping track of the chore or had become inured to such duties and were trying to enliven a dull, slightly distasteful task.

The question of whether people enjoy harming others—and, if they do, the question of how much evil can be explained by this pleasure—is the single most elusive and vexing problem in the entire topic of evil. This chapter will take a hard but open-minded look at the evidence. Probably the best sign of open-mindedness is frequent revision of one's opinion. The conflicting, inconsistent evidence has gradually led me to conclude that sadistic pleasure is genuine, unusual, acquired only gradually, and responsible for only a minority of evil. When it does come into play, however, it can make the victim's plight immensely worse.

For want of a better term, *sadism* can be used to describe getting enjoyment or pleasure from hurting others, as well as the desire for that pleasure. Unfortunately, the term *sadism* is also sometimes used to describe a pattern of sexual behavior involving dominance over others, and that narrower, more precise and specialized usage is not what is meant here.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, I particularly do not wish to claim that true sadistic pleasure is inherently sexual or indeed is related to the pleasures that accompany such sexual transactions. The present question is the more far-reaching and urgent one of whether human evil is driven by the pleasure of harming others.

### What It Feels Like to Hurt Someone

Most people have some experience with hurting others. It is not usually a pleasant experience, contrary to the sadism theory. Back when parents

used to use corporal punishment to discipline their children, one common line was, "This hurts me more than it hurts you." We (the children) didn't really believe it, but in retrospect at least there can be little doubt but that well-meaning, loving parents suffer when they hurt their children, even for a good cause.

More broadly, it seems safe to say that most people find it deeply upsetting to inflict harm, pain, or death on another person. The cheerful sadism that is often found in victim accounts and in the movies, where enemy soldiers laugh with pleasure while shooting, pillaging, raping, and torturing helpless victims, almost vanishes when one looks at the perpetrators' own stories and experiences.

One of the biggest surprises to emerge from World War II was the reluctance of American soldiers to shoot at the enemy. That war was marked by an unprecedented involvement of social scientists and other mental health professionals who sought to learn about the reactions and coping mechanisms of soldiers in combat. To their surprise, they found that about one in every four American soldiers could not bring himself to aim and shoot his gun at enemy soldiers during a battle. Such reluctance is especially remarkable because there is no apparent moral issue. In battle, a soldier's job is to fight the enemy, and he is bound by duty and obligation to do so. Hardly anyone maintains that it is immoral for a soldier to try to kill the enemy in battle, and of course soldiers are aware that the enemy is trying to kill them, too. Yet many soldiers could not pull the trigger. It seems there is some deeply rooted gut reaction that inhibits many people from shooting someone even when it is appropriate or possibly vital to do so.

A famous instance of this reluctance was documented during the Spanish Civil War in the 1930s.<sup>3</sup> George Orwell, who like many Western writers and intellectuals volunteered to fight against the Fascists, was dug in across from the enemy trenches, but the rifles were not effective at long range and so the men had to hide in no-man's-land and snipe at the enemy. On one occasion, Orwell's group fired upon small group of Fascists who were out of their trenches. Orwell took careful aim at a soldier who had been relieving himself when the shooting started and had turned to run off, holding up his pants with his hands. Orwell could not bring himself to shoot him. "A man who is holding up his trousers is not a 'fascist.' He is visibly a fellow creature," said Orwell. Of course, he did not have time to think through such reasoning in the split second

in which he had the chance to fire. His comment was probably made later as an articulation or rationalization of the sudden, unexpected gut reaction that made him unwilling to shoot.

Our own generation is more familiar with the sufferings of Vietnam veterans, such as the widely recognized posttraumatic stress syndrome. To be sure, some of the stress and suffering of these soldiers is a result of having been exposed to severe dangers, distressing losses of comrades, and feelingly helpless, at the mercy of unseen but deadly enemies. Other Vietnam veterans, however, suffer from the stress of having been perpetrators rather than victims. After the war, they were tormented by nightmares and anxieties about the things they did, rather than the things done to them. In one study of Vietnam veterans who sought therapy for posttraumatic stress disorder and related problems, 30 percent of them were found to be motivated by problems connected with their own violent actions.<sup>4</sup>

In March 1968, American soldiers massacred the inhabitants of the village of My Lai, in what is almost certainly the most discussed American atrocity of the Vietnam War. Considerable information is available about the incident, and although it seems that some of the American boys acted callously or vindictively, many were deeply upset during and after the incident. One private was guarding a group of about 40 villagers when Lt. Calley told him "you know what to do" with them. When Calley returned about 15 minutes later, he was angry to see the private still guarding them, and he asked him why they weren't dead yet. The private said, "I didn't know we were supposed to kill them." Calley helped line the villagers up, and the two GIs shot them with their automatic weapons. The private and other witnesses later testified that he had been crying while he fired at the people. He said he felt "all broke up" by the act of killing the civilian prisoners.<sup>5</sup> Some other soldiers were unable to bring themselves to shoot, and they either directly refused the orders or contrived ways to avoid them. Reportedly, one man deliberately shot himself in the foot as a way of getting excused from the killing duties.<sup>6</sup>

Another relevant group is police, because police officers sometimes must shoot someone in the line of duty. Unlike soldiers, who are often drafted into service, most police officers have voluntarily sought that career and worked hard to gain that job. Sometimes they find themselves in situations in which dangerous, armed criminals must be shot, both for

self-protection and to protect the public. Such shootings are thus eminently justified by professional duty, the need to protect the public, and self-preservation. Yet these officers too often find themselves having nightmares or other disturbances afterward. In recent years, most police departments have instituted mandatory counseling for all officers who have shot someone, as a way of helping these men and women cope with the stresses that arise from such an act.

Moral scruples should also be irrelevant when the victim desires to be hurt. Such cases are presumably rare, but that makes them all the more interesting. The anthropologist Gini Graham Scott spent several years studying people who desire sadomasochistic sex play. According to her research, one common problem is that a person desires a submissive, masochistic experience but is unable to persuade the spouse or romantic partner to take the dominant role.<sup>7</sup> (Most people start off desiring submissive experiences, and so the desire to be spanked is far more common than the desire to spank someone.) Again, a deeply rooted reluctance to hurt someone seems to be operating in such cases. If your spouse desires to be tied up and spanked by you, why should you refuse? Even if you do not have a strong personal desire to do those things, you should be willing to do them if only to give your partner the sexual enjoyment that he or she anticipates. But many people refuse. Or they cannot bring themselves to go through with it even if they want to consent.

To turn from the safe and consensual back to the horrific, the Holocaust has provided probably the most extensive evidence about how otherwise normal people respond to sudden demands to perform horrible deeds. Systematic killing of civilians began during the eastward thrust of the German troops, when special units were detailed to execute certain categories of people living in the captured areas. The killing procedures were still evolving at this point and were subject to local variations, but the broad pattern was roughly as follows. The unfortunate civilians were notified to be in the town square at a certain time. They were marched off in a group to a place near the execution site. Some were detailed to dig a pit. Then they were led to the killing site in small groups. They were ordered (perpetrators prefer the word *instructed*) to undress and stand in line. Soldiers with machine guns then mowed them down. Those who were not killed instantly had to be dispatched with a pistol shot to the head or other vital organ or stabbed to death. When one group was completely dead, the next one was brought along, and the procedure was repeated.

Apparently, many of the soldiers were very distressed by this duty. From a soldier's point of view, it might be regarded as fairly easy work: It is far safer than combat and spares them from the helpless vulnerability of the modern battlefield. Yet the military psychiatrists found themselves called upon to treat a broad range of psychological disorders, comparable to those resulting from the stresses of combat. Anxiety and depression were common, as well as nightmares and other sleep disorders.<sup>8</sup> There were also physical problems similar to those produced by stress in general, especially vomiting, diarrhea, and other gastrointestinal disturbances. One psychiatrist who treated many of these problems estimated that about 20 percent of the soldiers assigned to kill prisoners suffered some of these psychiatric problems.<sup>9</sup> Presumably, many more felt some suffering but did not seek treatment. Although the basis for such an estimate is far from clear, the figure of 20 percent does suggest that the suffering was very common and yet certainly not universal. One must wonder how many of the other soldiers felt no qualms, as opposed to how many merely kept their problems to themselves.

The massacre of Jews at the small town of Jozefow, Poland, is vividly described through the perpetrators' eyes in Christopher Browning's book, *Ordinary Men*.<sup>10</sup> These perpetrators were older reserve policemen who had been called up for active duty to maintain order in the occupied country. They didn't expect to be shooting at civilians, except maybe occasionally during a mutual shoot-out with resistance partisans or bank robbers. One morning they were roused very early and assembled in the dark to be given the day's orders by the old major, "Papa" Trapp, who was visibly upset. He meandered through some explanations of duty and wartime necessities and the obligation to follow orders even if they were unpleasant. And then he told them that the day's job would be to kill all the Jews in the nearby village, except for a few able-bodied males who would be sent to a work camp.

The procedure, used for this killing operation turned out to be especially hard on the perpetrators, and substantial changes were made in later operations of the same type, as the police group became experienced in this kind of unpleasant duty. The first time, though, the victims were marched off to a waiting area. Each policeman then had to select one person from the group, march him or her (more were women) off to the killing site, instruct the victim to lie face down on the ground, aim his gun right up close at the back of the victim's neck, and shoot. The extremely close contact with the victim—individual selection, walking

together as a pair, and then shooting from close proximity—undoubtedly increased the horror of the act. Like the troops at My Lai, the policemen at Jozefow found ways to resist and evade the duty. Some refused outright or politely asked to be reassigned. Others sneaked away or managed to avoid both refusal and participation.

Despite the point-blank range, the killing operation was greatly delayed because many of the men repeatedly missed their targets. The Germans developed a special word for the problem, calling it "shooting-past." The technical obstacle of shooting-past seems to represent the same kind of inner inhibition that blocked the American soldiers from shooting at their enemies on the battlefield. At the moment of truth, one simply could not bring oneself to kill this person. The poor woman is lying face down on the ground, your gun is aimed right at the back of her head, inches away, and when you force yourself to pull the trigger somehow your hand jerks the gun away and you fire into the ground near her head, missing her completely. You'll have to shoot at her again, unfortunately; the job doesn't go away just because you're weak. No doubt she makes some unnerving sound at this point, too. All of this would be extremely upsetting.

After the killing was completed, the men returned to their barracks for the night. This had been their first experience with such grisly duty. Many could not eat, but most of them drank alcohol very heavily. There was little conversation. Many men had nightmares, and the barracks atmosphere was further disturbed in the night when one man woke up from a bad dream firing his gun into the ceiling.

From the safe vantage point of a half century and a continent away, one may think that of course the policemen should have suffered severe moral qualms about what they had done. They were, after all, participating in a genocidal crime that has defined the cultural conception of evil ever since. But Browning reports that when the policemen testified about the incident years later, they did not generally cast their personal struggles in terms of ethical principles or moral scruples. Even those who managed to escape the horrible duty failed to claim that some personal trait of character or ethics motivated them. Instead, he said, these men "overwhelmingly cited sheer physical revulsion against what they were doing as the prime motive."<sup>11</sup> The perpetrators' accounts of the massacre, even the ones that condemned it most thoroughly, tended not to express the horror in the moral terms in which we now discuss the

Holocaust and similar events. They emphasized instead the disgusting, gruesome nature of the task, such as the sound of the screams, the feeling of being splattered with a victim's brains, or just the horrible gut feeling of killing a person. The first day of mass murder did not prompt them to engage in spiritual soul-searching so much as it made them literally want to vomit.

Similar evidence comes from observations of other perpetrators. Normal American citizens who participated in Stanley Milgram's famous experiment were instructed (ordered) to press buttons that they (falsely) believed were delivering painful electric shocks to another person, and although the subjects complied with their instructions, they showed many signs of stress and distress. At the other extreme, serial killers cannot be assumed to be normal or healthy at all, but they, too, often show negative reactions to their killings (especially their first ones). They report finding the experience disappointing and upsetting, and the long gaps between their early killings are due to the fact that they decided not to repeat the horrible experience (although they changed their minds later). The famous serial killer Ted Bundy said he never really achieved the satisfaction he expected from killing, and in fact his murders usually left him feeling empty, depressed, forlorn, and hopeless of ever finding emotional satisfaction. Other serial killers have reported the same feelings of emptiness and depression afterward.<sup>12</sup>

Last, professional torturers hurt others as a job, but they, too, often find it stressful. In one of the few studies of such professionals, researchers found that after the Greek military regime fell, many former torturers came forward to describe their own problems and sufferings. These resembled the posttraumatic stress patterns we have already seen in other groups: nightmares, depression, severe irritability.<sup>13</sup>

Thus, there is a convergence of evidence from many sources. Hurting someone is generally unpleasant, and it often evokes severely negative reactions. This is not to diminish the sympathy that the victim deserves, nor does it diminish the culpability of people who do bad things. The present question, however, is concerned with what it feels like to inflict harm on another human being, and the answer appears to be that it is quite upsetting. At least, that is how most people react the first time or first few times. As we will see, it does become easier with repetition.

Moreover, the distress associated with hurting or killing seems to be different from the moral or spiritual objection that might be expected. It

is not that people feel that their principles have been violated, although some may indeed have such objections. Rather, it seems to be more of a gut reaction.

### Why Do They Laugh?

Satan laughs when human beings suffer. By the same token, it is a standard pattern in movies and other entertainments to depict the villains laughing with pleasure at the pain and suffering of their victims. We have seen that reactions to hurting others often involve disgust, depression, and sympathy, which seem the very opposite of amused enjoyment. How can these views be reconciled?

The problem is all the more acute because victim reports do sometimes claim that their tormentors were laughing. For example, Mevludin Oric is a Muslim villager who accidentally survived a massacre by Serb soldiers in July 1995 when his cousin and best friend, who stood next to him, was shot and fell on top of him. Mevludin passed out from terror, lying soaked in his friend's blood under the pile of corpses, and therefore the Serbs did not finish him off. He recalls the actions of the Serbian soldiers: "They were laughing like crazy men—they must have been on drugs, that's all I can think."<sup>14</sup> He said that right up until they opened fire, he could not believe the soldiers would shoot him and his unarmed, innocent friends.

Undoubtedly, one major reason to emphasize the laughter is the myth of pure evil. Victims can quickly and effectively make their point about the evilness of their captors by reporting this laughter. (In Mevludin Oric's account, the myth is also invoked in the seeming incomprehensibility of the action, as well as in his ascribing their wicked acts to the alien power of drugs.) Yet it would stretch credibility to suggest that victims entirely invented the notion that their captors were laughing. Presumably, there must be some truth to the matter. Does laughter prove the existence of evil sadism? And if not, why would people laugh in the presence of others who are suffering and dying?

My own conclusion is that laughter is not very conclusive proof of sadistic pleasure, although it is revealing of how the perpetrator is feeling. People may laugh for a variety of reasons. Indeed, humor is one defense against a shocking or disgusting task. Thus, for example, an important part of medical training is growing accustomed to seeing injured bodies, and medical students are renowned for pranks and jokes featuring body

parts from cadavers, such as hiding a severed hand in a lunch box. Such humor helps to overcome the normal reactions of shock and disgust that a physician cannot afford.

Nor are these reactions confined to medical students. An experiment by Bella DePaulo and Matthew Ainsville videotaped people's facial reactions to a series of slides, and one of the slides involved a repulsive photograph of an accident victim.<sup>15</sup> Males often responded to the disgusting slide with a smile (although females hardly ever did). It was not a smile of pleasure, but rather one that suggested embarrassment and an effort to distance oneself from the shocked or offended reaction. Still, something similar may be at work among people who find themselves working in a place where torture or execution is occurring.

Laughter may also arise from nervousness or uncertainty about how to react. In Milgram's experiments, some of the participants laughed when they followed instructions to deliver painful electric shocks (or so they believed) to another person who was banging on the wall and shouting for them to stop. Milgram reported "the regular occurrence of nervous laughing fits" that "seemed entirely out of place, even bizarre." And he was not just talking about the occasional nervous giggle. For three participants, the laughter reached the point of "full-blown, uncontrollable seizures." In the postexperimental debriefing conversation, many of the subjects were embarrassed by their laughter and loss of control. They "took pains to point out that they were not sadistic types, and the laughter did not mean that they enjoyed shocking the victim."<sup>16</sup> Milgram concurred that this laughter was not a sign of pleasure or amusement but rather reflected some effort to cope with one's distress at a pressure-filled, upsetting situation in which one was hurting someone. A similar reaction may be evident in the way people sometimes laugh to break the tension, during a moment of anxiety or uncertainty or even during a frightening movie. But victims may not make such fine distinctions between different kinds of laughter, especially when the mere fact of laughter will strengthen their account by indicating that their tormentors are evil.

Laughter may also occur out of sheer pleasure over doing a job well. Jerome Kagan's book on self-awareness in two-year-olds included the observation that many young children spontaneously smile when they succeed in mastering a new skill or task, indicating a presumably natural or innate source of pleasure.<sup>17</sup> It may be true that most acts of harming a defenseless victim would not involve much skill. But some would.

Torture, in particular, is a craft involving particular procedures and goals. The journalist Elizabeth Becker found the notes of a young Khmer Rouge cadre who had worked as a torturer in the infamous Tuol Sleng prison. These were private notes and were probably not intended for the outside world, so they may have been more candid than usual. He quoted his instructors as saying that "the purpose of torturing is to get answers. It's not something we do for the fun of it." The instructor went on to talk about the danger of losing control and lashing out at a prisoner in a blind rage, such as when frustrated. But then he made a remarkable statement: On some occasions, the enemy prisoner will "respond in a way that fits with the desires of our questions, [and] we get so happy we laugh and have a good time."<sup>18</sup>

Is that a rationalization? It seems unlikely. An instructor speaking to trainees about torture would probably want to provide accurate guidance about what to expect, and his comments were never intended to be published for the broader world to see. He was not trying to make torture look good.

And it is certainly plausible that groups of men (and perhaps women) would sometimes laugh with pleasure when they are succeeding at a difficult task. Thus, there is nothing inherently funny about football or basketball, and in fact these are difficult, strenuous games that require exhausting exertion and hold the risk of serious injury. Yet near the end of an important contest, one can often see the players on the winning team smiling and laughing. Although it seems a grotesque stretch to propose that a group of torturers would experience the same sort of pleasure, it is actually quite plausible, provided that they managed not to be too distressed over the suffering of their victims. And as we will see in the next chapter, that numbness or lack of empathy is often sought and cultivated in such work. Thus, torturers might end up laughing or seeming to enjoy themselves in a way that their victims could easily misinterpret as sadistic pleasure. They would be laughing in spite of the violence, rather than about it.

The analogy to a sports game brings us back to the quotation at the start of this chapter, in which the journalist noted that some of the German soldiers assigned to shoot civilians kept a score sheet to record their kills. This report is not unique. Other sources have documented that Nazi killers occasionally made games out of the activity. Some required the naked prisoners to run across a field while the troops shot at them, thereby increasing the marksmanship challenge. One of the police

battalions guarding the Warsaw ghetto was encouraged by the captain to take pot shots at Jews near the wall of the ghetto. Scores were kept, top shooters were rewarded, and "victory celebrations" were held whenever a high score was reached.<sup>19</sup>

Yet making a game of killing does not prove that the killing itself was pleasant. Rather, it suggests a shockingly callous attitude toward the deaths. A callous develops for a purpose, however, which is to reduce sensitivity. If the killing were especially unpleasant, people might try to make it into a game to make it more bearable. Focusing on the game and the score would detract attention from the moral worries and the disgusting unpleasantness of the duty. Many people seek to enliven tedious, unpleasant jobs by elaborating them into games.<sup>20</sup> We certainly have every right to disapprove of killers who treat the killing as a sport, but we cannot infer that they did so out of love of killing. The reason may have been the opposite.

A final reason to laugh is the humiliation of another person. Humiliating, degrading experiences are sometimes funny to watch, and indeed a great deal of comedy is based on just that principle. Stand-up comedians tell stories about embarrassing things that happened to them, and televised comedy shows often get laughs by depicting events that make fools of their protagonists. Undoubtedly, many victims of oppression or torture are degraded, and their oppressors might at some point begin to find these scenes funny. Thus, to see a dignified, powerful adult man reduced to naked, fearful helplessness might possibly have an element of amusement in it, especially if he urinates involuntarily or begs to be released or unexpectedly makes an odd squeaking noise in response to pain. Sympathy for the victims would preclude seeing any humor, but one must recall that the attitude of the captors often precludes such sympathy. Imagine, for example, that Adolf Hitler were captured alive and pissed his pants in fear. It might be funny.

Powerful people sometimes do enjoy the humiliations they inflict deliberately on their victims. For example, sometimes perpetrators require their captives to sing, which has no instrumental or material benefit to the captors but does embarrass the victims. During the Stanford Prison experiment, in which college students were randomly assigned to work as either guards or prisoners in a simulated prison, the guards at one point required a prisoner to sing "Amazing Grace" by himself while the other prisoners did push-ups.<sup>21</sup> Likewise, in a recent television documentary, gang members described one of their capers in

which they forced a robbery victim who was riding with them as a prisoner to sing several songs for their amusement. In such circumstances, the singer knows that he or she is being deliberately humiliated, which affects the singing and makes it more difficult to hold the tune—thereby intensifying the amusement of the captors who can play at being music critics and comment on the false notes or resolute style of the singer.

There are plenty of reasons that people may laugh during the victimization of others without indicating that they are deriving direct amusement and pleasure from hurting someone. Probably, most group tasks contain some occasions for laughter, if only to break the tension, and these occasions may arise even when the group task involves oppressing or hurting a detested enemy who is now safely cowed and in one's power. Still, victims probably attend specifically to such laughter and accommodate it to the myth of pure evil. To them, it provides welcome proof that their oppressors are sadistic, wicked individuals.

And so I don't doubt that killers and torturers and other people sometimes laugh when inflicting harm. But that doesn't prove that they enjoy the harm. There's plenty of evidence that most people don't.

Then again, maybe some of them do.

### The Fascinating Spectacle of Violence

Now let us look for positive indications that people sometimes get pleasure directly from harm or violence done to others. A first and very clear set of evidence concerns the interest in viewing violence. People seem to enjoy the spectacle of other people being hurt or killed, when they are not taking part.

The conclusion seems indisputable. If nothing else, it is clear that people enjoy entertainments based on harm and violence. The majority of movies by Eastwood or Stallone or Schwarzenegger have some humor, some plot devices, some acting, but people don't see them for those reasons; rather, they go for the violence. They enjoy the humor and all that as extras. Many films have little to offer except violence, but they draw millions of viewers, and indeed slasher films such as *Halloween*, *Nightmare on Elm Street*, and *Friday the 13th* have often managed to beget multiple sequels. Nor is this appetite confined to North America: Many of Hollywood's blood-and-guts films are popular around the world.

The ongoing national debate about violence in movies and television is over the tough question of whether media violence is a cause of real

violence. What is all too easily overlooked is the fact that media violence is essentially an effect, a consequence. People *want* to see violent movies. Movies are made to make money, and so the moviemakers film what people want to see. If people did not want to see violence, there would be very few such movies, because no one would pay to see them. But people do want to see them. Apparently, lots and lots of them.

Movies are hardly the only source of violent entertainment. The more literate segment of the public reads books, and many of these books deal with violence. Over the past decade, a new genre of "true crime" books has become big business. These books take actual violent events and describe them in detail. An early instance of this genre was Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood*, a slightly embellished account of a true story in which a pair of convicts broke into a midwestern family's house to rob them and, finding nothing much to steal, slaughtered the entire family. At the time, the book created quite a sensation, but by now one can routinely expect such a book on nearly every gruesome crime.

The fascination with the spectacle of human suffering goes beyond any interest in crime or violence itself. Almost invariably, people stop to look whenever there is a chance to see an injured human being or some other serious suffering. Many traffic jams could be avoided if people did not all slow down to look when driving by an accident. It is the slowing down for the sake of rubbernecking that causes the cars behind to have to wait. Likewise, when there is a fire, neighbors and strangers gather to watch.

This fascination with violence should not be attributed to any special depravity of modern society, because it is not limited to modern times. The violent entertainments of the Roman Colosseum are well known but not usually appreciated in context. Today, people tend to condemn them for their anti-Christian violence or exploitive operation, but such criticisms (although legitimate) miss the point from the perpetrator's perspective. The Romans did not have cable television movies with Steven Seagal wreaking havoc on dozens of enemies. To see a spectacle of violence, they had to put real violence on stage. Hence the gladiators, the wild animals, and the rest. The lions were not introduced to the Colosseum to provide a special punishment for the hated Christians. Rather, the Christians were put there for the sake of the lions. The audience wanted to see somebody (anybody) being mauled and eaten by lions, and so suitable categories of criminals were used to furnish the victims. The Christians were simply one of these unfortunate categories of criminals.



Indeed, public executions have always been an important spectacle. Once again, the modern sensitivity tends to side with the victims and condemn such practices, but these modern attitudes differ from how people at the time regarded them. Criminals were evil, and seeing a criminal put to death was probably comparable to seeing a villain in a modern movie killed by the hero. It signified a morally good, correct act of justice, and some enjoyment of the scene was appropriate.

Popular historian Barbara Tuchman recorded a story in which a medieval French village purchased a condemned criminal from another village so that they could stage the execution in their own town.<sup>22</sup> Tax money and public funds were as tight then as now, and it is surprising that one municipality would expend some of its budget on punishing a criminal who was under the jurisdiction of another. Yet the purchase makes sense if one understands that the execution was a major public entertainment, like a concert or play. Such rural villages had few entertainments to offer the citizens: no televisions, radios, stereos, video games, board games, or other amusements. To see a criminal put to death might be the most interesting and exciting thing to see all year, and possibly the only such thing. If the village had money, why should they be deprived of such a stimulating event, simply because they had no criminal of their own to execute?

Some of the greatest spectacles were provided by the major religious persecutions such as the Spanish Inquisition. From the public's perspective, the high point of each phase of the Inquisition was the auto-da-fé,<sup>23</sup> in which the convicted heretics were put to death. These were treated as great events and were sometimes timed to coincide with major celebrations, such as the one in 1632 held in honor of the Spanish queen's giving birth to a baby princess. Typically, the auto-da-fé was announced well in advance, and people would come from many miles to the city to see it. Getting a room the night before an auto-da-fé was more difficult than finding one in South Bend the night before the Notre Dame homecoming football game is today. The festivities included a parade of the guilty, the collective recital of Christian vows by all the audience (comparable perhaps to the singing of the national anthem at modern sports events), the pronouncing of sentences, the individual responses to the sentences, and then the executions. The actual executions sometimes occurred at a different place, requiring yet another procession.

The worst condemned heretics were burned alive. Others who repented at the last minute gained the mercy of being garrotted (strangled

with a rope) before their corpses were thrown on the flames. To be burned alive, of course, is an especially nasty way to die, and it was common for the condemned to recant when facing that fate. Still, garrotting was not popular with the audience, and some crowds jeered and booed if too few heretics remained alive for the actual burning.<sup>24</sup>

Thus, people do enjoy the pleasure of watching other people suffer and die. The spectacle of violence holds a fascination that seems to transcend time and culture. This does not prove that people can enjoy inflicting the harm themselves, but it is difficult to dispute the fact that they can get some pleasure out of seeing others hurt. At the very least, one can say that inflicting harm on others would be a way of bestowing on oneself the well-tested pleasures of being able to observe someone suffering.

### Empathy, Children, and Psychopaths

One day at the beach near our home, a group of schoolgirls found that a big fish had swum into the small space between the pier and a cement beach wall and had trapped itself. The fish was in a pool of water, but in front of it the water ended, it could neither turn around nor back up. As it happened, a woman came by walking her dog, and the four girls appealed to her to help them save the fish. When she described the incident later, the woman said that her normal response in such a situation would be to fetch her husband to perform such a gross task as picking up a big fish. But on this occasion, she felt some pressure to be a role model to the girls, and that ruled out the option of running off to get a man to do the icky part.

She also had to cope with her dog, which was part wolf and quite ruthless in such situations. In the dog's checkered past, she had killed many squirrels, groundhogs, and other small creatures, and she had not refrained from biting the occasional human either, usually without bothering to alert them by barking first. This monster dog had the preposterous name of Lucy. Lucy did not like the big fish, not at all. Whenever the woman managed to get the fish freed up a little, it would move forward a couple inches, and then Lucy would start forward herself as if to kill the fish, and the woman had to tell Lucy to keep back. The big fish and Lucy remained in constant, unsmiling eye contact, while the woman tried to find a way to get the fish turned around, to save its life as the girls wanted.

Finally she succeeded in picking up the fish and turning it around. As she recalled, the fish was big and heavy and scaly and slimy and flopping, each of which increased the difficulty of lifting it. The girls cheered. Lucy was disappointed. The woman went home to shower and change her clothes.

One response to this story is to reflect that the big fish was very lucky to have been discovered by a group of girls rather than a group of boys, who probably would not have settled on saving it as the most appealing response. In fact, though, the woman recalled that it had been a somewhat close call even with the girls, because a couple of them expressed interest in throwing stones at the fish and poking it with sticks. But somehow the spirit of helping it prevailed. The point, though, was that it would not have taken much for the children to have killed the fish. Doing something was the key; whether they saved it or killed it was not such a big deal. The fish presented a problem and a potential adventure, and tormenting or killing it would have been one very feasible response.

Are children sadistic? Certainly, killing a big fish would be in character. Children do plenty of things that harm or kill other creatures. They pull the wings off flies or moths. When a couple of boys discover an anthill, they may spend the better part of an hour stomping all the scurrying black or red critters to death. Some children throw frogs into the air to see them go splat on the pavement. Some fire slingshots or BB guns at birds, rabbits, or squirrels. A recent news story reported that a group of 11 boys and girls, from 8 to 14 years old, chased a small horse into a barbed wire fence where it broke its leg, then beat the animal with sticks until it died.<sup>25</sup> Children also pick on one another, and although this does not usually reach the point of maiming or killing, it is acutely unpleasant to the child being tormented or humiliated, even just by malicious teasing.

Yet all of this does not seem to add up to pure sadistic pleasure, as normally understood. Curiosity and a spirit of play tend to guide these activities, not a fully emerged enjoyment in the suffering of others. Indeed, what generally brings these activities to a halt is the intervention of adults, who tell the child to imagine how that would feel if someone did that to you: Put yourself in the other's place. As the child develops some empathy with the victim, the cruelty subsides.

Empathy is an important inhibitor. The capacity for empathic response emerges quite early in life, but it takes years for empathy to be

developed and refined into a common response—and to be strong enough to keep people from inflicting harm.

Because empathy has to be developed, there are wide variations in how much people have. Young children may have only a rudimentary version. Sensitive, fully socialized adults, in contrast, may be able to feel sharp empathic pain simply by reading about the suffering of total strangers in distant parts of the world.

Other adults are less sensitive. At the low extreme are the psychopaths, who seem in many respects to be utterly lacking in empathy. Indeed, the disregard for other people's rights is regarded as one of the defining features of the antisocial personality disorder (the new name for psychopathy in clinical diagnosis). Research psychologist Robert Hare, who has specialized in studying psychopaths, defines such individuals in the following terms: They are superficial, impulsive, egocentric, grandiose, and deceitful. Compared to other people, they lack remorse, empathy, guilt, responsibility, emotional depth, and self-control.<sup>26</sup>

As children, psychopaths often take the lead in petty cruelties to animals and bugs and seem to be more fascinated and less troubled by the sufferings of the tiny creatures than their friends are. Later, as adults, they treat other people with almost the same indifference. "Do I feel bad if I have to hurt someone? Yeah, sometimes," said one psychopath who was in prison for kidnapping, rape, and extortion, when interviewed by Hare, "But mostly it's like . . . uh . . . [laughs] . . . how did you feel the last time you squashed a bug?"<sup>27</sup> Moreover, it looks like such answers are sincere, not just bravado. They really just don't feel much about it.

Psychopaths do get some amusement from the sufferings of their victims, although this does not seem to be a driving force. One man in Hare's study had been imprisoned after a burglary. He broke into a house and was searching for valuables when an older man came downstairs and began "yelling and having a fucking fit," as the psychopath recalled it callously. He struck a few hard blows to the old man's head and throat, "and he like staggers back and falls on the floor. He's gurgling and making sounds like a stuck pig,"<sup>28</sup> he said, with a laugh. In response, he kicked the man in the head repeatedly until the old guy fell silent. Another man described a fight in which his opponent pulled a knife on him, but he got the knife away and "rammed" it into the opponent's eye. He recalled the opponent's response with amusement: "He ran around screaming like a baby. What a jerk!"<sup>29</sup>

Normal human beings (as opposed to psychopaths) seem at least able to accept harm to animals without feeling much regret or empathic pain. Hunting and fishing represent popular pastimes that revolve around the killing of animals. Of course, there is room to question how much of the enjoyment is based on killing, and hunters are often rather testy about this topic, but it is clear that the killing at least fails to detract from a pleasant experience.

Several years ago, legal restrictions on hunting caused the moose population in the northeastern United States to expand dramatically. To control the overpopulation, a few states passed emergency measures allowing hunters to shoot them freely. The usual challenge of hunting was mostly absent, because after years of legal protection, the moose had lost most of their fear of humans. They were tame enough to stand right next to you. Yet many hunters still found enjoyment in shooting them. Newspapers had photos in which a hunter would walk right up to a moose, aim his rifle point blank at the unsuspecting, tame moose's head, and shoot it. Such incidents suggest that the killing itself furnished some pleasure, because there was little need for the stalking and other skills that many hunters cite as the central focus of the pleasure.

Taken together, the evidence does indicate that some people can inflict harm without great suffering. The implication may be that people only learn to be deterred by empathy. Many children start off being able to inflict harm without suffering a great deal of remorse, and psychopaths never seem to acquire the empathy and other factors that make one adverse to cruelty. This is not to say that they enjoy cruelty, but they do not necessarily find it to be objectionable and upsetting, either.

How can these observations be reconciled with the earlier evidence that people are often distressed and disgusted by their first experiences of inflicting harm on other human beings? There are two possible answers. One is that people are different. Only some people are upset, while others have no inner regrets or problems. The other is that the capacity for empathy does not always come into play.

There is some evidence for both answers. Let's begin with the psychopaths. Psychopaths do not seem to feel much regret over the suffering of others. "How did you feel the last time you squashed a bug?" as the one said. Such individuals seem to be incapable of feeling sympathy with people who suffer, including their own victims. (They may become fairly adept at pretending to have sympathy, however, to manipulate people into trusting or forgiving them.)

Now to the second explanation. It appears that most people develop a capacity for empathy, and this capacity deters cruelty. The fact that it appears between childhood and adulthood does not necessarily mean that it depends entirely on socialization, because it may have to wait until natural processes of maturation make certain abilities available. Empathy depends heavily on the ability to take on another person's perspective and imagine what that person is thinking and feeling. Such mental gymnastics develop only gradually. Thus, it is likely that empathy increases slowly with age, through both cognitive development and the influence of teaching and socialization.

Still, it seems that many people can disconnect their empathic responses and the inhibitions they bring. Some people become woefully upset at cruelty to animals, to the point of becoming vegetarians, protesting against hunting, shouting at people who wear fur, or demonstrating against research that involves the death of laboratory rats. Other people have no problem with these types of harm to animals. The difference is not a matter of the presence versus the absence of empathic sensitivity in general. Indeed, Adolf Hitler was a vegetarian and abhorred hunting and other forms of cruelty to animals, yet he initiated and presided over one of the greatest mass murder campaigns in history, and he remained coolly detached even from the sufferings of his own most loyal soldiers and followers.

The key point is that this empathic sensitivity seems to be selective. People may feel a great deal in some situations and toward some targets, but they seem to lack it utterly in others. And people are surprisingly flexible in their capacity to feel sensitive and empathic toward some and not toward others.

### Can People Really Enjoy Hurting?

Now we turn to the heart of the matter: what perpetrators say about getting enjoyment from hurting people. Most perpetrator accounts do not include such statements, and far more perpetrators describe how their fellows or colleagues enjoyed hurting than say that they themselves got pleasure from it. Still, references to pleasure from hurting are too common in perpetrator accounts to be dismissed or ignored.

One of the classic, definitive works on violence was Hans Toch's detailed study of violent offenders and violent policemen. He sorted the men in his sample into several categories based on their motives and

patterns of behavior. He labeled some men "bullies" based on the fact that they found pleasure in the suffering of others. Such a man would "go out of his way to be unfair, unmerciful, and inhumane in his violence."<sup>30</sup> When the victim shows signs of weakness or suffering—the point at which most violent predators regard their victory as secure and cease their violence—the bully intensifies his attack, as if the fun were just beginning. Such individuals seem to be rare—only a small minority (6 percent) of Toch's sample fell into this category—but they do exist. Moreover, some of Toch's observations suggest that bullies are made, not born, at least to the extent that violent patterns increase over time. "Violence is habit-forming," he concluded.<sup>31</sup>

Some American soldiers in Vietnam appear to have learned to enjoy inflicting pain and harm on their enemies. Interrogation of captured Vietnamese typically included some physical coercion, at least to the extent of hitting or slapping them. The American captors would generally start out treating this procedure as just another routine duty, but some would begin to discover a sensual pleasure in the work. Indeed, one scholar has proposed that "unless one sets out to do so, it is actually difficult to avoid the development of an involving esthetic in the sounds and rhythms of repeatedly slapping another person."<sup>32</sup> In some cases, the interrogation developed into a frenzy that caused the prisoner's death. Torturers from other cultures and other parts of the world report the same kind of problem. The premature death of prisoners due to overzealous torture is considered a common cause of unsuccessful interrogation all over the world. Thus, it is apparent that people can get carried away to the point of enjoying beating a helpless enemy prisoner.

Killing itself is sometimes pleasurable. In the words of one American veteran of Vietnam, "There is incredible, just this incredible sense of power in killing five people. . . . The only way I can equate it is to ejaculation. Just an incredible sense of relief, you know, that I did this. I was very powerful."<sup>33</sup> He said he felt like a successful hunter.

Indeed, it appears that several serial killers got their start in Vietnam. The notorious murderer Arthur Shawcross described his tour of duty in Vietnam as one of the best times of his life. He had free rein to kill men, women, and children, and he not only killed them but tortured and mutilated his victims, sometimes even dismembering them or in a few cases roasting and eating parts of the carcasses (there is some question about whether the last actually happened, although he admitted it). Years later, he said, "I was never happier."<sup>34</sup> Another serial killer, Joe Fischer,

got his start in World War II and was pleased to learn that killing brought medals and other rewards. He found that "killing felt too good to stop,"<sup>35</sup> and so he continued to murder after returning home from the war.

Obviously, serial killers are far from typical, and most people would like to believe that they are genetically twisted in some way and should not even be considered in the same breath as the rest of the human race. But the deeds of serial killers cannot be reduced to explanations based on extraordinary genetic configurations. Some cultures and eras produce far more serial killers than others, and in particular something about modern culture seems to bring out such acts. At best, one may suppose that there are certain (genetic or other) predisposing factors that are activated by experiences that help one discover the pleasure in killing. Modern warfare provides one such place to learn that killing can be satisfying.

There are similar reports from other wars. In the Spanish Civil War, good-natured and idealistic young men who volunteered to fight for freedom against the Fascist menace sometimes succumbed to an "emerging taste for blood"<sup>36</sup> in the phrase of one journalist. In a revealing incident, a man encountered someone he had known for years as "a cheerful fellow fond of youngsters" sitting in a bar drinking coffee one morning. The fellow said he had been up all night and boasted that he had "accounted for" eleven Fascists himself, and indeed his group of "lads" had killed more than 100 prisoners that night. The man asked him why he was participating in such killings. "Well, someone has to," the younger fellow replied, almost automatically providing the standard justification, but then he added in a more thoughtful tone, "The worst of it is, you know, that I'm beginning to like it."<sup>37</sup> Of course, the fact that this story was told indicates that someone thought it was unusual, perhaps rare. But was it rare in its frank honesty, or in its enjoyment of killing?

During the nineteenth-century colonial wars fought for control over Africa, the brutal violence led some men to discover pleasure in it. The Europeans had substantial advantages over the African natives in weaponry and tactics, and so some of them came to feel relatively safe. The campaigns of Carl Peters, in particular, show ample evidence of violent treachery (such as killing African rulers with whom he had signed a peace treaty), and he openly confessed that he found "intoxication" in killing Africans.<sup>38</sup> On the other side of the planet, one scholar summarized his research on the conquest of the Americas by saying that the early European conquerors "never ceased to take delight in killing just

for fun," as indicated by numerous reports of gratuitous sadism against the native peoples.<sup>39</sup>

The twentieth century has seen more of the same. A British House of Commons select committee recorded that natives were being cruelly treated on the notorious rubber plantations of Argentina. Some of the cruelties represented punishments that, although excessive, seemed at least to have some practical intention behind them. Others, apparently, were merely for sport. The committee reported that company officials would "amuse themselves" by shooting at Indians. To celebrate Easter Sunday or other holidays, they would douse Indians with kerosene and set them on fire "to enjoy their agony."<sup>40</sup> Such reports do not prove that these sadistic practices were the norm, let alone universal or even widespread. But they did occur, at least occasionally.

It is doubtful that the committee's evidence proved that enjoyment was the motive. Still, the gratuitous cruelty suggests an element of sadistic pleasure. The inference from gratuitous cruelty is important, because it allows us to see proof of sadism without having direct assertions of pleasure and enjoyment. Consider the serial murderers, for example. Some of these individuals frankly admit to having gotten pleasure from the experience, such as David Bullock, who told a New York state judge that "killing makes me happy,"<sup>41</sup> or Charles Schmid, who said it made him "feel good" to murder young girls and bury their bodies in the desert.<sup>42</sup> Even such remarks cannot be taken without a little skepticism, however, especially insofar as once one is a prisoner of the legal system, one may recognize the impossibility of providing a viable explanation for these horrendous crimes. In front of the judge, these killers may begin to realize how monstrously evil their acts appear to an outsider, and so they may claim enjoyment as a way of expressing defiance to conventional morality and its judgments on them.

Hence, signs of gratuitous cruelty are helpful as converging evidence. To be sure, it seems already gratuitously cruel to kidnap a stranger and kill him or her, and so the mere fact of serial murder could be taken as proof of the existence of sadism. Then again, these perpetrators might conceivably have some motive or reason for the acts according to their own twisted logic, by which the killings are seen as necessary or rational. But when the cruelty involves torture or other acts beyond the killing, then sadism is difficult to dismiss.

Henry Lee Lucas was one of the most notorious and sadistic serial killers, and his acts seem hard to explain without invoking sadism.

Squeamish readers may wish to skip ahead. At the height of his murderous career, Lucas was not satisfied with merely killing his victim or even with destroying the corpse. He liked to mutilate the bound and struggling victim before killing her and before he even made it clear to her that she would die. He would use a chain saw or other cutting tool to chop off her fingers and toes, forcing her to watch her body being destroyed piece by piece.<sup>43</sup> She would presumably realize that even if this horrible nightmare were to end and she were to escape or be saved, she would already have suffered permanent physical damage and would be a cripple for the rest of her life. Plus, of course, the pain of having one's fingers sawed off would be intense. If Lucas was going to kill her anyway, there was no need to go through the additional steps of carving her limbs off—unless he enjoyed it.

Another serial killer, Arthur Shawcross, likewise recounted actions that go so far beyond killing that one can only assume he enjoyed them (as is confirmed by the way he boasted about the events later). One of these occurred (supposedly; it is difficult to verify) when he was fighting in Vietnam, and he captured a young woman and a teenage girl who had hidden some ammunition. He could have killed them both right away, but instead he wanted to prolong the experience. He tied up the girl and forced her to watch while he killed the woman, cut off her head, carved her body up like a steer, roasted parts of the body over the fire, and ate some. After the girl had miserably watched the fate of her unfortunate friend, he did the same to her.<sup>44</sup>

Less extreme criminals also show some signs of getting pleasure and enjoyment from tormenting their victims. There was a telling moment in a recent public television special about teen violence. A sad-faced young woman was being interviewed in the youth prison facility where she was serving a multiyear sentence. She now felt remorse for her crime and victim, and she described the incident in a voice that occasionally showed danger of breaking with emotion, and with a hint of moisture in her eyes. She and her friends had abducted a man at gunpoint, planning to rob him. They discovered he only had \$20, which disappointed them, but they had decided in advance that they would have to kill him to prevent his being a witness. He had begged them to let him take them to where his elderly parents lived so that they could rob the parents. They had kept him begging for his life for several hours, had tortured and humiliated him, and had finally indeed robbed his parents, too, although they had not killed him. She added that they had done similar things

previously without getting caught. When the interviewer asked her why, she shrugged and said it was mainly for the fun of it. Fun? asked the interviewer immediately. The girl's face lit up and a wistful look of pleasure came into her eyes. Oh yes, she said, seeming surprised that he did not understand this. With a marked tone of nostalgia for lost pleasures that one now knows must never be repeated, she spoke of driving around, robbing ("jumping") people with guns. It was fun. But she knew that such pleasures were now forbidden and unwanted, and she fell silent.

Similar comments emerge in other interviews with teen gang members, although more commonly the interviewees say that it was mainly others who found pleasure in violence. In a typical comment, one person said of other young gang members, "They like the feeling of firing randomly at people who have nothing to do with the gang. It becomes a high."<sup>45</sup>

Gratuitous harm can also be invoked in cases of youth violence to suggest that people get pleasure from it. Thus, for example, the desire for cash might be enough to explain why a young man would break into people's homes and steal their valuable possessions, and so burglary alone would certainly not be proof of sadistic pleasure. But some burglars like to inflict gratuitous damage on the houses they invade. Thus, some of them urinate or defecate in the home, or they break items that they cannot steal.<sup>46</sup> Such practices suggest that people enjoy inflicting the damage, because there is no other benefit to them other than the intrinsic pleasure that they get from the act.

Gratuitous harm is not confined to furniture and appliances, either. The following story was quoted in Leon Bing's book on teen gangs, *Do or Die*.<sup>47</sup> A young man was talking to a girl when the girl's brother, nicknamed Sidewinder, came by. Sidewinder asked the young man where he was from, and when he heard the answer he realized that the young man was part of a rival gang. There existed the usual set of vendetta grievances—in the future, after telling this story, Sidewinder added that one of that gang had killed a member of his own gang, and he suspected that this young man "was probably there when that happened"<sup>48</sup>—but he had nothing personal against this individual. Still, he did belong to the enemy, and that was enough.

Sidewinder slipped away and collected three of his friends. They returned, and the young couple were still talking. The four jumped the young couple and began beating up the man. So far, perhaps, one could attribute these actions to the standing enmity between the groups. But

then Sidewinder and his friends turned more sadistic. First they put him in the trunk of a car and drove to an empty field. There they took him out and tied him by a rope to the car's trailer hitch. Then they dragged him around the field behind the car. "He got skinned up all bad, tore his scalp half off. Got all dirt and like gravel and stuff stuck in the blood,"<sup>49</sup> Sidewinder recalled. Next they drove to one of the other fellows' houses and threw him into the yard where there were two pit bulls, who attacked him viciously. "Man, they chewed him up—big ole chunks of meat comin' off his arms and legs, blood pourin' out, and [the victim] just screamin' and cryin' for us to take him on outta there."<sup>50</sup>

Sidewinder recalled that the young man had at first tried to act tough and stand up to the torture, but by this point he had broken down. The group rounded out the afternoon with a series of humiliations. They made the victim kneel and recite various demeaning statements, such as saying he wanted to perform fellatio on each of them, or "fuck my dead homeboys" (which was contemporary gang slang to express disgraceful insult to the memory of one's own fellow gang members who had died, often regarded as the ultimate insult and provocation). By this time the fellow had been "almost killed," presumably including severe bleeding from various cuts and some broken bones, so they "dropped him in the riverbed" and left him there. The pursuit of pleasure is evident in Sidewinder's final generalization about such escapades, which seem quite restrained to him because the victims are not killed: "When we tired of lookin' at 'em, we let 'em go."<sup>51</sup>

Still, it is important not to overgeneralize. Not all youth gang members claim to enjoy fighting, and many say they do not. Most often they merely point to a couple of individuals who seem to get such pleasure. One of the most thorough research projects on teen gangs was conducted by sociologist Jankowski, who lived with various gangs for a decade. He acknowledged that some do enjoy the violence, but they are a minority: "Only a small number of gang members enjoy fighting. . . . Most do not enjoy fighting at all and try to avoid it."<sup>52</sup>

Works on the Nazi Holocaust often include allusions to a callous, brutal, or laughing attitude while the perpetrators were doing their work, but as we have seen, such responses might be understood as practical strategies and coping methods. Such explanations fail in the rare but clear instances of obviously gratuitous violence, as in the following story. A German police lieutenant, heavily drunk early in the day, was waiting for the assigned Jews to finish digging the mass grave in which the

village's Jews would be buried after execution. He personally selected about two dozen men from the Jews waiting for execution. These men were ordered to strip naked and crawl on the ground. The lieutenant then instructed his noncommissioned officers to get their billy clubs and beat the Jews vigorously as they crawled.<sup>53</sup>

Compared to the mass murder that was going on all around, inflicting a few nasty bruises or even broken bones may seem like a relatively trivial matter, but it is psychologically instructive. The victims were going to be shot that afternoon, and their deaths should have satisfied any pragmatic or idealistic purpose. To beat them before shooting them was pointless and gratuitous. The purpose of that gratuitous brutality must therefore have been in the act itself, which suggests that the lieutenant got pleasure out of inflicting harm. Again, this incident is not typical, and one should not conclude from it that sadism was the norm—but it is rather unambiguous in suggesting that sadism was genuine.

One might think that Mafia killers would maintain a more professional attitude and not get carried away with pleasure. But some, apparently, begin to find enjoyment in such work. In Chapter 5, I quoted one example, in which the mob chief is said to have exclaimed "I love this" when bundling up a victim's body to dispose of it, and he later expressed the wish that he could bring the despised victim back to life so that he could kill him again.

A more thorough and thoughtful set of observations was furnished by Antonino Calderone, the Sicilian Mafia informant interviewed at length by criminologist Pino Arlacchi. Although every member of a Mafia family must be capable of murder and many will do the job eagerly because such acts often lead to career advancement, there is a norm that prizes remaining cool and detached. The Mafia does not respect gratuitous cruelty, and it admires the killer who remains calm and businesslike while taking a life.

That norm does not conceal the fact, however, that some men come to enjoy killing. Calderone observed that some men took to killing better than others, and he said that certain "sick" people found pleasure in it. When they first kill, something "springs loose" inside them, which they cannot understand or explain. "And in time murder begins to be pleasing; it becomes a vice, an illness."<sup>54</sup> His description resembles the process of becoming addicted to a drug, and we will return to this analogy when we try to explain the enjoyment of killing. For now, the important point is

simply that even some professionals find themselves gradually succumbing to enjoyment that emerges, perhaps surprisingly, from killing.

Next, let us consider rape. A small minority of rapes include gratuitous sadism that seems based on getting direct enjoyment from the victim's suffering. Researcher Nicholas Groth characterized these cases as involving men who plan and calculate how to torment a woman and who become excited through the process of inflicting pain on her. In some cases, the man does not even seek direct sexual gratification for himself; he may use a stick or bottle or some other object to penetrate the woman. In such cases, there is little basis for speaking of rape as a sex crime in the sense of the illicit taking of sexual gratification. His pleasure lies in hurting the woman, not in his own orgasm.

Groth concluded that about 5 percent of rapes fall into this category. The number is close to Toch's finding that about 6 percent of the violent men in his sample were bullies who engaged in violent acts for the sadistic enjoyment of hurting another person.

Marital rape also can contain signs of sadistic pleasure, although it is likely that some twisted urge for revenge over real, exaggerated, or imagined grievances lies behind many such domestic cruelties. In one well-known study of marital rape, several cases fit a pattern of sadism. One husband was attracted to detective magazines and other accounts in which women were treated brutally, and he would sometimes read these aloud to his wife. He hid in the closet one day and then jumped out to surprise her, forcing her down on the bed and raping her anally. He was angry afterward that she had resisted so hard. (She said she had not known at first that the attacker was her husband.) On another night, she went outside into the yard to see what some noise was, and he grabbed her from behind, tied her arms together, bent her over the stack of firewood, and raped her anally. He began to tie her up and take pictures of her with various objects, such as a banana, inserted into her vagina, and although sometimes she went along with these requests, she was very upset to learn that he showed these pictures to his buddies.

Finally he moved out rather than accede to her demand that they begin marriage counseling. After he left, she was going through her things and made a very distressing discovery. He had kept a card file of the forced-sex episodes between the two of them. Each card contained the date of the incident, a coded description of what he had done to her, and a rating of the episode on a zero-to-ten scale. This discovery made

her realize that he was far more systematic and calculating in his marital brutality than she had thought. She had assumed that the attacks were merely spontaneous outbursts, but that assumption did not square with his keeping a file with codes and ratings.<sup>55</sup>

A very different form of sexually tinged domination occurs in sadomasochism, and indeed the most precise and specific meaning of the term *sadism* refers to a sexual activity. Sexual sadism is therefore worth considering briefly as another possible source of insight into whether people get pleasure from inflicting pain. Although sexual sadism is not fully understood, enough is known to confirm the broad outlines of what we have already seen.

Sexual sadism is rare. Only a small proportion of adults engage in sadomasochism at all, and the overwhelming majority of those are primarily or exclusively interested in the submissive side (masochism). It is a common complaint in S&M communities that there are not enough people willing to take the dominant role. Everybody wants to be spanked; no one wants to do the spanking. In S&M clubs, for example, there are typically three or four times as many submissives as dominants.<sup>56</sup>

Moreover, most people who do enjoy the dominant or sadistic role seem to have acquired this preference after a long initial phase of being submissive and masochistic. I once met such a man when I was testifying as an expert witness at a pornography trial. He had been locally famous in the San Francisco scene as a submissive, but lately he had taken the dominant role. He spoke of "discovering your dark side" as a very gradual process of learning to embrace the dominant role. He had several women who were his slaves, and he was slowly finding more and more pleasure in spanking them and dominating them in other ways. Thus, the pleasure was real, but it had taken him years to discover it, and he said it was the same for every other sexually dominant person he knew.

### A Natural Basis for Sadism

Three clear conclusions emerge from our survey of evidence about getting sadistic enjoyment from inflicting harm or pain on others. First, there are too many such incidents, spread across too many different times and places, to ignore, and so one must conclude that sadistic pleasure is genuine. Second, it is nearly always a small minority of perpetrators who derive such pleasure—something perhaps on the order of 5 percent, or one out of twenty people, who are actively involved in

inflicting harm. Third, it seems that sadistic enjoyment is something that is gradually discovered over a period of time involving multiple episodes of dominating or hurting others.

In those respects, sadistic cruelty seems to resemble addiction. Few people get much enjoyment out of their first glass of beer, cigarette, cup of coffee, or even their first drug experiences. Moreover, most beer drinkers and drug users are not addicts, and there is even evidence that many tobacco users are not addicted.<sup>57</sup> Addiction thus afflicts only some of the users, just as only some perpetrators are sadists. And addiction, like sadism, is typically a process that develops gradually and escalates over time.

There are some signs that sadistic pleasure may be experienced as an addiction, in the sense that the person comes to crave that pleasure and to want ever stronger doses of it. We already quoted several men who said that killing became a habit, or "a vice," as one of them put it (thus making the parallel to addictive pleasures like tobacco especially clear). The same goes for rape. One researcher found that some rapists described it as habit-forming, saying "Rape is like smoking. You can't stop once you start."<sup>58</sup>

Similar remarks are made by torturers. It is fairly clear that in most cases torture is officially supposed to be a routine part of police work, aimed at securing information. Moreover, it appears that most torturers start out that way. Instructors emphasize that the goal is to gain a confession of relevant crimes and to obtain useful military intelligence that might help save the lives of comrades who may be in danger from enemy plots and attacks. As one continues to torture, however, one begins to discover sadistic pleasure in it. As a Uruguayan lieutenant reported in an interview with Amnesty International: "Subsequently the idea [of torture as merely a means to a legitimate end] began to lose its force and changed into the application of torture for its own sake . . . and also as an act of vengeance against the detainee."<sup>59</sup> One might have expected the converse, that the young, new torturers would tend to get carried away and go wild, while the older and more experienced ones would keep their cool and be more professional about it. But apparently torturers grow meaner and wilder over time.

### Addiction Processes

To understand sadism, it may be useful to apply what is known about addictions. One of the most important theories about addiction, called



opponent process theory, was proposed in the 1970s by Richard L. Solomon and John D. Corbit.<sup>60</sup> Their theory begins with the body's natural tendency to maintain a stable, peaceful state of equilibrium (called homeostasis). To maintain this state, the body must have processes to restore homeostasis whenever it is disturbed. Running a race, for example, will get the body excited; by the end of the race, one's heart will be beating hard and one will be breathing heavily. When the race is over, the heart can't continue to beat so fast forever, so there must be inner processes to slow it back down. Thus, the body operates on the basis of opponent processes: one process moves away from equilibrium (speeding up) and another has the opposite effect (slowing back down).

A very important point of opponent process theory is that the second, restoring process tends to get stronger over time. It is as if the body learns and becomes more efficient at counteracting the unusual state. Run a mile after not exercising for a year, and you'll gasp for air a long time afterward; but run a mile every day for a year, and by then you'll catch your breath very quickly afterward. Moreover, you probably won't even lose your breath as badly. Just as the second, restoring process grows stronger, the first process gets weaker. Together, these two trends may be nature's way of keeping us from being repeatedly pulled out of equilibrium. In running, this is called getting in shape: The same run puts less of a strain on your body, and you catch your breath faster afterward, than when you first started running.

Now consider alcohol use. Alcohol produces various pleasant feelings, such as euphoria and relaxation. These take the body away from its normal state. The body then has its own inner mechanisms for sobering itself up. Just as the intoxicated state may be very pleasant and easygoing, the hangover state is unpleasant and irritable. As one continues to drink on many occasions, one develops a tolerance for alcohol, so that the same dose produces less and less of a kick. Meanwhile, the hangovers get longer or more severe.

By the same token, drug addicts often find that the phase of withdrawal and depression becomes longer and more unpleasant as the months go by and they continue taking the drug, even if the amount of drug they take does not change. Addiction is spurred because the person thinks that taking another dose is the only way to feel good again quickly, instead of waiting for the body to regain its original state.

With alcohol and other drugs, the pleasure is all in the initial, departure phase (the A phase), and the restorative process (the B phase) is unpleasant. Being drunk feels good; having a hangover feels bad. But there is no reason to assume that the initial phase is always the pleasant one. Some opponent processes show the opposite pattern: The A phase may be unpleasant and the B phase pleasant.

For example, consider the recent fad of bungee jumping (or hang-gliding, mountain climbing, parachuting, and the like). The fear of falling is deeply rooted in human nature, and almost everybody responds to a free fall with panic. Thus, the initial (A) phase reaction is an extremely unpleasant one: terror. But of course the body is not going to remain in a state of terror indefinitely, especially once the fall is completed and the danger is past. To restore homeostasis, the body goes through some process of making itself feel better, such as releasing some inner chemicals that will calm the panic and compensate by giving pleasure. Sure enough, people find that the terror of falling is immediately replaced by a wave of euphoria and relaxation. On the face of it, it seems absurdly stupid to seek pleasure by jumping off a bungee pole or out of an airplane, because that seems a sure way to produce bad feelings; but the intense feeling of pleasure that follows may be quite desirable. People do seem to like it, after all.

Moreover, the tendency for the B process to grow stronger and the A process to grow weaker means that over repeated trials the person will get more and more of the pleasant part. A first bungee jump or parachute experience may be so frightening that the pleasure afterward may not seem entirely worth it. After a dozen such experiences, however, the fear has diminished and the pleasure is stronger than ever. Anyone who reaches that point is likely to find that the experience is compelling, and he or she may begin to crave to repeat it more often. One may also seek out even stronger or more extreme versions, such as jumping from yet higher places.

#### **Sadism: Pleasure in the Backwash**

Let us now apply the opponent process theory to sadism. We have seen that the initial reaction to hurting someone is typically very unpleasant. People are shocked, dismayed, disgusted, upset. But they do not remain in that state forever; the body finds a way to return to normal. Because the initial reaction is unpleasant, the offsetting (opponent) reaction must

be pleasant and positive. Thus, the first time they hurt or kill someone, they will feel bad, but the body will also create subtle good feelings in order to recover and get back to normal. The first time, probably, the bad feelings will be quite vivid and salient, while the good feelings of the B process will remain muted.

If the person inflicts harm on subsequent occasions, however, the balance between good and bad may shift, according to the pattern of opponent processes. The shock and disgust will grow weaker. The enjoyment will grow stronger and more obvious. (It will also start sooner, in keeping with the gradual rise in efficiency that one sees in opponent processes; like the parachutist or bungee jumper who begins to feel pleasure earlier and earlier in the process, instead of having to wait until the danger is entirely past.) In this way, sadistic acts of cruelty may start to bring pleasure.

In this view, the pleasure that one gets from hurting or killing is all in the B process, not the A process. It is somewhat misleading, therefore, to compare rape to smoking tobacco, as the rapist quoted earlier in this chapter did. The thrill of killing may be closer to the thrill of parachute jumping than to the thrill of taking drugs: The pleasure is in the backwash.

This theory seems to fit with all the observations about sadistic pleasure we have quoted. The initial reaction to committing a violent act is unpleasant, and it predominates the first time. Over time, one begins to find more pleasure in the aftermath, while the unpleasant part becomes weaker. Gradually, one may start to crave the experience. One may also seek stronger experiences, as the initial reaction becomes muted. Thus, sadists should become crueler over time, in the search for ever stronger highs.<sup>61</sup>

Consider the following account provided by psychologist Ervin Staub.<sup>62</sup> An American soldier in Vietnam was on helicopter duty. When he flew over a group of civilians, his commanding officer ordered him to fire his machine gun at them. He did not obey. The helicopter circled the area, and when it passed the civilians again, the same command was given, and again he refused. The officer in charge threatened to court-martial him for disobedience. The third time, he did shoot at the people on the ground. This experience shook him up to the extent that he vomited and felt very upset for a time afterward.

On later missions, however, the soldier complied more readily with such orders, and in a fairly short time he said he began to enjoy shooting

civilians. He compared it to shooting at targets in a gallery. (Today's young people would presumably use the analogy of playing a video game.) Thus, the same act that had initially produced severe distress in him was soon converted into fun. He went from having to vomit to actually liking it.

There is one major problem with this theory: Why doesn't everyone become a sadist, once exposed to the thrill of inflicting harm? Because opponent processes are natural reactions, they should be roughly similar for everyone. Yet we have seen that typically only a small proportion of perpetrators develop into sadists. What prevents this evolution in everyone else?

### A Vaccine against Sadism?

The most likely answer is guilt. Guilt is a learned, acquired reaction that makes people feel bad when they hurt other people.<sup>63</sup> So guilt would tend to stand strongly in the way of the opponent process pattern of becoming addicted to the pleasure of harming people.

Guilt may be unable to prevent the opponent process entirely, however. One can only become a full-blown sadist by recognizing that one likes to hurt others, as demonstrated by the comments from sadists quoted earlier in this chapter. Guilt may prevent this recognition. A well-developed conscience would not allow one to admit (even to oneself) having enjoyed the infliction of harm. Just as in sexual repression, guilt does not actually prevent the body's positive response—instead, it makes one refuse to acknowledge it. Guilt makes one disown and disavow the pleasure.

Guilt may even retard the initial emergence of sadistic pleasure. After the first killing, the killer may be full of distress and disgust, and even after recovering from that may feel bad because of guilt. Any pleasure that accompanies the body's recovery (the B process) would be concealed by the guilt. (As a highly socialized, acquired reaction, guilt would not be likely to set off opponent processes of its own.) This would explain why people might learn to enjoy watching violence, as in violent movies, more readily than they would learn to enjoy performing violent acts themselves. The opponent process may begin to grow faster and be accepted more easily when guilt is not present, such as when one is merely watching a film.

If this analysis is correct, then there is a potential sadist inside everyone, but our capacity for guilt—the conscience—keeps it hidden. Once

we begin to gain experience with inflicting harm on others, the capacity for sadistic pleasure will emerge, but guilt can thwart it. A person prone to a guilty conscience would be unlikely to allow himself or herself to learn to enjoy hurting others. Without the inner restraint of guilt, however, someone might well discover—gradually—that genuine pleasure could be found by tormenting and killing people.

### Having a Little Fun

Now let's look at another very different link between pleasure and harm-doing. Sometimes people take up certain activities because of the fun involved in them. Inflicting harm or damage may be a minor, tangential aspect of what they are doing, at least at first.

The word *fun* can encompass an impressively broad array of activities. Some of them are probably so thoroughly harmless that there is no way to link them to evil. Others may involve crimes and even violence.

Fun can be defined in terms of two broad properties. First, it is arousing or exciting. The word *fun* would not usually be used to describe calm, placid, serene activities. Second, it brings pleasure. Pleasure and excitement come in many forms, and they are not necessarily incompatible with causing some harm or damage, unless the harm is severe enough to elicit the distress reactions we just discussed.

It is clear that many people find enjoyment in the simple act of breaking rules. Doing something naughty is almost inevitably exciting, and if one succeeds at it, there is the pleasure of success. Thus, the simple recipe for fun is satisfied.

Shoplifting provides a good example. We saw in Chapter 4 that shoplifting generally brings fairly minimal benefits. Indeed, Jack Katz's research on shoplifting found that the items people stole were typically stored away, lost, or otherwise forgotten. The corollary is that people shoplift for the fun of it. Katz called these pleasures "sneaky thrills,"<sup>64</sup> because the accounts people gave him of shoplifting focused on the excitement of taking the item and getting out of the store without being caught. "I think the reason I steal is the adventure," as one teenager put it, after saying that he would shoplift items and then deliberately break them or throw them away. "You know, the fact that when you get out of the store and you've gotten away with it, your heart's pounding, you know; whaaa!"<sup>65</sup> He said the same applied to stealing cars. The appeal

was the thrill of driving around in someone else's car. You didn't particularly want to keep the thing you stole.

It may seem discordant to speak of fun in connection with the Nazi Holocaust, but if one can get past the initial shock the notion is plausible, especially with regard to the early stages of the movement. The photos in the Holocaust Museum in Washington show activities that might easily seem like fun to young people who did not anticipate that large-scale mass murder was to be the eventual outcome. The beginnings of the public Nazi movement involved torchlight parades, marching in uniforms, chanting, and other group activities that might well bring pleasure. On Kristallnacht and other occasions, there was an accepted license to break windows and smash the furniture in Jewish shops and homes. Such acts of vandalism can certainly be fun, especially when there is official permission to break the normal rules of respect for property. Indeed, people have told me about church groups here in the United States that would include "car smashing" as part of their youth group holiday celebrations. The church would purchase an old used car and put it in the parking lot. The young people were then given a pair of sledgehammers and free rein to demolish it. Even normally quiet, religious, well-mannered boys—somehow, the girls did not seem to see the point of this fun—would become wildly aggressive and clamor for extra turns in reducing the car to an unrecognizable pile of twisted fragments.

Likewise, many young people like bonfires and dislike the school discipline symbolized by books, and so a bonfire of books might fall into the same category of naughty fun. In my own youth, we sometimes would celebrate the end of the school year by burning a couple of our notebooks, in a sort of ritual celebration of summer. Again, if one did not see the horrors that lay ahead, the Nazi book-burnings might have appealed to people on the basis of fun. The legitimacy of the act is difficult to appreciate, but it may help to simply reverse the politics. If a giant trove of neo-Nazi hate propaganda were discovered in your neighborhood and the authorities decided to burn it in a big public bonfire, you probably would walk over to see the event, and by the time you stood around watching the fire and talking with your neighbors it might well end up being fun.

As we will see in the next chapter, the Ku Klux Klan started out specifically as a club devoted to fun, with no political or racial purpose. At first they played jokes on one another and then on members of the

public in general, and then gradually they began to aim their pranks at black people. The violence didn't start until later. Even then, though, one can understand that the organization may have had appeal as a source of fun. Members of the Ku Klux Klan in later decades would often reject the notion that racist politics were central. To them, it was a society devoted to good family fun: picnics, bonfires, parades, fireworks, baby shows, and pie-eating contests, mixed together with the costumes, rituals, and secret words.

The contrast is evident in Kathleen Blee's book, *Women of the Klan*. The researcher herself focused on the hate propaganda and racist cruelty that have become associated with the Klan, and as a feminist scholar she wanted to understand how women could come to participate in evil, violent behavior. She thought such behavior would normally be associated with men, and the idea of studying Klan women to gain insight into a feminine version of hatred and oppression was very promising. Unfortunately, the women Blee interviewed were no help. They kept turning the conversation away from racist hatred, which they seemed to regard as a minor and unfortunate aspect of the Klan. Instead they wanted to speak of being with friends, having parties, doing good deeds for the community, sewing quilts together, supporting churches, and so forth.

It is also necessary to consider that the exuberance of defying convention may enable fun-seeking people to do things that cause more severe harm than they might have intended. I recall reading a magazine letter when I was a teenager. The letter writer said he had belonged to a "shit club" in high school. The group would rove up and down the streets looking for parked cars that had been left unlocked. When they found one, they would get in. The two girls would climb in the back seat, lower their trousers, and defecate, and the three boys would urinate all over the front seat. I recall wondering whether that would be fun: defacing the car, breaking the rules, the excitement of not getting caught, plus the somewhat shocking intimacy of boys and girls sharing activities that were normally confined to separate bathrooms. Focusing on these thoughts, I was brought up short when the editors' response pointed out how this kind of fun would have to ruin someone else's good times. Like me, the young club members probably focused their attention on the excitement and mere naughtiness of what they were doing, without giving realistic consideration to their victims.

Similar logic applies to more extreme activities. Recent news coverage depicted a dramatic crime in which five young friends knifed a man to

death in a robbery that brought them only a single dollar.<sup>66</sup> The news coverage emphasized the single dollar, as if to imply that a human life was worth so little to these young men that they would kill for a dollar. The facts of the case suggested a different picture, however. The young men had intended to beat up a victim at random, as their form of fun. The robbery was not part of their plan, nor was the killing. The victim was on his way to a pay phone to call his girlfriend, because he had no phone in his home. The group accosted him and held a knife on him. One of them stabbed him, and the others took his wallet and ran. They had nothing against him and no reason to want to kill him. It was just supposed to be a random physical assault, for fun.

The one-dollar murder brings us back to the magnitude gap, which is essential to keep in mind when trying to understand sadistic pleasure. It is shocking to think that someone might enjoy hurting or killing someone, because the suffering of the victim is so very terrible. But to understand the perpetrator's enjoyment, one must appreciate that to the perpetrator the whole episode is a small thing, not a big thing. To judge the perpetrator's acts by the victim's loss may make moral and legal sense, but psychologically it is misleading. The five young men who killed someone and stole a dollar were not out to end a human life, with a full sense of the magnitude of such an act. They were only seeking a little excitement. If they had not been caught, they would have begun the next day just about exactly where they had begun the previous one, regardless of whether they had killed someone or not. To the victim's family and loved ones, life may never be the same, but to the killer it is only a small difference. The enjoyment is small. The whole experience is small.

Thus, the search for fun may bring people to activities that can lead to serious crimes and violence later on. To escape from boredom, people want activities that offer pleasure and excitement. Young people in particular tend to suffer from boredom, and they often find that violating rules creates excitement. Their initial acts may stop far short of violence. But as Chapter 9 will show, once people get started, the steps toward greater violence and evil are deceptively easy to take.

## Power

The novels written by the Marquis de Sade give literary expression to a remarkable (and remarkably unappealing) assortment of sexual practices, perversions, and deviations. One of de Sade's goals was to record in liter-

ature every known perversion, as well as perhaps inventing a few new ones. His ambitions went beyond producing an encyclopedia of pornography, however; he also aspired to be a philosopher. In his novels, the characters have long philosophical discourses in between the carnal acts. The result was a body of philosophical work that is, if somewhat less systematic and elegant than what Kant or Hegel produced, much livelier than theirs.

Along the way, de Sade's characters give a wide assortment of philosophical justifications for and reflections on their deviant sexual practices. One memorable point that he proposed on several occasions concerns why it is more satisfying to whip or flagellate a partner than to have simple intercourse with her.<sup>67</sup> With flagellation, one is more certain that her responses are sincere. The most fervent caresses may elicit a moan of pleasure that is faked, but the moans elicited by a fervent whipping are presumably sincere and believable.

This explanation for the supposed superiority of whipping over intercourse is based on an assumption that one's main goal is to elicit a sincere emotional response. If this is not the goal, then the argument becomes irrelevant. Still, there is something to it, at least to the extent that people do desire genuine emotion from their sexual partners. Indeed, even today, some people who have presumably never read de Sade use a version of the same argument in articulating their preference for certain types of pornography. In spanking films, one can believe that the moans are sincere, whereas the expressions of sexual pleasure in ordinary pornography are often merely acted (and sometimes not very convincingly).

One important pattern of sadistic pleasure, therefore, may be based on the wish to elicit sincere, believable emotional responses from another person. Is there such a wish? It might seem that eliciting emotion would not be much of an end in itself. There is one category of people for whom such responses are extremely important and desirable, however: those with a high need for power.

The need for power is essentially the motivation to have an impact on other people.<sup>68</sup> Power, intimacy, and achievement were the three main motives that garnered the attention of researchers during the glory days of motive psychology. Achievement involves the wish to do better and succeed at tasks. Intimacy involves forming close emotional connections with other people, based on mutual understanding and caring. Power refers to having an impact on other people, for better or worse. Each

motive has its own hell. The achievement seeker is miserable when he or she fails at a task. The intimacy seeker is miserable when he or she is unable to form a close, positive connection with one or two other people. The power seeker is miserable when he or she fails to have a strong effect on people. To be ignored, to be treated as irrelevant, to believe that one's own presence and actions make hardly any difference in what others do—these are the experiences that upset and frustrate people who have a high need for power.

Thus, power is a matter of eliciting responses from others. Of course, power may be sought as a means to an end, such as if someone wants to be elected president to carry out some reform or change. But power is also sought as an end in itself. Powerful people find validation in seeing others change their actions because of them. Power may be used to help or to hurt others, but the goal is to produce an effect. To be powerless is to live among people who go on about their business exactly as they would if you were not there. Rape, sexual harassment, and even children's teasing can also be understood in terms of power motivation.

Power is thus an interpersonal motive, not a solitary pursuit. As the political scientist Hans Morgenthau argued in a famous essay, power and love may spring from the same root of loneliness.<sup>69</sup> Love seeks to unite people by dissolving the boundary between them, so that they merge into one. Power likewise merges two into one, but it does so by imposing the will of one on the other. The power seeker wants to connect with others, but the connection is sought in order to have an impact on those people so that they change their actions.

Power is not inherently bad. Indeed, someone might find a very satisfying exercise of power in giving money to people, because the money will make a big difference in their lives. The leaders of large philanthropical organizations, for example, probably do not get much satisfaction of either their achievement or their intimacy needs in their work, because giving money to needy people neither creates close and lasting bonds nor produces direct successes. Such individuals probably do get immense satisfaction in power terms, however, because the money they give makes a huge difference in the recipients' lives. The distribution of charity is a very positive, beneficial, and socially desirable way of exercising power.

Our concern is with the other extreme, in which the lust for power leads to sadism. Here de Sade's theory becomes central. You can be very

certain that you are having an impact on someone if you are hurting or harming that person. The groans and tears you elicit are palpable, unmistakable signs that you are having an impact, that that person's life at this moment is quite different from what it would be if you were not there. Through the victim's cries, the power seeker gains validation of his own being, his importance, and his power.

The urge to cause suffering in order to establish one's power over others may well be one of the factors that affect torturers. Although they may start out performing torture as a job, and they often do seem to have achievement goals typical of work in general, they may come to enjoy the victim's suffering because it proves that they are succeeding in having an impact on others. Some torturers speak of how they react to the occasional victim who refuses to scream or cry or confess. These "tough ones" represent a challenge to the torturers, who may set aside their goals of getting information to pursue instead the goal of eliciting a reaction. As one French torturer said, "When we're dealing with those tough ones, the first thing we do is to make them squeal; and sooner or later we manage it." In a revealing comment, he added, "That's already a victory."<sup>70</sup> He said that he and his colleagues gained some satisfaction simply from eliciting a "squeal" of pain from the victim, even if no information was obtained. To them, the victim's tough resistance is a denial of their power, a way of refusing to acknowledge that they are in full control. Silence is a rebuke, a way of denying that one has been affected. The squeal is the victim's admission that the torturers have had an impact on him or her. It proves their power and control.

Another torturer told the following story, as a way of complaining about the effect that the job was having on him.<sup>71</sup> One day he went down to the street to buy a newspaper, but there was a line of people at the kiosk. He was in a bad mood and became annoyed at having to wait. He knew the man at the newsstand, so he cut in front of others and took his paper. One of the other patrons made an angry protest, wanting him to wait his turn. The torturer felt an immediate urge to beat him up. He said nothing, but he thought to himself, "If I had you for a few hours, my fine fellow, you wouldn't look so clever afterwards." Thus, in this incident, his wish to torture the other man was not a mere part of a plan to get his newspaper faster. Rather, he wanted to change the other's attitude toward him, to make the other realize that he was no one to be trifled with.

### When Empathy Serves Cruelty

There is one final twist to our analysis of sadism. As we have seen, there is reason to believe that empathy is generally a deterrent to cruelty. Empathy involves knowing what someone else is feeling. It is easy to see why people might be cruel, even unintentionally, if they did not fully appreciate what the victim must feel like.

Yet the most extreme cruelty makes use of empathy. To be seriously, thoroughly cruel, it is necessary to know what the victim is feeling, in order to maximize the suffering. Such knowledge may not correspond to the standard, somewhat careless way that psychologists use the term *empathy*, but it is literally correct. Perhaps it is most precise to say that maximum cruelty makes use of empathy without sympathy. To hurt someone, you must know what that person's sensitivities and vulnerabilities are, without having compassion or pity for the person's suffering. This is perhaps most obvious in the emotional abuse of intimates or family members. Intimates can say the most hurtful things because they know the other person's areas of vulnerability. The empathic bond to the other person becomes an instrument to facilitate cruelty.

Return for a moment to the torturer confronted with one of the "tough ones," a victim who refuses to succumb and submit. No matter how the torturer threatens and beats him, the victim remains silent and refuses to answer any questions. Torturers find such people aggravating.<sup>72</sup> The frustration goes beyond mere personal offense and encompasses the torturer's professional reputation and ambition. He doesn't want to fail to get the confession. Indeed, after he's been beating someone for hours, he may sense that the victim is close to yielding. If the torturer takes a break and lets someone else take over, the new person may get the glory of finally eliciting the confession, even though the way was prepared by the previous torturer's hours of work. So the torturer becomes desperate to break the victim's will before he has to stop, before his shift comes to an end.

Under such pressures, the torturer wants to find some extra measure with which to break the victim's resistance, to make him "squeal" with pain and provide the confession. To be effective, this extra measure must find the prisoner's most vulnerable area and cause exceptional pain there. And to do that, one needs empathy: One needs to understand the prisoner's feelings.

And so it seems that the most fiendishly cruel acts that people inflict on one another derive from an empathic understanding of the other. Empathy, especially when unmixed with sympathy, can be a dangerous tool in the hands of someone who wants to hurt. Of course, it is plausible that any very successful form of torture may be adopted by others simply for pragmatic reasons. The original invention, however, is aided by empathy.

One of the saddest and cruelest forms of torture involves making the main prisoner observe his or her family members being tortured. For example, S. V. Kossior was one of the original Bolsheviks, having joined up in 1907. He served the Communist party faithfully through the Revolution, and in 1927 he became a member of the Politburo, the top group of powerful men in the Soviet Union. In the 1930s, however, Stalin wanted to eliminate any potential rivals, including completely loyal people who had never differed with him, and he began to have the Old Guard members arrested. They were pressured to confess to nonexistent crimes against the party and country they had served faithfully all their lives. Some complied, yielding to party discipline or won over by the false promises of leniency that the authorities held out in exchange for confessions. Others, however, refused to make false confessions.

Kossior was in the latter group. Torture was applied, in the form of severe beatings with fists and wooden sticks (usually the legs of a chair), as well as wearing down the prisoner's resistance by preventing sleep and withholding food. Kossior stood up under all of it and refused to sign the false confession. Finally, though, the authorities found a way to break him. They brought in his 16-year-old daughter and beat her up and raped her right in front of him. Kossior broke down and confessed to all sorts of untrue things, such as having been a Polish spy and having taken part in terrorist acts against the Soviet people.<sup>73</sup>

Such indirect forms of cruelty are not limited to professional torturers, of course. They surface occasionally even in modern American households. In an important book on domestic violence, Richard Gelles and Murray Straus<sup>74</sup> related an incident in which an abusive father became angry at his young daughter. To punish her, he grabbed the pet rabbit that she loved and got out a big knife. The little girl sat in the kitchen watching silently while her father methodically killed her rabbit and gutted it. Similar incidents involve killing other pets, destroying favorite toys, or attacking special possessions of the child.

Emotional abuse can be exceptionally cruel, and yet victims find it hard to gain sympathy because they do not have scars or bruises. The success of emotional abuse relies on the abuser's knowing just what to say or do to cause the victim distress. Hence, there may be considerable cruelty in a family without violence, as long as the abuser has enough empathy to know how to hurt the victim. One approach is to know what the victim especially loves or enjoys and then spoil it. Some people wait all week to watch a favorite television program, for example, and may look forward to it with great anticipation. To be mean, all one has to do is wait until the program starts and then insist on watching something else (assuming there is only one television set). Yet even though such an event can produce intense disappointment and unhappiness, especially if it is part of a pattern in which one sees one's partner systematically trying to ruin all one's joys, it will seem trivial to outsiders. Claire Renzetti quoted one such case in her study of domestic cruelty in lesbian relationships. The unhappy woman said that if her lover had beaten her up, her friends would have come forward to support her and help her escape. But not for such minor events: "You can't say, 'My God, she makes me change the channel.' They just don't believe that could be such an awful thing."<sup>75</sup>

Of course, subtlety is not essential to emotional abuse. Such abuse may take the form of a man telling his wife she is stupid, fat, ugly, worthless, or bad. He may criticize her endlessly, saying that she is a poor cook, a lousy lover, a terrible housekeeper, an incompetent mother. He may accuse her of flirting with other men or having affairs, even though at other times he will say she is so unattractive and overweight that she is lucky to have him because no other man would ever want her. Women who abuse their husbands will often demean the man's earning power and virility. In general, such abusers seem to find the special sensitivities of their victims and then make cruel remarks in that area.<sup>76</sup>

Thus, empathy may prevent cruelty in some cases, but it can also serve it. The true sadist is not lacking in empathy—on the contrary, empathy helps the sadist to derive maximum pleasure and inflict the greatest pain.

The discussion of empathy leads back to one of the most basic questions about evil: Are human beings basically good or evil, or some of each, or neither? The phenomenon of sadism points strongly toward the view that some people are basically evil, because they seem to prove that

human nature contains the capacity to hurt others for the sheer pleasure of it. Yet, as we have seen, the enjoyment in hurting others is probably not one of the main causes of evil. Rather, sadism seems to enter the picture after evil is already in progress. The fact that empathy can be used to increase cruelty should not diminish the high value of empathy, which after all is responsible for some of humankind's most socially beneficial sentiments and noblest acts. The study of sadism does not justify the conclusion that human beings are basically or partly evil. It would be more accurate to say that human nature contains some built-in mechanisms that can be (and all too often are) adapted and recruited into the service of evil.



**PART  
3**

**How They Do It**