Does Humor Entail Cruelty?

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Abstract: This article tackles the question "does humor entail cruelty?," which is understood to mean: "How does humor have within or as part of itself, or relate closely to, cruelty?" First, the article explains the semantic fluidity of "humor" and "cruelty," both of which are polysemic family-resemblance terms or cluster concepts, i.e., devoid of any neat list of necessary and sufficient conditions, hence irreducible to any single, univocal definition. Second, nine mutual interlinkages provide the answer to the starting question: Ordinary cruel humor, blood-related etymologies, laughter-eliciting cruelties, humor in the face of cruelty, the anaesthesia of the heart implied by humorous acts, the institutionalisation of such a Bergsonian cardiac slumber, the implicit cruelty of taking decisions on whether performing humorous acts or not, the cruel responses that failed or unwelcome humorous acts cause, and the cruel irony of silencing humor to avoid all of the preceding potential and actual cruelties.

Keywords: Blaga, cluster concepts, cruelty, family resemblances, Harvey, Hillman, humor, Polanyi, polysemy, Wittgenstein

1. One Question

The question presented in the title has been debated repeatedly at several scholarly meetings and other academic venues in the field of humor studies in general, and philosophy of humor in particular. All such discussions occurring in direct connection with the recent publication of De Gruyter's four-tome book series entitled *Humour and Cruelty* (2022–2024). This short article offers a concise and, hopefully, cogent answer to the interesting question at issue, based primarily on the conspicuous mass of evidence accrued by said four-tome book series.

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2.   One Answer

The answer to the question "does humor entail cruelty?" is both asinine and profound, for it reads as follows: *It depends on what one means by "humor," "to entail," and "cruelty."*

3.   Two Interpretations and One Consideration

3.1. Braying

This answer is asinine—most assuredly *prima facie*, and maybe upon closer scrutiny too—for it is *obvious*, at least from a pragmatic perspective: Someone conceives of and asks the question at issue; someone considers and answers the question at issue; and these two thinking, living interlocutors—who may even be one and the same person—do so chiefly on the basis of their understanding of the conjoined uttered terms, which belong *in primis* to ordinary language, i.e., "humor," "to entail," and "cruelty" are *not* technical terms that were concocted *ad hoc* and have been closely regulated within, say, a scientific, expert, or professional community. As such, there can be as many uses as there are users, and the available evidence suggests that users are not at all shy to make use of these non-technical terms in all kinds of ways.

3.2. Fraying

This straightforward answer is also profound, upon a measure of reflection, if one comes to realise that the plausible meanings of "humor," "to entail," and "cruelty" are far from being univocal—such being their status at the time of writing. Not only has each person his/her own perspective on the linguistic-cultural and lived universe that s/he shares with the other persons. Also, the shared linguistic-cultural universe is internally diverse as well. As especially the first thick tome in the book series makes clear, investigating the history of "humor" and "cruelty" in Western culture opens the gate to an astonishing intellectual vista, or a proverbial can of

worms. Such being as well the unsettling result of the remaining three tomes in the same book series, i.e., insofar as these books explore in detail numerous mutual relations of "humor" and "cruelty;" hence, *inter alia*, how the former can be said to "entail" the latter.

3.3. Saying

By way of reference and application of Michael Polanyi's Gestalt-based epistemology and theory of knowledge, it is possible to explain the perspectival and multivocal semantic status of the terms at issue in two main ways.[2] First of all, as there exist features of lived reality ontologically independent of any subject, and linguistic-cultural ones that make it possible for a subject to live in this reality and establish viable ties with other subjects, there remain important subjective features as well, which contribute to establishing the meaning of such terms for each person, who may then be aware of them as being subjective or take them to be universally valid, i.e., objective, whether responsibly (e.g., upon reflection) or not (e.g., prejudicially). Secondly, albeit perspectival and multivocal, ordinary terms such as those at issue seem transparent and unproblematic most of the time, because no noticeable misunderstandings and practical difficulties arise; hence, their users attend *from* such terms in order to attend *to* some other goal, aim or end. When misunderstandings and practical difficulties arise, then the focus shifts from the original goal, aim or end onto the terms themselves, which undergo detailing, elucidation, exemplification, codification, stipulative restriction, etc., hence displaying at that point their inherent, constitutive, perspectival and multivocal semantic status, which had gone unnoticed until then or had been untroublesome.

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[2] See especially Polanyi (1962).

4. One verb, two working definitions

For the sake of the present short article, I shall merely *hint* here at the great variety of conceptions of "humor" and "cruelty" that have been made available in our culture, while relying on the prosaic understanding of "to entail" as *per* the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, which lists *qua* first, most common usage of this verb: "To impose, *involve*, or imply as a necessary accompaniment or result." Insofar as I shall concisely describe how "humor" can "involve," perchance regrettably, "cruelty," I must rely on the same dictionary's understanding of this other verb: "To engage as a participant, oblige to take part, occupy (someone, such as oneself) absorbingly, … to *have within or as part of itself* … to *relate closely*."

5. Four Conceptions of "Humor"

As concerns "humor," four main conceptions can be retrieved with relative ease within the history of our culture: A fluid or liquid, especially yet not exclusively of bodily origin (e.g., the aqueous and vitreous humors of the human eye); a temperament, mood, or psychological disposition (e.g., being filled with good humor, or being in a bad humor); an open-ended variety of acts, activities and/or events multifariously connected with laughter and/or amusement (e.g., "the contemporary umbrella term we use to refer to the comic and its cognates");[3] and "a special aesthetic category" to be kept apart from its cognates, or "a distinct psychological attitude" that is prototypically British, if not quintessentially English (e.g., black humor, tragicomedy, deadpan humor, Romantic sublimity, true humor, refined humor).[4]

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[3] Amir (2019, 73). See also Amir (2014, 234), and the older father of "humorology," Evan Esar (1954, 10).
[4] Cazamian (1930, vol. 1, 4).

6. Five Conceptions of "Cruelty"

As concerns "cruelty," five main conceptions can be retrieved with relative ease within the history of our culture: Excessive harshness of the heart or callousness in exacting punishments (e.g., the jurisprudential tradition of Seneca, Aquinas, and Barrozo); active or vicarious sadistic delight or bloodlust (e.g., Sade's notorious heroes and heroines, whence the term "sadism" was later derived); an imbalance, disorder, or other negative habit, attitude or institution, to be duly corrected by means of enlightened social reforms and/or target-specific interventions (e.g., Montaigne's and Locke's opposition to corporal punishment *qua* pedagogical technique); an insurmountable paradox (e.g., the adult's benevolent yet audibly- and visibly unwelcome acts of coercion of the toddlers or children for whom the adult is responsible); and a necessary instrumental or inherent good feature of reality (e.g., the Machiavellian use of pacifying violence by a competent prince, or the inherited predatory instincts aiding animals and humans to face threats to life and limb).

7. Three Genuine Scholarly Authorities and Three Fictional Continents

7.1. Austria

The astonishing intellectual vista, or proverbial can of worms, resulting from any candid, comprehensive account and assessment of the available conceptions of "humor" and "cruelty," as well as of their mutual cooperations and conflicts, is nothing but an inevitable variation on the fundamental theme of lexico-conceptual *polysemy*, which informs and characterises all *family-resemblance terms*, or cluster concepts. These terms and concepts being common-sense- or ordinary-language notions that do not come conveniently equipped with any neat, definitive list of necessary and sufficient conditions, but rather with loose, probabilistic, perchance paradigmatic, yet also endlessly-varied and endlessly-varying bundles of contingent distinctive

connotations, which Ludwig Wittgenstein famously said to "overlap and criss-cross" one another—hence reflecting people's practical, custom-driven, repetitive, yet also ingenious, creative, and inherently open-ended use of these largely quotidian notions.[5]

7.2. Romania

As the 20th-century Romanian philosopher and poet Lucian Blaga would have approached these seemingly-chaotic yet universally-common notions of our ever-mutating natural languages and ever-fluctuating conceptual frameworks, such prosaic, pervasive, pointed yet not pin-pointable polysemic notions can and may come across as philosophically frustrating, but they are also existentially-fruitful "Luciferean" categories of thought, communication, and self- as well as other-direction.[6] As such, "[they] relat[e] to man's distinctive existence within a horizon of mystery and revealing such mysteries."[7] Real persons' life unfolds in ever-changing natural and human environments, of which we know with any scientific exactitude but a tiny set of select aspects, only some of which we can predict and direct by dint of exact scientific means. Our survival and daily functioning require, in Blaga's understanding of concrete personal experience, much else and much more than just the transparent, straightforward, intellectually-pleasing, and unambiguous "positivist … useful fictions" that, say, lexical stipulations and axiomatic definitions can, and do easily, set in place *ab ovo* (see, e.g., the standard use of so-called "working definitions" in academic papers, including this one; or Vilfredo Pareto's candid remarks on "the more advanced sciences" of his day, which gave "senses very different … from

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[5] Wittgenstein (1953, par. 67).
[6] As translated, cited, and discussed in Allen (1996, 196).
[7] As translated, cited, and discussed in Allen (1996, 196).

7.3. The United States of America

At the close of the 20th century the American psychologist James Hillman invited his colleagues to try and regain:

a better sense of th[e] enigmatic force in human life than [commonly] do[ne by] contemporary psychology, which tends to narrow understanding of complex phenomena to single-meaning definitions. We should not be afraid of … big nouns; they are not hollow. They have merely been deserted and need rehabilitation. These many words and names do not tell us what "it" is, but they do confirm that it is. They also point to its mysteriousness. We cannot know what exactly we are referring to because its nature remains shadowy, revealing itself mainly in hints, intuitions, whispers, and the sudden urges and oddities that disturb your life and that we continue to call symptoms.[8]

7.4. Oceania, Eurasia, and Eastasia

"Humor" and "cruelty" are family-resemblance terms, cluster concepts. They are fluid, inchoate, liable to semantic distortions and permutations, open to considerable subjective colouring, and ultimately undecided, as indirectly revealed by the linguists' study of etymologies, the literati's poetical allusions and rhetorical constructions, the psychotherapists' method of mental association, the philosophers' continuing disagreements on their 'actual' meaning, and the humorists' never-ending calembours and fanciful comic bisociations. Such a chaotic situation may be intellectually frustrating, even cruel, for those who aim at confining meanings within air-tight definitions—the 'true' or 'real' signification of a term, as though such a thing existed in reality—and aspire, whether consciously or not, to an ideal language where

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[8] Hillman (1996, 10).

there is only one clear meaning *per* lexical expression—which was also the end-goal of the Party's Newspeak in Orwell's dystopian novel *1984*, ironically.[9]

8. Two Sets of Family Resemblances

8.1. Humor

As regards "humor" proper, the following family resemblances or characteristic connotations can be emphasised hereby, albeit in a non-exclusive and non-exhaustive manner: [1] Laughability (regularly, reasonably, and repeatedly, "humor" proper has been associated with "laughter," although neither adamantly nor always, e.g., laughing gas and agelastic humorists); [2] *medietas* (notions of measure, fairness, taste and/or equilibrium have been recurrently associated with "humor" proper, so as to avoid both extremes of paucity—e.g., being too weak, too timid, too sympathetic, too bland, too simple—and of overabundance—e.g., being too powerful, too rude, too clownish, too mordent, too cerebral—albeit exaggeration is also commonly associated with "humor" proper); [3] role-centredness (the initiator and likely enjoyer of a joke on the one hand, and the butt/s of the joke on the other hand, may be occasionally the same individual/s or group/s of people, but the two roles are clearly and continually demarcated, even when the initiator-enjoyer/s may happen to be thoroughly sympathetic to the joke's butt/s, or *vice versa*); [4] surprise (this emotion is often said to be central to "humor" proper, in several analogous forms, e.g., as a sufficiently strong stimulus or even a veritable shock pushing the recipient/s out of complacent normality, a novelty or a sufficiently uncommon creation catching the attention or striking the curiosity of the recipient, etc.); [5] sociality ("humor" proper is typically said to require social settings and institutions for the fundamental sakes of its onto-logical presence, pragmatic production, and plausible

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[9] Hillman (1964, 15, note 3).

purpose, although solitary humor does exist as well); [6] malevolence (more often than not, some evil component is said to lie at the centre—or at the very least around the centre—of "humor," e.g., unrefined vulgarity, public humiliation, scathing critique, merciless unmasking, teasing, etc.); and [7] duality (incongruous pairings, i.e., unresolved combinations of different elements—typically in the number of two—have been regularly mentioned in connection with "humor" proper: Ambivalences, inconsistencies, ambiguities, interferences, disruptions, violations, shifts, mismatches, contradictions, etc.)

8.2. Cruelty

As regards "cruelty" proper, the following family resemblances or characteristic connotations can be emphasised hereby, albeit in a non-exclusive and non-exhaustive manner: [1] Painfulness (plausible instances of painless cruelty can be encountered and/or conceived of— e.g., acts of necrophilia in a secluded morgue, gossiping about a dead person who had neither friends nor relatives, torturing an intensely algophilic individual, burning wantonly a beehive, smashing angrily a comely statue, etc.—typically, however, "cruelty" proper has an algetic component, whether physical or psychological, if not both); [2] excessiveness (whether concerning pain as such, its common uses for acceptable social aims—e.g., penal reprisals— our personal hopes of a decent existence, or the dreadful consequences of interpersonal misunderstandings, cruelty moves 'beyond' some set boundary, the very existence of which can be denied, at times); [3] role-centredness (whether caused directly or indirectly, "cruelty" is generally said to have "victims" and "perpetrators," even when the latter are one and the same self-abusing persons, a wider human collective, an institutional body, an impersonal force and/or an unknown agent, which might not exist as such, however, e.g., "fate" or "the gods"); [4] power (the expected roles of victim and perpetrator require power differentials, both logically and in practice, as egregiously exemplified by a tyrant and his/her subjects, or a master

and his/her slaves. Being polymorphic and context-dependent, however, power reversals can occur, and many contradictory power differentials may exist at the same time between the same parties); [5] culpability (whether delighted in, or indifferent to, the inflicted pain and/or harm, the perpetrator of "cruelty" proper is normally assumed to display a meaningful amount of *mens rea*, though it may be mostly or utterly absent, e.g., whenever the perpetrator is said to be "Destiny" or "Nature"); [6] malevolence ("cruelty," normally, is seen as a species of wilful evil [*malum volens*]. In the rarer cases in which "cruelty" proper is conceived of as good, it is either an instrumental evil—e.g., murderous self-defence—or an apparent evil, the goodness of which needs 'unveiled' and justified—e.g., Nietzsche's 'healthy' rediscovery of the cruelty drive); and [7] paradoxicality (cruelty's baffling character has been highlighted repeatedly, whether directly or indirectly, by philosophers and social scientists; nevertheless, its negative character and desired elimination keep being regarded as an obvious matter of common sense).

9. One Reformulation, Nine Answers, and One Reminder

Having established the polysemy of "humor" and "cruelty," as well as the hereby-adopted interpretation of the verb "to entail," the question put *via* this article's title becomes: *How does humor have within or as part of itself, or relate closely to, cruelty?* Below, there follow nine replies to this one question, which will then have to be regarded as having been answered. With these nine answers, in point of fact, I shall rest my case and conclude the present article.

Do keep in mind that by selecting certain definitions of the key terms at issue, a number of these replies—if not all of them—can be conveniently defused and dismissed *ab initio*. In other words, if "humor" or "cruelty" are decided to mean 'only this-and-this' or 'properly that-and-that'—while condemning the other empirically- and historically-available options as "wrong," "false," "unreasonable," "impossible," "implausible," "contrary to common sense," "metaphorical," etc.—then cases that some individuals—including noted Western philosophers

and less-prestigious yet as-real social scientists, classicists, poets, and interviewees—described as "humor" and/or "cruelty" cannot be so, axiomatically. Being epistemically humble, I decided not to do that.

9.1. Cruel Humor

Empirically, cruel humor abounds. It may even be prevalent, if not absolute: Sarcasm, gleeful schadenfreude, painful teasing, coarse horseplay, traumatic hazing, vicious pranks, self-exculpating satire, humiliating belittlement, spiteful criticism, obscene jocosity, hierarchical self-positioning by means of clever putdowns or witty retorts, grotesque caricatures and comic deformations, oppressive or offensive yet creative name-calling, and all modes and manners of playful disparagement that can be accused of being "cruel" because of their instantiating, in someone's view, some negative—i.e., evil, undeserved, painful, harmful, dangerous and/or blameworthy—phenomenon or phenomena such as blasphemy, heresy, sinfulness, immorality, bad or poor taste, irresponsible superficiality, culpable haplessness, group-threatening treacherousness, wicked inhumanity, cultural imperialism, nationalism, supremacism, racism, sexism, misandry, misogyny, misanthropy, elitism, unchecked egotism, narcissism, ageism, ableism, speciesism, neuro-normativism, body-shaming, narrow parochialism, exclusivism, colour-blindness, hetero-normativism, slut-shaming, indecency, disrespect, ugliness, anarchy, obscurantism, dishonesty, licentiousness, epicureanism, cynicism, patriarchy, verbal violence, lese majesty, obtuse intolerance, etc.

As to the typical targets of such decried yet popular forms of "humor" proper, they are easily and frequently liable of double victimisation. Thus, after having being attacked by means of cruel humor, should these targets be still standing, or dare complain about and/or denounce the cruelty of the jest or joke at play, then they can be attacked further and accused of having a "thin skin," lacking altogether "a sense of humor," taking things "too seriously," failing

miserably to realise or accept that "it was just a bit of fun" or "a joke"—hence, in essence, lacking discernment, being unreasonable or absurd, acting abnormally, and being intellectually deficient and/or socially inept to a grave, deplorable level—being "a snowflake," "a bore," "a poor sport," "proud," "prickly," "a party-pooper," "a killjoy," etc. Seen from this specific pragmatic angle, the cruelty of humor is not a singular subject. If anything, it readily doubles down on its derided object.

9.2. Bloody Humor

Modern English encompasses a great quantity of descriptors of "humor" proper constituting synonyms or close cognates of "cruelty," especially as far as its adjectival formulation "cruel" is concerned. Consider, in this connection, the following linguistic expressions: "Scathing," "abrasive," "searing," "black," "blistering," "harsh," "piercing," "sick," "cutting," "dark," "biting," "sharp," "acerbic," "wounding," "roasted," "scorching," etc. Humor has been commonly and repeatedly associated with fingernails, claws, fangs, hooks, bonfires, griddles, blades, knives, spears, bullets, battlefields, and all sorts of terminologies evoking hunting, warfare, ambushes, brawls, duels, contact sports, tortures, and the many harms—especially but not exclusively physical ones—that can arise thereof.

Etymologically, both "humor" and "cruelty" are rooted in the crude reality of immediate corporality: The former term in bodily fluids such as the green or black bile, phlegm, and blood; the latter in blood *tout court*, and the one dripping off uncooked flesh in particular. Semantically, then, it may just be inevitable that traces of this oozing, bleeding rawness should survive in the conceptual, connotative background of "humor," as legitimately and recurrently revealed, or just intimated, by literary allusions, mental associations, subsidiary or peripheral apprehensions, metaphorical and metonymical constructions, and inter- as well as intra-personal pragmatic conduct, including the jokes that we make, the pranks that we play out, and

the ways in which we characterise or describe them. Even those who favour exclusively a "humor" that ostensibly promotes cherished positive values such as love, justice, equality, fairness, peace or humaneness cannot avoid entirely the agonistic, algetic connotations of "humor" proper, which is then said to be "punching," even if in one direction only: upwards.

9.3. Humorous Cruelty

There have existed countless empirical instances of cruelty bringing forth humor: The chilling cases of unabashed hilarity among torturers and rapists; the songful cheers and merry hoots accompanying public executions or old as well as ongoing non-lethal forms of pillorying and corporal chastisement; charging and wounded soldiers' laughing fits on the gory battlefield; the sadists' recorded mirth while enjoying their abusive thrills; the satisfied grins and chuckles of inveterate gossips and chatterboxes; the delighted guffawing exhibited by the self-satisfied objects of spurned lovers' love; the gleeful derision arising from the act and/or recollection of humiliating subordinates or defeating adversaries; and the many extant forms of vicarious, violent, grisly, morbid, unkind and/or disparaging entertainment causing people to laugh and be amused—videogames, movies, plays, comics, operas, cartoons, etc.

Ethologically, the most common indicator of "humor" *qua* something funny, i.e., laughter, is itself said to be rooted in more primitive forms of animal threat—e.g., baring one's teeth and making sudden loud noises—and older ones of outright physical aggression—e.g., sinking those teeth into the body of an agonising kill or a terrified competitor. The lowly laughing monkey and the high-soaring bird of prey might well be one and the same animal: *Homo sapiens sapiens*.

9.4. Humor in the Face of Cruelty

There have been countless jokes that the victims of physical and/or psychological cruelties have made with uncanny regularity in the face of cruelties such as those listed above, and many others. Consider, for instance, self- and other-directed humor in the face of: Ageing, senility, mortality, death, illness, injury, genetic impairment, deformity, deprivation, unemployment, poverty, victimisation, ostracism, imprisonment, enslavement, and even extermination (e.g., "humor" proper survived in Europe's gulags, ghettoes, and concentration camps). Humor does not arise from "cruelty" proper solely as the perpetrator's or the audience's sadistic glee, but it can also take the shape of the victim's responsive, self-preserving glee—if not, more ominously, the victim's masochistic glee, which has also been recorded in the extant literature.

9.5. Brutal Cruelty

"Cruelty" proper has commonly been styled as presenting two standard faces: "Callousness," "brutality," or "hardheartedness," on the one hand (i.e., the absence of friendly, compassionate emotional dispositions); and "sadism," "ferocity," or "bloodlust," on the other hand (i.e., the presence of unfriendly, aggressive emotional dispositions.) As noted, there probably exists plenty of direct, intentional, conscious, blatantly aggressive humorous agency, i.e., sadistic humor (e.g., scorn, mockery, harmful pranks). However, there would also seem to exist room for plenty of "humor" proper that is, or can be, accused of instantiating callous "cruelty"—no matter how minimal or indirectly so—while, at the same time, the initiator/s and or enjoyer/s of it would or could defend it in good conscience as being "just a bit of fun" or "a joke." Peter's "humor" is then Paul's "cruelty," or *vice versa*, but neither Peter nor Paul has the last word on which understanding of these terms is the 'true' or 'real' one—a telling cruel irony.

Insofar as no explicit standards or overt criteria exist in this domain of social interaction, cruelty is generally loathed and said to be avoided, and no humorous act can be known with

certitude by anyone not to ever come across as being a "cruelty" of some kind—however marginal or unintentional—for someone at some point—including the initiator/s of the humorous act itself (e.g., whenever a joke falls flat or causes embarrassment)—why do people keep taking the risk of causing cruelty, to others and/or themselves, and go ahead with the risky humorous act? One much-debated component of the answer to this question is that, whenever engaging in this seemingly innocent yet inherently risky type of humor, people operate an *anaesthesia of the heart*, i.e., a reduction or cancellation of their sympathetic concerns and fellow feeling, at least with regard to those who could experience that humor as being a token of "cruelty" (e.g., those who feel cruelly humiliated because they didn't "get" a joke).

9.6. Institutional Cruelty

Operating an anaesthesia of the heart for humor's sake is, in most contemporary societies, an accepted, widely-practiced, actively-cultivated, and even expected or openly-praised activity, the inherent cruelty of which—or cruel potential thereof—is then neglected, underplayed, or even forgotten. Tacitly, standards are thus established, tweaked, revolutionised, reestablished, etc. Such standards determining, in the hopelessly murky and rather treacherous way of which all tacit praxes are inexorably capable, who is going to be "a good sport," "a party animal," "a person with a sense of humor," etc., and who is going to be "a snowflake," "a bore," "a poor sport," "proud," "prickly," "a party-pooper," "a killjoy," etc.

Such hidden, almost invisible, socially-allowed cruelties—if that is what they are—constitute examples of institutional cruelty, i.e., the possibility of causing pain, discomfort, humiliation, belittlement, etc., without paying much or any heed to it, for all or most players in the playpark—whether consciously or as a sheer matter of internalised habit—accept the ongoing social game as it is, and generally see its unpleasant components as an obvious, inevitable, perchance even good or virtuous appurtenance of their shared world—the cruel

components too, whether these are then nominally described as "cruel" by any of the participants, or not even by the victims themselves, who then make things worse for themselves. As the Canadian feminist and ethicist Jean Harvey observed at the close of the 20th century: "Accidental oversights and even a society-wide lack of awareness account for far more injustices and wrongs than do malice or indifference."[10]

It is only when certain tacit barriers or borders are stepped over that some voiced complaints start being heard and taken seriously by enough people, or by enough people of enough clout. It is the territory of so-called "gaffes," "faux pas," "bad taste," "disrespect," etc. Somebody has gone "too far," then, and largely informal paths for criticising, correcting and/or chastising can be deployed to redress the situation—humorous ones included, which further suggest the existence of a cruel *quid* within humor. How could humor work as an effective means of social regimentation, in fact, were it not sufficiently akin to a policeman's baton, a matron's whip, a parent's slap, or a teacher's cane?

9.7. Decisional Cruelty

Throughout human history, all kinds of painful, discomforting, humiliating and variously cruel praxes have been accepted and continued as though they were the very fabric of social life itself by both perpetrators and victims: Institutions. Some of them may well contain unseen cruelties within their normal *modus operandi*. For example, when deciding whether to address the frustrating polysemy of ordinary language or not, I, *qua* author, had to make a choice. Choices are, or can be subjectively experienced as being, cruel. Our choices being, philosophically, the Kierkegaardian point zero of human will's basic operations: The comical yet tragic location of Buridan's ass, which brings us back to the donkeys evoked in the opening pages.

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[10] Harvey (1999, 142).

Children do often and manifestly exhibit the in-built thorniness of choosing in the simplest dilemmas: Chocolate or strawberry? The wooden sword or the toy car? Later in life, however, most of us tend to make choices without paying much attention to them, and even less to the discomfort that the very act of choosing implied or brought forth in our childhood. We have toughened ourselves. We have become numb. Conceivably, that's the only way in which we can survive and operate effectively in the world which we inhabit, analogously to the way in which, while growing up, we tend to lose the initial, infantile alertness and immediate fear towards all kinds of sensorial stimuli—as has been recorded by students of tickling *qua* neuropsychological origin of the phenomenon of laughter.

Occasionally, however, difficult choices remind us of the pains accompanying, *inter alia*, evaluating competing options, gathering information, facing opportunity costs, or considering what it may mean that we well have to be living with the consequences of the choice that we are going to make—to say nothing of living with the consequences of the choices that we have already made. Different persons have different thresholds as to when such negative reactions arise within the mind (or soul, psyche, consciousness, etc.). Deciding whether, when, with whom, at whom, on what, for what one should initiate, participate in and/or accept humorous interactions are all, and after all, valid examples of choice.

As such, whether we realise it or not, humorous interactions, insofar as they require making choices, involve the pains characterising choosing and their potential rediscovery under difficult circumstances: Evaluating options, gathering information, facing opportunity costs, and considering what it may mean that we well have to be living with the consequences of the choice that we are going to make—to say nothing of living with the consequences of the choices that we have already made. Was repeating the same linguistic formulation as before, for one, a wise choice? Was it silly? Superfluous? Unprofessional? Ah! Uncertainty feels so cruel…

9.8. Responsive Cruelty

Attempts at "humor" proper can go tragically wrong. Not only can jokes and jests be perceived, disliked, and decried as "cruel" by someone—whether or not this "someone" is the intended target of the jokes or jests at issue—but the jokers and jesters, and/or those who respond positively to them, can become the targets of cruel punitive measures. The instances and degrees of such chastising reactions vary enormously across time and space: Caned pupils in 20th-century British and South-African schools, flogged medieval monks in Europe and Asia, censored and imprisoned anti-revolutionary or unpatriotic satirists in Bolshevik Russia and 21st-century Myanmar, fined or fired cheeky workers in contemporary factories and enterprises, and murdered blasphemous cartoonists in 2015 Paris. All such cases can unleash in turn a more-or-less long chain of escalating acts of revenge, counter-revenge, and their own ensuing cruel punishments, until either party, both parties or a third party bring the violent spiral to a close.

9.9. Humorless Cruelty

Why would anyone risk facing such punishments? If anything, the continued existence of "humor" proper, the mercurial and unsettling *quid* of which I have tried to preserve in these pages, hints at the subtle cruelty of life itself, and the merciful role that humor can play therein. As a long line of serious philosophical and psychological studies has been corroborating for a few centuries, restraining or eliminating humor from people's lives would constitute yet another cruelty, and possibly a worse one than having to face—sometimes and somewhere—the cruel sting of humor itself.

Repression is, after all, the mother of neuroses, if not of psychoses. Humor, even if potentially or necessarily cruel as such, is a crucial psychic safety-valve, the tight screwing of which comes with non-negligible costs. Indeed, as already noted, whenever people are confronted with horrible cruelties, many of them will opt for using humor to try and keep sane,

if not actually safe. Getting rid of such a safety-valve for the sake of being utterly kind and avoiding all potential or actual forms and types of cruelty, then, could turn out to be an even worse cruelty—a humorless one—and yet another cruel irony.

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