

Cruel

To be cruel is to behave toward others as though you wanted to harm them or frustrate their needs and desires. Whereas kindness can, on occasion, serve as self-protection, cruelty is more dramatically committed, and asserts the determination of the actor. Cruelty is viewed negatively, as kindness is viewed positively, but that is not to say that all cruelty is unjustifiable. Cruelty to a brutal enemy can on occasion be a way to discourage vile and dangerous behavior. The identification of cruelty, furthermore, is not uniform from one culture to the next. For example treatment of animals which might seem cruel in one culture, is commonplace and acceptable in another: to wit the penning up of large African game animals in Western zoos, a practice which might be viewed as cruel by a game warden in Zambia, but would be considered benign in San Diego.

Examples

1

I have no capacity for cruelty to animals. My aversion is itself phobic, I think, and springs in part from the experience I had in Germany, one summer, rooming in the home of a butcher, whose Schlachthaus was across the road. Herr Meyer was of course a nice man, as butchers are, and cordially offered to acquaint me with the procedures of his business. I was inexperienced in the work of a slaughter house, and accepted his invitation to a tour. What I saw, as he took me through the stages of upyanking, throat cutting, sternum splitting affected me badly. I considered it cruelty to animals, and still do. And yet I am aware that nature, 'red in tooth and claw,' as the nineteenth century discovered it, is not sentimental. It does not 'weep for itself.'

2

Cruelty for its own sake, as in sadism, seems to me boring—though I have not experienced it first hand. When I read the Marquis de Sade I think ho-hum, the body can only yield so many pleasures, the mind can only enjoy torture to a certain point. The fact is that cruelty is sterile, gives birth to nothing fresh from itself, and is thus unlike kindness, which generates a taste for itself. Our contemporary taste for violent and cruel action, in the media, grinds its own boring gears, and leaves us feeling empty.