



Hume and the Enlightenment

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Hume on Sympathy and Cruelty

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As Annette Baier has it, cruelty is for Hume the worst vice. Yet Hume does not I argue provide either in the *Treatise* or in the second *Enquiry* a fully adequate account of why this should be so, of why cruelty is so morally terrible. For Hume it appears moral judgement depends on the operation of the mechanism of sympathy. But sympathy as Hume understands it cannot account either for our response to the infliction of extreme human suffering, especially suffering that renders its victim completely abject, nor for our judgements about such acts or those who inflict them.

In this paper I consider what within Hume's system quite generally one might be able to offer to account for our moral judgments concerning the infliction of such extreme suffering. A general problem for Hume I suggest is that it is not the victim's experience of such suffering – what it feels like – that makes it morally terrible but its capacity to destroy that in us that makes us capable of distinctively *human* experience at all. What I will conclude then is that in order to account for our judgements about extreme suffering and cruelty we need a conception of a human being as the object of a certain kind of unconditional respect, and that in order to provide that we need to turn from Hume to that other great enlightenment philosopher, Kant.