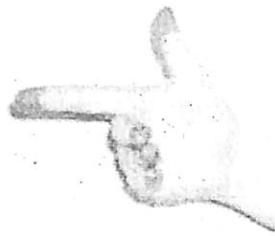


Towards a Moral Ontology of the Hand: From Torture to the Healing Touch

ARINDAM CHAKRABARTI



My impression is that what has been charged thus far is abuse, which I believe technically is different from torture. And therefore I'm not going to address the 'torture' word.

.....Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld

Looking at these photographs, you ask yourself, How can someone grin at the sufferings and humiliation of another human being? Set guard dogs at the genitals and legs of cowering naked prisoners? Force shackled, hooded prisoners to masturbate or simulate oral sex with one another? And you feel naïve for asking, since the answer is, self-evidently, people do these things to other people. Rape and pain inflicted on the genitals are among the most common forms of torture. Not just in Nazi concentration camps and in Abu Ghraib when it was run by Saddam Hussein. Americans, too, have done and do them when they are told, or made to feel, that those over whom they have absolute power deserve to be humiliated, tormented. They do them when they are led to believe that the people they are torturing belong to an inferior race or religion. For the meaning of these pictures is not just that these acts were performed, but that their perpetrators apparently had no sense that there was anything wrong in what the pictures show.

.....Susan Sontag

What kind of person, bhikkhus, torments others and pursues the practice of torturing others? —A thief, an executioner, a prison warden, or one who follows any other such bloody occupation. This is called the kind of person who torments others.

...The Buddha, Middle Length Discourses

As one of the speakers of Euripides' Hecuba comments, "This is what it means to be a slave: to be abused and bear it, compelled by violence to suffer wrong." The meaning of extreme inequality has never really been defined better. If such distances create the climate for cruelty, then less inequality may be a remedy.

...Judith Shklar¹.

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1. Cruelty and Inequality:

Both the *Mahābhārata* and the Buddha identify human cruelty to other humans as the main source of avoidable suffering. Judith Shklar has also argued that we must “put cruelty first” when we worry about contemporary human vices. This paper urges us to heed the uncannily prescient diagnosis of the *Mahābhārata* that a certain kind of shameless cruelty springs from rampant inequality of power and conspicuous consumption. We are outraged by the news of a gruesome murder, we are appalled when minor girls are gang-raped or a sane man showers bullets on elementary school-children. But we do not usually have the same reaction when we gather that one person makes more money in a day than an entire village, in the same country, makes in a year. Yet, this essay would like to argue that contemporary human aggression and mass atrocities have a direct correlation with arrogant exhibition of inequality of wealth and power. The staggering and staggered (inevitably non-simultaneous) global growth of capitalism, along with the spread of military as well as cultural colonialism, not only sanctions but celebrates increasing inequality of power and consumption, even while it indulges in a moralistic rhetoric of justice, freedom and ‘world-peace’. This paper uses some classic narratives from Buddha’s discourses, as well as insights from modern Western thinkers, to suggest some ways out of these gruesome times. This second ‘hope’ful part of the paper is not based on some suggested bio-engineered or miraculous transformation of human nature, but on the moral faith that future cruelty—with the suffering and depravity that it would entail—**can** be prevented because it **should** be prevented. Newspapers, radio, television, wherever we look in the public media since the start of this 21st century, we encounter horror stories about incredible atrocities exemplifying two pervasive and destructive forms of human aggression. These are: uncontrolled – nearly suicidal – greed for conspicuous consumption fed by gloating at economic inequality, on the one hand, and unimaginable cruelty to each other, individually and collectively, in both the private and public spheres, on the other. Ancient Indian moral psychology traced the root of the latter to the former: the vulgar celebration of gross inequality of consumption is the root of the cruelty of enjoying the sight of others’ starvation, humiliation, poverty, powerlessness and suffering. The same sentiment was echoed in Gandhi’s statement that poverty is the worst form of violence, especially when juxtaposed with filthy opulence. Of course, humans have been atrocious to each other in the past also. The cruelty at the

time of the *Mahābhārata* war, or at the time of the crusades, or of the Russian Cossacks or at the time of the guillotine in France or lynching of blacks in the United States, in Stalin’s USSR and, of course, in Hitler’s Auswitchz, was most probably much more brutal than contemporary cruelties. But the special “eliminationism” (Goldhagen, 2009) of the current war machines, and the daily demonstrations of global indifference to human suffering well-advertised on television are more blood-curdling than ever before. According to ‘Mobilizing the Will to Intervene’ a study by leading Canadian and American figures, “poverty and inequality, population growth and the youth bulge, ethnic nationalism and climate change” are the chief drivers of deadly violence right now on the earth.¹ The essay by Montaigne ‘On Cruelty’ which forms the basis of Judith Shklar’s classic first chapter (Shklar, 1984) expresses incredulity at the possibility:

that there were souls so monstrous that they would commit murder for the mere pleasure of it; hack and cut off other men’s limbs; sharpen their wits to invent unaccustomed torments and new forms of death, without enmity, without profit, and for the sole purpose of enjoying the pleasing spectacle of the pitiful gestures and movements, the lamentable groans and cries, of a man dying in anguish.

Yet, as if spilling from Tarantino-films to real life, precisely such insane, inexplicable, un-utilitarian cruelty or the relished imagination thereof has become common to the conduct of the American military, religious fundamentalists or adolescent angry outbursts in megametropolises, often without any ideological clothing. The more we chant the mantra of multi-culturalism, the more we seem to develop insidious ethnic supremacy claims and utter intolerance of cultural differences until (as Slavoj Žižek notes) a Hindu or Muslim fundamentalist or a skinhead or an American soldier, under instruction from their brainwashing superiors announces that they kill, maim or rape the infidel, the foreigner or suspected terrorist because “it makes him feel good to beat foreigners, that their presence disturbs him”. Sometimes it is caused by envy (they should not have what we don’t have) or jealousy (they should not take away the special object which we alone have) of riches or privileges, but sometimes it is cruelty for cruelty’s sake, like children ganging up to torture a frightened kitten (Žižek, ‘Some Politically Incorrect Reflections on Violence in France and Related Matters’). Sometimes, not just people but at times—even the environment—turns cruel. Such a time of ancient ‘global warming’ is described in vivid detail in the *Mahābhārata* in the part called ‘Duty During Distress’ inside the Twelfth Canto, the Book of Peace.

2. "Staying Alive" as Over-riding Intrinsic Value, in the *Mahābhārata's* Ethics of Crisis:

For twelve years there was not a drop of rain. Even the planets around the earth, mars and moon, took a course which promoted a decade of scorching drought. Not even dew drops could be seen anywhere. Rivers dried up into narrow drains. Everywhere lakes and wells and springs disappeared and lost their beauty in consequence of that order of things which the gods brought about. Water having become scarce, the places set up by charity for its distribution became desolate. Priests and scholars abstained from obligatory daily sacrifices and recitation of the Vedas. Royal treasuries were all depleted. Agriculture and keep of cattle were given up. Markets were shut down and shops abandoned. People no longer collected diverse kinds of articles for sacrifices. All festivities and amusements ceased. Humans and animals were dying by the hoards. Everywhere heaps of bones were visible and every place resounded with shrill cries and yells of fierce creatures.² The cities and towns of the earth became empty of inhabitants. Villages and hamlets were burnt down. Some afflicted by robbers, some by weapons, and some by bad kings, and in fear of one another, they all began to fly away. Temples and places of worship became desolate. They that were aged were forcibly turned out of their houses. Kine and goats and sheep and buffaloes fought (for food) and perished in large numbers. The Brahmanas began to die on all sides. Protection was at an end. Herbs and plants dried up. The earth became shorn of all her beauty and exceedingly awful like the trees in a crematorium. In that period of terror, when righteousness was nowhere, O Yudhishtira, men in hunger lost their senses and began to eat one another. The very *Rishis*, giving up their vows and abandoning their fires and deities, and deserting their retreats in woods, began to wander hither and thither (in search of food). The holy and the great *Rishi* Viswamitra, possessor of great intelligence, wandered homeless and afflicted with hunger. Leaving his wife and son in some place of shelter, the *Rishi* wandered, fireless³ and homeless, and regardless of food, clean and unclean. One day he came upon a hamlet, in the midst of a forest, inhabited by cruel hunters addicted to the slaughter of living creatures. The little hamlet abounded with broken jars and pots made of earth. Dog-skins were spread here and there. Bones and skulls gathered in heaps, of boars and asses, lay in different places. Cloths stripped from the dead lay here and there, and huts were adorned with garlands of used up flowers.⁴ Many of the habitations were again filled with sloughs cast off by snakes. The place resounded with the loud crowing of cocks and hens

and the dissonant bray of asses. Here and there the inhabitants disputed with one another, uttering harsh words in shrill voices. During such a time of decades of ecological and political crisis, the sage Viswamitra was caught trying to steal a portion of stale dog-meat—an ugly slice of the thigh of a dead dog—from an 'untouchable' hunter's bedroom. In the XII Book of Peace of the *Mahābhārata*, the low-caste dog-eater tries, in a longish ethical dialogue, to convince the Brahmin sage that he should not be touching, stealing or eating this prohibited food, while the sage argues that when survival is at stake, any food is equally permissible. With profound irony and stark realism, the narrator of the story demonstrates how starvation reverses the moral stances of the vegetarian upper caste and the meat-eating lower caste. The only morality left at such times would be 'saving life'. How do you decide which is the morally preferable option in such times of extreme crisis? The *Mahābhārata* offers a thumb-rule: "*Dharma has been prescribed for the sake of flourishing of living beings. Whatever promotes sustaining and enhancement of life, for sure, is dharma*". The torturing power-exhibitionist, the revengeful militant, the suicide-bomber, or the hate-spreading verbally violent religious demagogue does not promote or sustain even his own life, and destroys the lives of others. Thus, even if they swear to act in the name of 'dharma' they are working against it.

3. Utopian Hospitality of the Bird Towards the Hunter

The completely opposite trait of extreme self-sacrifice for saving the life of someone from another species, is exemplified in another *Mahābhārata* story told in the same chapter. A pigeon enters a fire offering herself as food to the ruthless hunter who had captured her husband (partner bird) in a cage, considering him a hungry guest in a crisis. This looks rather extreme, but the narrative shows this to be a point of transformation for the hunter's character: his cruelty is melted away by the pigeon's self-effacing hospitality. At this point we may feel the following discomfort: Is not the idea of sacrifice, of the self or of a victim, a cultural ideological religious root of cruelty and violence in the Indian tradition? Was the Buddha not protesting against it in preaching non-violence? In response one could say that it is not sacrifice but blind submission to an allegedly blood-thirsty divine voice which is the root of cruelty. Buddha's rebellion, against ritual animal-sacrifice and his move to kindness, was against this heteronomy of sacrifice. As far as renunciation of the selfish ego is concerned, Buddhism is as much in favor of self-sacrifice as the *Mahābhārata*.

The story of Nagananda, a classic Buddhist Sanskrit play, is a case in point, where the phoenix-like bird Garuda is fed by the hero's (Jimutavahana's) own body, to save the lives of fellow serpents. The root of modern technocratic society's mass-cruelty is elsewhere, as we shall see in the last section on Erich Fromm's diagnosis of contemporary human destructiveness as necrophilia: love of death and dead bodies.

4. What is Cruelty?

There is a subtle but fundamental distinction drawn in the *Mahābhārata* between 'non-violence' (*ahimsā*) and 'non-cruelty' (*ānṛśamsya*). Knowingly and unknowingly living beings cause violence to each other, to themselves and to the environment as long as they live. Violence in the widest sense is inescapable. To live is to practice some measure of violence on others and oneself. Thus, the meat-selling vegetarian hunter tells the self-righteous brahmin Kausika, "Having pondered over this point for a long time, I have come to the conclusion that there is no one on earth who is completely nonviolent". But it is possible to be non-cruel. Cruelty involves avoidable, unrepentant, and deliberate extreme violence, usually inventing untrue rationalizations such as: 'God commanded us to torture them', 'Those brutes deserved it' or 'I had to teach her a lesson' or 'We were giving it back to them'. What, then, is that cruelty? The *Mahābhārata* gives a very uncanny answer: "**While (hungry) others are looking on, to consume food, drinks and lickable delicacies all by oneself is cruelty**" (Mbh., Book XII, Ch. 164, Verse 11). Cruelty has more to do with gloating over inequality and flaunting gluttony in front of the starving than with intentional blood-shed. Of the thirteen faces of truth listed in *Mahābhārata* (Mbh., Book XII, Ch. 162), the most important first face is: **Equality/impartiality/fairness** (*samatā*). What does brutal inequality have to do with untruth? Here are the thirteen forms of truth: equality, self-restraint, non-maliciousness, forgiveness, modesty as readiness to be ashamed of one's transgressions, humility, fortitude/tolerance, non-jealousy, renunciation, contemplativeness/mindfulness, dignity, steadiness/patience, kindness and non-injury.

5. Should we be Cruel to the Cruel?

Montaigne announces that he hates cruelty most cruelly. That arouses a deep issue in moral psychology. How cruelly should we hate or punish cruelty? Should our moral outrage at atrocities done to us or other humans turn into a rage which fuels greater or equal cruelty? Should we be cruel to the cruel? Empathizing with the victims of torture, one may go to the extreme of planning

counter-torture as retribution against the cruel tormentors. But that would be repeating cruelty and perpetuating the revenge spirals of violence. How strong should be our disgust at the moral monsters? Is it possible to govern without retributive harshness? Persuasion and discussion before coercion, diplomacy before war, the softer option is the tougher. The following astute advice is given to Yudhisthira in praise of clemency: "Combat the mild with mild means, with mild methods again one diffuses the fierce; there is nothing that mildness cannot achieve. Hence the mild turns out to be the stronger and sharper"⁵.

6. Why are Humans Great? Because they have Hands!

As we move to the topic of the human hand, which could touch and talk but is often used as a tool of torture, let us digress into a somewhat meandering methodological preamble.

Analytical epistemology of errors, logic and rhetoric of public debates, moral psychology of mental, physical and verbal violence, aesthetics of dance and theatre, therapeutic phenomenology of mind-breath- and body-control, linguistics of ordinary and ritual speech are some of the many areas in which Sanskrit and other Indian vernaculars are known to have had a rich and continuous, if multiply conflicted, history of rigorous, intricate and dizzyingly diverse theory-construction. But it is precisely in these areas, that over the last 200 years, the English speaking educated South Asian elite willingly submit to continued cognitive colonization, especially in their proudly *post*-colonial work. It is not that they don't perceive that the only theories in terms of which they think, happen to be all Euro-American, which they use to interpret South Asian ethnographic data. It is not that they do not feel the anthropological objectification involved in such questions as the following: 'How would Foucault explain the Power/Knowledge of the Shankaracharyas of Kanchipuram?'; 'What would Lacan say about the gaze of the street-children of Mumbai?'; 'What would be a Marxist-Leninist political analysis of the inter-play of labor and capital behind the Bollywood film industry?'; 'Is Gandhi's Harijan a Levinasian "Other"?'; 'Was Buddhist epistemology empiricist, rationalist, Kantian, internalist or externalist?'

It is not that we don't see that we are at best native informants and at worst raw data in this uniformly Western theoretical enterprise where some of us are trying to play the fourth fiddle, our own intellectual constructions doomed to unoriginality, on pain of nativist revivalism.

But it seldom occurs to us to reverse the direction of theory versus data. We cannot think of using the Rasa

theory from Bharata through Abhinavagupta to Mahimabhatta to interpret Italian Opera or use the sophisticated theories of the five layers of objective and subjective body and the roots of corporeal *ahamkara* in Vedanta to understand the gasoline-guzzling body-image of a global yuppie consumer. Or to ask 'Does Daniel Dennett have a Charvaka style theory of consciousness? Is later Wittgenstein a *prasangika madhyamika*, or Hume a *angtma-vgdin*?' The reason is not that we fear the temporal or cultural misfit between theory and data. That misfit does not bother anyone when it happens the other way. The reason is much simpler. Much as we know the Indian facts and figures, the current political, literary, religious, and artistic practices, we do not know the Indian Theories of anything. And, as Spivak puts it mildly, ours is a "Sanctioned Ignorance". Some ignorances seem to be politically more correct than knowledge. Our weird, vibrant, anachronistic, provincial, vernacular practices are fertile grounds for markets to try and invest European theories on. The yield of such investment is the lucrative crop of West-evaluated European-sounding theories of South Asia. Indeed, actually historically, such glorious ethical theories as Utilitarianism grew out of justifying/spreading the British Empire for the greatest good of the greatest number. Edmund Husserl remarked that the Oriental mind is too crude and practical to fashion pure theories?— right now, even the post-colonial experts apply Freud, Marx, Foucault, Walter Benjamin, Max Weber and Julia Kristeva to understand Indian art, mysticism, politics, poetry and purity-pollution taboos, etc. If I am being snide about such outpourings of post-colonial theorization, what method would I suggest for re-working Indian theories and Indian criticism?

The best strategy would be to adopt a fusion method. And fusion need not be confusion. Plus, some methodological confusion may be precisely what is apt in this context. To understand confused practices, you need confused theories. Pure theories have no place in today's sadly madly gladly mixed up world. All I hope is that in the near future people will try the cross-cultural enterprise the other way.

An earlier generation of admirers of the East believed or at least would have us believe that there simply is no theory of aesthetics in India: there are only those voluptuous erotic sculptures on the temple-walls and a body of classical poetry and a bunch of blissed out Yogins who tell us to transcend all theoretical disputes and pass straight from Kamasutra postures and Tantric rituals to samadhi, skipping all 'why' questions! We now know better. If we have to test and rejuvenate by creative criticism and adapt those numerous intricate theories of making, communicating, enjoying, suffering, interpreting and assessing art that are already available in Sanskrit

theoretical literature, then we must try it out on literally outlandish examples and see if they work. The cultural difference between Elizabethan England and ancient Greece did not stop anyone from trying out Aristotle's theory of catharsis or mimesis on King Lear. Of course, the theories need to be changed and enriched to fit examples undreamt of by the original philosophers living in radically different times and places. But that is no reason to freeze the ancient theories with their own local and contemporary examples or to be skeptical about the point of assessing Sylvia Plath's work by the interpretive tools of *gnandavardhana*. Especially at a time when philosophers have loosened up considerably about finding the 'correct meaning' of a work of art and are not always looking for what the poet or artist herself meant, the possibility that a ramified rasa-theory may unravel the mystery of how a creepy face of an obese man made of skinned dead chicken can be the subject of a masterly painting by Arcimboldo.

Now, to HANDS. Let me start with a parable from the *Mahābhārata*, where the narrative *is* the theory.

Kashyapa was a learned ascetic – the son of a sage. One day, on the street, he got run over by the speeding chariot of a rich and proud businessman. Fallen, injured and outraged, Kashyapa "gave up his sense of self" (*tyaktvā'tmānam*), cursed the life of a poor intellectual and decided that it was better to die, since life without money was life without meaning. As he lay there on the road, half-dead and half-conscious, Indra – the king of gods – assumed the form of a jackal and whispered to the frustrated scholar: "Get up lucky fellow! Look at yourself, you are born in the most enviable species of humans, on top of that you have attained rare erudition in the Vedas! Above all – *you have got a pair of hands – no other achievement is greater than having hands*. Just as you are craving the wealth of that merchant, we the other beasts are craving your hands. Lacking those organs, we cannot even reach all parts of our own bodies to take out thorns or worms or biting bugs from our skin. Those who have hands, with their god-given ten fingers, can build homes to protect themselves from rain, snow, and the sun, weave fine clothing, cook food, make a bed, and can enjoy life in so many artful ways. At least thank your destiny that you do not have the body of a jackal or a frog or a rat or a worm." At the end of his long discourse, the divine jackal made a snide remark about the abuse that humans make of their hands: "Surely those human beings who have hands, acquire power and wealth by making slaves out of other human beings and animals". Yet, if your body is free from diseases, and complete with all your limbs, you have no business complaining about your life and dying. Just get up and live an upright moral life, teaching and learning the scriptures and performing

your priestly duties (Mbh., Book XII, Ch. 180).

What is most remarkable in this life-affirming passage from the *Mahābhārata's* Book of Peace is that it is not thought, reasoning, fertile imagination, dharma, or cognitive linguistic superiority of man, but the special structure of this one motor organ – his hands – that is celebrated as what sets Kashyapa apart from other animals.

Incidentally, in his *De Anima*, Aristotle underlines the centrality of this same body-part by comparing the soul to the hand. Saint Thomas Aquinas, in his commentary, elaborates: "The hand is the most perfect of organs, for it takes the place in man of all the instruments given to other animals for the purposes of defense or attack or covering. Man can provide all these needs for himself with his hands. In the same way the soul in man takes the place of all the forms of being, so that his intellect can assimilate intelligible forms and his senses sensible forms" (*De Anima*, 431b20–432a14). Aristotle says specifically of the human hand that it is "the instrument that includes other instruments". The hand serves as a metaphor for the omnidextrous human soul. Why are hands so important to such unlike philosophers as Vyasa and Aristotle?

In a little-known passage in his *Anthropology*, Immanuel Kant underscores this connection between the rationality of man – both his sensibility and his understanding – and the structure and sensitivity of his fingers: "The characterization of man as a rational animal is already present in the form and organization of the human *hand*, partly by the structure and partly by the sensitive feeling of the *fingers* and *finger-tips*. By this, nature made him fit for manipulating things not in one particular way but in any way whatsoever, and so for using reason, and indicated the technical predisposition – or the predisposition for skill" (Kant, *Anthropology*, p. 323).⁶

In the light of these reflections on the technologically gifted human fingers, we can perhaps read a different meaning into the famous mysterious words of the *RgVedic Purus.a-sUkta*: "And he exceeded all by **ten fingers**".

Nearly two thousand years before the British polymath professor of geriatric medicine, Raymond Tallis, wrote his brilliant work on the phenomenological semiotics of the hand (*The Hand*, 2003) – distinguishing the Reaching/Grasping Hand, from the Talking Hand and distilling out a "chiro-digital" philosophy trying to get a "grip on the conscious human agent", Bharata's *Natya Shastra* had a chapter of 283 terse verses exclusively devoted to the meaning and use of hand-gestures in dance and theatre. Although the approach was art-directorial, rather than technological or pragmatic, the semiotics of finger-foldings and palm-showings and arm-flexings and fist-

clenchings that was discussed in the 9th chapter of *NS*, aimed at laying down both a culture-embedded as well as a universally learnable emotional language of the hand. This basic list of twenty four palm-finger configurations is memorized, in an unbroken tradition, by Bharatanatyam dancers even today. Gifted performers learn to make up phrases and entire narrative sentences, or pure abstract emotional designs by improvising these hand-signs combinatorially with other limb-work.

The theory of performance and aesthetic relish in Bharata supervenes on the basic theory of human emotions. The former is the theory of *rasa*, the latter the theory of *bhāva*. The theory of stable emotions such as love, mirth, pity, fear, amazement, anger, courage and disgust connects up with the Sāmkhya theory of pleasure, pain, inertia—*sattva*, *rajas*, *tamas*—as constitutive of all physical and mental objective dynamic realities. One important thing to note here is that pain and suffering go with the principle of activity rather than that of inertia. *Rajas* is *duhkha* and *kriyā*. All enterprise, speed, running around and turbulence come from *rajas*—and *vita activa* is the life of suffering.

How can I use the theory of theatre and make-believe to interpret something as serious as prison-guard behavior at the time of terror? Well, as Susan Sontag remarked in her *New York Times* meditations on the Abu Ghraib photographs, with her usual incisiveness—to live is to pose and perform. Lyndie England's acts of brutalizing Iraqi prisoners and posting photographs of triumphant and sporting hand-gestures are a theatre of cruelty, acting for the sake of being photographed. Perhaps we have to add a tenth 'rasa' to accommodate the sick exhibitionism which expects such spectacles to be sharable fun. And that is precisely the enrichment and paradigm shift which I would like to bring about in Indian theories of theatre and violence by trying them out on an American sample of a common human perversion—taking delight in the communicatively duplicated dehumanization of a fellow-human. The syndrome of course is not uniquely American at all. It has had its ugly exemplification repeatedly in big crowds watching dalit women being tortured on the streets in Bihar and not just in Bihar.

Another disturbing and momentous phenomenon that I would like to focus on is the continuity between morally and emotionally contrary types of hand-grips. A pat becomes a slap. A friendly squeeze becomes a hurting pinch. The caring befriending tender hand-holding in which fingers work together with the thumb seems to stiffen into the tight fist where the thumb works like a lock to close down the grip. A hold becomes a grab. A reassuring persuading self-explaining index-finger-thumb union becomes a threatening pinch or a punch. A

festive power-exuding thumbs-up sign turns into a sinister mimicry of the most diabolical deployment of the fist and thumb to advertise to the world: "Look at me, I can also enjoy blood-sport and humiliate those terrorist beasts like my male bosses". (Lyndie England about General 'Chip') Intimacy turns into smothering, caring anxiety into controlling cruelty. The touching hand turns into a torturing hand. Can the Buddha reverse this natural civilizational slippage from caress to cruelty?

Extreme inequality of power and dehumanization is brought about most starkly when one human being uses his endowments (e.g. the fingers) to strip another human being precisely of those very human endowments (the fingers). Folklore in India and Bangladesh has it that this was done by English businessmen of the East India company in the 18th century, who cut off the thumbs of weavers of super-thin muslin in Bengal (now Bangladesh) so that their product could not compete with the coarser cloth that the British cotton mills produced to sell back in India or to the world. Similar in structure is the mechanism for using vile or threatening speech to silence or take away the language of another community. It is cruelty, once again, of gloating at the helplessness of another individual or community after snatching away their power and capability.

Mankind's future is in our *hands*. It all depends upon how we use them. Instead of manipulating and using to switch on killing machines of unimaginable destructiveness, if we retrain the hands to greet and caress each other in gestures of relinquishing power and giving up coercive agency, in giving the gift of fearlessness (*abhaya-daks.in.ā*) to each other (*Mahābhārata*), then there would be grounds for hope.

7. How to deal with extreme Cruelty of the hand: Angulimāla and Lyndie England

In the kingdom of Kosala, at the time of Siddhartha Gautama, there lived a devilish bandit called Angulimāla (Finger-garland). His name came from his habit of chopping off fingers from people he killed for the joy of killing and wearing a garland of those fingers. In his early life, Mr. Finger-Garland used to be a non-violent young brahman, a brilliant studious good natured student loved by his teacher. His name was "Ahimsaka"—the Non-violent one. To see him condemned, jealous classmates cooked up a rumor that he was going to murder the professor. The professor finally started believing these lies, and tested devoted Ahimsaka by commanding him to kill a thousand people and offer their fingers as a gift to the Guru!! This is what turned Ahimsaka (the non-violent one) into Angulimāla (the one with the finger-garland). He became a hardened killer.

When the blessed Sakyamuni Buddha heard about this bandit, he calmly started walking on that very jungle-trail where Finger-garland ruled.

The villagers and disciples warned and forbade the Buddha but he would not listen. He walked with his begging bowl quietly and fearlessly ahead of Angulimāla. Angulimāla was only one finger short of a thousand, so he started chasing the Buddha with a bow and arrow. The faster he ran, the faster the Buddha seemed to walk, performing a miracle, keeping a steady distance between them. Exhausted, Angulimāla shouted, "Stop, you monk, stop, I am going to kill you". Still walking the Buddha answered peacefully, "I have stopped, Angulimāla, it is you who need to stop now". Angry and puzzled Angulimāla said,

"While you are walking, recluse, you tell me you have stopped

But now, when I have stopped, you say I have not stopped.

How is it O Recluse, that you have stopped and I have not?"

The Buddha replied:

"Angulimāla, I have stopped for ever ("nirodha" means stopping, ceasing)

I abstain from violence towards living beings;

But you have no restraint towards things that live

That is why I have stopped and you have not"

Years of oblivion of his own harmless nature suddenly lifted from his mind and Angulimāla's grip on his bow and arrow slackened. He cast away his weapons, and surrendered at the feet of the Blessed one.

The Buddha violated King Pasenadi's orders when he gave shelter to this convicted felon in his monastery and would not let him go to prison. Indeed, the local citizens and villagers never forgave him and would always throw stones at him and spit at him when he went for his begging rounds from door to door as a *bhikkhu*. But the *Majjhima Nikāya* had a strange ending of the Angulimāla story. Even after his conversion-experience, Mr. Finger Garland suffered from guilt and shame and self-abomination for a long time. Buddha healed him by turning him into a healer. One day Angulimāla came back from his alms-round and wept inconsolably to the Buddha. At the sight of a woman giving birth to a deformed child, he was frustrated that with all his austerities he could not do anything to alleviate the sorrow of this mother. The Buddha told him to go back to this household and tell the woman—"Sister, if I have never in my life deprived any living being of their right to live, may your child become all right by the power of my truth". Angulimāla was shocked because that would

be such a blatant lie, since he was notorious for his countless killings. But he obeyed the Buddha and the baby got healed. Angulimāla reflected over this miracle for a long time and came to understand the deep mystery of lacking a self, relinquishing agency and – as one of the *Suttas* is called – being able to put down the burden of karma, causing desire and aversion, anger and pain, and stopping.

Let us reflect critically on the photographs of private Lyndie England gloating at the torture and sexual humiliation of Iraqi detainees at Abu Ghraib. Private England was Corporal Charles Graner's obedient girlfriend and assisted him in most of the photographed atrocities in Abu Ghraib. I am particularly interested in the hand-gesture that she made with a thumbs-up or a shooting-hands sign of triumph.

Lyndie England also got sucked into a similar exhibitionism of cruelty, taught quiet clearly by her superior Army officers at Abu Ghraib. She did not cut off the bodies of dead Iraqi detainees. But she used her own hands to torment, humiliate, and drag on leash naked Iraqi men. And then—like a garland worn to flaunt one's disgusting cruelty – she posed for photos to be circulated to patriotic war-cheering Americans.

In 2007, Lyndie England was released on parole. She now lives in a mobile home with her mother and her child from Corporal Graner. Has she cast away her weapons? Loosened her grip? Perhaps going from the position of a prison-guard to a prisoner did not help her overcome the residues of the theatre of Cruelty that she was made a part of. Would the Buddha be playing with the notion of truth if he told her to go and announce to the world – “To speak the truth, it was not I who did those things, and right now there is no ‘me’ anyway, there are only those photos on the internet, and a constructed butt of global contempt and this child to take care of?”

What ethics of alien human bodies in pain can the Buddha – or the larger Indian therapeutic tradition based on the Samkhya system of *guna*-s – offer us, that could replace the torturing drive of the human hand with compassion and empathy? If it is the (karmic) fate of all bodies to suffer anyway, why should a rational being try to alleviate the suffering of other bodies? Incidentally, the misconception that bodily suffering is always passive needs to be argued against, suggesting a new (Samkhya?) notion of pain as active agency.

8. Reactive Cruelty due to hate-speech or blind obedience to an imagined authority

A wise swan in the *Mahābhārata* once remarked: “When I am cursed I do not curse back, self-control is the door

to immortality, and I am telling you this sacred secret: ‘There is nothing higher than being human.’” Once again, we must ask, what makes humanity greater than even divinity? Speech, a specially human medium of communication, closely connected to the hands, harbors the opposite possibilities of incontinence and restraint, domination and relinquishing of power, cruelty and persuasion to kindness. Restraining the revenge impulse: the swan extols the human above all, because man is capable of controlling the impulse to avenge cruelty with cruelty and thus sustain life.

Cruelty, as the willful inflicting of physical pain on a weaker being in order to cause anguish and fear, is often prompted, in turn, by the aggressor's blind – nearly insane – submission to allegedly divine authority that one cannot question because one is never supposed to understand why. The idiocy of such ‘god’-sanctioned brutality is best brought out by this Woody Allen spoof of the Old Testament story of Abraham and Isaac:

‘And Abraham awoke in the middle of the night and said to his only son, Isaac, “I have had a dream where the voice of the Lord sayeth that I must sacrifice my only son, so put your pants on.”

And Isaac trembled and said, “So what did you say? I mean when He brought this whole thing up?”

“What am I going to say?” Abraham said. “I’m standing there at two A.M. I’m in my underwear with the Creator of the Universe. Should I argue?”

“Well, did he say why he wants me sacrificed?” Isaac asked his father.

But Abraham said, “The faithful do not question. Now let’s go because I have a heavy day tomorrow.”

And Sarah who heard Abraham’s plan grew vexed and said, “How doth thou know it was the Lord and not, say, thy friend who loveth practical jokes?”

And Abraham answered, “Because I know it was the Lord. It was a deep, resonant voice, well-modulated, and nobody in the desert can get a rumble in it like that.”

And Sarah said, “And thou art willing to carry out this senseless act?” But Abraham told her, “Frankly yes, for to question the Lord’s word is one of the worst things a person can do, particularly with the economy in the state it’s in.”

And so he took Isaac to a certain place and prepared to sacrifice him but at the last minute the Lord stayed Abraham’s hand and said, “How could thou doest such a thing?”

And Abraham said, “But thou said—”

“Never mind what I said,” the Lord spake. “Doth thou listen to every crazy idea that comes thy way?” And Abraham grew ashamed. “Er - not really ...no.”

“I jokingly suggest thou sacrifice Isaac and thou

immediately runs out to do it."

And Abraham fell to his knees, "See, I never know when you're kidding."

And the Lord thundered, "No sense of humor. I can't believe it."

"But doth this not prove I love thee, that I was willing to donate mine only son on thy whim?"

And the Lord said, "It proves that some men will follow any order no matter how asinine as long as it comes from a resonant, well-modulated voice."

And with that, the Lord bid Abraham get some rest and check with him tomorrow.'

The following *Upanishad* story of listening to the thunder for lessons of self-control, clemency and generosity should not be confused with thoughtless obedience to any rumbling command from the heavens!

9. Hopes, Utopias, and Ideals: What the Thunder Said

Once upon a time, 'in the beginning', three creatures representing the three species: gods, humans, and demons, went to the Creator for learning the art of living. After years of austerities under his tutelage, when the time came for the final instruction, the cosmic teacher only uttered the syllable 'da' to each of them. Each of them took that sound to mean something different and took home the lesson most appropriate for themselves. The gods heard 'dgm^yata' (restrain), for their problem was an endless lust for power and pleasure. The demons heard 'day^aadhva' (be kind), for their problem was cruelty and rage. The humans took the 'da' sound to mean 'datta' (give), for they were an acquisitive unsharing lot. Since then, whenever the clouds burst out, the thunder repeats those sounds da, da, da; nature reminding the gods, men and monsters of the most important moral lessons for a good life. T.S. Eliot composed a timeless poem with the title 'What the thunder said' on the basis of this beautiful fable from the *Brhadaranyaka Upanishad*.

Of course, the celestial, the demonic and the human are all three different aspects of human nature, with its lust, violence and possessiveness. Giving the gift of fearlessness, gift of truth (knowledge-sharing), gift of kindness, and restraint—all these virtues are unified in non-cruelty. Man's ideal must be connected to what he is capable of and what he most badly lacks (but the *Upanishad* adds a warning, "Give with shame" acknowledging the unfairness of inequality of resources).

To summarize this first part of my paper—the ideal of non-cruelty of the body and speech developed in this paper could be fittingly called a uniquely Indian contribution to global ethics. Restoring the ancient name

that is associated with India's geographical and cultural identity, the Indian Constitution calls the country 'Bhārat'. This name, in turn, is allusive of the vast Sanskrit epic of nearly a hundred thousand verses: *Mahābhārata*. This epic text, *Mahābhārata*, says time and again that – non-cruelty (*ānṛśamsya*) – understood as the principle of *not hurting others as one cannot oneself bear to be hurt* is the single most important virtue that human beings ought to cultivate. Its complex narrative records a total intra-dynastic war that is said to have ravaged northern India a few thousand years before the common era. It paints a gruesome realistic picture of the human lust for power, deceitfulness and cruel mass destruction which can only be matched by the recent history of the 20th and the beginning of the 21st centuries. Nothing that is good is untouched by the bad, and in the worst evil there is some possibility of good. This mixed message is the theme of most of the stories of the *Mahābhārata*. Yet, the text extols "humanity" as that than which there can be nothing greater. What is that humanity which is so rarely found among humans? In short, that humanity is a life-sustaining truthfulness tempered with humaneness and inner resistance against the natural instinct of revenge.

In the longest didactic XII book of the epic, called 'Book of Peace', we are reminded and warned of a time of global crisis when decades of drought, total failure of governance, mutual conflicts among kingdoms, and loss of all livelihoods for people would make starving humans feed off each other's flesh. How should rulers and ordinary human beings live during such times of distress and crisis? Giving highest priority to non-cruelty, respect for life, and even saving the life of one's enemies if they have become guests, fairness (equitability), and self-control in the form of non-retaliation; the 'narrative-ethics' of this epic set a regulative ideal of ego-less-ness and caring truthfulness (in Bernard Williams' sense) which could serve as a 'new' virtue ethics for our future generations who will most probably have to deal with an ecological and socio-political crisis similar to the one described in this book. We have seen in the sage-stealing-dog-meat story how crisis leads to desperate reversals of Moral Sense: Saving Life and wishing to live becomes the primary over-riding virtue.

About the factual future of mankind, the author of the *Mahābhārata* was not so hopeful. Indeed, he ends on an explicitly pessimistic note: "I am crying with my raised hands, that power and pleasure will come from performance of dharma (duty or correct conduct) but no one is listening". Similarly, the message of non-cruelty seems to fall on deaf ears even right now at the start of the 21st century. Yet, it remains our duty to hope that people would listen, that humans will see the necessity

to stop taking delight in causing pain and destruction of lives if they have to survive as a species.

Towards the end of the 18th century, Immanuel Kant – the author of *Perpetual Peace* – who was no facile optimist either about human nature or about the prospects of European or international politics, spoke about the moral necessity of considering a peaceful cosmopolitanism of war-averse democracies to be possible. Not only did he confess, sarcastically, that he borrowed the title 'Perpetual Peace' from a Dutch shopkeeper's sign on which a graveyard was painted, in his *Anthropology* he emphatically asserted that all pre-sentiments or alleged pre-vision of the future is a chimera (*Anthropology*, p. 187). "Is the human race as a whole to be loved: or is it something that one can view with distaste, wishing it all the best but not really expecting it. So that we can turn our attention away from it, though with feelings of regret?" (*On the common saying: That may be correct in theory, but it is of no use in practice* (1793), by Immanuel Kant, Mary J. Gregor and Allen W. Wood, 1996, pp. 273-310).

In the face of crisis, personal, moral, cultural, social, or global, when acting ethically becomes incredibly hard and most certainly unrewarding or positively disadvantageous, two alternative lines of practical reasoning could be followed: The first is Kant's argument for non-epistemic moral faith or hope (for the perfectibility, hence immortality of the soul, etc.). The state of the world is currently known to be such that there is little likelihood that we can perform our moral duties and still flourish. But we ought to perform our moral duties, unconditionally, and it must therefore be possible to do so (because 'ought' implies 'can'). Since that *requires* that the state of the world eventually change towards the better, we must hope that things will get better; for, otherwise doing good things would mean not living well enough to do anything, which is inconsistent. Therefore, even though there is no empirical or scientific evidence that things will get better, we must act as if they will and believe that the world is ultimately aiming at the highest good where virtue and happiness will be united, and communities will stop killing each other.

The second is the stark realist/'absurdist' moral skeptic's pessimistic line of reasoning: The known state of the world makes performance of ethical or humane action nearly impossible, because under the current circumstances all ethical actions are meaningless, and life itself is 'absurd'. There is no evidence supporting the belief that the state of the world is going to change for the better becoming more conducive to ethical life. Therefore, there is no point trying to do ethical actions or lead a valuable life. We are not obligated to do what

we cannot survive doing. Hope is not easy to subsume under cognition, emotion or volition. Ordinary language analysis reveals the following features:

- i. Hoping is an imaginative mental act directed towards the future, stronger than wish and weaker than firm rational belief. Apparent counter-examples of hoping about the past are easily reducible to hoping that it turns out, after future investigation, that this was the case in the past.
- ii. The object of hope must be possible. However desirable I may find the prospect to be, I cannot hope that my cat will become a square on the hypotenuse. There has to be an initial likelihood of an event or state which is desired by the hoper, a state she takes to be happier or less unhappy than her current state.
- iii. The object of hope is not merely desired but also good or morally attractive to the hoper.
- iv. A hope is an objective claim falsifiable like a belief but does not come with any alleged rational justification, and often maintains itself in the face of evidence to the contrary – 'hoping against hope'. Hence the blind-fold in the image.
- v. Unlike knowledge, which has an inter-subjective truth-claim, hope is a subjective demand which does not compete with scientific forecasts or claim explanatory powers or predictive success. Unlike foreknowledge, hope precludes the possibility of inactive waiting for a happy future to come about; it entails effort, engagement, and readiness to suffer, on the part of the hopeful, in order to bring about what is hoped for.

Kant raised the question: What may I hope?, admittedly uniting the Speculative with the Practical Interest of Reason. In the 'Canon of Pure Reason' under the III part of *Critique of Pure Reason*, called 'Doctrine of Method' Kant lists three major interests of Pure Reason: **What can I know? What ought I to do? What may I hope?** In the Logic lectures he adds a 4th question to the list, claiming the first three to be preliminaries to answering the main question of pure reason: **What is man?**

Is Happiness or Worthiness to be happy the object of Hoping? Non-cognitive Belief or Moral Certainty? "Our faith is not knowledge, and thank Heaven, it is not!" "A morality will break down if we could attain to knowledge of God's existence through our experience or in some other way.... hope for reward and fear of punishment will take over" genuine good will and virtue will become simply a version of enlightened self-interest, which for Kant is the very antithesis of morality (Kant in *Lectures*

on the Philosophical Doctrine of Religion, 1996). "Hoping ultimately amounts to the conclusion that there is something because something ought to occur" (*Critique of Pure Reason*, A 806/B 834).

Against the apocalyptic prevision of doomsday-pessimism, we can posit Jonathan Lear's conception of Radical Hope (Lear, 2006); or Bertrand Russell's grounds for Hope for Humanity, not any radically new humanity, but the same old humanity with its mixed nature. "What is mistakenly called 'human nature'," comments Russell, "likes somebody to hate, and does not feel fully alive except when some enemy is being injured. It is this way of feeling that has hitherto set limits to the growth of social cohesion, which is now an imperative necessity if the human race is to continue. The real obstacles to worldwide social cohesion are in individual souls. They are the pleasure that we derive from hatred, malice and cruelty. If mankind is to survive, it will be necessary to find a way of living which does not involve indulgence to these pleasures. If such a way of living is to be successful, it must not be merely through self-denial and self-restraint. It must be by changing the sources of happiness and the unconscious impulses which mould our moral phrases" (Russell, 1951, p. 70).

If the narrative-teachings of the *Mahābhārata* and Buddha's discourses take hold of the moral and political imaginations of world-leaders and global and local policy-makers, then, we may hope that such a truly human world of diminishing cruelty will be possible. Though we can hope, in the technical sense sketched above, we cannot 'demand' or 'expect' anything less than we have offered to them. And surely what we have to do now for them to be happier and less cruel to each other, we have to do without any hope of a reward for us. After all, one cannot work for a utopia like a financial investor. Russell tells us about some shrewd profit-calculator who once asked, "Why should I give and work for posterity, what has the posterity ever done for me?" The political man will, thus, always mock the moral man for his optimism. Emmanuel Levinas remarks: "The moral consciousness can sustain the mocking gaze of the political man only if the certitude of peace dominates the evidence of war" (*Totality and Infinity*, 1969, pp. 21-22). It would be possible to withstand the empirically well-founded cynicism about any new humankind being just as cruel as the old one, only with a moral certitude that we shall overcome cruelty – some day – because we must.

Cruelty, cybernetic worship of speed, and grounds of

Hope for a less cruel slower life.

In a chilling section of his masterpiece 'The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness?', Erich Fromm brings out a close link between 'Necrophilia and the Worship of Technique'. The fascist futurist F.T. Marinetti wrote a *Futurist Manifesto* (1909) of a more efficient and affluent future generation that will worship no other god than Aggressive and Warlike Speed. Extolling the automobile and the holiness of fast moving wheels and rails on which they rotate, this "new religion" calls "running at high speed the highest form of prayer". At one point the manifesto spews hatred for all forms of slowness, moralism, "effeminate tenderness", and "utilitarian cowardice", and welcomes a forthcoming destruction of houses and cities to make way for great meeting places for cars and planes (Fromm, 1973, p. 345).

Before this early 20th century 'dream' becomes a real 21st century nightmare, we must remind ourselves of another *Mahābhārata* story where, unlike Abraham, a son did not immediately set out to obey his father's command when an angry father told the son to kill his mother and left the house. The son was a slow thinker and was nicknamed 'Delayed Doer'. He deliberated both sides of the issue and could not make up his mind and took his time. Meanwhile the father came back repentant, aghast at his own atrocity and found that the son had not yet executed his orders. The father gratefully congratulated the son saying: "Oh! Delayed Doer! Thank you, you be blessed, Delayed Doer! Thanks to your slow action and waiting, your mother's life has been saved and you have saved your father from a heinous crime! Glory be to your slowness!"⁷

There will always be worshippers of speed. But let some of us try to slow down, and take our time to debate, deliberate and re-examine our own attitudes and lifestyles. Perhaps that would make us less cruel. Otherwise why would Wittgenstein write that philosophers should salute each other with the greeting "Take your time"? (Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, p. 80e).

NOTES

1. See 'Pattern of Genocide,' by James Traubb, *The New York Times*, Sunday Book Review, October 15, 2009. Doi: <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/10/18/books/review/Traub-t.html>.
2. See *Mahābhārata*, Doi: http://www.sacred-texts.com/hin/m12/m12a140.htm#fn_427.
3. See *Mahābhārata*, Doi: http://www.sacred-texts.com/hin/m12/m12a140.htm#fn_428.
4. See *Mahābhārata*, Doi: http://www.sacred-texts.com/hin/m12/m12a140.htm#fn_429.
5. See *Mahābhārata*, Book XII, Chapter 140, Verse 66.

6. See *Kant: Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*. Doi: ebooks.cambridge.org/ebook.jsf?bid=CBO9780511809569.
7. See also, 'The Boy "Slowpoke" as Deep Thinker: In Defense of "Straying" wives against Father's Uxoridal Rage' by James L. Fitzgerald (2010) in *Epic and Argument in Sanskrit Literary History*, Essays in Honor of Robert Goldman, edited by Sheldon Pollock, New Delhi, Manohar.

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- , 'Some Politically Incorrect Reflections on Violence in France and Related Matters,' Doi: www.lacan.com/zizfrance5.htm.

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