

# BETWEEN THE SPECIES

## Torture and the *Corrida*

### ABSTRACT

In recent years the debate over the morality of bullfighting has been focused on whether or not it should be characterized as a form of torture. Francis Wolff has argued that it should not be, and Gabriel Andrade has claimed that it should be. But in my view neither author adequately defines bullfighting or torture. In this essay I have three goals. The first is to provide an adequate account of bullfighting, including its structure and meaning. The second is to define the necessary conditions for torture. And the third is to show that bullfighting meets those conditions. Thus, any defense of bullfighting must be a justification of that form of torture.

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Volume 24, Issue 1

Summer 2021

<http://digitalcommons.calpoly.edu/bts/>

**I.**

In 2014, an English translation of Francis Wolff's spirited defense of bullfighting was published. Entitled *50 Reasons to Defend the Corrida*, it offers up an array of arguments and considerations in favor of the very old, very contested tradition of the *corrida de toros* (or simply, the *corrida*). In 2018, Gabriel Andrade's similarly spirited critique of Wolff's defense was published. In it, Andrade focuses on the "most notorious" (2018, 160) of Wolff's arguments in order to reveal their flaws. I will review these arguments, along with Andrade's responses, below (in section IV). Presently, in what may well turn out to be a spirited attempt, I intend on weighing in on the issue by highlighting the mistakes and building on the truth in both Wolff's and Andrade's essays.

Let me be clear: it is true that I find certain aspects of Andrade's critique wanting. But he is not wrong to call Wolff's arguments into question because Wolff's bullfighting apology is indeed flawed. Among his claims are some that range from the doubtful to the incredible, and his arguments are a mixture of clear truths and confounding falsehoods. One of the biggest mistakes Wolff makes is to deny the parallels between bullfighting and torture. Wolff clearly believes that bullfighting is not torture, while Andrade more or less clearly believes that it is. In what follows I will describe Wolff's defense and Andrade's critique, and I will pay particular attention to the issue of torture. I want to know if bullfighting *is* torture. Knowing that will require a fuller account of both torture and bullfighting than either Wolff or Andrade provides in the works under consideration. Once I have provided this fuller account, I will conclude that bullfighting is, among other things, a form of torture.

## II.

Andrade's critique is based on what he calls "undisputed facts". (2018, 161) These facts, he says, "are enough for common sense to dictate that, indeed, a great deal of torture goes on in bullfights." (ibid.) What are these facts?

The *corrida* is divided into three parts (*tercios*). In the first, the bull is let into the ring where he meets the matador and the picadors. The latter are mounted on horses and carry spears. When the bull charges the horses, the picadors stab the spears into the muscle at the top of the bull's neck. Andrade claims that the purpose of this is to weaken the bull in order that the matador will have an easier time killing it. In the second *tercio*, short harpoons (*banderillas*) are placed along the neck muscles by either the matador or one of the matador's assistants. Andrade suggests that the purpose of these is to cause further damage. In the third *tercio*, the matador will usually guide the bull with the cape until he (the matador) decides it is time to attempt the kill (the ultimate goal, I suppose). Ideally, the kill is achieved by plunging a sword into the top of the bull's neck, behind the head, downward toward the heart.

Having been to many bullfights himself, Andrade knows that the *corrida* is a highly organized, ritualized spectacle. Every element is infused with meaning, from the matador's clothes to the way the participants are arranged as they parade into the ring at the event's opening ceremony. But in order to distill the *corrida* down to its essence, Andrade presents the barest selection of facts in order to set up his critique.

## III.

Andrade is describing the modern *corrida*. The methods, tools, and techniques were altered throughout the nineteenth

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and twentieth centuries owing to shifts in artistic sensibilities and regulatory activity (grounded in concern for the well being of the bulls, the picadors' horses, and the spectators). He is also describing the Spanish-style *corrida*. Other styles exist in other parts of the world – France, Portugal, Tanzania, the United States of America, and parts of the Middle East and Southeast Asia, for example. These styles differ from the Spanish style, some slightly and some greatly. The most important difference has to do with whether or not the bull is harmed or killed. In one variation, the objective is to grab flowers that have been attached to the bull's horns. In another, acrobatic humans jump and flip over the bull as he charges them. And many in the United States will be familiar with the bull riding that is part of most rodeos. These variations involve little, if any, harm to the bull. But it is the Spanish style that is most popular and that has been subjected to the most scrutiny.

Given Andrade's focus on the modern Spanish-style *corrida*, his presentation of the facts strikes me as incomplete. It is a fact (an undisputable one, surely) that the lances and harpoons of the first two *tercios* cause damage. But by characterizing these stages of the bullfight in terms of only two objectives – causing damage to the bull and weakening its neck muscles – Andrade misleads. Naturally, if the matador is going to achieve his ultimate goal of killing the bull with a sword to the heart, the bull must be weakened. A matador could get nowhere near the neck of a bull that had full strength and control over his horns. But the *corrida* is not merely a competition of strength, a fact illustrated wonderfully by Hemingway's (1960) account of the response from famous matador Rafael Gomez, known as "El Gallo", to a question about exercise. Having been asked what sorts of exercise regimen he observed in order to maintain his strength, he responded incredulously. "“Strength,” Gallo

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said. “What do I want with strength, man? The bull weighs half a ton. Should I take exercises for strength to match him? Let the bull have the strength.”” (Hemingway 1960, 26) Gallo’s response highlights two points. The first reveals something of the way some proponents and participants regard the *corrida*. In the real struggle between life and death, death always wins. But when the struggle is symbolized in the *corrida* more often than not the matador defeats death... and not because death is overcome by strength. Rather, flexibility, grace, bravery, and experience are the tools available to the matador, allowing him (in most cases) to evade death. Death is not the kind of thing that can be overcome by means of brute force. But in the drama of the *corrida*, the fragile human being can get the better of death, if only symbolically. In the words of Angela O’Donnell (2017), it is a form of “wish fulfillment”. So, to regard damaging and weakening the bull as the only goals of the first two *tercios* is to fail to grasp the full meaning of the *corrida*.

The second point brought out by Gallo’s comment on strength reveals something else left out of Andrade’s critique. From the moment they meet in the ring, the matador is assessing the bull’s temperament and quirks. If the bull appears nervous or timid, then the matador will stoke the bull’s confidence by maximizing his contact with the horses. If the bull favors the right or left when he charges (something that can be determined with the help of the cape), the matador will correct for these tendencies through the placement of the *banderillos*. A bull that swings his head during a charge or that charges in any way other than a straight line is an unpredictable bull. And predictability is one of the few advantages the matador can enjoy. This being the case, it seems clear that what goes on in the first two stages of the *corrida* is not solely (or even primarily) a matter of damaging and weakening the bull.

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Nonetheless, based on this presentation of the facts of bullfighting, Andrade insists that “a great deal of torture goes on in bullfighting”. (161) This assertion is contrary to what Francis Wolff has argued. I should like now to run through Wolff’s torture-related arguments and Andrade’s responses. Both will, I believe, prove inconclusive regarding the exact nature and moral status of the *corrida*.

**IV.**

According to Wolff, bullfighting and torture have different goals, and so cannot be the same. The goal of torture is to cause suffering, while the goal of the *corrida* is to create some sort of entertaining artistic expression. As I will explain more fully below, it is not clear to me that the primary goal of torture is to cause suffering. More typically, the causing of suffering is simply a way of bringing about some other, ultimate goal – extracting information or punishing, for example. The suffering caused in the course of torture is most often, then, a proximate goal. It is something intended, but usually not for its own sake. Be that as it may, the bull and the tortured both suffer. But they suffer for different reasons. In my view (which I elaborate upon below, in section V), the torturer inflicts suffering so that the victim might offer up secret information, or as retribution for some action(s), or for any number of other reasons. In Wolff’s view, the torturer inflicts suffering for the sake of the suffering, while the matador and his entourage inflict suffering for the sake of entertainment and art. And so, believes Wolff, because torture and bullfighting are aimed toward different ends, they cannot be the same thing.

This does not persuade Andrade. If the purpose of the *corrida* is to entertain by the achievement of an artistic expression, then why permit the suffering? There are ways of making

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artistic expressions that do not involve pain and suffering. And there are forms of bullfighting that are not so violent as the Spanish style, while just as entertaining. Neither the desire to entertain nor to create art is sufficient, individually or jointly, for justifying the pain caused to bulls in the *corrida*, believes Andrade.

Another point of difference highlighted by Wolff involves the differences between the bull and the tortured in terms of autonomy. Most victims of torture are confined, tied up, or otherwise prevented from acting out defiantly, while the bull has a chance to move and to fight back. Indeed, the matador and the crowd *want* the bull to fight back. It is a sign of quality and bravery, without which the *corrida* cannot stand as the intended symbol for life and death.

Again, Andrade is not convinced. Yes, the bull enjoys rather more freedom than the typical torture victim, and is expected to fight back. But both the freedom and the expectation are of a limited sort. The matador has the upper hand throughout the fight, and unless something goes very awry the bull will end up dead. Andrade compares the *corrida* to Roman gladiatorial combat, and suggests that the defiance exhibited by the combatants (and desired by the spectators) does nothing to justify the suffering.

Wolff points out another difference between torture and bullfighting: the latter is much more of a fair fight than the former. The power dynamic in a case of torture is very lopsided, with most power in the hands of the inflictor. But the *corrida* is a fair contest, matching the bull's considerable strength against the matador's skills. The danger for the matador is very real.

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These points *do* seem to persuade Andrade. He does not reject the view that bullfighting is morally wrong, but he does back off from the characterization of bullfighting as torture. “Even though it may technically be more of a fight than torture, the bull is severely weakened and, ultimately, has no chance of winning.” (Andrade 2018, 164) As I will suggest below, technicality is exactly what is needed in moral appraisal of the *corrida*. So it seems that Andrade undermines his case, while making inaccurate judgment of the bull’s chances of triumphing. They are small, but they are not zero.

Wolff writes that if the *corrida* were torture, then the bull would flee from the matador (as any victim of torture would do if he could). But the bull does not flee, so the *corrida* must not be torture. Andrade points out the validity of this argument, and then to its lack of soundness (owing to a false premise). Fleeing is not the only natural response to threat – fighting back is another. The fact that the bull often fights back should not, says Andrade, be taken as a sign that the bull is a willing participant in the *corrida*. It is simply a natural response to an unpleasant situation. Besides, where would the bull go? He is confined to the ring, and if he retreats he will be pursued. The bull could not flee, even if he wanted to.

A final argument may be worth mentioning. In defense of bullfighting, Wolff compares it to industrial meat production. The fighting bull lives a fairly pleasant, stress-free life until the age of four or five, at which point he undergoes around twenty minutes of pain and stress prior to being killed. By stark contrast, steers destined to become meat live shorter, more stressful lives. They are confined in crowded areas, and are fed diets that include animal tallow, antibiotics, and corn (a grain the bovine digestive system has not evolved to thrive on). They are

usually slaughtered at two years of age (or sooner), after being prodded through a line of similarly anxious companions.

Wolff is right to cast a disparaging light on the meat industry, and to suggest that by comparison the fighting bull lives a good life. But he means this comparison to be a vindication of bullfighting, and Andrade correctly points out that it is not. All it does is highlight another institution sorely in need of moral scrutiny. Angela O'Donnell does an excellent job of characterizing the differences in quality between the fighting bull and the meat cow. She writes, "There is nothing powerful or graceful about [the meat cows'] deaths. They are never feared or revered. Their lives are not sacrificed, bull by bull. They die nameless and en masse." (O'Donnell 2017) It is a point well taken, though not exactly as an argument for the *corrida*, as Wolff intended.

## V.

For all of its flaws, Wolff's defense has something going for it: it is philosophical. Andrade's critique is, by his own characterization, a common sense critique. It relies on analogies and (if I am correct) mischaracterizations. Andrade seems to be content with saying that common sense shows us that bullfighting involves (or is) torture, and is therefore evil. But to paraphrase Mark Bernstein (2004, 189), common sense indicates the beginning of an investigation, not the end. Andrade may be correct, but what is needed is a more rigorous account of torture. For such an account I turn to a pair of authors on the subject: S. Miller (2005, 2017) and M. Davis (2005, 2007). The definitions they provide of torture are the most accurate, clear, and helpful among all the accounts with which I am acquainted.

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Torture can be characterized by pointing to six jointly necessary criteria. The first is that torture involves the infliction of extreme, prolonged suffering. To indicate that the suffering is prolonged is to distinguish it from assault. Note that the first criterion involves *suffering*, not pain. Certainly, many instances of torture involve extreme pain caused by burning, shocking, pulling, twisting, and any number of other horrible actions. But some cases that one would want to call torture do not involve pain. Sleep deprivation, not an inherently painful sort of thing, causes one to suffer from exhaustion. Food deprivation may not be painful itself, but it leads to suffering. (Whether or not mental suffering should be considered torture is a matter of some debate, nicely treated by Miller 2005.)

The second criterion for torture is that the infliction of extreme suffering must be intentional. I might accidentally shock you in the course of attaching jumper cables to a car battery. That shock would not count as torture, the pain and suffering it would no doubt cause notwithstanding. Additionally (and this is the third criterion), the intentionally-caused extreme suffering must be non-consensual. The willing recipient of a brand (delivered via branding iron) would have been intentionally made to suffer, but he would not have been tortured. A fourth criterion is that the being experiencing the suffering must be incapable of preventing the suffering. Although it would certainly be wrong, my shocking you with jumper cables without your consent would not be considered torture if you had the ability to prevent it. The victim of torture, then, must be defenseless.

So far the definition of torture is as follows: Torture is the intentional infliction of extreme, prolonged suffering on some non-consenting, defenseless sentient being. (At the risk of re-

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dundancy I say ‘sentient being’ in order to underscore the *experience* of suffering as a necessary condition for torture.) As it stands, this definition does not acknowledge one of the key elements of torture. Torture, unlike most other forms of violence, drastically restricts autonomy. The victim of torture might display small acts of defiance (say, turning the head, clenching the teeth, or straining against shackles), but she cannot assert her will to a greater degree than that. Torture typically involves restraining a victim to a chair, wall, or table, or confinement in very small quarters. The definition of torture, then, must be expanded. Torture is (a) the intentional infliction of extreme, prolonged suffering on some non-consenting, defenseless sentient being; (b) the intentional, substantial curtailment of the exercise of that being’s autonomy (achieved by means of (a)).

If there is anything left out of this definition, it relates to the reasons behind the act of torture. Torture seems to be a particular kind of violence undertaken for particular reasons. The possible reasons are many, and include the desire to obtain a confession, obtain information, punish, intimidate or coerce to act a certain way, destroy without killing, or merely to please the torturer. (Davis 2007) In general, one goal of torture is to “break” the victim – or more accurately, the victim’s will. By inflicting extreme pain, the torturer can wear down the victim’s will *not* to share information or confess or what have you. When a victim’s will is broken in this way, it may be said that the torture has achieved the goal toward which it was put. So a more complete definition – and this is the final version I will present here – would look like this: Torture is (a) the intentional infliction of extreme, prolonged suffering on some non-consenting, defenseless sentient being; (b) the intentional, substantial curtailment of the exercise of that being’s autonomy

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(achieved by means of (a)); (c) *in general*, undertaken for the purpose of breaking the victim's will.

**VI.**

With a much clearer account than either Wolff or Andrade provides it should be possible to determine whether or not bullfighting should be considered an act of torture. The first three criteria seem to be met. Bullfighting does involve the intentional, non-consensual infliction of extreme, prolonged suffering. If one were to take issue with this, it would likely be with regard to the capacity of bulls to suffer. I harbor no doubt that bulls *can* suffer (and *do* over the course of the *corrida*), and I will not devote space to the related questions *can bulls feel pain* and *can bulls suffer?* 'Yes' is the answer to both as far as I am concerned. Of course, one might also question whether or not bullfighting is non-consensual. Andrade (2019, 167) points out that bulls clearly do not consent to the treatment they endure in the fight. Wolff would agree, but only because he believes that consenting is beyond a bull's cognitive abilities. Again, I will not take up this issue here. Bulls can feel pain and can suffer, and it is eminently reasonable to suppose that they would rather not.

The fourth criterion (defenselessness) is not so obviously met as the first three, as a fighting bull's defenses are impressive. Averaging in excess of one-thousand pounds, wielding razor-sharp horns, and capable of running faster than the fastest human (35 mph for the bull, 28 mph for Usain Bolt), the typical fighting bull seems more than adequately outfitted. But the bull's ability to use his horns is compromised by the damage done to his neck muscle by the lance. His size, strength, and speed are compromised, too, by the lance and the *banderillas*, as well as by the fact that the matador works so close to

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the bull. The bull's size and speed may actually become liabilities in this interspecies judo match. (I rather like the comparison between bullfighting and judo, especially in light of these words from Jigoro Kano, the founder of judo: "In short, resisting a more powerful opponent will result in your defeat, whilst adjusting to and evading your opponent's attack will cause him to lose his balance, his power will be reduced, and you will defeat him. This can apply whatever the relative values of power, thus making it possible for weaker opponents to beat significantly stronger ones." (Kano 2005, 39-40))

It should be noted that defenselessness is not only a matter of physical abilities. The defenselessness (or helplessness) that a torture victim exhibits is of two sorts: physical *and* intellectual (Davis 2007, 32). The victim typically knows little or nothing about the torturer's plans. Part of the agony of torture is the anticipation of unforeseen suffering. Fighting bulls are very deliberately kept away from capes prior to the *corrida*. It is reputed that they have quite good memories and would not be so tantalized by the matador's cape if they had prior experience of the futility in charging it. Having no knowledge or experience of the *corrida*, bulls cannot know what is in store for them. And so they are in a position of intellectual defenselessness. Thus, the fourth criterion appears to be met.

In addition to the preceding, torture substantially curtails autonomy (the fifth criterion). And the *corrida* certainly seems to limit the bull's autonomy. His freedom to run away is limited by the wooden walls of the fighting ring. His ability to control his movements is limited by the physical damage done to his body. And his capacity for making effective responses is limited by his lack of experience. All of this points to the curtail-

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ment of the bull's autonomy and to the satisfaction of the fifth criterion.

The final point (and sixth criterion) to be considered has to do with breaking a victim's will. Given the fact that different people understand the *corrida* in ways not obviously having to do with breaking the bull's will, the satisfaction of this criterion appears, at first glance, questionable. Some regard the *corrida* as a sport, and they enjoy the athleticism displayed by the matador. Others are excited and entertained by the risk to which the matador exposes himself. There are doubtless some spectators who are thrilled by the prospect of a goring, just as there are hockey fans who expect fights or automobile racing fans who expect crashes. Still others see bullfighting as a kind of art, an expression of human resilience and defiance in the face of death. Perhaps this way of understanding of the *corrida* was behind Hemingway's description of bullfighting as a tragedy – a drama centered on suffering that is played out before an audience. In perhaps its most "elevated" sense, the *corrida* is a ritual involving elements of the cultural and the sacred. For some Catholics it is a kind of passion play, an allegory of redemption. For some Spaniards it is an expression of national identity – though there is an increasing number of people who want to separate the notions of bullfighting and Spanish-ness. (The Catalonian ban on bullfighting of 2012, along with the ensuing legal battles, is evidence of this cultural shift.)

What is the purpose of the *corrida*? An accurate answer probably includes all of the above... and possibly more. The *corrida* is sport, entertainment, art, tradition, and ritual. Thus, it involves a variety of purposes. But what these purposes have in common, it seems to me, is the breaking of the bull's will for the sake of conquest or expression or sacrifice. Regardless of

the way bullfighting is understood, the common denominator is reducing the bull to something that can be killed by a small (but brave) man with a thin sword.

## VII.

What common sense suggested, careful analysis has confirmed. Bullfighting should be subject to the same sort of moral scrutiny as acts of torture should be. Now, whether or not there are any redeeming characteristics of the *corrida* I leave for another essay. My intention here has been simply to provide an adequate account of bullfighting, define the necessary conditions for torture, and show that bullfighting meets those conditions. That having (presumably) been done, it is now up to Wolff and other defenders of the *corrida* to delineate morally acceptable instances of torture (if any there be) from the morally unacceptable ones. And if it should turn out that there are no morally acceptable instances of torture, then perhaps Andrade's suggestion that bullfighting be altered so as to eliminate the suffering and killing should be taken to heart. Without those elements, the meaning of the *corrida* may be lost. But that could be a sacrifice worth making.

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