



# **Polemical Pain: Slavery, Cruelty, and the Rise of Humanitarianism (New Studies in American Intellectual and Cultural History)**

*Margaret Abruzzo*

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In 2008 and 2009, the United States Congress apologized for the "fundamental injustice, cruelty, brutality, and inhumanity of slavery." Today no one denies the cruelty of slavery, but few issues inspired more controversy in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Abolitionists denounced the inhumanity of slavery, while proslavery activists proclaimed it both just and humane. Margaret Abruzzo delves deeply into the slavery debate to better understand the nature and development of humanitarianism and how the slavery issue helped shape modern concepts of human responsibility for the suffering of others.

Abruzzo first traces the slow, indirect growth in the eighteenth century of moral objections to slavery's cruelty, which took root in awareness of the moral danger of inflicting unnecessary pain. Rather than accept pain as inescapable, as had earlier generations, people fought to ease, discredit, and abolish it. Within a century, this new humanitarian sensibility had made immoral the wanton infliction of pain.

Abruzzo next examines how this modern understanding of humanity and pain played out in the slavery debate. Drawing on shared moral-philosophical concepts, particularly sympathy and benevolence, pro- and antislavery writers voiced starkly opposing views of humaneness. Both sides constructed their moral identities by demonstrating their own humanity and criticizing the other's insensitivity.

Understanding this contest over the meaning of humanity and its ability to serve varied, even contradictory purposes illuminates the role of pain in morality. *Polemical Pain* shows how the debate over slavery's cruelty played a large, unrecognized role in shaping moral categories that remain pertinent today.

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