

## **Indifference**

### **An everyday autism**

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#### **Abstract**

In this paper the author reflects on the curious fact that the human being from infancy relates to others, starting with mother, from the first weeks, but later in life appears able to switch off that engagement with others and to treat them with indifference and callous disregard.

**Key-words:** Auschwitz, indifference, object-relations, institutionalisation, desocialisation, other minds, labour process

#### **The Shock of Auschwitz**

It was only recently that I had taken the trouble to visit Auschwitz. I wondered how, psychologically, such a place could have been developed. The export of human subjects to Auschwitz in cattle trucks expresses the message that they were not persons. Their experience was a matter of indifference to those managing the extermination process. And indeed the extermination effected by the use of Zyklon-B, a rat poison, gives the same message. How is it that other human beings can be seen as lacking the essential humanity that the rest of us have?

In this contribution I want to reflect on how a species that evolved by natural selection to have such a passionate faculty for engagement with others, can also lose that compassion. 'Compassion' conveys the capacity for a communality of passionate feelings, a mutuality of engagement. The human being has the capacity more than any other animal – *much more* we suppose. But equally we have the capacity to move between indifference and engagement. It might seem the very basis of ethical thinking and behaving.

Hitler and his close associates could be called mad but what made a whole society willing to be led by Nazi leaders into setting up Auschwitz? How many hundreds of SS people were involved in the camp, shovelling people in and out of gas chambers, denying humans were persons? It is hard to believe all SS people were incapable of human feeling; one can see where the camp Director lived in a house on the edge of the slaughter camp where he had his quite human life with his family and children. In a similar vein, we can painfully wonder about the bombing of Dresden, and the obliteration of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

How can people get into that mode of thinking that others are not to be respected as people? It is an extraordinary capacity of humans to be able to drop their concern for others as persons. And to be caught up in a social dynamic to collaborate in a dehumanising process. For instance, in the camp at Auschwitz, the inmates were sparsely housed (those that did not go immediately from the trains to the gas

chambers). Moreover it was not just the SS running the camps, but inmates themselves were recruited in exchange for special favours and food, to be 'overseers' in the camp huts, and the 'special squad' who worked the gas chambers. Those depersonalised 'objects' took, seemingly, the same inhuman step in the mechanical depersonalisation of their comrades.

Once the culture allowed such things, it seemed any individual could become involved with it. As Bill Buford described the enthralling experience of liberation in a football crowd, 'with numbers there are no laws' (Buford 1991, p. 64). Many of those members of the football crowd who commit delinquent or even on occasions murderous acts together are ordinary responsible citizens in other circumstances. Arendt (1963), described the socially peaceful 'normality' of the SS after the war. The point is that who can deny we would collaborate in this dehumanising process were we conscripted (consciously or unconsciously) to it – however normal we might be. What gets into us? Or what is lost from us?

What state of mind is it when we reduce others to inanimate, non-human status?

### **Institutional 'care'**

This phenomenon where humane care is dislocated and lost, and others become less than human, is not exceptional. Though obviously different in some respects, there is also a process called depersonalisation even in the practice of professional care itself. In fact, it is one of the most distressing features of the helping professions. What might be thought of as a personality disorder, afflicts many quite ordinary caring people working in healthcare and other forms of professional caring.

The work of Isabel Menzies (1959; see also Hinshelwood and Skogstad 2000) showed that, due probably to the stress of care work itself, patients are approached merely as '*objects*' of care – for instance, a diagnosis, a diseased organ, a bed number, etc. Menzies interviewed and observed the nursing service of a London Hospital. The service had approached Menzies with, as it were, a 'symptom'. Certain organisational problems, especially in the provision of nurse training seemed insoluble. The students could not complete the required amount of time on each of the specialist wards. They were moved arbitrarily around the wards at a moment's notice to fill gaps in the teams of staff. There was an underlying attitude that a nurse does not form attachments to her patients or her colleagues; therefore she can be moved for the benefit of the hospital. There were also ways of doing the work so that the nurse never really got to know her patients as persons; they were only symptoms, illnesses or parts and functions of the body. These practices allowed nurses to avoid too much contact with dying, frightened, maimed patients in pain. Menzies realised that this nursing work can be too stressful for a whole shift every day; and so these practices grew up to minimise the nurse-patient relationship. As a result of indiscriminate re-assignment to different wards, not only did student nurses get a poor training, but the emotional distance from patients led to reduced job satisfaction,

since so many went into the work in order to help physically ill people and see them get better. In fact, they rarely had the satisfaction of knowing actual individuals who got better. The reduced job satisfaction made nurses leave the work, and many students did not finish training. This led to gaps in the provision of staff, with the need to constantly move nurses around the wards.

This nursing practice involved the sad result that nurses turned away from the person who suffers to attend purely to what he suffers from. Tom Main wrote acidly about the traditional psychiatric hospital:

Within such a setting, health and stability are too often bought at the excessive price of desocialization. Sooner or later the patient, alone and unsupported must face the difficult task of returning to the society in which he became unstable, and there regain social integration and a daily sense of values and purpose. This task is no light one for a desocialised man, however healthy he may have become (Main 1946, p. 8).

Such observations of the related phenomenon of institutionalisation (Goffman 1961) was one important factor justifying closure of the mental hospitals in the UK.

It is true that those resident in such institutions are often very strange people. They can confound ordinary expectations of a caring relationship, or of any relationship for that matter. For instance, the Nobel Prize winning playwright, Samuel Beckett, visited a mental hospital and wrote in a letter to a friend about one patient

[The patient] was like a hunk of meat. There was no-one there. He was absent (Beckett 1935, quoted in Knowlson 1986).

Such a reaction to their strangeness leads even their families to reject suffering people, to fail to acknowledge them as persons any more, and to dispose of them to psychiatric care.

The anthropologist and psychiatrist Rob Barratt (1996) made a similar study of the way patients are admitted to a psychiatric ward. The culture proceeds in three ways, in sequence. At first the patient is admitted and regarded as a disease with symptoms, rather than a person with volition and experiences. In Barratt's terms he is not a 'moral' agent, and does not have responsibility for how he is. In the second phase the team engage in all the investigations of the personal, social and medical history, until they complete a compendium of facts. The patient is then a 'case', to be understood in terms of his neuro-biochemistry, psychological and social factors, all of a technical nature. His case is an agglomeration of those facts. Only in the third phase does something like a person begin to emerge. Then, as he begins to recover two things happen: first, he begins to be held responsible for the things he does and says; and, second, members of staff begin to express personal views of liking or disliking the patient. At this point they are reconstructing a relationship with the *person* of the

patient. He has achieved again the status of a moral being, who could be approved or disapproved of. Interestingly, Barratt observed that this last process, the more personal reactions of the staff to the person of the patient often occurred first of all off the ward and in the canteen society during coffee and meal breaks.

The attitude to a patient as a desocialised or depersonalised 'commodity' impacts badly on certain patients, typically those with chronic schizophrenia (Hinshelwood 1999). Their difficulties include a problem of identity anyway, so to depersonalise the patient through the institutionalisation of a psychiatric service enhances that deficit. So, the culture of emotional distancing and downgrading of the relationship impacts on the lack of firm identity of the person to create a kind side-effect of the care, analogous to the side-effects of pharmacological medication.

### **Mental aberration**

The various examples touched on, need some explanation. We need to explain how some faculty of mind seems to go missing. There is a loss of the capacity to relate and care. First let us examine this process in which a mental loss happens (and then later the conditions under which this may occur). Here is an example of a man in psychoanalysis, who showed a psychological process of losing (splitting off) a part of his mind; specifically he split off his experience of caring about anything:

The session I have in mind started with the patient's telling me he felt anxiety and did not know why. He then made comparisons with people more successful and fortunate than himself. These remarks also had a reference to me. Very strong feelings of frustration, envy and grievance came to the fore. When I interpreted - to give here again only the gist of my interpretation - that these feelings were directed against the analyst and he wanted to destroy me, his mood changed abruptly. The tone of his voice became flat, he spoke in an expressionless way, and he said that he felt detached from the whole situation. He added that my interpretation seemed correct, but that it did not matter? In fact, he no longer had any wishes, and nothing was worth bothering about (Klein 1946, p.19).

He could abolish his own capacity to feel that anything had an emotional meaning for him. His indifference supervened instead of his strong sensibilities. In this instance, it occurred when he was occupied with his aggression. Under scrutiny, within a clinical session, this patient reacted dramatically. Something of him disappeared altogether, "He added that my interpretation seemed correct, but that it did not matter" (ibid.). So he was left with a detached indifference and lack of interest. Klein emphasized:

The patient split off those parts of himself, i.e. of his ego which he felt to be dangerous and hostile towards his analyst. He turned his destructive impulses

from his object towards his ego, with the result that parts of his ego temporarily went out of existence. In unconscious phantasy this amounted to annihilation of part of his personality... [and] kept his anxiety in a latent state (Klein 1946, p. 19).

The patient actually lost a part of himself — his feelings of frustration, envy and grievance. So, in effect he became in different.

To lose one's feeling is a kind of amputation of an important aspect of one's self — the capacity to feel *for others*. Interestingly, in this example from a clinical session, the process of loss was transitory because it was later followed by a recovery of the lost faculty. The discussion at this point is to show that faculties of mind can simply stop functioning for a period of time. In this instance, the striking loss is the faculty of care and empathy.

### **Other minds**

We are currently under the massive influence of the cognitive sciences. The 'cognitive revolution' as it has been called, in the 1950s, came about in academic and experimental psychology, as behaviourism went out of fashion (Chomsky 1959; Neisser 1967). It also left affects in abeyance as well; they seem some derivative of, or epiphenomena arising from, cognitive functioning. Other quasi-psychological disciplines, such as information theory and communication theory were developing too, as machines capable of simulating cognition were rapidly developed. Later from the 1980s the development of neuroscience came to support cognitive psychology, and it was increasingly based on the development of the computer, and therefore the computer model of the brain/mind. This conglomerate, from computer science to neuroscience has become a colossus now called the 'cognitive sciences', occupying a territory reaching from the pocket calculator to the PC to the human brain.

It is natural that the computer should be a very prominent model for thinking about the brain-mind complex. However it relegates subjective experience to some function accompanying of a computational system as a side-line. It prioritises the 'mind' as a mechanism for dealing with information. The computer deals with numbers expressed in Boolean binary algebra, so the belief is that a brain is likely to do something similar.

In fact, from experience, our minds respond to other minds in somewhat non-cognitive ways that are more intuitive. Cognition can seem a very partial explanation. We know so little of *what* our mind is and how we know others and care for them. Thomas Nagel deliberated on the capacity to ponder other minds in his pointedly titled paper, 'What is it like to be a bat?' (Nagel 1974). How do I know that entities that are other persons have minds as I do myself? Indeed, regarding them as persons implies regarding them as having a mind. This turns the problem the other way around — not how can we be indifferent to other minds, but how can it be that we know other minds at all? Often we do not get it exactly correct what someone else is

thinking and feeling; it may be interfered with by what I am thinking or feeling, or maybe they are confusingly dissembling or in conflict. But the interesting thing is that so often we *do* 'read other peoples' minds.

Other minds are not simply objective 'things' that exist, like a chair-leg (Wisdom 1952). Nor are they just replicas of one's own mind, although we may base our understanding of someone else's mind on our own experience. Although we do attribute feelings, thoughts and experiences we are familiar with, to our pet dog or horse. We may do that to other persons as well, but, when it comes to other human beings, we are also open to real differences of experience, and we can stretch our imaginations to try to fit ours with theirs. We often have that I-know-how-you-feel moment when someone tells you of the death of a parent, or the birth of a child – or others know how you feel when you give similar news to them. Interestingly, one knows the distinction – the distinction between knowing one's own experience and knowing you are feeling someone else's. Knowing how they feel when someone tells you of their moment of pain or joy, is different from your own pain or joy, yet it feels compellingly the same. Someone else's feeling is theirs, yet one does know it, from all sorts of cues and clues, whilst knowing it is not one's own experience right then.

This is something we call empathy, a faculty that seems to exist amongst other mammals only in relation to their young (possibly birds too). It is this capacity to 'read' each other's experiences, thoughts and feelings, which distinguishes human societies from animal herds and flocks. I won't argue for that distinction from animals, because anyway, the important point is that human society is based on feeling for and caring about other's experiences as much as one's own.

This empathic connection with others may, today, be graced with the terms 'mindfulness' (Kabat-Zim 1982), or 'mentalisation' (Lecours and Bauchelard 1997; Bateman and Fonagy 2004). Those terms are perhaps a reaction to the remarkable fact that for the most part of the Twentieth Century academic psychology has treated the human mind as an objective 'thing'; a psychology of indifference, perhaps. Behavioural psychology, succeeded by cognitive psychology, has tended to repudiate the full nature of human experience (Bruner 1990). The fact is that 'reading' each other's world of subjective experience, forms the needles that knit our individual minds into a society.

### **Creating the social**

As indicated above, the individual's decision to switch on, or off, the function of empathy – to become indifferent or not – is highly determined by the culture of our society or local group. The SS man has an empathy which almost certainly functioned quite differently at home compared to when he was at work In Auschwitz. Similarly with a nurse in charge of a ward in the old-fashioned mental hospital, he/she comes from being a loving parent at home, to a professional overseer controlling insanity when at work. It is obviously a transition familiar to anyone moving from group to group, organisation to organisation. Even in the example

above of the psychoanalytic session where the man lost his feelings, there is a determining factor; that factor is the social/interpersonal interaction between the patient and the rather challenging analyst. All this implies that one factor at least in the switch to indifference is a social triggering. The demand of a social role enables (or compels) the individual to switch to indifference. This was adequately confirmed experimentally by the ethically dubious research of Milgram (1964) and Zimbardo (2008).

This determining social factor needs some awareness *at a social level*. It may be only manageable through social policies. The slave-owning societies of the southern US, the Caribbean and Brazil exemplify the social conditions for the indifferent depersonalisation of slavery. Such social conditions operated fairly successfully for some centuries on a broad scale. In the end the social conditions of slavery were dealt with by political action – the abolitionist movement. It is important therefore not to individualise the state of indifference, even though there is, no doubt, a variation in the degree to which individuals become indifferent. But just as important are the social conditions.

### **Labour process**

Harry Braverman (1974) has developed this idea of the ‘labour process’ as originally identified by Marx (1867) in Chapter 7 of *Das Kapital*. Simply, an industrial enterprise engages a worker to make some physical product, shall we say nails. Then that factory has costs that include the worker’s daily wage to cover his/her living costs for a day, plus the maintenance and servicing costs of the factory and the enterprise itself. Then if the enterprise is successful, the worker makes enough nails in a day to cover his proportion of the costs the enterprise runs up. The intention is that the worker will make more nails than just covers these costs. Then the extra nails which the worker has made belong to the enterprise. The worker sells his time, not his products, so his material products (his ‘embodied labour’ as Marx called it) are taken from him. In other words the organisation attempts to get more value out of this labour than has been invested in it in the form of wages. That surplus value created by the worker is not the worker’s. In contrast, co-operatives share the surplus, but the vast majority of enterprises in contemporary Western society do not share in that co-operative way.

The importance is that the product of the worker is alienated from him, or him from his product as Marx tended to say. Marx described the effect of the process as making ‘labour’ a material entity, objectified as something as material as the machine energy or the raw material the labourer uses. In his notebooks, published as *The 1844 Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* in 1975, he described the unfairness of a separation of a worker from the product of his labour:

[T]he object that labour produces, its product, stands opposed to it as something alien, as a power independent of the producer. The product of labour

is labour embodied and made material in an object ... this realisation of labour appears as loss of reality for the worker, objectification as loss of and bondage to the object, and appropriation as estrangement, as alienation (Marx 1844, p. 324).

If the work product is disconnected, then the producer is disconnected to some degree from what is felt – by him, and by others – to be him. It stands opposed as something alien. The worker becomes a lesser person; as Marx said, 'The worker becomes poorer the more wealth he produces' (p. 323). He becomes poorer in that psychological sense. He is, in this terminology, alienated and his personal 'being' is reduced; a process akin to, if not identical with, the indifference we are tracking. Significantly, these comments from Marx's account of indifference (alienation) in the exploitation of labour, resonate with the quite separate conceptual system of psychoanalysis (Hinshelwood 1983). Earlier in this paper, we saw the example of a man in analysis who showed a process of splitting off a part of his ego, splitting off the capacity to have his own feelings. Such splitting of the ego is not restricted to that function, but it is a more general process that can occur in deeply unconscious aspects of a person; so that for example:

In such fantasies products of the body and parts of the self are felt to be split off, projected into mother, and to be continuing their existence there (Klein 1955, p. 142).

That is from Melanie Klein again, and she is describing the mechanism of splitting of the ego, or self. Following that splitting, the parts of that divided self are then dispersed from the self (projective identification) and experienced as located in some other person:

[These mechanisms of splitting and projective identification lead] to the weakening and impoverishment of the ego resulting from excessive splitting and projective identification' (Klein 1946, p. 104).

Here the alienating process is attributed to the self – the ego splits itself. In terms of the labour process, the labourer engages in splitting his own ego (for reasons to be discussed) and then objectified as some aspect within the personality of someone else. In other words there are two processes involved here: one is a social process required of a worker by the culture of his working situation; and the other is a psychological process that originates within the labourer. The social and the psychological converge in the debilitating labour process (Hinshelwood 1996, 2019). Why might the psychological processes of the individual fit into and converge with the impoverishing and debilitating social process? This is a particularly important question, not just for psychoanalysts of the unconscious in the clinical situation, but

also for those seeking to understand political processes which can support or curtail the social origin of the damage that occurs to individuals.

In the opinion of the present writer, the convergence of social and psychological forces results in self-organising and self-sustaining cycles that play on the susceptibility of individuals (Hinshelwood 2019). The psychological processes of splitting and projective identification are put into motion for purposes of psychological (and unconscious) defence against experiences that would normally cause significant pain if they were to become conscious. These cycles typically play on the experiences, felt at phantastical intensity, of guilt or self-survival. There is a need for a more thorough detailed treatment of how the social process can initiate unconscious defences which, however damaging to the individual, sustain the social process. Some consideration of this can be found in Hinshelwood (2019). Conceptual thinking and then empirical research needs to be developed in the areas of indifference and alienation pointed to in this paper.

### **Ethical relations to other minds**

Despite the astonishing impact of Enlightenment science in transforming the physical world we live in, there is unfortunately a potential for this serious side-effect just mentioned. Managing other human minds as if they were merely material objects risks depleting those minds, and indeed depleting the minds of those who attempt the technology and the management.

The minds of others are delicate things and can degenerate into fragments – not just in the form of mental illness but in processes of normal splitting which may leave individuals enduringly depleted (Hinshelwood 1997). At the same time it is not a simple matter by any means to employ the knowledge of these unconscious processes, in matters of public policy. Being unconscious, they are by definition, not easily amenable to conscious debate and use. The threatening possibility is that these socio-psychological co-operations appear to become stable, and exist over whole periods of history. When they are not declining they are growing, and it may be that a step in the growth of the alienation of persons is taking place at the present. The ethos of late capitalism is not just that workers become commodities separated from their products. It is conceivable, though speculative, that consumers too, become depersonalised entities too. The commodification of the products, of the labouring producers and of the consumers may have been co-ordinated by the technology of the machinery that now accompanies purchasing via the internet or elsewhere. The consumer is an addendum to an encounter with a machine, and his purchase which is accomplished by algorithms written for generalised transactions is remote from the personal encounter of face-to-face shopping.

In this case the machine is a realisation of the indifference process. Aspects of the individual worker and consumer are removed from their repertoire of their own responsibilities, so that personal engagement is not a priority. It is not necessarily the case that such transactions should require an alienating indifference, but in the

context of attitudes that have grown up around the means of production, it would seem likely.

### **Political debate**

We need to know how to debate the importance of psychodynamics for political policy. In fact we need a ‘technology’ of debate itself, including political debates. To take into account these emerging cycles of alienation, may require us to develop a whole new method of debating.

Our highly technical culture tends to overlook the unconscious dynamics. We consider our society gives a freedom for individuals to express themselves as persons. That ignorance of the unconscious is understandable, yet ordinary political discourse needs to acknowledge it. In our culture we increasingly emphasise the freedom of the individual and the idea of “democracy” increasingly assumes we are completely free individuals. Some in the late Twentieth Century even argues sometimes that democracy and freedom are in opposition (Davidson and Rees-Mogg 1997); the imposition on the rich to provide health or education for everyone curtails the freedom of successful entrepreneurs, and for them democracy is suspect, even unacceptable. And as a result increasing inequality, with extreme poverty, are quite acceptable. That indifference in the fabric of our contemporary culture is known as neoliberalism. Such attitudes had previously peaked in the entrepreneurial society of Eighteenth Century Britain; a historical period when the constitution of the US was written, which enshrined, in September 1787, the freedom of each individual (not slaves, of course). That document consigned the poor, unthinkingly and unfeelingly, to poverty and privation. Nevertheless it has been assumed to be a timeless ideal, and therefore inspired the articles of the United Nations in October 1945.

The attitude of indifference to poverty and the damage to human lives is justified in various ways, for the continuance and flourishing of inequality. Adam Smith’s (1776) idea of the ‘invisible hand’ consigns the impact of entrepreneurial society to an inevitability; it gets its justification from a ‘trickle-down’ argument – the wealth of the rich gets distributed amongst the poorer as the richer spend their money. In fact, Adam Smith’s argument includes a caveat that the invisible hand works well under conditions of *good government*, a condition sometimes forgotten. It might be argued on the basis of this paper that the condition of good government would require understanding of the unconscious dynamics underlying entrepreneurialism and its success. The challenge is to introduce such thinking into political debates, especially those concerned with the extreme inequality that has erupted in the last 40 years.

### **Conclusion: The argument**

Human beings are group animals, evolved to live in communities, and with mixed inter-tribal conflict and co-operation. The ability to experience other persons is probably rather different from the herd behaviour of many animals. Care, concern, and the recognition of other minds is most highly developed in humans, though

mammals (and birds) clearly show care and concern for their young when immature. Yet such a faculty of the human mind disappears strikingly under certain circumstances which are not always clearly appreciated. I was most strongly pointed to these reflections after visiting Auschwitz a few year ago. But the phenomenon of indifference to – as opposed to interest in and concern for – others and there mental experiences had always been a puzzle to me when encountering the conditions and culture of mental hospitals when a young psychiatrist. This set up a question about how could the most caring of animals, also become the most indifferently cruel and murderous?

In this reflection, I recommend developing this question, and suggest, from a psychoanalytic point of view to investigate how the mind can disengage its capacity for concern and care, amputate its most human of characteristics. And we should point to the need for public policies at the level of the state and of commerce. We need to consider the important factors in promoting indifference, or preventing it. On the latter point, of politics, much more debate understanding and campaigning need to flourish.

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