Psychological Roots of Moral Exclusion

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Unless one shares Albert Schweitzer's reverence for all living creatures, one would not feel it to be unjust if one killed an annoying mosquito. Similarly, injustice is not involved in relations with others -- such as heathens, "inferior races," "heretics," "perverts" -- who are perceived to be outside one's moral community or opposed to it. They may be abused, humiliated, tortured, or murdered without feeling that one has violated the accepted canons of justice.

This important, path-breaking Journal issue presents rich discussions of and insights into the processes of moral exclusion which enable otherwise moral people to engage in barbaric actions toward other individuals or groups. It provides a basis for understanding how Eichmann, reputedly a good family man, could be a mass murderer of Jews in the Nazi era. It also helps to explain how the New England captains of ships that raided the African coasts for slaves and transported them to the Americas under the most brutal conditions could, nevertheless, be leaders of their local churches.

I would like to turn, briefly, to an important question which is not systematically addressed in this Issue: the question of whether or not there is a need, which emerges inescapably during the course of human development, to identify some people as allies and others as enemies (Volkan, 1985). Or, in other words, is the moral exclusion of some people a psychological necessity? Erikson (1985, p. 214) has noted, in his description of the tendency of humans to engage in pseudospeciation, that "while man is obviously one species, he appears and continues on the scene to split up into groups which provide their members with a firm sense of unique and superior identity..." Tajfel (1978), similarly, has characterized the invidious social differentiation that typically is made by in-group members toward members of an out group.

The object-relations school of psychoanalysis (e.g., Isaacs, 1946), in their discussion of the sources of love and hate in human development, have suggested that the potential for moral exclusion is latent in all people. I
believe that it is worthwhile to summarize below the essence of their discussion since it is not presented elsewhere in this Issue.¹

Evolution, through natural selection, has insured that all living creatures have the capacity to respond positively to stimuli that are beneficial to them and negatively to those that are harmful. They are attracted to, approach, receive, ingest, like, enhance, and otherwise act positively toward beneficial objects, events, or other creatures; in contrast, they are repelled by harmful objects and avoid, eject, attack, dislike, negate, and otherwise act negatively toward them. This inborn tendency to act positively toward the beneficial and negatively toward the harmful is the foundation on which the human potential for love and hate develops. How this human potential will be developed and expressed is determined by each individual’s life history, his/her contemporary social circumstances, and conflict.

The original feelings of gratification and harmonious oneness with the world occurs in the womb and is recaptured by the infant with trustworthy maternal figures, who respond to its need for nourishment and nurturance with warm, loving and reliable care. Such beneficial experiences, repeated and over time, give rise to two complementary concepts: the good (idealized) other and the good (idealized) self. These are the seeds from which adult love and adult self-esteem ultimately develop; favorable circumstances are necessary for the seeds to germinate and grow into healthy maturity.

Inevitably, the infant’s experiences are not only gratifying but they are also frustrating and harmful: feeding is too little or too late; or not available. The infant feels the painful sensations associated withaloneness, emptiness, rage, teething, etc. These harmful experiences, repeated and over time, give rise to two related concepts: the bad other and the bad self. These are the seeds of adult hate and self-destructiveness. There are a variety of forms of the bad other ("exciting," "rejecting," "persecuting," etc.) and the bad self ("needy," "destructive," "persecuted," etc.); they will not be elaborated here. The concepts of good other, good self, bad other, and bad self are initially concrete and sensual (i.e., they are in terms of the stimuli and sensations immediately associated with the gratifying or frustrating experiences) rather that abstract-symbolic.
In the early stages of development, the conceptions of "good" and "bad" other and "good" and "bad" self are separate. In part this results from a lack of integration due to cognitive immaturity but it also represents the active splitting of the cognitive processes to prevent the good (other or self) from being overwhelmed by the bad (other or self). This active splitting sometimes is referred to as the "paranoid-schizoid" position: "paranoid" is used since the main anxiety is that the bad will persecute and annihilate the good; "schizoid" is used since the major defense is the active "splitting" of the ego so that the "good" and the "bad" do not come into contact.\(^2\)

During this and subsequent periods of development, there is also employment of two mechanisms affecting self-control and social perception: introjection and projection. There is introjection or internalization of the good and bad objects: the internalized good parent provides support in the absence of the external parent and the internalized bad parent inhibits or punishes the "needy" or "raging" behavior of the bad self. There is projection or externalization of the good or bad self, or of the good and bad other, onto others or onto objects of the environment. Thus, the teddy bear in childhood and one's fatherland or one's mother church in adulthood can serve as externalizations of the good parent and be important sources of self-support.

Criticism or attack on these externalizations of the good parent or the good self are apt to be viewed as attacks on one's vital parts. Projection of the bad self onto an adversary enables one to attribute to the other the evil we feel, but deny, in ourselves and to attack it there with exceptional vigor.

As cognitive and emotional development proceeds, the small child will attempt to bring his good and bad objects together and recognize his mother as a whole person and also realize that it is he, the same person, who loves his mother when she gratifies him and hates her when she frustrates him. How he deals with his ambivalence, his love-hate for the same person, and his sense of evil and goodness in himself will play an important role in determining the roles of love and hate in his later life. There will be little need for hatred if he has been helped to develop an integrated view of himself with sufficient confidence in the good aspects of himself to be able to have a constructive orientation to his own
shortcomings. Such a perspective enables one to love others in their full reality, with awareness of their weaknesses as well as their strengths. Of course, this is a matter of degree. Object-relations theorists assume that, even under the most favorable circumstances, integration is never so perfect that temporary (or even more enduring) disintegration or splitting can not be induced by adverse circumstances. Presumably, the tendency to resist such disintegration will be a function of the weakness of the integration that has been achieved by the individual in the course of his development, the degree of adversity, and the vulnerability of the individual to the particular types of adversity being experienced.

Unfortunately, many people are raised under conditions which are not conducive to integrated perspectives of self and others. Their harsh circumstances, authoritarian family, or ethnocentric culture predisposes them to continue the active splitting between the good and bad. The consequence is that there is an idealization of those individuals, groups, places, institutions, and values with whom one (or one's groups) are in conflict or potential conflict. Destructive conflict facilitates the projection of parts of the split off bad self or bad other onto those with whom one is in conflict. It does this by turning a conflict into a win-lose struggle in which the interests of the self and other are perceived to be completely opposed. The other becomes an enemy who deserves to lose as well as a threat to the interests of one's self (who deserves to win).

The splitting, with its associated idealization of those identified with the self, and the denigration of those with whom one is in conflict, leads to strong boundaries between the "we" and the "they". Under such circumstances it is easy for the "we-group" to exclude the "they" from their moral community: to perceive the "they" as not entitled to the moral and justice considerations to which the other members of one's community are entitled. Excluding the "they" from one's moral community permits one to consider oneself to be a moral person even as one engages in what would normally be considered depraved actions.

Several social conditions appear to be particularly conducive to the development or intensification of hatred and alienating emotions which permit otherwise non-violent members of a society to dehumanize and kill victims (Gurr, 1970; Staub, 1989). First of all, there is an emergence of or increase in difficult life conditions with a corresponding increase in the
sense of relative deprivation. This may happen as a result of defeat in war, economic depression, or even physical calamity. Second, there is an unstable political regime whose power may be under challenge. Scapegoating may be employed by those in power as a means of deflecting criticism and of attacking potential dissidents. Third, the social institutions are authoritarian; nonconformity and open dissent against violence sanctioned by authority is inhibited. Fourth, there is a claim for superiority -- national, racial, gender, cultural, religious, etc. -- which justifies treating the other as having inferior moral status. Fifth, violence is culturally salient and sanctioned as a result of past wars, the attention in the media, or the availability of weapons. Sixth, there is little sense of human relatedness or social bonding with the potential victims because there is little in the way of cooperative, human contact with them. And, finally, there is no active group of observers of the violence, in or outside the society, who are strongly objecting to it and serving as a constant reminder of its injustice and immorality.

To sum up, the excellent papers in this Issue provide a rich understanding of the social and psychological processes which facilitate the moral exclusion and barbaric treatment of other people and groups. I have suggested that the potential for such moral splitting resides within all of us. This potential is most apt to be activated if in the course of one's psychological development one has not successfully integrated one's good and bad images of self and significant others, if present social circumstances are harsh and otherwise conducive to "black-white" thinking, and if one is engaged in a destructive rather than a constructive conflict with the other.
Notes

1. The discussion is presented from a perspective and in a terminology that is meant to be more accessible to the reader of this journal than is the more technical, specialized jargon of object-relations theorists.

2. See Segal (1973) for an excellent presentation of these basic ideas from Melanie Klein (1932).

3. See Deutsch (1985) for a discussion of conditions under which an "economic crunch" may lead to increased solidarity rather than increased alienation.
References


