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*A tale told by an idiot; the “banality” of violence?<sup>1</sup>*

*[...] it is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury signifying nothing.*

Shakespeare, *Macbeth* Act 5 Scene 5

*Un racconto narrato da un idiota; la “banalità” della violenza?*

*[...] è un racconto narrato da un idiota, pieno di grida, strepiti, furori, del tutto privi di significato.*

Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, Act 5 Scene 5

*Abstract*

Violence is commonly thought of as being essentially a matter of behaviour, its psychological consequences incidental or consequential. From this, for example, arises the idea that violence is a matter of impulse or that it is mindless. Here, perhaps counter-intuitively, I will consider the idea that psychological experience is at the heart of violence and that action and behaviour are merely corollaries. From this vertex it is possible to consider how violence manifests not an absence of mind but rather its obliteration, as I will describe, in the face of affective experiences which are felt to be overwhelming.

With good reason clinicians may hold a prejudice in favour of keeping violence firmly out of the consulting room. But by adopting a perspective which understands violence as a kind of *acte manqué*, both concealing and revealing, it becomes possible to understand its manifestations within the consulting room and consider it as it is lived in the therapeutic relationship, moment by moment, within the transference/countertransference relationship, as opposed to taking place “out there”. As a clinician attempting a clinical understanding as opposed to, say, a philosophical or a theological one, I want to consider the “the evil of violence” from an analytic point of view and especially the ways in which “symbolic” elements vie with “diabolic” elements

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in all human beings and how these matters come to be played out in both normal and pathological development. In keeping with Arendt's comment about the "banality of evil" we will consider the banality of violence.

*Keywords:* Pipsychoanalysis, violence, aggression, affect, emotion, infant-development

### *Abstract*

Generalmente s'intende la violenza come un fatto comportamentale, le cui conseguenze psicologiche sono incidentali. Da qui, l'idea che la violenza ha a che fare con l'impulso o che sia irragionevole. Qui, contro intuitivamente, io voglio considerare l'idea che l'esperienza psicologica è al cuore della violenza e che l'azione e il comportamento ne sono il corollario. Da questo vertice è possibile considerare le manifestazioni di violenza non come un'assenza di pensiero, quanto piuttosto come allontanamento e radicale cancellazione di un'esperienza affettiva che rischia di sopraffare.

Con buone ragioni i clinici hanno un pregiudizio nel tenere la violenza fuori del gabinetto di consultazione. Tuttavia nel considerare la violenza una sorta di atto mancato, che nasconde e rivela, diviene possibile comprendere le sue manifestazioni nella stanza di consultazione e considerare come è viva nella relazione terapeutica, momento dopo momento, nella relazione transferale e controtransferale, in opposizione all'aver luogo "fuori da lì". Quale clinico che cerca di comprendere le ragioni cliniche, in opposizione a una visione teologica o filosofica, voglio considerare il "demone della violenza" da un punto di vista analitico, e in particolar modo come gli elementi simbolici del "diabolico" entrano nella vita umana influenzando i comportamenti normali e patologici. Nel parafrasare la «banalità del male» di Hannah Arendt, io parlerei della banalità della violenza.

*Parole chiave:* psicoanalisi, violenza, aggressione, affetto, emozione, sviluppo infantile

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Introduction

Without doubt violence is a complex matter that includes cultural and social factors as well as context so I must begin by apologising and admitting to the limitations of my approach because here I am going to concentrate on the psychological dimension of violence and especially understandings that may be provided by a broadly psychoanalytic perspective on this. Having said this I also want to propose that this perspective has particular value, not least in the ways in which it privileges and systematically explores subjective experience and provide a counterpoint to those understandings of violence, which conceptualise violence primarily in terms of behaviour.

In this essay I want to provide an alternative view of violence which understands violent behaviour as an effect of what is essentially a psychological phenomenon. Whilst it may be the behavioural aspects of violence that command most attention I want to propose that these external world phenomena can be best understood as the manifestation of an internal world phenomenon. I want in particular to explore the nature of affect and that way that emotions are capable of, in the analytic idiom, *integration*; alternatively, in the context of failures of early mediation and attunement of affect by primary carers, *disintegration*. If an ordinary part of each human's affective repertoire consists of what may be characterised as *aggression* and capable of integration we may then understand *violence* as a disintegrated - say defensively dissociated or split off and projected - pathological variant of aggression. With this in mind I want to explore the importance of understanding the differences between aggression and violence and how they are linked.

An important part of my thesis rests upon the nature of affect and emotion and relevant to my subject here, how complex manifestations of the basic command and motivational neurological "affect" systems give rise to "aggressive" phenomena and these include reflexive, automatic, behaviours as well as hedonically toned subjective 'feeling' experiences. In the latter case, during infancy, emotional-feelings are evoked by contact with particular objects; at first these emotional-feelings (along with sensation-feelings) lack psychological representation but over time, within the context of relationships with carers, they may become so or alternatively, in the absence of adequate containment and

mediation, they remain unintegrated or may become defensively encapsulated within states of disintegration. It is in this circumstance, I contend, that the phenomenon of violence arises.

To begin with, however, I want to consider affect and emotional-feeling. In recent years there has been renewed interest in these amongst neuroscientists and elsewhere and this begun to displace cognition which has dominated psychology, arguably since the Enlightenment. With the aid of imaging technologies is beginning to be possible to observe some of the neurological substrates of emotion and feeling in real time and to more adequately develop a science of subjectivity, something that Freud attempted in the 1890s but abandoned lacking the tools to do so.

Assumptions about the primacy of cognition have begun to be questioned and the centrality of affect as discrete brain/mind qualities has begun to be re-established, for example in LeDoux's idea of the «Emotional Brain» (LeDoux, 1998; Damasio, 1999; Panksepp, 1998) and as new kinds of technology such as PET scanning have begun to make it possible to cross reference subjective experience and objective brain processes this opens up the possibility of better understandings and reassessment of the relationship between affect and cognition.

### *The nature and importance of affect*

#### *(i) Cognition and affect*

Discreet “emotions” or “feelings” tend – with exceptions – to be treated as though they are obvious, self-evident, existential, givens. I want to challenge this.

So at this point I want to briefly explore the idea that what we commonly think in terms of “givens” are not. My experience is that amongst analysts, for example, but also amongst artists, philosophers and theologians too, there is quite a wide variety of mostly implicit, assumptions about what these discreet emotional-feelings are. Often there is a relatively simple assumption that human beings are endowed with a kind of painter's palette of “basic” emotions, such as love, hate, fear, anger or jealousy, envy and so on; one might think for example of the “seven deadly sins” or “the virtues” as examples of these; emotions with consistent characteristics, existing in varying amounts and

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deployed in different ways in each individual. Infant and adult development may be then seen as a matter of concerning how each emotion finds its place in the individual's conscious experience. Ideally these might be taken responsibility for ethically, or alternatively not and unconscious because of repression or dissociation.

Instead I want to sketch out a rather different picture, one that gives a much more central role to affect and emotional-feeling in the generation of a Self, in the sense of a dynamic core-self with both somatic and mental qualities having conscious and unconscious aspects; a self too, in the sense of having moment by moment subjective experiences (consciousness), which in some circumstances may also be reflected on objectively (self-conscious reflectiveness).

What then do we mean by “affects” and what for example is their relation to emotional-feeling? How far, for example, do they include hedonically toned subjective experiences or are merely or essentially behavioural “approach or withdrawal” responses which are reflexive in character and may lack any subjective “feel” to them? Quite clearly there *are* automatic patterns of behaviour which are activated by stimuli originating in the environment and lack a concomitant, subjective hedonic experiential dimension. But there is disagreement as to how far non-human animals or which non-human animals are capable of subjective experiences of a pleasurable or unpleasurable kind as opposed to operating on a “robotic” basis devoid of subjective experience. I have in mind here subjective experience that is about consciousness that includes a subjective “feel” to it; when it comes to any kind of self-conscious feeling (not just being conscious of feeling but *knowing* that we are conscious of this) the existence of this capacity appears to be dependent upon the possession of Von Enconomo neurons (VENS) and this is limited to mankind, some cetaceans, some of the great apes and elephants, all of whom pass the mirror test – recognition of a mirrored reflection as one's own (Craig, 2009).

(ii) *The functions of affects*

When we turn to the function of affects there is consensus that they are an evolutionary development which links behaviour to the body systems that maintain body homeostasis within relatively narrow limits, which is achieved by responding to changes in both the internal and the external milieu. (Panksepp, 1998; Damasio, 1999; 2003; Panksepp & Watt, 2003; Panksepp, 2004). Affects embody particular values and function in living

organisms in ways that serve to create and preserve the conditions necessary for an organism's internal body homeostasis; the way in which a particular organism may be drawn towards or retreat from particular objects in the environment for example. In a simple way that might perhaps lack qualities that might truly be thought of as affective; one might think here about the movements of nematode worms away from objects which fall into the category "threat" or towards those objects which constitute "food". Such "attraction" and "aversion" phenomena are not confined to organic objects (and of course ultimately have chemical reactions at their core), but living organisms display increasingly complex and flexible responses to environmental stimuli, the more complicated they are, biologically speaking. The capacity for complexity and flexibility in an organism's interaction with its environment increases broadly in proportion to the complexity of the animal's nervous system apparatus (for example its elaboration into a brain, or the size or complexity of a brain structures).

In human beings and the "higher" animals the body systems that control blood pressure, temperature, blood sugars and so on depend upon affective systems in order to allow organisms to "judge" their environment and evaluate objects within it for their potential for enhancing or maintaining homeostasis or alternatively determining what might be a threat to this. Affects embody particular values. Those originating in parts of the brain, that are older in evolutionary terms are fixed whilst those which involve the cortical areas are plastic and may be amenable to variation, for example learning from experience. Such emotional systems are not merely reflexive or may have appetitive or aversive hedonic feeling qualities, which, as noted, for example, mediate approach and withdrawal patterns of behaviour.

Objects in the external world which possess the quality of eliciting an affective response, which have been called by Damasio, Emotionally Competent Stimuli (ECS) (Damasio, 1999), create in an organism, "a temporary change in the state of the body proper, and in the state of brain structures that map the body and support thinking" (p. 53). In this way affects are closely correlated with body states but rather than being a direct effect of body states, in the way that James and Lange postulated, relate to the neurological *mapping* of body states (Damasio, 1999). In human beings this mapping produces the necessary, though not sufficient, conditions required for the capacity for self-reflective, self-consciousness. This is because mapping takes place at several brain levels simultaneously and a self arises as primary level maps of the bodily changes that take place when the

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organism comes into contact with an object (ECS) are also mapped at a secondary level and this creates a simultaneous non-verbal account of the organism's interaction with the object and how it is affected by this. In the process

the swift second-order non verbal account narrates a story: *that of the organism caught in the act of representing its own changing state as it goes about representing something else [...]* the knowable entity of the catcher has been created in the narrative of the catching process [author's italics, Damasio, 1999, 170].

In this way a core-self arises in that the brain maps thus created have the quality of being images which, stored as memories, on retrieval – re-membered – come to be treated in experience as “external” objects, themselves capable of evoking affect (ECSs).

(iii) *Types of affect*

In understanding a little bit more about the nature of affects we may also come to understand more about their intrinsic qualities. So affects may be what Stern describes as “category” affects; feelings such as “rage”, “fear”, “sexual” and so on or as “vitality” affects, for example “rushing” or “explosive” linked much more to the ways in which category affects are experienced (Stern, 1985).

One problem of categorising affects in this way has been that because they have tended to be taken at face value they also tend to be conceptualised as part of an innate repertoire of “basic” emotions/feelings possessing implicit qualities involving generating particular kinds of subject experience.

Recent research paints a different picture. Panksepp's work suggests that there are seven affective brain systems, which are involved in: «i) seeking resources ii) becoming angry if access to resources are thwarted iii) becoming scared if one's bodily well-being is threatened iv) various sexual desires that are somewhat different in males and females v) urges to exhibit loving and attentive care to one's off-spring vi) feelings of panic and distress when one has lost contact with one's loved ones, and vii) the boisterous joyousness of rough and tumble playfulness» (Panksepp, 2004).

These should not be understood as necessarily involving the capacity for generating particular sorts of emotional “feels”; in some animals they probably generate *only* stock, reflexive action patterns but perhaps also allow action patterns, which are learned. All animals including humans, have this capacity and affective systems operate predominantly, at this level. Elsewhere, however, they may afford a subjective “feel”, but *without* any objective sense of that subjectivity; a world filled only with subjective feeling-toned experience - of organisms, including human infants almost exclusively immersed in their own subjectivity. We can think about this as a kind of hierarchy of affective effect. Particular kinds of affect are capable of combination in a potentially infinite number of ways within the parameters that they provide.

I am concerned here that I may have created an erroneous impression with my reference to Panksepp’s seven basic command and motivational affective systems that suggests I am implying the existence of discrete emotional forms only awaiting expression or, perhaps in a more developmental sense, realization. This is not the case. If an affect generates a feeling tone at the level of awareness, let alone, self-consciousness, they have already been subject to a very great deal of processing and development in terms of the forms in which they reach expression or realization, mostly as a consequence of the ways that they interact with the objects in their environment, and in “higher”, social animals, especially in relation their primary carers. I will return to the significance of this care shortly but Garfield and Lane (2005), for example, describe emotional (subjective) experience in terms of,

five levels of emotional awareness in ascending order ... awareness of physical sensations, action tendencies, single emotions, blends of emotions, and blends of blends of emotional experience (the capacity to appreciate complexity in the experiences of self and other [Garfield & Lane, 2005, p. 9]).

We might link this to what I have previously described; affects interact with other affective systems to give rise to affectively imbued images in memory, which have an “objective” quality characterising particular sorts of object relations, in the process also acquiring cognitive qualities.

So as an example of how this might get played out during development we might consider how, in the young of mammals including human beings, awareness of protracted separation from a primary object upon which it is dependant for survival,



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gives rise to “Primitive Distress Vocalisation” – distress calls; in some animals it may be that this has purely a signalling function without any affective “feel”. But clearly in some animals including humans a “feel” is generated. During development this basic affective “feel” comes to be subject to modification as a consequence of combination with other affective elements - and we may think here about the difference between an animal for whom the biopsychological distress goes on for a long time without this being relieved by being responded to by its carer and compare this with one who has been relieved by such a response along with the manner and nature of that response. The combination of affects and their cognization may be seen to lead to the development of “social affects” such as “separation anxiety”, shame and guilt and in pathology depression. In this way what we may think about as “basic” kinds of affects may be understood as affect blend or affect/cognition amalgams albeit functioning as affects rather than as cognitions. Such developments are of course critically dependent upon the processes of socialisation, patterns of attachment and to the cultural milieu for their form as mental representations.

*The importance of aggression*

I hope at this point to be forgiven for taking so long to consider the nature and function of affect, emotion and feeling; the question “How is this directly relevant to the question of violence?” might be legitimately asked? But before I go on to directly address this I need to first give particular attention to a particular kind of affective quality, namely *aggression*. I want to propose here that in order to understand violence we first have to differentiate it from aggression and understand the relation between these.

Drawing on affective-neuroscientific and developmental research a picture emerges which suggests that what we aggregate under the rubric of “aggression” is more diverse and complicated than at first seems to be the case. If on the one hand it consists of disparate neurological systems which give rise to similar phenomena, on the other hand it indicates the ways in which single systems give rise to differing phenomena. So an instance of physical attack behaviour by one animal on another might be the result of a number of different possibilities; a fight to preserve a territory, a fight to avoid predation; an attack in order to kill and eat a prey animal. Behaviourally each of these instances may seem quite similar but involve different affective systems and indeed the

qualities of the hedonic one might be quite different. So a behaviour might be underlain by a subjective feel of “hot affective attack”. Or with a predatory animal attacking its prey the affective subjective feel may be of “quiet biting” attack and lacking any “hot” affective element. This picture might be subject to change, however, if a prey animal injures or causes pain to the predator in the course of the predatory attack, so that the affective tone changes from “quiet biting attack” into a “hot affective attack” (Panksepp & Watt, 2003).

Alternatively a single affective system might be responsible for situations which have important differences; an example here is the way that the so-called “inter-male aggression” system, which is governed by testosterone, which give rise to fighting for territory and opportunities for mating amongst males, in females is responsible for invoking aggressive behaviours in defence of their off-spring (Panksepp & Watt, 2003).

From this perspective perhaps it proves to be the case that aggression, or as it turns out more strictly speaking the *aggressions* (quiet biting attack – predatory aggression – cold aggression, affective attack, hot aggression, etc.), describes or may involve different kinds of affective elements and may include different kinds of emotional-feelings which have a number of functions including mediating distance and difference in relation to an object and related to this forming judgements as to what may be internalised and what may be rejected; what is to be protected or defended or what is to be attacked and driven away and so on. In human infant development the interplay of these affective elements can be seen both interpersonally, as important in the establishment of object attachment, and intra-psychically in defining internal objects and the differentiation of “I, “not-I” objects.

In this way aggression is a normal and indeed essential part of the affective repertoire of human beings. But it is not monolithic and the concept of aggression both represents and is dependent upon a number of affective sources and similarities in behavioural expression may obscure the extent to which there may be diverse origins as well as diverse significance and that this may be obscure.

Critically, however, human infants whilst endowed with a range of affective potentials/capacities are dependent upon the cultural milieu in which they develop and grow for these affective potentials to be realised, given form and expression in the increasingly complex social context of their lives. This is true for the micro-culture of the original relationship between the primary carers, initially mother (probably commencing in utero)

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(Piontelli, 1992) afterwards the expanding into the family and then societal culture in which the individual lives.

If these aggressive affective potentials exist at a very basic psychosomatic level then their realization is dependent upon the ways in which the carers are able to mediate these aggressive potentials. To take a simple example:

An infant being fed in her “highchair” by her mother is old enough to have gained some mastery over the control over her limbs. Mother is attempting to spoon feed her but the little girl seems reluctant to accept this seemingly wanting instead to feed herself. She refuses to accept the food-laden spoon into her mouth pushing away mother’s hand but reaching for the spoon. Mother is in a hurry and wants to finish the feeding so that she can go out. Finally the little girl sweeps the dish containing the food off the highchair’s tray and onto the floor.

It may be apparent that this early situation is already a very complicated emotionally with the potential for a myriad of developments. It contains the possibility of all sorts of responses by both mother and infant; even in the little girl this is already very complex. Prominent amongst the affective elements are aggressive elements although it may also be seen how far their expression is contingent upon other affective elements. So the mother may experience the girl’s aggression as self-assertion and self-agency or alternatively as an attack up the mother. This may be merely a matter of interpretation by the mother and that either construction is equally valid. The way in which individuals are able to represent their experience for themselves is not derived or implicit, but is created and indeed co-created within the relationship between subject and object and this is the basis of culture whether this is the culture that exists between a mother and her infant or with a wider social group. This is important for the subject of aggression because the ways in which this is mediated and given expression will be dependent upon the mores into which an individual is born or enters.

*Violence as pathological sub-category of aggression*

I have described the ways in which aggression is an affective capacity, essential for the optimal existence of an animal and that this comes to be realized at various biopsychological levels; that at higher levels this may have a subjective emotional–feel to it which has characteristic but also has individual and idiosyncratic qualities arising

out of the way experience, mediated originally by primary carers, bears upon innate potentials. Out of this, in humans and probably in some other animals, develops a subjective sense of self and in a rather smaller group of animals but still limited intrapsychically in humans, a self-conscious sense of self.

Ideally we might think about the way that aggressive emotional-feeling, along with other emotional-feelings given meaning in a social context gives rise to a relatively coherent sense of self which is felt to be congruent in terms of the relationship between that which is felt to be 'internal' and that which is felt to be external, iso in relation to its environment, including a social world and which enables an individual to negotiate the inevitable conflicts that arise intrapsychically and interpersonally.

It is important that Analytic ideas include a working model of what we might all ordinary or 'normal' development but inevitably it is also intimately concerned with the ways in which this may not happen. Rather than processes of "integration" and individuation, it is concerned with failures of integration and of disintegration, dissociation and fragmentation. Viewed from this perspective it is possible to then think of violence as an expression of a failure to integrate or differentiate affect and especially emotional-feeling. Principally this is about aggressive feeling but as I will go on to describe, it may be more complicated than this.

We might think here about the way that it is common to hear violence referred to as "mindless"; elsewhere for violence to be understood to involve the lack or loss of aspects of a psychological sense of self. I think that although there may be ways in which this is true this is only in a very specific and I would contend misleading sense. It may be more accurate to say that violence involves, not an absence of mind, but rather an attempt to ablate the mind or at least part of a mind where an individual struggles, in the face of affective experiences that he or she is unable to manage, to divest him or herself of important qualities of mind by way of self-protection.

Analytic ideas about violence and aggression are important because they consider intrinsic mental qualities and implicit meaning as an alternative to those ways of thinking which seem to assume, for example, that violence may be adequately defined and described merely in terms of types of behaviour or as only a quantitative excess or "inappropriate" manifestation of aggression. Many theories and models of violence have very little that is psychological within them. Psychological theories, by which I mean theories assuming a significant place for mentation and mental experience,

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inevitably draw upon behavioural phenomena as a source of data. The risk, however, is that descriptions of behaviour may not be much help understanding psychological processes because of the way that disparate underlying processes may lead to similar kinds of behaviour and similar kinds of underlying processes may be expressed in varied ways. When it comes to violence this is a particular problem because my argument here is that whilst aggression may be basic and lacking in a self-conscious “feel” to it, violence is not basic. It concerns the capacity for relatively highly developed psychological experience, but one in which the felt experience fails to be mediated and mentalized (Fonagy et al, 2002) within a “competent” relationship, say an infant with his or her mother. The feeling has been ‘felt’ but in the absence of necessary containment and mediation, the feeling is felt to be unbearable and must be ablated.

I will return to this in a moment but as an aside here we might reflect upon the way that an animal’s attack on another may commonly be referred to as “aggressive”; it would be less common for “violent” to be used and if it is, implicitly it is likely to be understood that this use is descriptive and analogous rather than implying motivation; intuitively we understand that “violent”, implies motivation that applied to animals is likely to be anthropomorphic.

Returning to humans we might take an obvious converse example here, which indicates that it is intuitively understood that human violence involves a relatively well developed idea of mind in the way that that motivational element is considered to be important. Consistent with this is the way that there is fairly widespread agreement that sexual offences are essentially violent and it is true that threats or coercion are often employed in the course of a sexual assault. But it may also be the case that little or no physical force is actually used; in strictly behavioural terms it is possible that a violent act may be indistinguishable from a consensual equivalent. It is the *emotional* tone that endows the act with its quality of violence. To give another example, in English law the *threat* to strike somebody constitutes an offence of assault as much as an actual blow. Again it is the emotional tone of the interaction that endows it with the quality of violence.

Without an unambiguous understanding of a particular act’s emotional meaning the significance of the behaviour remains obscure. It is also capable of misinterpretation or distortion in order to avoid its psychological, social or legal consequences. So consent is central in determining whether or not a given act of body penetration is rape, or in a

medico-legal arena, what in one context might be treatment, in another is assault.

Emphasis upon violence as behaviour defines violence as a physical act and whatever the superficial attractions of this, the concept of violence may in this way become divorced from any consideration of underlying psychological states. Without this we must set aside the possibility of non-violent acts of aggression, which whilst behaviourally similar or even identical to violent acts of aggression, have a very different meaning. Perhaps importantly too, a behavioural definition disallows the possibility of violence confined to the mental sphere. This latter is of particular importance clinically and especially when we come to consider the origins of violence in the mental states of the perpetrators of violence. I hope to show that what the perpetrator imagines, mostly unconsciously, to be the mental state of the recipient is an essential and overlooked aspect of violence compared to other aggressive phenomena.

*Violence as evacuation of unmediated aggression; the emptiness and banality of violence*

If definitions of violence that limit themselves or privilege behaviour obscure questions of meaning and motivation how are these matters to be elucidated if we think that it is important to take these into account? One possibility is to consider more carefully subjective experience and in particular try to differentiate the emotional-feeling qualities of aggressive phenomena in order to tease out those, which are peculiar to violence.

We might start here with Freud's now somewhat debased phrase "acting-out" (Freud, 1914) which has passed into everyday speech. By this phrase he had in mind, in his original formulation, the way in which unacceptable thoughts, ideas and feeling are repressed but in consequence, rather than being given direct expression, instead manifested obliquely, as dream images, symptoms, body sensations or alternatively are enacted.

This idea was developed by Bion (1989), who, drawing upon Keats' concept of "negative capability", proposed a mode of psychological defence by which action becomes a substitute for a (a painfully affectively toned) thought. By this means an action may become

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something which...is thought, even though it is thought apparently instantaneously transformed into action, or to reverse Keats's formulation of negative capability "action which is used as a substitute for thought and not thought which is a prelude to action" [Bion, 1989].

In context, it is clear that when Keats refers to "thought", like Bion, this includes the experience of emotional-feeling. From this perspective violence may be understood as a type of action which fulfils the function of eliminating mental contents – feelings - which are felt to be unacceptable or too painful to bear; I will turn in a moment to the nature of the contents being eliminated but this understanding means that it is possible that phenomena not usually thought of as action, such as speech and some kinds of mental activity for example obsessional rumination may be used for purposes of psychological evacuation – the ablation of feeling – rather than their expression. In this sense they have the essential quality of "action" or of "doing" and are intended to evacuate mental experience rather than give mental representation to mental contents. It is perhaps in this sense that the idea of "mindlessness" arises, not because this is an expression of a body driven automatic behavioural pattern, devoid of mind, but because of the extent to which the action is intended to divest the actor of an embodied affective experience, which is felt to be unbearable. This sort of "mindless" action is characterised by the operation of psychological splitting and projection mechanisms particularly projective identification, which have the aim of getting rid of unwanted affective experiences in both unconscious phantasy and conscious subjective experience.

If violence has the function of removing from a mind, affective experiences felt to be unbearable, by means of splitting and projection it then become possible to understand something about the parts of the mind which are being evacuated. Donald Meltzer proposed a concept of violence as violation (Meltzer,1986) that includes the subjective experience of "violation" as a central component part. It includes an implication of intrusion, which may be either emotional or physical but does not distinguish between these. Important here is the recognition that violent action is resorted to in those situations in which an individual lacks the necessary capacity to manage their affective experience in a way that allows them to give mental representation to this. Instead the tendency to fail to differentiate between emotional and physical experiences, which are instead experienced as though they are concrete intrusions by alien, non-ego, non-self elements. From a slightly different angle Fonagy's concept of mentalization illuminates the ways in

which patients prone to violent action lack the capacity to “mentalize”, that is mentally represent their affective experiences, (Fonagy & Target, 1999) which are experienced instead as either pleasurable or unpleasurable body states. As a result such patients may be unable to think about or evaluate their affective experience but become instead driven by their body-states; on the one hand this involves the unreflected-upon pursuit of pleasurable body states, whatever the long term consequence of this might be, and on the other the avoidance of unpleasurable body states, whatever the consequences of that might be (giving rise to the rather misleading idea of “impulsiveness”).

In the absence of a more sophisticated capacity for representing emotional-feeling experience and for this to become the basis of relating to other people, excessive resort to evacuatory projective identification becomes the means by which the infant (and later the adult) is able to evoke in his or her carers sufficient understanding of his or her affective state to enable the carer to respond in a way that mediates the experience. So an infant communicates her hunger and her anxiety about her hunger to the carer and the carer responds in a way that recognises the hunger and the anxiety that it is generating. Initially the hunger is not experienced as “hunger” only as an unpleasurable body experience; the carer’s response over time, by means of an accurate enough identification with the infant, allows her to derive the meaning of her experience, “I am hungry”, along with the context in which this may be borne, “but mummy will feed me shortly”.

The converse may also be true, however. So in the absence of the carer being able to mediate, attune to and give meaning to the experience, the infant is left with only variations upon body states, which lack a context within which they might be managed. In the absence of the growth of increasingly sophisticated mental structures which allow reflection upon and give meaning to (contextualise) experience, projective identification becomes a way not of communicating experience in the expectation of this being met, but instead a way of emptying into the other experiences that cannot be borne. It is then the means by which the infant divests him or herself of the experience by way of psychological defence typically by resorting to increasingly aggressive splitting processes or dissociation. Rather than the affect being evoked in the other as a means of communication – “This is how I feel” the evocation instead has the quality of “I don’t feel this, you feel it”.



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*Implications in practice*

What becomes fixed also are the paranoid, because projectively identified, elements; the aggression is projected and the sense of loss of the containing and mediating carer (either as an internal or an external object) is denied. Although my essay here is not meant to be a clinical one something which I have been addressing has implications for both analysts working clinically as well as in the world beyond which concerns the implicit assumptions that inform the concepts that in turn inform the work that analysts and therapists are trying to do.

For this reason a clinical example might help to illustrate both the way in which the affective element is held in projection and the way it has failed to be given mental representation.

A previously withdrawn and socially isolated woman was admitted to a mental hospital having hit the man and woman who lived next door to her. The reason she gave for the assault was that they were sending “electrical waves” through her bedroom wall in order to interfere with her body. Talking to her it became clear that what had happened was that she had heard the couple having sexual intercourse through the party wall between their houses. The woman’s description of her body sensations seemed to indicate that she had become sexually excited. She had, however experienced her own sexual excitement as both alien and a violation - an assault- to which she had responded “in kind”.

My vignette is intended to convey the way in which violence is not mindless, but that the user of violence is somebody who knows something about having a mind but wants to get rid of it into and locate it instead in somebody else. They so not want to have a mind, filled with unbearable feeling, which unmediated takes on a violating quality. They do not want to “mind” it is the other who must “mind”; the mind that they have is too painful to bear and must be located in another either in the hope that it might here find containment, either in the hope of understanding and transformation or more destructively and tragically to merely pass the feelings of violation and helplessness into another, usually weaker, object: the woman; the child; the outsider; the despised Other. One of the discoveries of analytic investigation is the extent to which there is a high degree of correlation between the kind of experience that the perpetrator of violence is trying to evoke in the recipient of the violence and the qualities of the affective

experience that the perpetrator is trying to divest him or herself of. It may be important to note that when we think about the violating qualities of the experience, it may not be the actual qualities of the experience that bestow this, but rather their affectively overwhelming quantity (Carvalho, 2002), in this case the woman's unmediated sexual/jealous feelings are felt to be overwhelming and thus acquire an "attacking" quality to obliterate these.

Is it possible to say something more about the quality of the psychological experience, which is characteristic of violence? I have considered already the important part played by the sense of violation to which violence is a response in the manner of my example, but it may be important to qualify this, in particular what is meant by the word "response". In using this word I do not mean to suggest that violence has its origin in the environment, in any simple sense; that it is simply reactive. This idea has considerable currency, however, with many writers explicitly or implicitly contending that violence is a reaction to something that has, as it were, been done to patients (see de Zulueta, 1993) and this question has been extensively played out in the rather futile, polarized "innate/environment" debate. Nonetheless the strength with which the "reaction" idea is adhered to may have its roots in the fact that subjectively recourse to violence is likely to be experienced as reactive. This may not just be a matter of rationalisation, justification (or hollow self-justification, depending upon your point of view) but be a consequence of the fact that subjectively, unintegrated, unmediated aspects of the Self are likely to be experienced as alien, at least initially, and as it were "coming at one" and felt to have an origin in the environment.

In consequence, it is common for people to describe their violence and their experience of using violence as a *reaction* even in circumstances in which to an outside observer such a contention is absurd. Intellectually the person may (although often they will not) be able to see that such a position is absurd, but this will be in contradiction to their feeling and to their experience, which precipitated the violence. Often the violence is conceived of as an action, which is directed, *as though* it were against an object in the environment.

It may be argued that experience does not accord with my description and that for example, violence and say criminal violence does not operate in this way but is in support of exploitation as in the case of theft or related to questions of status or control. In the absence of detailed research into this question it is difficult to make

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generalisations about this, but in my inevitably limited clinical experience, perhaps surprisingly and somewhat counter-intuitively, the material gain or advantage which appears to be the motivation for a crime, turns out to be secondary and it is the sense of triumph and of having made a fool of or of having “beaten” someone that seems to be much more important in this respect.

I began my essay with a quote from Shakespeare, near the end of his play *Macbeth*, at the point in when the terrible destructive implications of all that has passed before, finally become clear. Finally he has to face the emptiness of his previously lauded aspirations and motivations; the emptiness of his rationalisations and the perverse manner in which the good has become corrupted and replaced by ‘throwing apart’ diabolic as opposed to ‘putting together’ symbolic forces, a process heralded by the witches at the beginning,

“... fair is foul and foul is fair....”

*Macbeth*, Act 1, Scene 2

In psychoanalysis the question of basic motivation has taken a totemic significance. It was an early manifestation of this, which led to the split between Freud and Jung in part pivoting on Freud’s insistence upon the unique role played by sexuality. But by 1920 in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (Freud, 1920) Freud reluctantly modified his views to add an aggressive instinct to the sexual one. Aggression, from this revised perspective, was understood by him to be destructiveness self-directed, only secondarily redirected outwards. This concept “Thanatos”, stands side by side with “Eros” in Psycho-analysis and was significantly elaborated upon by Klein in the development of *her* ideas and which she in turn augmented this with her concept of an “epistemophilic” instinct.

Freud’s “Dual-Instinct theory” is still very influential and widely holds sway, often becoming a duality, frequently polarized and often Manichaeian; it has been expressed by Jung, for example as the tension between an ego and its shadow. It is this duality, which has often been used as a framework for understanding the motivational and command systems manifesting not least as affect and emotional-feeling. Contemporary discoveries throw this duality into question, however, in the way that I have touched upon in this essay, with their more nuanced understanding of a diversity of affective

systems, interacting with each other and the processes of cognization to produce a dynamic unconsciousness, conscious awareness and self-reflective consciousness. This then affords us a perspective in which we can come to understand violence as arising as a consequence of failures to mentalize, represent and integrate emotional-feeling which lacking symbolisation instead become concrete and enacted. This understands violence as having the qualities of an *acte manqué*, which like other unconscious communications simultaneously both accurately reveals but also conceals.

My title also obliquely makes reference to Arendt's comment at the Eichmann trial upon the «*banality of evil*» (Arendt 1963) in my reference to the banality of violence. In my experience of the perpetrators of violence I have been struck by how uninteresting they are as people; for the most part their violence is the most interesting things about them. This may mislead us into thinking that this means that there is nothing unusual about them. But when I say that they are uninteresting I do not mean to convey that I am judging them to be essentially devoid of worth or qualities that give them value as human beings. It is rather that I suspect that their "uninterestingness" is important as countertransference experience and a consequence of the kind of projective, evacuatory processes which have an essentially destructive function –and I use the word destructive in a merely descriptive way here without intending any sort of critical judgement about this – in contrast say to creative or re-creative ways – and again I use this merely descriptively. It is an emptiness that is at the heart of violence an emptiness consequent upon the way in which what gives vitality and meaning has been evacuated out of a tragic fear of engagement with life.

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