A COMMENT ON ADAMS AND BALFOUR: DIGNITY VIOLATIONS, AN ALTERNATIVE VIEW OF ‘ADMINISTRATIVE EVIL’

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The major focus of Adams and Balfour’s article in this volume is on what they call ‘administrative evil’ where ‘evil’ is not intended but somehow inherent in modern ‘technical rationality’. Adams and Balfour draw inspiration from Bauman’s (1989) work and, further, use the interesting metaphor that administrative evil is ‘masked’. This means it is difficult to recognize – unlike intentional evil which is ‘unmasked’, that is, readily recognized. Common to both forms is that ‘evil’ implies ‘depriving of humanity’ or to ‘make someone suffer’, and there is no reason to question this. A basic aim of the article is thus to draw attention to ‘masked evil’, phenomena Adams and Balfour believe are insufficiently attended to. There is a broad variety of problems which Adams and Balfour do not touch on but which more or less appropriately can be subsumed under the label ‘masked evil’. Adams and Balfour mention a continuum according to degree of deliberation on consequences. There are, however, no examples given of acts which do not occur at any extreme of deliberation. A related point is that there are historical and cultural determinants of whether (and to what extent) we regard some forms of suffering as ‘evil’ or not.

I draw attention here to three types of examples which are hard to place at any extreme of deliberation on consequences. Honour killings, the first, may be the most unmasked; corporate crime and, finally, consequences of inequality, seem to me to be the most masked. In response to Adams and Balfour, I discuss how reparations or healing may be carried out for some of the examples, but also indicate how administrative measures of this kind may backfire.

It is ironic that the major examples used to illustrate ‘masked evil’ are fairly spectacular events: for instance, failure to sufficiently attend to the hurricane Katrina; treatment of child survivors after the Holocaust; US incarceration of thousands of innocent Japanese during WWII. I am afraid that concentration on such events may, paradoxically, serve to ‘mask’ everyday humiliations, as well as other effects of inequality.

The three types of examples given above call for a concept to replace (or perhaps supplement) the concept of ‘administrative evil’, and I will suggest the use of the term ‘violation of dignity’ as a superordinate term for all kinds of violence. The final section has some suggestions for dealing with violations of dignity.

HONOUR KILLINGS, ‘ACCEPTABLE RAPE’ AND FEMALE GENITAL MUTILATION

Evelin Lindner (lecture 16/10/2007; see also her website (http://www.humiliationstudies.org)) can draw on an extensive experience as a clinical psychologist in Cairo, and has written of a mother who said to her: ‘My daughter has been raped, the family’s honour has suffered and thus my daughter must be killed’. When a protest against this was raised, the mother said sternly: ‘You do not show any respect for our culture’. Well, honour killings are a part of some cultures. It is a part that cannot be condoned from a liberal Western point of view, but appears to us as ‘evil’.

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This poses a problem for the distinction between administrative, 'masked evil' and the
'unmasked' forms. Adams and Balfour describe 'masked evil' thus:

people can engage in acts of evil without being aware that they are in fact doing any-
thing at all wrong. Indeed, ordinary people may simply be acting appropriately in
their organizational role, in essence just doing what those around them would agree
they should be doing. (p. 10)

From what is known about 'honour killings' – which also take place in some Western
countries – there is little reason to think that the perpetrators were 'aware of doing any-
thing wrong' but, rather, were just 'doing what those around them would agree they
should be doing'. They might say that they were simply repairing or rectifying harm, that
is, a severe violation of family honour. Does it, however, follow that 'honour killings'
should be regarded as 'administrative evil'? Is Adams and Balfour's concept 'moral inver-
sion' an appropriate label for 'honour killings' (where 'perpetrators' label killing an
innocent person as 'good and proper').

The history of rape also shows that whether this is considered to be 'evil' varies
widely both culturally and over time. A prominent example here is the way many
women have been (and to some extent still are) treated in many non-Western societies.
In Tibetan Buddhist cultures, what Westerners would see as rape tends to be seen as
acceptable provided the 'perpetrator' has a clearly higher status than the victim. A good
place to start to think about such issues is the work of Unni Wikan (1996). She recounts
and discusses in detail a story from Bhutan about a woman in a monastery who was
raped, conceived a child, and consequently was expelled while nothing happened to
the perpetrator monk! In Norway, rape in marriage was, until just a few decades ago,
legally inconceivable, the implication being that the husband had unlimited right to
sexual intercourse with his wife.

In terms of female genital mutilation (FGM), the change over time is quite marked. The
fairly recent wide currency of this term in Western countries is in itself a testimony to the
general attitude of condemning such practices. A few decades ago, however, such opera-
tions were performed on girls in Western hospitals. Today the tendency would be to
consider this operation a criminal offence. Can we hope to see the previous day when
this kind of practice will come to be regarded as archaic and unacceptable as we now
regard the practice of foot binding in China?

There is, however, reason to warn against an emphasis on the law which is one-sided.
Arild Aambo (personal communication, 2/12/2007), who has extensive experience in
working with minorities familiar with such practices in Norway, emphasizes that in order
for such a law to have beneficial effects it is necessary that a majority in the relevant
groups accept the law as fair. If not, the making of a practice illegal may serve to further
alienate the group from larger society and the practice will be more likely to go under-
ground rather than to decrease.

CORPORATE CRIME, 'SOFT TARGETS' AND CIVIC RESPONSIBILITY

Corporate crime represents an area where the 'evil' may well be placed somewhere be-
tween masked and unmasked. Instead of insisting on a punishment model, Braithwaite
(2002) strongly argues for restorative and dialogical practices. He makes the interesting
point that those who are mainly responsible for criminal acts may not themselves be the
ones who should instigate reparations. Brickman et al. (1982) make a similar point: those
responsible for the bringing about of bad consequences may not be the ideal candidates
for solving the problems they have created. Being blameworthy in other words does not imply being able or willing to repair harm.

Braithwaite (2002, p. 24) discusses a case where thousands of aborigines were cheated of millions of dollars by an insurance company. After a series of hearings, and restorative justice conferences (RJC), some of the executives of the insurance company were deeply ashamed of the consequences of what their company had done, and instigated substantial pay backs. The ones capable of feeling ashamed are what Braithwaite calls ‘soft targets’. Perhaps we can say that they are only indirectly responsible for the crimes committed but without being culpable in the strictly criminal sense.

Conversely, in general, there will be some who deny any responsibility, ‘hard targets’ as categorized by Braithwaite. They may lack empathy for the victims of their policy. Braithwaite argues, as far as possible, for restorative procedures. He goes on to discuss possible outcomes if criminal procedures were to be emphasized:

At worse, illiterate Aboriginal witnesses would have been humiliated and discredited by uptown lawyers, the case lost. The industry wide extensiveness of a pattern of practices would never have been uncovered: that was only accomplished by the humanitarian engagement of many locally knowledgeable actors. (p. 24)

The incidence of humiliation quoted above mirrors Adams and Balfour’s concern that ‘formal reparation processes can replicate a kind of administrative evil’ (p. 14). Braithwaite as far as possible advocates the shunning of formal proceedings but at the same time recognizes that sometimes restorative practices will not be sufficient. ‘Talk softly, but carry a big stick’ is one of his favourite quotations, but ‘the challenge is to have the Sword of Damocles always threatening in the background but never threatened in the foreground’. This implies treating people as trustworthy and conscientious so that ‘even the worst of people’ will be inclined to put their best self forward (pp. 120–1).

Closely related to the notion of ‘soft targets’ is that of locating people with a strong sense of civic responsibility. Braithwaite calls for ‘discussion with a wide range of actors with preventive responsibility’ since ‘we live in a community wherein many individuals can pull strings of informal control and evoke bonds of responsibility’ (pp. 116–17). This again points to a major advantage of RJC. Such conferences build on and strengthen widespread feelings of responsibility. In cases where, for example, extended family and friends participate in cases of family violence, there will usually be an increased sense of responsibility for safe-guarding victims of violence (for further discussion, see Braithwaite 2002; Tschudi and Reichelt 2004). Adams and Balfour provide a clear picture of the power of restorative justice when dealing with the aftermath of mass violence, and correctly point to the influence of ‘pre-modern and non-bureaucratic models’ in such cases. It seems to me that what they miss, however, is that, in predominantly peaceful societies, restorative justice may also be relevant in a wide variety of cases and with a wide variety of harms.

There is widespread belief in punishment for serious transgressions. Braithwaite, however, emphasizes that there are several situations where threats of punishment will not deter criminal actions but may indeed have the opposite effect. Such threats may give rise to resistance. Indeed, in the case of powerful corporations, the actors may have available a variety of countermeasures. In his work on alleged crimes by pharmaceutical firms, Braithwaite has pointed to the strategy of appointing a vice president whose main task is to go to prison if necessary (Braithwaite 2002, pp. 203–4). Emphasis on punishment will tend to create an adversarial climate, and this will be less likely to produce desired
outcomes than will a dialogic climate – as, for example, in restorative justice. The concept of a ‘regulatory pyramid’, however, implies that if all attempts at dialogue fail it is possible to turn to deterrent strategies. In corporate cases of incurable ill will or incompetence incapacitation, for example, the revoking of the licence to operate may be necessary. This measure occupies the apex of the pyramid, symbolizing the fact that this measure will be used infrequently while the broad base of the pyramid indicates that restorative and dialogic approaches will be those most frequently used.

INEQUALITY AND HUMILIATION

Richard G. Wilkinson has worked for more than 30 years to understand the consequences of inequality, and provides a broad, passionate, in-depth treatment of the relevant research in his 2005 book, appropriately titled *The Impact of Inequality. How to Make Sick Societies Healthier*. He makes the point that, conceptually speaking, he really has no original thesis, but reiterates the slogan launched in the French revolution in 1789: ‘Liberty, equality and fraternity’ [today we must add ‘sisterhood’ to fraternity or, instead, use a neutral term such as ‘social cohesion’]. What is new here is the extensive scientific underpinning of the claim that equality is the major factor of the three.

Wilkinson restricts himself to analysis of developed countries, and argues that to the extent a society is marked by equality, then liberty and social cohesion will follow. His basic measure of inequality is based on distribution of material resources, that is, income. The larger the relative amount of the total national income that is concentrated (say, in the hands of the 10 per cent richest), the larger the inequality. The EU uses an alternative measure of inequality: the percentage of persons with less than half the average income (and Wilkinson points out that alternative measures are generally highly correlated).

A major political message may be read in the fact that ever higher productivity does not lead to an increase in the quality of life. There is now clear evidence that while there has been a tremendous increase in total income over the last 50 years, quality of life has remained remarkably stable. To the extent that higher productivity leads to more inequality, social problems will increase. It is not the absolute amount of income that is important but the relative amount. To give just one telling example: the black population in Harlem in the US has many more resources than the population in Bangladesh; life expectancy and general health, however, is much lower among the black population of Harlem. In general terms, the US is one of the richest countries in the world. It is however fairly low on indices of health (for example, infant mortality and life expectancy), but extremely high on crime, including murder. The Scandinavian countries have a much more equal distribution of resources as well as better health and fewer serious crimes.

Perhaps not everyone is inclined to relate shorter life expectancy to ‘evil’. Wilkinson concedes that if, generally, a shorter life was somehow sweeter and easier for those with shorter rather than longer life expectancy, it would be problematic to equate lower life expectancy with, for example, ‘evil’. However, since the poorest part of any given population will tend to have a much more stressful, and generally unrewarding, life, this is hardly the case here. To fortify the connection between life expectancy and social injustice, Wilkinson poses the following rhetorical question: what would we think of a government which deliberately deprived parts of the population of between five and fifteen years of life? (Ch. 4).

How does economic inequality work and how does it have its effect? The primary reason is not that the poor lack the means necessary for basic sustenance. It is rather the social psychological consequences which matter: inequality leads to social comparison, the need to ‘keep up with the Jones’. This acts to preclude satisfaction with a modest style.
of life and leads to stress and ill health, with an ever-increasing quest for the most recent status symbols. Furthermore, any hierarchy that is pronounced, leads to subservience towards those ‘higher up’ and contempt for those ‘lower down’ the social ladder.

Wilkinson is very clear that humans have two separate and different social strategies: dominance/submission in hierarchical settings; and affiliation in more equal settings. A strong correlation that buttresses this thought is that trust and cooperation are much more pronounced in egalitarian than in hierarchical settings. With hierarchy, distrust and competition reign: in the US, lack of trust goes with an almost obsessive concern with ‘safety’, the safety industry being one of the fastest growing. The more hierarchical the society, the more those at the bottom of the social ladder will tend to feel humiliated, literally ‘looked down upon’. Being treated with respect is a basic human need, and people, especially poor people, and especially males, will be vulnerable to signs of disrespect and turn more readily to violence.

Liberty means not being dominated; not being humiliated. Inequality and the consequent hierarchies of dominance thus deprive persons of freedom and dignity. This view of liberty is greatly expanded by the political philosopher Philip Pettit (1997) who equates liberty with ‘non-domination’. To the extent that someone can dominate you, you are not free. Furthermore, as Wilkinson (2005) makes abundantly clear, equality paves the way for social cohesion, and thus viable social relations.

One should, however, be attuned to the possibility that administrative attempts to bring about greater equality may backfire. An explicit aim of school policy in Norway and Sweden in the last decades has been to bring about greater social equality. A prominent social-democratic belief has been that a strong focus on grades and individual responsibility have served to bolster inequality. Consequently, there has been increased emphasis on group projects. Those with a background from homes with more ‘cultural capital’, seem to be the ones who mainly profit from this, however. Such pupils tend to get the major responsibility for finishing the projects while those from more deprived backgrounds tend to be ‘free riders’. Consequently, this policy may have the opposite of the intended effect: it may serve to increase rather than decrease social inequality.

A similar lesson emerges from Braithwaite and colleagues’ work on punishment and alternatives. Rather than be guided by strong ideological beliefs, then, the effects of various policies should first be carefully studied in order to try to ensure that they promote healthier societies.

**Violation of dignity as a superordinate view of ‘evil’**

Adams and Balfour, quoting Claudia Card (see their References), disengage from any ‘denial of evil’ and deplore a Nietzschean turn, from emphasis on redressing consequences of evil, to ‘what inclines people to make judgments of evil in the first place …’ (p. 5). This may, however, be precisely what might (or perhaps should) have been a central concern (without any implication that the Nietzschean relativism and power fascination should be taken on board).

Both across time and across cultures there are pronounced changes in ‘judgments of evil’. I have drawn attention to different views of rape (forced sex), and FGM, both across cultures and across time. Growing recognition of the rights of women, and less acceptance of killings (military killings are deliberately not discussed here) illustrate what are called, appropriately enough, ‘moving targets’. For there is today a lower threshold for invoking terms of strong disapproval – as for instance ‘evil’ – than in previous times. The same tendency may be seen in Western societies concerning the treatment of children, where
it is now more common to outlaw physical punishment. A related example in the case of adults is the banning of the death penalty in the EU.

The direction of change in the above examples point to a definition of ‘evil’ which can claim universal applicability. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) from 1948 can provide such a starting point, and it is appropriate to quote the Declaration’s first sentence:

All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights.

Thus the prototypical form of evil would be the violation of ‘dignity and rights’. This readily fits with Wilkinson’s view of inequality. Lindner (2006) has provided a general framework for understanding the shifts in ‘judgments of evil’ we have outlined. In her analysis, the long, predominantly agrarian, period in human history was marked by inequality and hierarchic structures, where men dominated women and children, and land owners dominated workers. Preservation of status, of honour, was a dominant value, and might lead to the draconic step of ‘honour killings’, as discussed above. Underlings were supposed to stay content with their humble place, and Lindner distinguishes between ‘honour culture’ – marked by inequality and humiliation – and ‘dignity culture’, marked by equality.

The industrial revolution brought a gradual change. Interestingly, Lindner points out that at the end of the 18th century, ‘humiliation’ took on its present core meaning of ‘putting down’, and she sees humiliation as equivalent to violation of dignity, or domination. Thus dignity is equivalent to nondomination (for further discussion, see Tschudi 2008).

The notion of ‘moving target’ also implies that as ‘human rights’ (see also UDHR 1948), become better known and respected, treating others in undignified ways is less likely to be regarded with equanimity. In most Western societies, ordinary workers are no longer expected to accept any whim of the owners. Put another way, being dominated is, in many cultures, today more likely to be experienced as humiliation than was the case previously, something that might be considered a major source of conflict.

On the necessity of a protective state and civic responsibility

Looking back, does the 20th century mark a new height in bloodiness? Pinker (2002) collates all current evidence on relative numbers of people killed in pre-state tribal wars, and finds that in relative terms that century was relatively rather peaceful. Adams and Balfour give a brief nod to Pinker but still insist that the 20th century was one of the bloodiest both in absolute and relative terms (p. 5). It might be useful here to take a look at the strong emotions evoked in academic quarters by a prime example: the high killing rate in a pre-state tribe, the Yanomamo in the Amazon. Pinker describes how those who first reported this were violently attacked, to the point of themselves being held responsible for genocide. The story is further reported and discussed in great detail by Borofsky (2005) in The Yanomamo: The Fierce Controversy and What Can Be Learned From It.

The work of Pinker and Borofsky might well be supplemented by Diamond’s (1998) description of life among pre-state tribes in New Guinea, tribes he has studied extensively, and to whom he dedicates his book. Nevertheless, he says: ‘... extensive long-term information about band and tribal societies reveals ... that murder is a leading cause of death’ (p. 277). One way to interpret this is that what to us is a horrible crime might for these tribes simply be a fact of life. Diamond does not imply anything even remotely resembling the old colonial diatribes about ‘the savagery of the primitive’. Diamond’s description in no way implies that some New Guinean tribes were ‘evil’, but they might
have had quite different emphasis from us on what constitutes heavy ‘evil’. Fredrik Barth, who as an anthropologist has extensive experience in living with tribes in New Guinea, and is well acquainted with Diamond’s work, supports the general picture he gives (personal communication, 23/10/2007).

I take the above as strong support for the necessity of a protective state. This is in line with Pettit’s view that a primary aim of the state is to protect the citizens from domination. It might well be – as Wilkinson emphasizes – that relations within pre-agricultural tribes were marked by equality and cooperation, but we must add that there was also the danger of war with neighbouring tribes. As Wilkinson makes abundantly clear, however, there is wide scope for better governance in our modern states. He emphasizes especially the importance of wider employee ownership of corporations, and hopes for a tax policy which will increase the possibilities for such changes. While in some cases 15–20 per cent employee ownership is increasing, few corporations have more than 50 per cent employee ownership. With such majority the influence of shareholders would drastically decrease and thus purely financial considerations (such as shutting down some plants) would have less influence. The major point here is the consequences in social terms of such redistribution of economic power:

It transforms the status of employers. They cease to be simply means or tools to fulfill other people’s purposes … they become people who work cooperatively, as part of a politically equal and democratically controlled community. As such, work has the possibility of becoming an expression of social purpose rather than a demeaning subordination to the will of an unelected unaccountable employer. (Wilkinson 2005, p. 308)

This fits in nicely with Pettit’s view of ‘freedom as nondomination’: employee ownership will increase freedom for the employees. We should, however, not only consider ‘shareholders’ but also the wider concept ‘stakeholders’; see Hutton (1995). I like to think that society at large grants a licence to a given company, and passes laws regulating the company (minimum wages, restrictions on unwarranted dismissals, protection of whistleblowers, and so on). If a company repeatedly violates such laws, and every attempt to make it change its ways fails, this licence should be revoked.

There is also a place for individual actions to fight violations of dignity. Unni Wikan (personal communication, 18/8/2007) was asked to find out why girls lagged behind in schools in Bhutan. With some trepidation, she told a group of leading politicians that the data she had collected showed that this was related to sexual discrimination. In all probability, statistical data only would not have carried the day, but when she supplemented this with a vivid retelling of women’s stories, this made male leaders reconsider the undignified treatment of women in the educational system. Another example which makes violations of dignity visible is Rosa Parks’ refusal to acknowledge the racial discriminatory practices in the Memphis bus service in 1955 when she remained seated. The Norwegian Nobel Peace Prize committee was not attuned to the importance of making such an assault on dignity visible. They really should have given her the Nobel peace prize together with Martin Luther King.

I think strong action against violations of dignity are easier for persons embedded in a supportive social network. Unni Wikan has the advantage of a scientific support community; Rosa Parks was trained in non-violent peace action. We should, however, be aware that unhealthy winds are blowing; after the demise of state ownership in the communist countries: ‘The Unites States lost its liking for equality: people came to assume
equality involved a sacrifice of freedom' (Wilkinson 2005, p. 310). This should serve to underline the scientific responsibility to make more or less ignored forms of domination and thus loss of freedom, visible, and furthermore to suggest ameliorative action.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

It seems to me that Adams and Balfour's examples of 'evil' can also be positioned under 'violations of dignity'. There is, however, a difference in time perspective. As implied by their title – 'Explaining Evil' – Adams and Balfour look at events that caused suffering in the past. In addition, they are concerned with barriers – and also prospects – for reparation of harm in the present. I try to describe specific forms of suffering and humiliation, and to draw attention to some ways of abolishing such happenings in the future. Rosa Parks was concerned that neither she nor her black sisters and brothers should continue to suffer humiliation – here, in public transportation. Unni Wikan was concerned that sexual domination of girls in Bhutan should be curbed. Wilkinson describes the extent to which hierarchical structures lead to reduced quality of life, and the challenges this poses for healthier policies. Networks which combine research and practice are important, and my own comment would not have been possible without general inspiration from Transcend International (1993).

For all the examples, suffering should be seen in relation to broader cultural patterns, and this should serve to curb enthusiasm for quick fixes. As discussed above, merely passing laws against FGM, for example, is not likely to work. Dialogues are important. It is necessary to work together with local people, celebrate local successes, and aim at gradual cultural changes. In principle, a similar strategy can be used in Western countries: for example, as Wilkinson does, to point to local successes with employee ownership.

The distinction between giving attention to past events and concentrating on the future should not be seen as an 'either/or' question. Both perspectives are necessary and I hope that this interchange will give rise to further perspectives on to what extent we can relieve suffering, and what we just have to accept. A similarity between Adams and Balfour's article and this response is to search for what they call 'a secular understanding of the nature of evil'. However, in some ways, this may miss important perspectives. Johan Galtung (personal communication, 22/10/2007) underlines the fact that it is impossible to understand George W. Bush without drawing on biblical teachings. George W. Bush is convinced that he leads a fight to combat evil – which in those terms is literally the work of the devil. Steeped in secular thinking, we may be at a loss to fully understand and deal with his policy. This raises the question whether, by stripping away all religious connotations, we miss a deeper understanding of what 'evil' may imply.

REFERENCES


