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High value and the significance of significance: Speech of the Suffering Soul'

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A lens on human action and a theory of Mind

Particularly relevant right now to the psychodynamics of

- Black lives matter and the demand for racial justice

- Deaths of despair

- Loneliness and isolation and why it matters

Mental forces

Drivers of human action should include something that practitioners adopt as a working assumption but which doesn't usually feature in the panoply of psycho-dynamics

The significance of significance

The struggle in personal and social life for the value and worth of human beings

Against the factors that assert our value

that say 'I'm worth more than that'

Reactions against this

1. Demoralisation (depression, giving up or even suicide)

2. Resignation (temporary acceptance)

3. The Protest (not taking it; re-valuing sense of self)

4. Often violence

This interplay seems fundamental to the drivers of human action

our need for a valuable self goes to the heart of the human situation

Conclusion?

We are motivated to pursue high value! Where does this come from?

This is NOT the same as self-esteem. It is profoundly relational

Abstract

Although the term 'psychopathology' is used medically to mean diseases of the mind, in fact it derives from Greek words 'psyche', 'pathos' and 'logos': literally, the speech of the suffering soul. The proposal I advocate in a recent book is that amidst the multi-dimensional complexity of human behaviour, we are motivated by the pursuit of worth.

Private as well as public worlds demonstrate that humans are not just interest-led. We are motivated by the desire to pursue our value and protest when it is breeched. What the energy is for this is a question with profound consequences.

What we will propose here is a new paradigm of the inner world based on the value and worth people need to have in order to flourish but which is by definition relational, held with others. This is not about narcissism and neither is it a re-framing of self-esteem.

What seems beyond dispute is that we have an impetus to feel worthwhile. How far that is grounded in being someone of worth is a question to be asked and a challenge.

The dominant pursuit of value-in-oneself may seem obvious yet it is not up there amidst the panoply of mental driving forces that form the seed-bed of psycho-dynamics. Neither is it a regular topic in social psychology. After all, one could have a sense of self in which identity subsists, without that being grounded in value and worth. The two categories are not coterminous. Are we psychologically structured so as to require a strong sense of value within which to live and move and have our being and do our best work? What would it mean to say that human subjects are formed amidst a dynamic struggle for human value against a constant litany of devaluing factors? What does it mean for human action that we seem compelled to live as if we had high value or we wither in its absence? Where can we locate in the psychological literature the role that issues of value or a sense of a valuable self play in the architecture of the mind?

Can we propose new theory? What would it mean to say that the impetus towards high value is vital? Should the inner psychodynamic world of the drivers be re-configured?

Notes for the address – devaluation as a psycho-dynamic driver of human action

Consider some powerful social forces on the contemporary scene

1. **Black lives matter –** throughout their lives, the lived experience of black people is that they are de-humanised, treated as unequal, deemed less important and of value than the systems of social and political life allow. Structural barriers hold people back – it is not a question of failure in individual effort. As a placard in a recent Civil Rights march in Washington read, 'we matter'! [i]

2. **Deaths of despair-** deaths by suicide, alcohol-related liver disease and drug overdose have risen rapidly since the mid-1990's. In the US, the rise was from about 65,000 per year in 1995 to 158,000 in 2018. The Pandemic has sharpened inequalities everywhere and we await the sad legacy of Covid-19.

3. **Gender inequalities –** not only the intersection of ethnicity and class but gender also needs to be factored in. Black women are still an afterthought and the dominant discourse is about killing black men. The abuse suffered by many women in the pandemic was frightening. In a country like Mexcio, women routinely get killed more often.

4. **Social isolation and the impact of loneliness on the psyche –** human contact being a prime source of validation of the self along with jobs that were also under serious threat. When the toll is counted, the impact on those struggling with money worries from employment falling off or large scale cessation of social contact will add significantly to the social strains we saw already.

Do we have strong psycho-dynamic theory to help explain why these differentials do so much damage? What account can we give of just how and why the psychological impact of these things is so pernicious?

'Life is sacred'! We know that and affirm it. Yet the value and worth of people is under fierce assault today. I aim to show that this not just an abstract ideal or ethical imperative. It is wired into the human operating system.

Points for the presentation

The idea of people needing to have a sense of a valuable self has often been noticed. Invariably, this is at the level of counselling practice; treating people ethically. Being a counsellor can help ease feelings of insignificance and powerlessness; to admit that is hard to do. These proposals show how a notion of human worth can be operationalised to become fundamental to theory structures of personality and drivers of behaviour.

Twenty years ago -

What happened 20 years ago? At the conclusion of narrating some distressing circumstances, a client suddenly said something very familiar yet it struck me afresh. "But I'm worth more than that!" Why was someone telling me about their value as if we were discussing the value of an asset, of a car, house or security? I began to listen out for it. And there it was again and again. What were the circumstances that led to it?

3 types of experiences were giving rise to reports of being devalued. I articulate each of these negatively but there are positive aspects to be translated into useful knowledge

  i)   **Indifference** – not being seen nor heard, not noticed, disregarded
  ii)   **Inferiority** – treated unequally. Not having our humanity honoured, belittled
  iii)   **Indignity** – reaction that comes from having our dignity assaulted or violated

Positive dimensions of these different responses are the drive for 'value-in-oneself' as seen by:

- A reaction against i**ndifference** points to a drive to be regarded, seen favourably, listened to
- A reaction against **inferiority** and diminishing suggests an impetus towards significance
- A reaction of indignation against **indignity** suggests that our sacred space must be respected

A theory structure began to take shape, informed by a considerable body of research and counselling. The latter was drawn upon in an ethnographic survey documenting my journey here. Believing that, as my PhD supervisor said, I was 'on to something,' it seemed to me I was finding a fundamental driver in human action: counter-reactions showed up an impetus to realise a high value.

The reaction against these devaluing circumstances seemed to be fourfold:

a. **Demoralisation** – people just seem to give up, become depressed, suicidal or blaise

b. **Collusion** – when for a while, individuals or social groups may go along with their devaluing

c. **The Protest** – the reaction that may have been suppressed of 'I'm worth more than that!'

d. **Violence** – the cry of the devalued lashing out in symbolic exchange to exact compensation

How then did those responses of resistance show that the drive to extract worth was fundamental? Where might that sit relative to classic accounts of the drivers of personality? Could we do another Freud or Jung 2.0? should we revisit Maslow? In the book I reference four situations on our current landscape.

➢ **Our aloneness** - we need significant others to give us a sense of being worthwhile people

➢ **Intensified social comparison** and the way that plays out with issues of social media usage and body image that makes teenage girls especially vulnerable to mental health problems

➢ **Compensation strategies** in inter-personal or international transactions to gain power

➢ **Outright violence** to fill up a deficit, for example shootings in America this week where

All are intriguing. But as a grandfather of two, let me refer briefly to several of these.

Intensified social comparison

An article in the UK press reports '*self-harming by teenage girls doubles in 20 years*'. Pressures of school and social media blamed as hospital admissions rise. Over-sharing on social media creates pernicious consequences. All the way from fame-hungry children to the epidemic of self-harming and threats to mental well-being that are crippling young people, we live in anxious times.

The platforms that are supposed to help young people connect with each other may actually be fuelling a mental health crisis. Having to cope with peer pressure amongst many hundreds of young people around you at school daily is hugely magnified by social media. Anxiety is now framing social space.

Depression and anxiety are affecting more young people than ever before. According to a study published at the end of 2014 by the Office for National Statistics, one in five 16- to 24-year-olds suffers from psychological problems.[ii] A report from the Government Equalities Office claimed that one in five teenage girls are opting out of classroom discussions and playing truant because they hate the way they look. Charm, looks and popularity are paraded, weighed in the balance and found wanting. This is an image-saturated environment where there is a disproportionate emphasis on appearance. A question is- what is the mechanism by which these effects cause psychological harm?

For all those who find a response in personal make-over projects to be empowering, there must be far more who experience fascism of appearance practiced by our current social arrangements as oppressive. It reinforces low self-esteem, especially with girls.

"*Social media is very similar to a slot machine*," said Former Facebook executive Sandy Parakilas, who tried to stop using the service after he left the company in 2012. "*It literally felt like I was quitting cigarettes.*" What seems to be driving this addictive behaviour is the compulsion of needing to be valued. One of the most alluring aspects of social media for users is 'likes', which can come in the form of the thumbs-up sign, hearts, or retweets. Leah Pearlman, co-inventor of Facebook's 'Like' button, said she

had become hooked on Facebook because she had begun basing her sense of self-worth on the number of 'likes' she had. "*When I need validation - I go to check Facebook, "I'm feeling lonely, 'Let me check my phone.' I'm feeling insecure, 'Let me check my phone.'*"

Ms Pearlman had tried to stop using Facebook after leaving the company. "*I noticed that I would post something that I used to post and the 'like' count would be way lower than it used to be."Suddenly, I thought I'm actually also kind of addicted to the feedback.*" *It's a social-validation feedback loop.* A review of studies from 12 industrialised countries found that adolescent girls are increasingly depressed and anxious about their looks. 2012 was the moment when the proportion of Americans who owned a smartphone surpassed 50 percent. As Jean Twenge observed, rates of teen depression and suicide have skyrocketed since 2011. It is not an exaggeration to describe this ' iGen' as being on the brink of the worst mental-health crisis in decades.

Our value is calibrated through conformity to the norms of society. Society is hard-wired into us. At some point political arguments run out and we are left with something else, an 'inaccessible interiority' that lies beyond the reach of any political or sociological framework. This is the black box of politics.

New divides are opening up. Internet media brings intensified social comparison. Technology makes the world more unequal as large gaps yawns between elites favoured by automated futures and those who will serve in low-paid jobs and wait at tables. Inequality matters because it gets under the skin. Discussion about social anxiety and status syndrome become core issues because they dig into the role that our sense of value plays in human action. It is a strategy of switching positions. Under various oppressive regimes, social actors move from disvaluing actions or words relative to everyone else to an absolute sense of identity. It is they themselves that are on the line.

The main book attempts a unified theory of human devaluation driving social processes. The impetus towards high value does not take place in a vacuum. Subjective experience often shows an overlap of competing principles; external constraints and pressures rub up against an internal driver towards being of value. As an internal motivator, the drive

towards high value constantly interacts with external systems. Deleuze sees subjectivities constituted by the internalisation of outside forces. [iii] Here I want to observe that there is a psychological or psycho-social dimension to experiences of class, gender, ethnicity, disability, ageism, sexuality, religion or colonialism which converge on and either reinforced or subverted by personal experiences of being devalued.

Inequalities highlighted by Covid -19

As Deaton and Anne Case document in their book 'Deaths of Despair', real (inflation-adjusted) wages for US men without a college degree have fallen for 50 years. At the same time, college graduates' earnings premium over those without a degree has risen to an astonishing 80%. [iv] Educated Americans are pulling away from the less-educated majority not only in terms of income, but also in health outcomes. Pain, loneliness, and disability have become more common among those without a degree. That was before the COVID-19 pandemic. Now, the virus has newly exposed the pre-existing inequalities.

Traditionally, to be born on the right side of those equations was enviable while those born on the wrong side means that we are of negligible account. The connecting thread between the social and the personal is that of the systems in which we live and to which we are largely blind. Being devalued by society collides or colludes with value in oneself, a profound impetus in the psyche. Value-in-oneself is a crucial dimension to well-being. Put simply, being written off or devalued is bad for you; receiving a heady sense of being a worthwhile person with worthwhile tasks is good for you.

The idea of human value is a fundamental theme in social and cultural life and the motor behind many psychological and social processes. The notion of the (high) value of persons is associated with human rights discourse but these proposals indicate that it goes beyond the merely aspirational: value-in-oneself is fundamental to human functioning and motivation.

It is a 'taken-for-granted' assumption that has yet to be factored into theory. Indeed, the mystery of a human person cannot be grasped without invoking a construct of

human value. The category of 'value-in-oneself'' acts as a helpful lens through which to observe human action and human reactions - both to difference and indifference. It has been well-understood that class or prejudice affects an individual's sense of identity and self-worth.[v] The sense of self is also a familiar face in psychology. But I am calling attention to the role that a sense, not just of self, but of a *valuable* self plays. In suggesting that issues of value arise repeatedly along power-lines of everyday transactions, it is important to remember that 'value' is here employed as a neutral term; entities can be accorded high or low value. The endemic struggle for our value in public and private worlds is an important dimension ignored in psychological and sociological descriptions of the world. It is a challenge to theory. Why has this not been an active dynamic in accounts of human action?

How the social transmission of value impacts upon the value within the personhood of the individual subject will be a major focus here. As we will argue here, significance is a vital and ineradicable impulse in human affairs. Yet it is one head of a three-headed hydra of ways in which a high value asserts itself in everyday life. The demand to be listened to and given attention is also pressing; the need to be accorded dignity goes to the heart of our humanity in equal measure. An imperative towards being of significance and not being given second class treatment or live a third rate life is somewhat different to not being heard. It is separate from reacting to indignity or being set trashed.

Pandemics tend to magnify existing inequalities rather than flatten them. The most affluent managed to shelter, hide from the virus in their gardens or second homes, work remotely and get food delivered to their homes courtesy of deliveroo and on-line slots. Poverty made the experience of Covid harder to bear. It was the lower paid working communities that were harder hit, often cramped in tower blocks and homes without gardens. Plus of course the elderly and vulnerable. There was an inter-generational as well as class divide. Resilience depends on capacity. How people fared in that public health emergency was a very different experience according to social location.

Internal reactions to race and ethnicity

Racism has been around for as long as people dominated and enslaved each other. Pervasive concentrations of power seep through the very language we use about ethnicity, gender, age or intact bodies. White privilege and exceptionalism shapes standards and debates about what tone to use and what is correct (I'm looking at a challenging new book on that- Layla Saad's '*Me and White Supremacy: How to Recognise Your Privilege, Combat Racism and Change the World*'.[vi]

Recently we have seen the spectre of America burning. The London and similar protests have been vibrant with a sense of that simmering sense of injustice boiling over with the revolting death of George Floyd. I remember well the sheer sense of rage that engulfed the American street after the assassination of one of Martin Luther King in April 1968. Current events have strong resonance with that – except now we have Smart camera phones to record and transmit images faster than Covid.

Inequality matters because it gets under the skin. It digs into the role that our sense of value or its absence plays in human action generating psycho-social effects as well as lack of cash and poverty of power. But racism doesn't just get UNDER the skin though it does that to be sure. Racism is an attitude of mind that shapes both perpetrator and victim. Steve Biko, the black South African leader who died under Apartheid-era brutality diagnosed a submissive state of mind and lack of self-respect as illness. We collude with the definition of ourselves that others impose upon us. [vii] Racism is inscribed ON the skin

It is a curiosity of history that white people in the time of Queen Elizabeth 1 used to prize their skin colour so much they would rub whiteness into it. Now a sun tan is a mark of health and vitality. It is though a tragic curiosity that so much misery has been played out on the surface of human beings. A casual observer looks at this central phenomenon of history with complete astonishment. If the configuration of genitals and gender has evoked so much historical agitation, how come that, in addition it has been the colour of skin, and not just the colour of money that has so sharply divided the human

consciousness? Who was responsible for this? If the answer is, 'we did it', then who are the 'we' who subjected our fellow men and women to such unimaginable cruelty and abuse? Why would we do it?

And who determined that skin should witness such mortal combat? Who set the pattern that the darker the skin the greater the inferior status? Racism has been so deadly because it combines the sharp divides of history into lethal challenge. This is all the more surprising since 'race' is a largely artificial construct as is 'religion' with which it is closely intertwined. Do either actually exist as the basis for pernicious cultural inequalities? Not really.

Education has to be the great antidote to inequality everywhere. Wanted: an early warning system about devaluation of human life; especially of those who are different. Antibodies need to build up. A psycho-social lens is critical to any kind of understanding how difference generates such horror that disfigures our humanity so profoundly. We need to grasp how the virus takes hold and how different levels of value are placed on people's lives. Imagine an early-warning system of moral education as a 5-point scale with descending levels:

- Denigration (inter-personal put downs)

- De-personalisation (cloaking people with invisibility so they becomes objects)

- Desecration (acts of violence that degrade and assault the dignity of lives)

- Dehumanisation (acts and practices by the authorities that brutalise and kill people)

- Demonisation (genocide that treats ethnic groups like vermin or as sub-human)

Once a way of speaking and practice becomes thinkable, the mind is prepared to go down to the next level that can be acceptable. The descent into darkness is a series of steps. But the racism we have seen wearing such an ugly face doesn't just arrive from a clear blue sky. It is firmly lodged in social transmission sites of cultural narratives and then gets reproduced.

Steve Biko's narrative shows the extent to which there is unintended collusion between devalued and devaluers. It shows how human identity is created attitudinally, in dialogue and in symbolic interaction with others. The Protest is emancipation of the mind, the freedom to be who you are.   "*Whites must be made to realise they are only human, not superior. The same with blacks. They must be made to realise they are also human, not inferior... Blacks have had their noses rubbed in the dust by white racism, de-personalising them to the extent that they have...... come to doubt the reality of their own personhood and humanity. They came to believe that the denigration of their humanity by those who oppress them is the truth about themselves".* [viii]

A high degree of value –in- oneself is essential for life. Without it, we wither. Yet unwitting collusion or demoralisation is not the only response to devaluing forces. Another script is possible, a stance that refuses to accept the script being handed out and which seeks another part in the play.

Whether it features in narratives of minorities or the marginalised feeling they can join the mainstream or whether it is an individual freshly empowered to rise above the script handed to them, the Protest summons a prominent energy in social life. Devaluation triggers demoralisation when the absolute sense of a valuable self is assaulted. Without value we wither. There is another reaction, however. Devaluing forces engender their opposite. Oppressive formations create universal victim subjects when people are not accorded the same validity. Being edited out of the picture can generate a response that calls forth Protest. This is because that very sense of a valuable self- whether individual or mobilised into the collective psyche of a group – seeks to assert itself. It is a strategy of re-valuing as individuals and groups feel more energised and hopeful about the future and their role in it.

It is time to expose the virus and how it is lodged in attitudes that can be transmitted that de-personalise and then de-humanise people of colour as being ripe for violence. The global pandemic ran its deadly course alongside existing sharp problems in societies. Among them was the spectre of Minnesota burning, an epitaph on racism in

the justice system that shapes the social experience of black people in America. Clearly the richest country in the world was not the most advanced. The Mayor of Minneapolis described the vicious racism as a worse virus than Covid. It is time to change.

What is vital now is for high quality social analysts to combine with activists and show what it looks like: one where every life really does matter: where people flourish alongside each other and nature. Racism is different levels of value placed on different lives. Hierarchies of value – some on a higher level– shapes social experience. Until we acknowledge that, you get different outcomes: you won't tap everyone's potential, get fair policing, fair education for all, a fair wage or universal health care.

Paraded across the divides of modern times, inequality is both wide and widening. How should societies respond to pervasive concentrations of power that seep through the very language we use about ethnicity, gender, age and intact bodies? And what do we do about obscene disparities of health as well as wealth, amongst those who live in the same city (let alone same country?) Inequality gets under the skin; it provokes a reaction about our sense of value and worth.

Will we see a new social model? The challenge of the hour is towards a larger, collective polity that helped us get through, a model that must include sources of hope such as faith and psychology communities that help engender spiritual stockpiling and personal resilience. Taken together, in its pain and severe social stress, the crisis could help open up society in a way that was much needed and build better.

The fight for equal worth is fundamental to struggles on the contemporary scene. For everywhere there are deficits. Condemn us to live without value and the flowers perish- or they never unfolded. That they can still respond to the sun shows how essential that sun is. Try as we might, we do not function well without a sense of a valuable self. We were condemned to live as if we had a value, to fight against the depression that condemns us to a constituency of one. Self-respect or the value of significant others is not self-indulgent luxury food. The language of our inner self where we construct meanings of everyday life is clear. 'Give us this day our daily bread'!

[i] Altman, Alex (2020) 'The President, the Protesters and the Plague of Political Violence'. Time Magazine p31 June 15th 2020

[ii] Measuring National Well-being, Exploring the Well-being of Young People in the UK, 2014 http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20160105190918/http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/rel/wellbeing/measuring-national-well-being/exploring-the-well-being-of-young-people-in-the-uk--2014/rpt---exploring-the-well-being-of-young-people-in-the-uk--2014.html accessed July 2018

[iii] Deleuze, G. (1993) *The Deleuze Reader*, ed by C.V. Bounds. New York: Columbia University

[iv] Anne Case and Angus Deaton (2020) *Deaths of Despair and the Future of Capitalism* Princeton, NJ.: Princeton University Press

[v] Jones, M. (2002) *The Social Psychology of Prejudice*. New Jersey: Prentice Hall.

[vi] Layla Saad's '*Me and White Supremacy: How to Recognise Your Privilege, Combat Racism and Change the World*' (Quercus 2020).

[vii] Biko, S. (1986) *I Write What I Like*. San Francisco: Harper & Row

[viii] Tutu, D. ( ) from Kofi Appiah-Kubi & Sergio Torres, eds. *African Theology en route*