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The Nature of Hate

Robert J. Sternberg and Karin Sternberg


Reviewed by Catherine Scott

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In the annals of human civilisation our own era will probably go down as one of the bloodiest and most vicious. The sheer number of ‘genocides’ that have been committed since the turn of the nineteenth century and the associated body count beggar belief. The most notorious, the Holocaust, spawned a spate of psychological research into the causes of that terrible event, in the hope of preventing its repetition. This included the research by Adorno and his colleagues into the authoritarian personality; Kohlberg’s work on moral development; Milgram’s research into obedience and, most recently, the research by Robert Sternberg into hate.

Sternberg and Sternberg’s book provides a good summary of the research and theory on hate to date, before presenting and elaborating on Robert Sternberg’s duplex theory of hate and summarising the research evidence for it. The book also covers many of the best-known collective degenerations into hate and their apparent causes, including some of the most notorious recent genocides in Rwanda, Sudan and the Balkans.

There is a sense in the book, however, that, the demon being wrestled with has still not been entirely subdued, or at least, understood. The many and varied examples of people’s sometimes violent aversion to one or even many of the members own species are not in the end resolved into a convincing whole.

Wittgenstein’s observation about the sources of ‘philosophical bewilderment’ is of potential use for understanding the unresolved complexities revealed by Sternberg and Sternberg’s discussion of hate: ‘We are up against one of the great sources of philosophical bewilderment: a substantive makes us look for a
thing that corresponds to it’ (cited in Lazerowitz, 2004, p. 162). The word ‘hate’
does suggest the existence of a unitary phenomenon, as does our experience of
our own strong ill-feeling towards others, either as individuals or groups.
Sternberg and Sternberg are on to something when they observe that people say
they hate everything from homework to individuals who have grievously wronged
them in some way to abstract entities, like members of some category of person,
but that surely these diverse experiences can not be identical in content and
intensity.

‘Hate’ like most or all concepts, is ‘fuzzy’, that is, there are no clear cut
boundaries around it nor a set of attributes that are all present in every case of it:
as with all concepts, membership is determined by ‘family resemblances’ (Rosch,
1999). There are, in other words, a collection of attributes that are characteristic
of people’s experiences of hate but no experience of hate, whether of homework
or members of some despised ethnic group, necessarily includes all or even most
characteristics. Sternberg’s duplex theory of hate, with its three components,
could be styled as an investigation of the fuzzy concept of ‘hate’. It is, in other
words, a study of how people think and talk about hate. As such it is of value and
interest. In the end, however, the experience of strong personal enmity by one
individual to another is substantially different to mass hatred and murder. It may
have been desirable to explore these phenomena separately rather than as
manifestations of one human tendency.

The ultimate purpose of the book is search for a way to ‘cure hate’. Because such
a wide variety of phenomena is covered it is unlikely that there exists one
panacea that will cure them all. Certainly therapy may help those individuals who
are afflicted with a propensity to hate or so maimed by experience that they
descend into hate but hate that comes from collective causes may be much
harder to stifle.

As an example, the strong temptation for leaders to cook up an external threat to
distract followers from problems on the home front will not be cured by therapy of
any sort: only the development of a polity sufficiently well-fed and secure, as well
as too sophisticated to fall for such tricks, will eradicate that source of
manufactured hate. Certainly the eradication of injustice and inequality in all their
guises would remove a powerful incentive to loathing one’s fellows, especially
those who seem to be better off than oneself. The apparently universal narrative
of ‘pure evil’ besetting ‘blameless victims’ that Baumeister so thoroughly explores
(1996) will always be available as a means to explain why the other is bestial and
fit only for extermination. Collective approaches that address the root causes of
division between peoples may ultimately the best cure for mass hate but we are
still drawn towards explanations and interventions that begin at the individual
level.

Indeed, Western psychology as an enterprise is strongly individualist in its
emphasis, not surprising, given that individualism is the dominant belief
system/model of the person in Western cultures. Psychology starts with the
individual as an explanatory variable and sometimes adds other aspects of the
situation in its attempts to account for human behaviour. Such a ‘bottom up’
model constantly runs into problems, however, as Sternberg and Sternberg’s
analysis reveals.
More convincing explanations for human behaviour become possible when the bias towards starting with the individual is put aside and ‘top down’ influences are investigated as primary causes instead of add-ons, with one, one top down variable particularly implicated in the bloody nature of our age.

Anthropologist Mary Douglas has explored the key role of culture in human conduct and has written about the catastrophic effects of cultural failure, when the usual vibrant conversation between the four cultural tendencies that she describes in her grid/group theory falls silent, ordinary life ceases and human society degenerates into the sort of nightmare Hobbes envisioned (Douglas, 2004).

The key cause over the last century and more of cultural failure – the disintegration of everyday life - has been war. Wars have gone from events that affected mostly military personnel to being an assault upon whole populations. Starting in the mid-nineteenth century, each subsequent war saw civilian deaths accounting for higher and higher percentages of the casualty figures. The ‘evolution’ of weapons from devices used at close or relatively close quarters and capable of inflicting injury on one or a few persons to implements able to destroy a great number of people from a considerable distance undoubtedly contributed to war’s breaking out of the battle fields and into the realm of ordinary life, a development Sternberg and Sternberg comment upon.

The disruption or total destruction on of normal existence by the intrusion of death and horror on a massive scale is sufficient to explain the degeneration of human behaviour into viciousness. There is nothing special lurking in our genes
or our natures that explains hatred on a grand scale and the murder that follows it nearly so well as the reactions of ordinary people to extraordinary circumstances. When horror becomes the norm it is not surprising that it is reflected in the conduct of those afflicted by horrible situations. What would need explaining is a circumstance where people could see their cities destroyed, their homes, businesses and farms ruined, their loved ones and neighbours murdered and mutilated and simply go about their ordinary business.

Sternberg and Sternberg provide evidence for this in their book when they report on how the war to remove Saddam Hussein resulted in an upsurge of sectarian hatred between Sunni and Shiite and of both groups towards the invading forces. Brutality in the form of suicide bombings and attacks on civilians increased. Without the experience of a war conducted at close quarters it highly unlikely that ordinary Iraqis, or indeed anyone, would voluntarily descend into slaughtering their fellows.

Our age is the age of genocide because our age is the era of total war. Remove war or at least remove it from the cities and villages in which people reside, I would contend, and the wave of mass murder would also decline. This is one powerful method to cure hate, but one, unfortunately, that lies well beyond the capacity of any individual, therapist or otherwise.

Sternberg and Sternberg are to be commended for staring horror in the face and attempting to understand with the laudable purpose of ridding the world of hate and its consequences.
References


