

Harm as a Psychological Concept: Some Fragmentary Reflections

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Abstract

This paper outlines the not-so-sharp contours of the concept of harm. It sees harm as largely a psychological concept and argues for the need of a third concept — harm, in addition to the two incumbents upon us — violence and trauma. It also argues that it is the relative blur in the use of the concept of harm that makes it fecund in terms of its capacity to unveil multiple forms and facets of human experience, including the process of self-harm.

Keywords

concept, kin-concept, category, self-harm, polyvalence, ambivalence, overdetermination

Uttering a word is like striking a note on the keyboard of the imagination.
(Wittgenstein, 2009, p. 7)

Introduction

What is it to utter the word “harm”? Which note does it strike on the keyboard of imagination when one utters the word harm? How does one move from one note to another? How do the notes relate to each other? How do they connect or come to combine — so as to produce understanding. I argue, with Wittgenstein, that it is in *usage* that the word harm reaches understanding. How do we distinguish such usage from the usage of two related words: “violence” and “trauma”? This paper tries to delineate the not-so-sharp contours of the concept of “harm” with respect to two of its *kin-concepts*: (a) violence (including subtle and slow violence) and (b) trauma (including minor trauma). The not-so-sharp contours, or this relative blur, is seen as the promise of the concept of harm.

“But is a blurred concept a *concept* at all?” Is a photograph that is not sharp a picture of a person at all? Is it even always an advantage to replace a picture that is not sharp by one that is? Isn’t one that isn’t sharp often just what we need? Frege compares a concept to a region, and says that a region without clear boundaries can’t be called a region at all. This presumably means that we can’t do anything with it. But is it senseless to say ‘Stay roughly here’? (Wittgenstein, 2009, p. 38).

This relative blur makes the concept of harm fecund as against what Boesch (1991) designates as (i) “black-box-scientism” in mainstream psychological sciences and (ii) the method

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of experimental verification in logical positivism (p. 15). We will explore how the concept becomes fecund in terms of its horizon of meaning-making and the related explanatory potential it offers.

The Category of the Harmed

This takes us to two related questions: what is a *concept*? When is a concept a *psychological* concept? Let us first distinguish between the category “harmed” and the concept harm (needless to reiterate in this context, the concept of harm and the category harmed are in a mutually constitutive relation). The category harmed designates a nosology of persons who have been harmed — by either others or by themselves (“themselves” includes the idea of “self-harm” in psychology). Such persons carry in them the experience of harm. The category harmed offers us a taxonomy — of those who have been harmed. It could be a person. It could be a group, collective or community. It could also be an animal or a plant. It could be the planet. In that sense, it is relatively easier to categorise the harmed, depending on either physical or psychological “attributes” or “first-person perspectives” (including first person narratives/testimonies).

The Concept of Harm

The concept of harm takes us to the question of rational human understanding (Kant designates it as *Verständnis* against the colloquial *verstehen*) of harm, including our ability to think about harm and judge whether *this* is harm. There appears to be a continuum of “signifier-concept-judgement”. The signifier “harm”, the conceptualisation of harm, and the judgement premised on an understanding that this is *indeed* harm. How tight is this triad? How thick is the connection among the three?

There are two options before us. The first would be to make the connection among the three thicker and tighter; that is, to make the connection between (what Freud [1891, 1917] designates as) “word” and “word-idea” objective (like in the legal enunciation of violence; where harm is the “violation of a legally protected interest” [Kleinig, 1978, p. 27]). It is to staple securely and tightly, and with certainty what Freud calls the “word-presentation” (the word image or signifier) and the “thing-presentation” (mental image or signified).

The other route would be to keep the word and word-idea connection creative; all the more so because harm is an acutely culture-sensitive concept. It will have radically different genealogies (Foucault, 1980) in different cultures; what would come to be known as harm would be located in the culture’s history of ideas. It will also emanate differently from different cultural archaeologies (Foucault, 2002; one could also call them archetypes [Jung, 1981]). What would qualify as harm could then be different in different cultures. Each culture could have its own *endorsed narrative* of harm. However, one of the problems of the endorsed narrative is *Malleus Maleficarum* (usually translated as *The Hammer of Witches* [Kramer, 1486]) which foregrounded the need to extirpate the “dark and horrid harms” of witchcraft. Federici’s *Caliban and the Witch* foregrounds processes of witch-hunt and colonialism (let’s call it *land hunt*) at the origin of capitalism. She shows why, between 1560 and 1630, did a campaign against witches, most of them women healers and midwives, start with such ferociousness. Witches seemed to embody everything “that capitalism had to destroy: the heretic, the healer, the disobedient wife, the woman who dared to live alone” (Federici, 2004, p. 11). Did a discourse of harm contribute to this carnage?

In this context, it would not be inappropriate to ask: is “modernity” yet another culture that produces a more globalised and generalised narrative of harm across extant cultures? In that sense, the deployment of the concept of harm remains suspended in a somewhat ambivalent manner between its understanding in local cultures and the universalist understanding of harm in modern culture (or the culture of the modern). The two above-mentioned conceptualisations of harm, the universalised modern concept of harm, and culturally contextualised conceptualisation of harm continue to create what Bose (1949) designates as an interminable *see-saw* in our relationship with harm.

The other is to invoke the concept of harm along the angle and axis of *practice*. It is in doing, in *deed*, indeed that the concept of harm would find elaboration. It is in *use* that the concept of harm would find clarity. A word gains its meaning from its use in language and can have no determinate meaning abstracted from the conditions of its use. The horse gallops in the language of biology. The same horse moves two and a half squares in the language of chess. But what does it mean to “use” a word and what conditions of use determine meaning? The speaking of language is part of an activity. It also emanates from a form of life. Cultures use and deploy

concepts differently. Cultures usually enunciate concepts based on a *typology of examples* and/or *exemplars*. See, this is an example of harm. See, this is the person who has been harmed by deforestation and the drying up of the river. This animal or this snake is harmless. This yam is harmful for the throat.

Yet another option, is to see the concept of harm as being deployed to not just *diagnose* either the self or the Other/world, but to *transform* the self and the Other/world. It is one thing to deploy a concept to diagnose, to adjudicate *whether* there is harm, including *who* has been harmed and who has harmed; but it is another thing to deploy a concept for *transformative praxis*. For example, for purposes of healing. Healing can, again, take two forms: (1) where the harmed self is healed, and (2) where the larger society is healed; that is, healed through transformative and reconstructive exercises. The nature of what I designate as “deployment” would be different when harm is invoked with the diagnostic impulse and when it is invoked with the curative or transformative impulse; akin to what Erikson (1969, p. 511), building on Gandhi, designates as the *cure of an unbearable inner condition* — for the one who has been harmed and even for the one who has harmed (the “emphasis is not so much [or not entirely] on the power to be gained as on the cure of an unbearable inner condition” [Erikson, 1969, p. 511]). Why cure *both*? Why not cure just the harmed? For Gandhi, the one who has harmed (i.e., the coloniser) has also been dehumanized in the process of harming the colonised. In that sense, the coloniser has also (self-)harmed himself. Harm could thus be seen as a concept that could engender transformative *double-conversion*. Why double conversion? Because while the harmed works through the experience of harm and cures him-/herself of an unbearable inner condition, the one who has harmed could also be invited to self-transform into a harmless (or at least a less harmful) subject. It is to engender in him/her *the courage to change*. Erikson defines psychoanalysis as that which “offers a method of intervening nonviolently between our overbearing conscience and our raging affects, thus forcing our moral and our “animal” natures to enter into respectful reconciliation” (Erikson, 1969, p. 514). Such a working through our raging affects and such a non-coercive reorganisation of desire shall perhaps reduce the quotient of actual and potential harm in human existence.

Gandhi also converted self-harm — that is, *fast unto death*, into a form of militant non-violent struggle (Erikson [1969] designates it as *militant non-violence*) against the British — to counter the much larger and expanded harm British rule caused to India and the Indians. What is the *zemiology* (derived from *zemos*, the Greek word for harm) of such a political praxis? The invocation of a third concept: harm, as distinguished from violence and trauma, thus helps one unveil aspects and facets of the human condition (here “fast unto death”) that have hitherto remained unaddressed.

Harm as a Psychological Concept

When does a concept become a psychological concept? What would be an example of a psychological concept? Freud’s concept of “melancholy” would be a psychological concept as against Newton’s concept of gravitation. In the 1917 paper *Mourning and Melancholia* (*Trauer und Melancholie*), Freud enunciates two responses to loss. One, where one would mourn the loss and “move on with life”; Maybe blame the doctor for the death and find solace. The other, is where one does not blame the doctor for the death; but blames oneself. The loss folds back upon oneself, upon one’s own self to engender self-depreciating effects on the self. According to Freud (1917):

The distinguishing mental features of melancholia are a profoundly painful dejection, cessation of interest in the outside world, loss of the capacity to love, inhibition of all activity, and a *lowering of the self-regarding feelings to a degree that finds utterance in self-reproaches and self-revilings*, and culminates in a delusional expectation of punishment. This picture becomes a little more intelligible when we consider that, with one exception, the same traits are met with in mourning. The disturbance of self-regard is absent in mourning; but otherwise the features are the same” (p. 243, emphasis added describing *Verlust des Selbstwertgefühls*).

There is, as if, an eating up of the self, a kind of self-cannibalism. One half of the ego — the accusatory half — is eating up the other half of the ego — the accused half. What ensues is protracted self-harm. One blames oneself for the death: *I could have done more ... I could have acted faster ... I could have prevented this death, had I ... had I*. Here, one is not just traumatised by the death. One takes a further step in the direction of self-harm. In the triad of the kin-concepts violence-trauma-harm, harm looks to be the most apt concept in this context. While the death could have been traumatic, the after-effects of the death had taken the form of self-harm. We hence need a concept over and above the two established ones: violence and trauma.

What makes a concept a psychological concept? Reference to self? The angle of interiority? The possibility of and a gesturing towards an *Other within*? The reference to experience or to what was *sensed*? Or subjectivity? The first-person perspective (as against the third-person perspective)? What is the difference between a first- and a third-person perspective? Let us take the example of fever. One's subjective feeling of being feverish could be seen as a first-person perspective. The objective thermometer measure of fever could be seen as a third-person perspective. Harm could present itself as both a first-person and a third-person perspective. One could harm without the intention to harm. One could also harm oneself — self-harm. Humans look to have the rather uncanny capacity of harming themselves by their motivated irrationality (*akrasia*). One could also harm oneself by internalising the oppressor's harmful principles; even in one's *opposition* to the oppressor's harmful principles one could still speak the language of the *proposition* (see Nandy, 2009, for the idea of the "intimate enemy"). One could experience harm without violence, both overt and covert — there could be non-violent harm in the shape of global environmental degradation (see Linklater, 2011, pp. 29–75). There could be harm without trauma — harm without an objective harm-inducing Other. Harm also opens up the angle or the axis of the non-known or the unknown in violence research. What one did not know could not hurt, but it could still harm. Inanimate objects can be harmed, for example; but they could not be hurt. Harm thus helps us extend the effects of violence to the inanimate world. Harm also helps us look at our own *unintended harm*; especially in two situations: one, when one is "doing good" or "trying to do good" to the other (for e.g., through the civilising mission or through development in the global South; more on this below in the section titled "What is it to Cure Ourselves of the Cure") and two, when one is trying to change or transform the world. Foucault's question becomes relevant in this context: how does one keep away from unintended harm, especially when one believes oneself to be a revolutionary militant, trying to institute change or transformation in the world? (see Foucault, in Deleuze and Guattari, 2000, p. xiii).

Such possibilities introduce a certain multiplicity and indeterminacy in the enunciation of the concept of harm. Building on the above discussion, one can suggest that the concept of harm remains informed by, as Boesch (1991, p. 14) suggests:

- (a) *polyvalence* of meaning and experience
- (b) *ambivalence* in the process of a secure, certain and solidified delineation of harm and
- (c) *overdetermination* of "cultural psychological and social psychological perspectives" (see HARM, n.d.).

Overdetermination

... a thousand threads one treadle throws,
Where fly the shuttles hither and thither,
Unseen the threads are knit together,
And an *infinite* combination grows.
(Freud, 1965, p. 317)

Freud invokes the metaphor of *weaving* to make sense of the uncanny (*unheimlich*) weave of dreams. He also highlights the indeterminate nature of how the day's residue, childhood experiences and memory traces, and unmetabolized *rem(a)inders* from the past can come to get woven into a dream rebus; as well as how multiple possibilities can get engendered. The deployment of the concept of overdetermination in the context of dreams by Freud has in it a hint of the *Nachträglichkeit* — the afterward-ness or the "activated-after-the-event-ness" of the experience of harm, which seems to suggest a notion of time-space or of language not

subordinated to the present, not subordinated to what is being presently experienced. For Freud, a harm may have little or no effect at first; yet a later harm of a somewhat similar kind may provoke a symptom by triggering off the earlier harm, a process that may in turn be continuously repeated; a process that may in turn effect and affect subsequent processes such that one does not have an exact clue of the final trajectory or of the end.

Such is the human subject. One can think of the subject in terms of an overdetermined ensemble of a thousand threads. The colours of some are known. Some remain unknown. Unseen are the processes in which the threads are knitted. Uncertain are the end affects. What we have is an infinite combination always already in the process of emerging. Overdetermination thus shows how the subject is menaced by unthought-of-remainders. The not-so-sharp contours of the concept of harm is thus in tune with the Freudian notion of the subject.

Beyond For and Against

Most people's usual response to violence is to condemn violence; or at worst, offer secret or tacit support to violence, especially subtle violence. Violence tends to get us interpellated into a rather pointed "for" and "against" debate. It is *pointed* in the sense of Arjuna,¹ looking at *only* the bird's eye in a rather pointed and focused manner when asked "what do you see" by *guru* Dronacharya. What would it be to make sense or develop an understanding *of* (not show an *understanding* towards) the "singularity of the field of violence"? *Field*, in the sense of Yudhisthira seeing the same bird's eye in the context of the whole; the bird and making sense of the whole, the bird against the background of a larger whole, the tree on which the bird is perched, the tree understood against the background of the sky, and yet not lose contact with the *singularity* of the violence. Singularity gestures to the point where the *object* of analysis is not well-defined or is beyond our scope of understanding or comprehension; something whose curvature exceeds linear parameters. Understanding (of violence) would however sound blasphemous in the context of the "for and against framework".

The concept of harm can take us beyond the for and against framework. Psychoanalysis remains in tune with the concept of harm. Or the concept of harm remains in tune with psychoanalysis. Lifton's (2000) *The Nazi Doctors: Medical Killing and the Psychology of Genocide* comes to mind as an effort to make sense of how such medical practice was constructed according to a rather dogmatic and objectified view of humans. Lifton's attempts at an understanding of the psychological core of violence led to many misunderstandings in the context of the for and against framework. The psychoanalytic work on violence by Bose (2000), written in the form of "children's fiction", titled *Red-Black* also takes us beyond the for and against framework. Written against the backdrop of colonialism and the epic war — the battle of Kurukshetra in the Mahabharata — Bose opens up a psychoanalytic exegesis on violence beyond the good black ant and the evil red ant framework.

What is it to Cure Ourselves of the Cure

This section of the paper takes up the question of the *(un)intended harm* of doing good. Take, for example, parenting as a process of doing good to the child, or the "civilising mission" as a means of ushering in the values of enlightenment in the life world of the colonised, or development in the global South as a method of uplifting the third world or the indigenous from its self-imposed decrepitude. Harm as a concept makes us acutely aware of the problems of such cures; and the harm — even if unintended — such cures can perpetuate. It also alerts us to how we have given consent to the civilising mission and continue to give consent to development.

Gandhi was once requested to offer an example of non-violence from history. Gandhi argued that he will not be able to because history (in its classical form) — definitionally — is the documentation of wars, conquests, and exploits of the kings. It would hence be difficult to give an instance of love, compassion, kindness, empathy, et cetera — the nursery bed of non-violence —

¹ Arjuna is one of the five Pandava brothers who are being trained by Guru Dronacharya in archery in the heroic Indian epic well-known throughout South East Asia: *Mahabharata*. Yudhisthira is the eldest brother and is considered to be endowed with philosophical wisdom. Arjuna is considered to be the warrior who can aim with precision, because he sees the bird's eye. He can, with absolute precision, hit the bull's eye. Yudhisthira, on the other hand, sees the whole. He sees the connections; the interdependence. That disqualifies him in the art of war. But qualifies him perhaps for deeper reflective wisdom, wisdom that touches polyvalence, ambivalence, and especially, the overdetermined nature of existence and reality (for more information on the *Mahabharata*, see Basu, 2016). The concept of harm inaugurates Yudhisthira's perspective in violence research.

from history. This is primarily because we have never written stories of such non-violent emotions. Has this training in history harmed us? Has it trained us in the naturalisation and normalisation of violence? Has it left us culturally denuded in terms of non-violent emotions?

I shall now build on a conversation that took place between Brian Massumi and Erin Manning and their two interviewers, Jonas Fritsch and Bodil Marie Stavning Thomsen. In this interview, Manning builds on an extract from Tito Rajarshi Mukhopadhyay's, *The Mind Tree* (2011) to present in Tito's own words his own experience of a typical encounter between an autistic child and the doctor. The parents have brought Tito, a "non-communicative" child, to the doctor. Because Tito is not making much eye contact with the doctor, is not playing, and is not engaging with the doctor, the doctor moves gently to the diagnosis of autism: "your child is unempathetic, unrelational, and really it's a cross to bear" (Massumi, 2011, p. 125–127). Tito narrates the same encounter differently. Manning shows how Tito writes of going into the doctor's office and recalled the magical way the light reflected on the mirror and the way the mirror reflected back on the wall. Tito talks about how the curtains interacted with the light and how the door reflected it and how all this affected his relationship to the room and the room's relationship to him. The doctor did ask him to play with some toys on the table, but they were not as interesting as the movements of the light; so, he chose not to play with. Tito had a kind of hyper-relationality that did not settle for the human as its point of focus. In the doctor's office, Tito was very much part of the "welling speciation room-light-movement, and that this speciation was very much intertwined with an emergent relational field in which he was intensively active" (Massumi, 2011, p. 125–127). In our obsession with "human-human modes of communication", we overlook these "emergent ecologies".

This example demonstrates once again how even the medical and psychiatric (including psychiatrised psychology-psychoanalysis) diagnosis and consequent cures — which is supposed to do good — could paradoxically harm the subject because of its *a priori* and universal assumptions regarding humans.

The Hippocratic Oath *primum non nocere* (first, do no harm) could be relevant here. The concept of harm makes us acutely aware of the subtle and unintended harm we may cause to Others. The Gandhian socialisation processes had tried to equip us with an awareness of how our actions can harm fellow humans; how our needs (which at times turn to greed) can harm the animal and plant world including the planet. It makes us reflect constantly on the possibility, even if thin, of harm. Such an awareness is born in Gandhi from multiple Jain, Buddhist, and Vaishnavite sources in the South East Asian philosophico-spiritual tradition. Such traditions would follow the principle of not-harming others, even animals, plants, and the planet.

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