

Thinking in the Fundamentalist State of Mind

Or why it is wrong to bomb Syria

Introduction

The last time that I was here I described 2 states of mind that result from our early developmental process. The first is called by psychoanalysts the paranoid schizoid position but I prefer to call it the fundamentalist state of mind in which the universe is perceived to be divided between good and bad, right and wrong, certainty is the preferred mental state and I said that thinking is hated in this state of mind. Today I want to try to open up what I meant by that because, at first sight, it might appear not to be true.

The 2nd state of mind, which is called the depressive position, allows a view of the universe filled with complexity and ambivalence in which there are always pros as well as cons. I said that thinking belongs to this state of mind because I define thinking as, predicated on not knowing, the activity of processing feelings (which are the form in which our psychic apparatus registers stimulation, either from outside or from inside) using symbols so that the feelings can be turned into information which can then generate further feelings to be turned into more information and so on. I hope I conveyed that this continual activity operates unconsciously.

My theme last time was that, placed in the role of leadership, politicians, particularly career politicians, are uniquely poorly placed to manage the combination of anxiety generated by their new role and the projections from the general public into them. I said that strong anxiety pushes all of us into a fundamentalist state of mind and that it is only the knowledge that this will happen along with a strong internal sense of identity and the ability to welcome help from outside that rescues us from becoming trapped in that fundamentalist state.

Bullying

A good example of the kind of situation I'm describing arises in the face of bullying. In fact, I think that bullying is one of the easiest social problems to understand and deal with if only it were not for the impact that the bully has. It is my belief that bullying arises because the bully is unable to process fear. Of course there are a myriad of different ways in which we come to the state of not being able to manage fear but there are only a few things that can be done if that is your problem. What the bully does is to get rid of his feeling via a process that psychoanalysts called projective identification; in his unconscious imagination he projects his fear into somebody else. If you watch a video of a bully, you will see the bully visibly relax as soon as the victim starts to show signs of fear. The bully clearly enjoying himself the more that the victim expresses the fear.

I haven't got time today to talk about the details of projective identification, although it lies at the heart of everything that I said the last time. Suffice to say that it is a process by which we get rid of thoughts or feelings that we cannot bear by unconsciously projecting them into somebody else and then believing that they really are a part of that person's character. The latter bit is what "identification" is referring to; the other person is *identified* with the thought or feeling that we have unconsciously projected into them. Melanie Klein, who originally described this phenomenon, believed that it was an entirely unconscious process but Wilfred Bion, who had a great deal of experience in psychiatric hospitals, said

that it really did have an effect on the actual other person; in other words, some form of communication was involved.

Sometimes the mechanism used to generate the required feeling in the other is easy enough to spot. For example, a bully who is actually physically threatening a victim makes it obvious how fear is being generated in that victim. More often these mechanisms are subliminal, we don't notice them but they are incredibly powerful. In terms of this example of a bully, we can say that a bully will always make the other person feel fear. If you know that you will be frightened in the presence of a bully, even a young child, you are in a position to manage that experience and continue to deal with the bully in spite of how you feel. Unfortunately, many of the people who should be managing bullies are both unaware of this process and also unable to tolerate the experience of fear in the face of, for example, a small child. So they create ridiculous rules to avoid the actual confrontation with an apparent bully, which is why bullying is often so badly dealt with.

Looking at the event of feeling frightened in the presence of a bully a little more closely reveals process that I am talking about today. Fear (another form of anxiety) seems to generate an urge to avoid not knowing and to move, instead, to certainty. In fact, it is clearly an advantage to our species that this happens because the sense of fear might be caused by a sabretooth Tiger and the species wouldn't survive very long if we simply sat there wondering about the pros and cons of the source of this fear. When you unpick the impact that a bully has, the victim usually and very quickly creates a story to explain the fear. For example, a teacher might believe that the reason he is not pursuing a confrontation with the bully is because he doesn't have absolute proof that bullying has occurred and he imagines the bully complaining to a powerful parent who then complains to the school which then suspends the teacher whose career is put in jeopardy. I am not exaggerating in this example; it is very common.

Tolerating the Anxiety of not Knowing

I have just described the pressure to turn anxiety into something understood or known about. When we make this premature adjustment, we move into that state of mind in which certainty is one of the defining properties. This is a state of mind that Freud described as governed by the "pleasure principle". He believed this to be the natural state of mind of all animals (and I agree with him); a state of mind in which pain or discomfort is avoided. I am saying that the idea or explanation that provides certainty in the face of fear or anxiety is actually an omnipotent solution; it puts us in the camp of the ideal in contrast to the camp of the evil. Not only does this relieve us of the immediate discomfort of the anxiety or fear, it is accompanied by a surge of pleasure.

There are 2 places where I am confronted with anxiety on a daily basis. The first is what you might describe as the clinical setting and the 2nd is when I am teaching or supervising somebody. In the clinical setting I am either with the patient (with my psychoanalytic hat on) listening but without any idea what it all means, or I am doing organisational work the client or with a team and I haven't the slightest idea what the problem is in the organisation. The same is true in supervision: I listen to a supervisee describe his or her work and I have no idea what to say that might be of any help to them. My training has taught me how to manage this state of not knowing and the accompanying anxiety. Freud described the necessary attitude of the analyst as a state of free-floating attention. Keats called it negative

capability and Bion advised us to be without memory or desire. In the end, each of us finds his own way to tolerate not knowing and I think this usually emerges from experience which provides us with the knowledge that, when we stay in that state long enough, an idea will emerge that makes sense of what is going on without the feeling of euphoria or superiority which characterises certainty.

I think that a characteristic of the sort of idea that I'm talking about is that it always provokes new questions. It's not that it doesn't explain what is happening, it does and usually in a way that we had not anticipated but it also maintains and even stimulates an aspect of the human mind that I think is essential to humanity; curiosity.

Curiosity

So I should give just a few words about curiosity and the central place that it holds in the development of our mind, specifically our conscious mind. Whether or not it is the most important mutation that makes human beings such a successful species I must leave to others to decide; what is clear is that it operates like a computer programme in our minds requiring us continually to explain to ourselves what is happening to us. These explanations gradually accumulate and form that part of us that we think of as "me"; the conscious mind. In healthy development today's explanation becomes tomorrow's new question, in other words our explanations are constantly modified in the light of experience.

There are many ways in which this urge to know, this curiosity is important but, for today's discussion, it is its *absence* that becomes significant. In my view the curiosity urge is a sign of a healthy state of mind, its absence is a cause for concern.

Certainty allows apparent Thinking

So let us move back to the state that occurs if we choose certainty rather than curiosity and not knowing. As I said earlier the identification with the ideal gives us a surge of superiority and good feeling. The world appears to be clear, unambiguous and we are able to make clear and unambiguous decisions. This frees our conscious mind to operate rather well. And this is this quality of that state of mind that I want to think about today because it provides a platform from which plans, strategies and detailed conscious thinking can occur. And herein lies the paradox which arises from my statement that the fundamentalist state of mind hates thinking.

On the face of it it looks as if I am saying that a fundamentalist state of mind can provide a basis for complex and clever thinking and yet I am also saying that this state of mind hates thinking. The paradox is resolved as soon as we look at the way that the same word, "thinking" is being used to describe 2 different things. Bion recognised this and described the deeper form of thinking as alpha function. As I said earlier, what I mean by thinking is the transformation of feelings into meaningful data. The thinking that can occur at a very complex level in a fundamentalist state of mind is a *conscious imitation* of this process but has excluded any contact with the unconscious process which I would call deeper form of thinking.

It seems to me that the simplest way of putting this is to ask oneself whether the assumptions that any particular argument is based upon are true or even acknowledged to

be assumptions. A patient may tell his analyst that he has managed to behave much better over the weekend towards his family and might go into a lot of detail to demonstrate how much better he has been only for the analyst to point out the patient appears to think that his analyst is a very demanding superior with particular ideas of how his patient should behave, possibly a bit like the patient's experience of his father. In other words, the analyst is not looking at the elaboration of the idea that the patient has behaved better, he is looking at the assumption beneath the claim. The analyst sees that the patient believes that his analyst has particular requirements, specifically his patient's good behaviour towards his family.

Oliver Letwin

In my example the patient's elaboration might have been very eloquent and convincing in the same way that the thinking produced by somebody in a fundamentalist state of mind can be very persuasive. But these lines of thought maintain a defence against knowing about the original anxiety. It is often much easier to see this looking back, which is why I am so grateful to Oliver Letwin. Mr Letwin has often been described as one of the significant thinkers in the Conservative party and, as a young adviser in Margaret Thatcher's Downing Street policy unit, his very eloquent and persuasive advice played a decisive role in rejecting demands from three cabinet members that assistance schemes be introduced in the aftermath of the Tottenham and Handsworth riots in 1985. I quote, "The root of social malaise is not poor housing, or youth 'alienation' or the lack of a middle class ... Riots, criminality and social disintegration are caused solely by individual characters and attitudes. So long as bad moral attitudes remain, all efforts to improve the inner cities will founder. David Young's new entrepreneurs will set up in the disco and drug trade."

I am quoting because I want to convey that particular *quality* that comes with certainty which indicates the sense of an identification with something omnipotent and superior. He has apologised for his remarks and I, for one, would be happy to leave it at that because it is such a good example of the phenomenon that I'm describing and because we are all liable to fall into the same trap. But please notice that he showed no curiosity or interest in what it really was that provoked riots and it is this lack of curiosity and interest that warns us that we are in a fundamentalist state.

Adolescence

I don't think that many people would disagree with me that adolescence is the most disturbing stage of development that we have to endure. The reason, of course, is because the enormous changes in our bodies stimulate the journey from childhood to adulthood. It was Freud who pointed out that there is a large and very clear difference between child sexuality and adult sexuality. Indeed, it is this difference that allows us to say that the sexual abuse of children is abuse at all and, specifically, that the damage is the destruction of the child's discovery of that difference.

This discovery happens during adolescence and generates massive anxiety which often takes the form of deep worries about urges that we are suddenly aware of and had never experienced before. Of course it is easy from the position of the adult to see that these are adult sexual urges experienced for the first time but the adolescent struggles because, like

all children, he thought he already knew what sexuality was about. You might say that the adolescent is confronted with questions about his entire sense of self.

In other words, this is a time of sustained and powerful anxiety. Adolescents tend to form groups during this period which serve to mitigate these anxieties by the development of theories and beliefs that can be held with passion ... until the next belief takes over. Obviously this makes adolescents very vulnerable to any explanation that can resolve their uncertainties. Those people who represent a fundamentalist approach to particular belief systems will have a very receptive audience amongst many adolescents, so we should not be surprised at how easy these organisations have found it to recruit members to join in their fundamentalist campaigns.

Once again the key features are a complete absence of curiosity, beliefs expressed as facts and a language of certainty and blame. I could go on about the problem of adolescence but that would take me away from today's task.

Bombing, Suicide Bombing and Whose Problem is it anyway?

Along with the move towards career politicians, there has been a change in language. Charlie Brooker in his review of 2015 pointed out David Cameron's habit of telling us that what he is doing is "the right thing" or "right for Britain". Actually he is not the first politician to speak in this way, it has been developing trend for many years. It is an example of the way in which language, which, after all, is merely symbolic, can become quite concrete. The advantage of this is that it generates a sense of certainty. It's not that the symbolic function has disappeared completely, rather that the thing symbolised by the word or phrase takes on a more concrete version of what it is supposed simply to be a symbolic representation of.

In my view these are the sorts of tricks that people who are arguing from a fundamentalist state of mind develop. I don't mean that this is done consciously (although I am quite willing to believe that there are people who *do* think out these ways of presentation) but they are an inevitable consequence of the particular language that accompanies that state of mind. In the interests of remaining contemporary whilst trying to be provocative I would say that Hilary Benn's speech about bombing Syria, which many of us took to be his opportunity to retaliate against the father who gave him the name Hilary in the first place, shows all these hallmarks. Benn makes use of images of the Second World War, fascism and Hitler to create a picture of the fundamentalist universe in which there is right and wrong without confusion or ambiguity.

The problem with the argument against bombing is that it depends upon tolerating anxiety in order to make further investigations and develop relationships. There is no doubt that IS behaves in a vile and utterly reprehensible way for which there can be no apology or mitigation. But it is also true that this tells us an awful lot about the organisational state of mind of this group, which is essentially extremely primitive and driven by absolute certainty and no curiosity. Thankfully people are gradually coming to understand that when your child behaves like a little tyrant filled with certainty and rage, it doesn't help to bomb him or hit him. All that does is to teach him that such behaviour is perfectly reasonable as long as you are the stronger party.

If we can tolerate the anxiety that these infantile bullies inject into us long enough to be able to think about what is going on, there are certain things that become clear. For example, the absence of real symbolic capacity (demonstrated by the way that symbols are turned into something concrete) helps us to see what matters to these people. Another fundamentalist minded politician, Ronald Reagan, famously described the eastern bloc as the "axis of evil". IS describe their enemy as Western decadence as symbolised by the United States and Paris.

You could say that, if this was a patient, these symbols (the eastern block and the West) are the objects of transference. In this case transference within a belief system about good and evil. The belief systems are specific; in Reagan's case it was Christianity in the case of IS it is Islam. Fundamentalist organisations appear to operate according to the same rules that the fundamentalist state of mind operates, and it exists within a context. For the child the context is the environment in which he is being cared for, for the fundamentalist organisation it is the belief system to which it claims membership.

One of the key qualities in this relationship is the subtle way in which a system of belief is turned into a system of fact. Religious beliefs are just that, beliefs. They are not facts. This is not the place to enquire into the popularity of such belief systems but it is important to recognise the difference between belief and fact because fundamentalists turn beliefs into facts.

It always feels to be the weaker position to represent truth as something not known, uncertain or unclear. And unfortunately many of the leaders of the belief systems that have spawned fundamentalist sects (and I cannot think of a single organised religion that does not or has not spawned fundamentalist sects) seem frightened of taking the lead in challenging the distortion of belief into fact. Perhaps the anxiety that hits them becomes represented in their conscious mind as a fear that the belief itself will be destroyed by such a conflict.

It seems to me that, if we can understand this idea about membership or context, the way that we think about fundamentalist organisations changes. Sects, subgroups, committees are created as an expression of some sort of tension within a system.

Tension is often the result of a pressure for change.

Change creates anxiety and this will inevitably produce a reaction to get rid of that anxiety by resisting the source of it, namely the change.

It is not simply that the fundamentalist sect is "the problem of the parent belief system", it is more that the fundamentalist sect is an expression of some pressure for change within that original system.

If we make the mistake of treating the role that we have been given by IS as if it really *is* something that belongs to us, we maintain a fantasy or delusion that protects the world from having to face a much more challenging and complex problem.

If the analyst whose patient treats him as if he is a demanding and angry father starts to yell at the patient about his behaviour, we would not only be shocked but would think that something had gone seriously wrong with the analyst. Why are we not therefore shocked that, accused of being intolerant decadent and arrogant, our government behave like public school bullies?

The braver solution is to seek to discuss with the Islamic world how to manage these dreadful but infantile manifestations of their own Religion and how to address the underlying but un-faced pressures for change within Islam.