

The Unabomber, the Underground Man, and Asperger Syndrome

“Autistic Acts of Malice”

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13 April 2010

Hans Asperger (1906–1980), delineating the syndrome he identified, called attention to “autistic acts of malice” among those whom he characterized as “little professors” because of the formal way in which they spoke, devoid of feeling:

These acts typically appear to be calculated. With uncanny certainty, the children manage to do whatever is the most unpleasant or hurtful in a particular situation... There can sometimes be distinctly sadistic acts. Delight in malice, which is rarely absent, provides almost the only occasion when the lost glance of these children appears to light up.¹

The gratuitous maliciousness in Dostoyevsky’s *Underground Man* is addressed by Nikolai Mikhailovski, a literary scholar:

The underground man actually begins to torment Lisa for absolutely no reason at all; it is simply because she happened to be at hand. There are no reasons for his spite towards her... The hero torments her because he wants or likes to torment... There is an unconditional cruelty.²

It is likely that the *Underground Man*’s cruelty is multi-determined and that his responses to Lisa involve unconscious displacement of hostility remaining from his previous encounters with schoolmates and the lieutenant. The intensity of the hostility, however, is analogous to those with Asperger disorder.

One seven-year-old boy whom Asperger studied told his mother:

Mummy, I shall take a knife one day and push it into your heart, then blood will spurt out... It would be nice if I were a wolf. Then I could rip apart sheep and people, and then blood would flow.³

Theodore Kaczynski’s sadistic malice was expressed when he described how he “blew to bits” Hugh Scrutton, a computer-rental store owner: “Excellent. Humane way to eliminate somebody. He probably never felt a thing.”⁴

Asperger considered that such responses stemmed from the profound humiliation experienced by the stigmatized child:

Autistic children are often tormented and rejected by their classmates simply because they are different and stand out from the crowd. Their conduct, manner of speech and, not least, often grotesque demeanor cries out to be

¹ Asperger, “*Autistic Psychopathy*,” 77.

² Nikolai Mikhailovski, “Dostoevsky’s Cruel Talent,” quoted in Dostoevsky, *Notes from Underground*, Michael R. Katz, ed. (New York: Norton, 2001), 141–42.

³ Asperger, 79–80.

⁴ Quoted in Chase, 66.

ridiculed. Children in general have a good eye for this and show great accuracy in their mocking of conspicuous character peculiarities. Thus, in the playground or on the way to school one can often see an autistic child at the center of a jeering horde of little urchins. The child himself may be hitting out in blind fury or crying helplessly.⁵

As mentioned in the previous section, in his first year as an undergraduate at Harvard, Kaczynski came to the conclusion that he needed sex-change surgery and scheduled an appointment with the campus psychiatrist to arrange it, but was unable to discuss this when the time came. He stated:

As I walked away from the building afterwards, ...I said to myself why not really kill the psychiatrist and anyone else whom I hate? What is important is not the words that ran through my mind but the way I felt about them. What was entirely new was the fact that I really felt I could kill someone. My very hopelessness had liberated me because I no longer cared about death. I no longer cared about consequences and I said to myself that I really could break out of my rut in life an[d] do things that were daring, irresponsible or criminal.⁶

Dostoyevsky's *Underground Man* also describes feelings of humiliation in his early years, and, like Kaczynski, used his considerable intellect unsuccessfully to make connections with people:

My schoolmates received me with spiteful and pitiless jibes because I wasn't like any of them. But I couldn't tolerate their jibes; I couldn't possibly get along with them as easily as they got along with each other... In order to avoid their jibes, I began to study and made it to the top of the class... Their jibes ceased, but their hostility remained, and the relations between us became cold and strained... As the years went by I made several attempts to get closer to some of them; but these attempts always turned out to be unnatural and ended of their own account.⁷

Not all acts of cruelty and malice, such as stalking and terrorism, are indicative of Asperger syndrome, but when such acts arise, Asperger syndrome should be among the possible underlying problems that may produce them. Recently, three forensic psychiatrists at the University of California School of Medicine, came to a similar conclusion.⁸

⁵ Asperger, 79.

⁶ Chase, 305–06. Note that Tom Ripley's decision to murder Dickie Greenleaf arises after he feels humiliated about being called "queer."

⁷ Dostoevsky, *Notes from Underground* (2001), 46–47.

⁸ J. Arturo Silva, Michelle M. Ferrari, and Gregory B. Leong, "Asperger's disorder and the origins of the Unabomber," *American Journal of Forensic Psychiatry*, 24:2, (2003), 5–43.

They note that Kaczynski was aloof and could not understand the feelings of others. He also exhibited an aversion to being touched and experienced extreme distress when exposed to noise, both common reactions in children with autism. A neighbor described the young Kaczynski as “a child who was an old man before his time,” consistent with Hans Asperger’s description of his young patients as “little professors.” And, as an adult, Kaczynski was extremely impaired in social relationships.

Kaczynski’s preoccupations with bomb-making and the perceived evils of technology, the authors say, may be viewed as typical of the obsessive interests of a person with Asperger syndrome. In their study cited above, the University of California researchers conclude that their characterization of a subset of serial killers as having high-functioning autism could lead to a greater understanding of the etiology of both serial homicide and autism:

Psychological phenomena of central importance to understanding serial killers such as deficits in empathy have frequently been explained as originating from a psychopathic core, thereby missing the possibility that deficits in empathy may also be due to autistic psychopathology.⁹

It makes sense to consider Asperger as a spectrum disorder. Its incidence in the population at large is far greater than is thought. The major problem is a difficulty “reading people,” and those with the disorder are frequently hurt by those who misread them. As a consequence, they may become social isolates like the Underground Man and Kaczynski. Just as it is possible to teach people how to have a dialogue with themselves (by writing a poem, painting a picture, or playing a musical instrument) it is possible to teach a person who has no concept of another’s mind how to be in better touch with people.

Until that occurs, there is bound to be considerable frustration, aggression, and, at times, acts of violence on the part of those cut off from meaningful contact with others, and these feelings will manifest in such problems as stalking.

⁹ Ibid.

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Chapter Ten of *Dostoyevsky's Stalker*. <www.bloomsbury.com>
ISBN 9780761849933

Bloomsbury Publishing

www.thetedkarchive.com