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Self-Injurious Behavior as a Window To the Soul: Support for a Will to Power?

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Abstract. This article describes a rationale for self-injurious behavior in the political world.

The most common perspective on political events still comprises rational and logical analysis based on a preference for gain and an aversion to cost. This perspective is often said to come up short in dealing with self-injurious behavior that seemingly is based on high cost and low, if any, gain. Yet there does appear to be a rational, logical substrate supporting such behavior.

For example--in the politics of the family and proximal social sphere-- anorexia nervosa seems to present mostly cost and little gain leading, too often, to death. However, prudent therapists have noted that many anorexia nervosa patients are generating a huge psychological gain in self-control and control of the political world. What makes this observation difficult to accept is that many people employ other behavioral strategies in the quest for control, do not make such a focus of their moment-to-moment lives, and perceive themselves to be in a situation wherein their control strategies are strongly linked to lethal consequences.

Another example involves oppressed minorities who engage in destruction of their own neighborhoods and in behavior that risks death. Such behavior can certainly look like it would lead to high cost and low gain. However, some political commentators have noted that such behavior may be the only way--at least in the perspective of some of the oppressed--to gain more self-control and control of the world. Again, this observation is difficult for many people to accept.

So, for at least some people in at least some situations, the needs for self-control and political control exhibit extreme power over human behavior. And the situations and people involved seem to be often enough a focus of political conflict. Yet, satisfying these needs is less often the subject of political negotiations to resolve conflict than the giving and taking of the chips of gain and loss within zero-sum games or the Talmudic splitting of hairs about who has more chips.

As Nietzsche has written in The Genealogy of Morals: A Polemic (cited by Hollingdale (1999) as an example of a psychological, political philosopher who eschewed metaphysics) "a will to nothingness, a will opposed to life, a repudiation of the most fundamental pre-conditions of life, but it is and remains a will!..And…man would rather will nothingness than not will." As self-injurious behavior might exemplify, efforts to resolve conflict that focus on the psychological meaning of resources, as opposed to the amount of these resources, may be fruitful and even attenuate the issuing of non-negotiable demands in a zero-sum context. A properly interpreted will to power may, then, be best held aloft, not as a guidon for political conflict and war, but as an agenda for peace via self-struggle. (See Adityanjee. (1994). Jauhar: Mass suicide by self-immolation in Waco, Texas. Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease, 182, 727-728; Baumeister, R.F. (1997). The enigmatic appeal of sexual masochism: Why people desire pain, bondage, and humiliation in sex. Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology, 16, 133-150; Bemporad, J.R., Ratey, J.J., O'Driscoll, G., & Daehler, M.L. (1988). Hysteria, anorexia, and the culture of self-denial. Psychiatry: Journal for the Study of Interpersonal Processes, 51, 96-103; Hollingdale, R.J. (1999). Nietzsche: The man and his philosophy. (pp. 183-184). Cambridge University Press; Shorter, D.L.

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