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Indifference to the Suffering of Others

Occupying the moral and ethical high ground through doublespeak

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First part of an argument developed further in: *Enabling Suffering through Doublespeak and Doublethink: Indifference to poverty and retributive justice as case studies* (2013)

Introduction

The [indifference](#) to the [pain](#) and [suffering](#) of others is a continuing theme of reflection and comment, recently exemplified by Somalian world music star, [K'Naan](#) (*On Indifference to Human Suffering*, *Utne Reader*, 3 May 2013).

Most recently this has taken the form of a much publicised comment by Pope Francis (*Pope Francis condemns global indifference to suffering*, *The Guardian*, 8 July 2013; *Pope Francis condemns global indifference to suffering on visit to Italy's migrant island of Lampedusa*, *The Independent*, 8 July 2013; *Dismantling the globalization of indifference*, *Sooner Catholic*, 18 August 2013). The Pope used his visit to island of Lampedusa to highlight plight of migrants and asylum seekers who die trying to reach Europe. As the Pope notably indicated:

The culture of comfort...makes us insensitive to the cries of other people, makes us live in soap bubbles which, however lovely, are insubstantial; they offer a fleeting and empty illusion which results in indifference to others...In this globalized world, we have fallen into globalized indifference. We have become used to the suffering of others: it doesn't affect me; it doesn't concern me; it's none of my business. (*Comfort makes us indifferent to suffering of migrants*, *Pope says*, *Catholic News Agency*, 8 July 2013)

Disasters anywhere highlight the issue, as noted with respect to Pakistan, for example:

More than 20 million men, women and children are suffering, and one million homes have been carried away by the destructive floodwaters. This is the worst catastrophe Pakistan has seen in 75 years. It is high time to act and to bring aid to the displaced. It

is a humanitarian imperative. (*Pakistan: 20 Million Suffering under Generalized Indifference*, CEI, 20 August 2010).

Now that the "international community" is actively planning to intervene in Syria, the delay in doing so gave rise to relevant comment:

In Syria, more than 40,000 people have been murdered; millions have been forced to flee; countless souls have been psychologically and physically scarred for life; entire villages, towns and farming communities no longer exist; and throngs of desperate, starving children have lost both their parents and their homes. (Anne R. Pierce, *Hell in Syria. Indifference in America. Ricochet*, 2 January 2013)

Curiously missing from current arguments for intervention in Syria, in response to the "unacceptable" use of chemical weapons (rather than the unacceptability of the massive death toll), has been the lack of reference to previous use of chemical weapons by the [US-led Multinational Force in Iraq](#). A notable instance was that of [Fallujah](#) -- now giving rise to a high level of birth defects (*Hypocrisy and Legacy of Death Linger as US Claims Moral Authority in Syria*, *Common Dreams*, 27 August 2013). Also missing is any reference to the identity of the suppliers of the chemical weapons to Syria (as opposed to attributing blame for their use). There is also no comment on whether the proposed intervention will give rise to a death toll equivalent to that already experienced -- as suggested by the case of Iraq.

The following commentary derives from previous concern at the avoidance of [due diligence](#) in the analysis of crises and commentary on them (*Vigorous Application of Derivative Thinking to Derivative Problems: transcending bewailing, hand-wringing and emotional blackmail*, 2013). This concern is most evident in the case of the Pope's effort to occupy the moral high ground with respect to indifference to suffering, as argued more generally (*Is There Never Enough? Religious doublespeak on population and poverty*, 2013).

A wide selection of [references](#) is given below on "[indifference](#)" and on "[suffering](#)" separately, as well as on "[indifference to suffering](#)" -- especially since consideration of "indifference" may imply "suffering", and consideration of "suffering" may imply "indifference".

There is clearly no lack of insight on the matter. More pertinent is the tendency simply to deplore the condition, rather than attempting to frame the concern in terms of why so little is effectively done about it, as argued more generally (*Recognizing the Psychosocial Boundaries of Remedial Action: constraints on ensuring a safe operating space for humanity*, 2009).

There is the curious assumption that "others" will somehow respond appropriately, even though there is little indication that this has proven to be adequate in the past (*Responsibility for Global Governance: Who? Where? When? How? Why? Which? What?* 2008). The issue is further confused through its association with appeals for "tolerance" -- as a means of constraining attitudes and actions which engender suffering. This could be said to encompass a tolerance of indifference to suffering itself.

The approach here is to indicate various "styles" of indifference to suffering -- which may well overlap. The argument is developed in a second part (*Enabling Suffering through Doublespeak and Doublethink: Indifference to poverty and retributive justice as case studies*, 2013) in the following sections:

- [Cultivating indifference to suffering through doublespeak](#)
- [Enabling suffering through religious doublespeak](#)
- [Enabling suffering through legal doublespeak](#)
- [Enabling suffering through political doublespeak: Iraq vs. Syria](#)
- [Exploiting suffering as a means of moral and emotional blackmail](#)
- [Transcendent justification for indifference to the suffering of others?](#)

Religious, legal and political [doublespeak](#) are explored as a means of exploiting suffering in a process of emotional and moral blackmail towards questionable ends. Given the crises faced by civilization, and the level of suffering to be expected, the concluding section focuses on the possible nature of a "transcendent" justification for "indifference" to the suffering of others.

General indifference to suffering

The most systematic attempt to document the extent of suffering has been that of [Ralph G. H. Siu](#) (*Panetics Trilogy*, 1994) through the [International Society for Panetics](#) -- an initiative summarized in *Panetics: the study of the infliction of suffering* (*Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, 1988). A particular focus on suffering is provided by the [Algosphere Alliance for the Alleviation of Suffering](#).

The most succinct account of indifference that emerged from research for this exercise was that of [Gaither Stewart](#) (*The Seduction Of Indifference, Again And Again And Again*, *Countercurrents.org*, 20 December 2007)

Framing offered by Gaither Stewart	
Martin Niemöller (1945)	Checklist of examples of indifference
<i>First they came for the Communists, and I didn't speak up, because I wasn't a Communist. Then they came for the Jews, and I didn't speak up, because I wasn't a Jew.</i>	Indifference about global warming. Indifference about national health care. Indifference about poverty and the abyss between rich and poor. Indifference to the value of labor and the working man. Indifference about a society based on euphemisms and slogans. Indifference about public corruption and crime. Indifference about violence against women. Indifference about arms controls.

*Then they came for the Catholics,
and I didn't speak up,
because I was a Protestant.
Then they came for me,
and by that time there was no one
left to speak up for me.*

Indifference about the government defrauding its citizens.
Indifference about capital punishment.
Indifference about bombing civilians from the stratosphere.
Indifference about facts.
Indifference about a free press
Indifference about the indifference granting the government
license to defraud citizens.
Indifference about indifference.

Indifference of nature to suffering: As noted by Gaither Stewart:

It's true that there are many kinds of indifference and many things to which we can be indifferent. Animals can be loving and attentive one moment and totally indifferent the next. Just watch a cat, after a few caresses it marches away triumphantly. Nature in general is indifferent....

Researching the word indifference I re-encountered Albert Camus' notation of the universe's "benign indifference" toward creation.... The spark of human life in us differentiates us from nature, which, though neither good nor evil, doesn't always seem neutral. But in human beings the battle between good and evil is eternal. From that point of view humanity is also in battle with nature, against its apparent meaninglessness. We humans instead search for meaning.

Therefore man is an alien creature in the universe because he cannot be genuinely indifferent to what is good and what is bad. In that sense, the indifference of reasonable people to war seems inconceivable. In the same western generation that was obsessed enough with the Vietnam War to help bring it to an end, the indifference to the Middle East wars today seems impossible.

From an atheist perspective, Richard Dawkins (*River Out of Eden: a Darwinian view of life*, 1996) argues:

The total amount of suffering per year in the natural world is beyond all decent contemplation. During the minute that it takes me to compose this sentence, thousands of animals are being eaten alive, many others are running for their lives, whimpering with fear, others are slowly being devoured from within by rasping parasites, thousands of all kinds are dying of starvation, thirst, and disease. It must be so. If there ever is a time of plenty, this very fact will automatically lead to an increase in the population until the natural state of starvation and misery is restored. In a universe of electrons and selfish genes, blind physical forces and genetic replication, some people are going to get hurt, other people are going to get lucky, and you won't find any rhyme or reason in it, nor any justice. The universe that we observe has precisely the properties we should expect if there is, at bottom, no design, no purpose, no evil, no good, nothing but pitiless indifference.

Indifference of God: By contrast, for the religious, the degree of human suffering has long encouraged speculation and debate on the apparent indifference of God. As framed by Roger Foster (*Is God Indifferent to Human Suffering? The Good News*):

If God is all-powerful, He could easily prevent disasters such as earthquakes, hurricanes, tsunamis, tornadoes, floods, droughts and volcanic eruptions. But He lets them happen. Why?

Some assert that *God is not indifferent to suffering: a Christian perspective* (Ysgol Stamwell School, 21 May 2013). For the Catholic Pope, *God is not indifferent to human suffering* (Catholic News Agency, 10 December 2003). The question as to *Why does God allow innocent people to suffer?* (Christian Answers Net) is however recognized as one of the most difficult questions for Christians to answer. Saleem Akhtar Malik asks *God's Indifference? Why do the righteous suffer?* (Booksie, 25 May 2012).

For Stan Duncan, *God Suffers When We Suffer* (The Huffington Post, 28 May 2013), arguing:

God is indeed in the midst of suffering, but as its resolution, not its cause. God is in its healing. God is in the relief workers, the doctors, the volunteers, and in the heroic acts of people who saved their neighbors and pulled survivors from their shattered homes. God is in the relief agencies, like the Red Cross and Church World Service, who showed up the morning after the storm with emergency supplies and health and nutrition kits. God's act of creation is for good, not evil, and when the creation falls, God is in the pain too, working for the best possible outcome of the destruction.

From a Jewish perspective, Jonathan Wittenberg responds to the question *Can God really love us when we suffer so much?* (The JC.com, 24 September 2009):

God does not prevent pain and suffering, in people or animals. God does not stop disasters overwhelming thousands of people or overrule injustice when it torments and murders millions. Is God, then, not at best indifferent and at worst cruel? Further, are not many of the most appalling deeds committed, unashamedly, in God's name? How dare we then speak of God's love? We cannot blame God for how religion is abused. But we can ask where, if the so-called benign deity allows tragedies to happen, God's mercies reside.

Buddhism naturally explores the matter from another perspective, stressing that right concentration ensures indifference to pleasure and suffering. Thus for the Vipassana Dhura Meditation Society:

Some people fear that giving up attachment makes a person uncaring and indifferent toward others. On the contrary -- although one no longer needs others, true compassion for other beings increases the more one stops clinging to the illusory ego.

Nature of indifference: Inspired by the example of indifference constituted by the [Holocaust](#), in a much-cited speech [Elie Wiesel](#) (*The Perils of Indifference*, *American Rhetoric*, 12 April 1999) comments:

What is indifference? Etymologically, the word means "no difference." A strange and unnatural state in which the lines blur between light and darkness, dusk and dawn, crime and punishment, cruelty and compassion, good and evil. What are its courses and inescapable consequences? Is it a philosophy? Is there a philosophy of indifference conceivable? Can one possibly view indifference as a virtue? Is it necessary at times to practice it simply to keep one's sanity, live normally, enjoy a fine meal and a glass of wine, as the world around us experiences harrowing upheavals? ...

Man can live far from God -- not outside God. God is wherever we are. Even in suffering? Even in suffering. In a way, to be indifferent to that suffering is what makes the human being inhuman. Indifference, after all, is more dangerous than anger and hatred. Anger can at times be creative. One writes a great poem, a great symphony. One does something special for the sake of humanity because one is angry at the injustice that one witnesses. But indifference is never creative. Even hatred at times may elicit a response. You fight it. You denounce it. You disarm it.

Indifference elicits no response. Indifference is not a response. Indifference is not a beginning; it is an end. And, therefore, indifference is always the friend of the enemy, for it benefits the aggressor -- never his victim, whose pain is magnified when he or she feels forgotten. The political prisoner in his cell, the hungry children, the homeless refugees -- not to respond to their plight, not to relieve their solitude by offering them a spark of hope is to exile them from human memory. And in denying their humanity, we betray our own.

Indifference, then, is not only a sin, it is a punishment. And this is one of the most important lessons of this outgoing century's wide-ranging experiments in good and evil.

As noted thereafter ([Against Indifference: a conversation with Elie Wiesel](#), *Reform Judaism*, Winter 2005):

Elie Wiesel: "I believe that a person who is indifferent to the suffering of others is complicit in the crime. And that I cannot allow, at least not for myself."

Elie Wiesel: "The opposite of love is not hate, it's indifference. The opposite of art is not ugliness, it's indifference. The opposite of faith is not heresy, it's indifference. And the opposite of life is not death, it's indifference."

For Janette E. McDonald ([The Spirit of Hope and its Near Enemy Indifference: a phenomenological continuum](#), 2007):

What is indifference? Where hope and hopelessness are full of emotion, indifference lacks it. Where hope and hopelessness often demand some kind of human action, indifference stifles it. Where hope and hopelessness are heartfelt, indifference has no heart. Where hope and hopelessness epitomize our deepest humanity, indifference diminishes it. Its qualities are carelessness, thoughtlessness, mindlessness, feelinglessness, and perhaps even, humanlessness. It is this diminished human state that creates the potential for personal and global catastrophe because indifferent people stand by idle and do nothing often with a callous and cowardice. Therefore, I suggest that one's state of indifference is an ignorant intersection of vacuity and numbness which reveals itself most conspicuously as apathy.

Absence of empathy: A commentary in the *Daily Kos* ([Indifference: the absence of empathy to suffering and discrimination](#), 15 December 2009) notes:

Planet earth is a vast stage upon which a diversity of people acts out the scenes of our lives on a daily basis. This diversity sometimes becomes a focal point for intense distrust, animosity, and sadly violence over said differences. Humanity likes to divide and categorize ourselves into distinct groups of people based on largely socially constructed characteristics ranging from race, gender, religion, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, ethnicity, and so on. Instead of celebrating the unique individuality of such diversity of identity humanity has all too often used such differences as a means to justifying destructive ends. The indifference displayed all too often for the history that is an open book for all to read is a major social problem. Our disconnection to the plight and pain of our fellow sisters and brothers as a united human race across this planet must be examined if we are going to improve life for all...

The only way humanity can continue to improve life situations across the board is to more fully wake up to our own ignorance and indifference. As much as no one would like to admit it we all have been indifferent to people's problems and have not been cognizant of our prejudices about the world and people different from ourselves. The way that we stop genocide from happening, people being fired for their sexual orientation, or start to address poverty is to stop being too indifferent. The absence of empathy displayed far too much across a great diversity of peoples (essentially all of us) remains a barrier to our own prosperity as a planet. Indifference and ignorance are not to be claimed by a single group or person because we have all engaged in this on one level or another. The challenge for humanity is to become more socially conscious of the wide range of issues that impact people across this planet. This is not a Liberal or Conservative political issue as much as it is simply caring about the

human race and the course of civilization through greater awareness with solutions that get to the heart of our problems.

For Edvard Jordaán (*Responsibility, Indifference and Global Poverty: a Levinasian perspective*, 2006):

Consider the fact that thousands of people die daily from preventable, poverty-related causes through no fault of their own. However, despite our failure to prevent more of these preventable deaths, we generally do not seem to consider ourselves particularly guilty, unjust, bad, immoral or irresponsible for our failure to act. This study attempts to understand our continued good conscience amid the suffering of the world's poorest. In doing so, it draws on Emmanuel Levinas's ethical philosophy to demonstrate how writings in the principal debate about the extent of our responsibility for others at the global level, the so-called 'cosmopolitan-communitarian debate', contain a number of elements that enable and perpetuate our indifference to the world's poorest.

For Marcia Sá Cavalcante Schuback (*Towards a phenomenology of pain and suffering: a reflection on Max Scheler's phenomenology of pain and suffering*):

The greatest danger to humanity in the age of indifference is not the danger of a total extermination of life. The greatest danger is to be anesthetized by indifference by which we suffer compassion for the pain of the other in order to avoid encountering the pain of discovering otherness in oneself, being the facticity of one's own destiny. The pain of a non lonely birth and a lonely death is the pain of transforming oneself by pain. This transformation consists of abandoning the subsistence in the self in order to give one self to be coming an other. Scheler observed many times in the Nietzschean mood that feeling compassion (*Mitleid*) is not difficult. But it is difficult to feel joint-joy (*Mitfreude*). It is possible to read in Scheler's claim that only in joint-joy can in different compassion be transformed in to the passion of belonging and in this way in to the realization of solidarity.

World problems as potential indicators of indifference: It is also appropriate to note that any comprehensive collection of "world problems" recognized by disparate constituencies must necessarily offer an indication of forms of suffering to which many are indifferent -- especially when the issues are held to be of little significance from other perspectives. This is the case with regard to the compilation of the [World Problems Project](#) within the framework of the *Encyclopedia of World Problems and Human Potential*.

Varieties of indifference to suffering

These may perhaps be usefully clustered as follows

- [Indifference to pervasive suffering](#)
- [Indifference to neighbourhood suffering](#)
- [Indifference to institutionalised suffering](#)
- [Indifference to suffering elsewhere](#)
- [Indifference to the suffering of another group](#)
- [Indifference to non-physical suffering](#)
- [Indifference to historical suffering](#)
- [Indifference to non-human suffering](#)

Indifference to pervasive suffering: The most obvious form of indifference to suffering is the simple process of ignoring it as irrelevant -- according to the principle of the [three wise monkeys](#): "see no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil". Expressed otherwise, suffering then passes "under the radar" of attention. The process is so effective that people can be exposed to suffering but be blithely unaware of its nature or extent. One articulation from a Thai perspective is offered by Zashnain Zainal (*Behind the Smiles: callous indifference to the suffering of others*, 1 March 2013):

People walk by, most with little care for the disabled, the children and the elderly who decorate the uneven roads. Stretched palms, others bowing low at every pedestrian who passes by, people live in either utter misery or burdened with irregular misfortune.... the poverty and urban grimness that consumes most of the city, leaving only the privileged few scattered in high-rise condos or luxury bungalows.

Looking ahead, the night seems unbearable. The smog is different, maybe the reaction of pollution and a vile sense of toxic loss. I see the homeless, chained to this culture of modernization where people chase after a dream that are beyond their means -- and sacrificing their core values that makes us human.

The victimization, infuriating those in the working class, has seeped deep into the multi-clustered society. Hardship of those unfortunate to have tasted it, or drown in its cesspool, are burdened by the guilt, the frustration of their predicament -- for being born poor, marginalized and begging at the bottom of the social pyramid. Delicate to bear the thought of having the soul to live but in a city that seems to care not. Their minds and bodies, bruised to suffering, coldheartedness, and inhumanity, they toil away in a society that lacks the capacity for empathy, hidden behind the smiles.

Indifference has now been recognized through the term [psychic numbing](#). This is described as the tendency for those in a society to withdraw attention from both experiences that were traumatic as well as from current issues that are perceived to be of great risk, but have low probability. It is relevant from both a collective and individual perspective. As noted by J. E. Robertson (*'Psychic numbing':*

why does mass suffering induce mass indifference? Casavaria, 15 August 2010):

'Psychic numbing' is a relatively new term, assigned to the phenomenon which shows people tend to feel less urgent compassion, and tend to give less, when the suffering in question is shown to be more systemic and more pervasive, or affecting larger numbers of people. Some psychologists believe it is linked to our intuitive sense that if one suffers alone, the suffering is worse, but if one is accompanied, there might be some security in numbers, not just emotionally, but practically.

The phenomenon is associated with what has come to be recognized as **compassion fatigue**, namely the gradual lessening of compassion as a consequence of the multiple appeals for it. This may also be termed "care fatigue". Institutionally it is especially recognized as **donor fatigue**. For individual activists it may be recognized as **burnout**.

Where there is some awareness of particular suffering -- a degree of sensitivity and empathy -- there is typically a need to tolerate it, especially if little can seemingly be done about it. There is then a level of habituation, possibly to very high orders of suffering in others. Depending on the country, the culture, or the neighbourhood, this may require acceptance of direct exposure to the suffering repeatedly highlighted in national and global campaigns: hunger, poverty, homelessness, violence, crime, etc.

Indifference to neighbourhood suffering: The general habituation to suffering is especially highlighted for the individual in a "neighbourhood" context, again depending on the country and culture.

- indifference of neighbours to the suffering inflicted on others through noisy, odours, aggressivity, incivility
- indifference to exacerbation of street pollution through discarding waste, urinating in public, dog faeces,
- indifference to suffering of the impoverished, the homeless, the disabled -- evident in solicitation by beggars and possibly even highlighted by the presence of dead bodies in the street
- indifference to fear and insecurity engendered in others by harassment, attacks, or exposure to their consequences for others
- indifference to solicitation by the needy, whether beggars, prostitutes, or otherwise
- closed houses of prostitution
- airlines, etc transportation, cafes, public spaces (*Guidelines in Response to Degrees of Anti-social Behaviour: airline passengers and children as a case study*, 2011)

Indifference to institutionalised suffering: As noted with respect to those in prison, many can be readily considered to be characterized as indifferent to suffering. A prisoner is indifferent to the suffering of the victim, the prison guard must on some level be indifferent to the suffering of someone who is stuck in the system in order to keep sane in their job, the judge is supposed to be indifferent in order to dispassionately make a legal decision (*The ethics of indifference to suffering*, 6 April 2010). There is of course the degree to which some may have been convicted because of action in defence of those on whom suffering has been inflicted. Irrespective of such considerations, suffering is typically inflicted on some prisoners by others -- with the complicity of bystanders. Society is generally indifferent to such dynamics.

Other variants are evident in concentration camps, educational institutions, the military and certain corporate environments. Especially questionable are cases of indifference to suffering in health care environments, hospices, and orphanages.

Indifference to suffering elsewhere: The phenomenon of psychic numbing applies most obviously in the case of reports of suffering at a distance, whether in another neighbourhood, another country, or in a distant region (as distinct from the case of other institutions, as discussed above, or another group, considered group). Examples include:

- Benjamin Laude (*Confronting Indifference: the forgotten crisis in Eastern Congo*, *The Julliard Journal*, May 2009)
- Savo Heleta (*The Arab and Muslim Indifference Regarding the Suffering in Darfur*, 1 August 2009)
- Art Schaffer (*Indifference, The Unacknowledged Immorality*, *Eclectic Church*)
- Hana Shalabi (*Palestinian non-violence and global indifference*, *Al Jazeera*, 23 Mar 2012)

Most obvious is the relative indifference to the suffering in wars "elsewhere" (*List of wars by death toll; List of ongoing military conflicts; Review of the range of virtual wars*). A degree of suffering, and the indifference to it, may also be evident from the number of protests -- and the felt need to protest that indifference, as with many neglected problems (*List of ongoing protests*).

Indifference to the suffering of another group: This applies in the case of the suffering of some other ethnic or religious group, whether or not those affected are in a distant region or separate in some way within a neighbourhood. Examples include:

- Abdu'l-Bahá (*The Cruel Indifference of People towards the Suffering of Foreign Races*, *Baha'i International Community*, 24 November 2003)
- Philip Weiss (*Indifference to Gaza Suffering Chalked Up to Jewish Ethnocentrism*, *MondoWeiss*, 10 December 2008)
- Michael Finch (*Christian Indifference to Christian Suffering*, *FrontPageMag*, 12 April 2013)

Christians are being persecuted all over the world. Churches are being burned and destroyed, girls are being raped and ancient Christian communities reaching back 2,000 years are being obliterated. And the world yawns. Most shockingly, many Christians in the West, worse than yawning, look away and in some cases embrace the perpetrators and blame our allies.

Historically this has been most obvious in the case of "lower castes" or "lower classes", more recently exemplified by racial discrimination, as in South Africa, or in parts of the USA (*Harry Belafonte Calls Black Celebrities' Indifference To Black Suffering Unconscionable*, *Universal Mindset*, 3 July 2013)). In earlier periods, this was most evident in the case of slavery -- of which traces remain today, other than those now defined as wage slaves. It continues to be of significant with respect to bonded labour.

The suffering may also be associated with various forms of [massacre](#) (or [pogrom](#)), extending to [genocide](#) (*List of events named massacres*; *List of genocides by death toll*). An effort has been made to distinguish the *Stages of genocide, influences leading to genocide, and efforts to prevent it* -- presumably associated with different degrees of suffering and indifference to it.

The example of genocide to which most attention has been drawn is that of the [Holocaust](#), namely the mass murder of 6 million Jews during World War II. There is continuing concern at the relative indifference to suffering occasioned by that process. The difficulty is that that particular genocide is used to exemplify the challenge of all forms of genocide -- with the others only too readily forgotten and ignored in the process as relatively inconsequential.

Typically any example of massacre or genocide, and interpretations of it, gives rise to controversy. Thus in response to the above-cited comments of [Elie Wiesel](#) (*The Perils of Indifference, American Rhetoric*, 12 April 1999), [Lawrence Davidson](#) (*The Crime of Indifference: an analysis, Information Clearing House*, 30 June 2013) argues:

Recently there have been several articles calling attention to the fact that, as [Uri Avnery](#) puts it, "We [Israelis] have become so accustomed to this situation [an occupation "going on only a few minutes drive from our homes"] that we see it as normal." [Ethan Bronner](#), the *New York Times*' former Jerusalem bureau chief, [confirmed this](#) pervasive indifference to the suffering that Israeli policies and discriminatory practices cause. "Few [Israelis] even talk about the Palestinians.... Instead of focusing on what has long been seen as their central challenge -- how to share this land with another nation -- Israelis are largely ignoring it."

The indifference, leading to detachment, that Wiesel so fears can quickly become a habitual part of our lives. After all, so much of our lives are just "a stream of habitual actions" that can be either "rationally useful or irrationally unfit for a given situation." It is in the latter case that we get into trouble. When Israelis ignore Palestinian suffering they act in a way "irrationally unfit for their given situation" and that means, in Wiesel's terms, "there is something wrong" with them. As Americans, we should recognize the symptoms, for we too have repeatedly behaved in this fashion. Having modeled this insensitivity for the Zionists, it now stands as a mark of our "special relationship" with the land of Israel.

The case of the Holocaust thus exemplifies **a complex of issues relating to the indifference to suffering of another group**:

- the controversy typically associated with anything described as massacre or genocide, notably the tendency by historians to challenge or defend claimed fatalities, leading in the case of the massacres of indigenous Australians to what has been described as the "[history wars](#)". The controversy regarding the [Armenian massacre](#), and its denial, continues to be of political significance.
- the tendency to promote the significance of the suffering of one group of victims, or one act of genocide, so as effectively to diminish attention to others. In the case of the Holocaust, little reference is made to the impact on gypsies and homosexuals, for example. This suggests an unquestioned tendency to "competitive suffering" -- a dubious effort to establish which group has suffered the most.
- the degree to which special privileges are subsequently claimed for the group subject to massacre or genocide -- especially evident in the case of indigenous peoples affected by genocidal policies in the past

There is an obvious difficulty in engaging in "rational" discourse over such matters without evoking accusations of inappropriate discrimination or insensitivity. Again this is especially evident in the case of indigenous peoples and of the Jewish people. At what point do the arguments of those who have suffered become excessive, however, even to be deemed inappropriate? Can they ever be so deemed? If it is the case that no "rational" discussion of the matter is possible, appropriate or effective, how then to engage fruitfully with indifference to suffering -- whether in this case or more generally? Should it be accepted that such matters are "beyond discussion"?

As previously discussed, there is a case for engaging those who have suffered in the articulation of guidelines for such discussion if that is considered possible (*Guidelines for Critical Dialogue between Worldviews: as exemplified by the need for non-antisemitic dialogue with Israelis?* 2006).

Indifference to non-physical suffering: Mental suffering can also be called psychological or emotional (see [Psychological pain](#)).

Wikipedia profiles a range of forms of mental suffering: [grief](#), [sadness](#), [depression \(mood\)](#), [disgust](#), [irritation](#), [anger](#), [rage](#), [hate](#), [contempt](#), [jealousy](#), [envy](#), [craving or yearning](#), [frustration](#), [heartbreak](#), [anguish](#), [anxiety](#), [angst](#), [fear](#), [panic](#), [horror](#), [righteous indignation](#), [shame](#), [guilt](#), [remorse](#), [regret](#), [resentment](#), [repentance](#), [embarrassment](#), [humiliation](#), [boredom](#), [apathy](#), [confusion](#), [disappointment](#), [hopelessness](#), [doubt](#), [emptiness](#), [homesickness](#), [loneliness](#), [rejection](#), [pity](#), [self-pity](#).

Consideration can also be given to the indifference typically associated with suffering consequent on [structural violence](#) (including [cultural violence](#)) or on [symbolic violence](#). Also of relevance is indifference to the suffering associated with [social rejection](#), namely when an individual is deliberately excluded from a social relationship or social interaction for social rather than practical reasons.

Indifference to historical suffering: For many groups the memory of massacres of the past is far from forgotten -- even when long past. This frames consideration of their relationship with other groups, again as is typical of the Jewish people. Such memories are also typical of peoples whose efforts to achieve independence have been violently repressed or considered impossible.

It is readily forgotten that this is also true of many other peoples and especially indigenous peoples with their particular reliance on oral history -- as with those who have suffered exceptionally from colonialism and its efforts to annihilate their cultures. The descendants of those who perpetrated those acts have typically forgotten the reprehensible role of their ancestors, or set such events aside as "incidental" and subject to a variety of interpretations. It is this which can be a source of suffering in that it exacerbates the indifference perceived to be exhibited by the perpetrators.

One useful framing is offered by [Honni van Rijswijk](#) and [Thalia Anthony](#) (*Can the Common Law Adjudicate Historical Suffering, Melbourne University Law Review*, 36, 2012, 2). The concern can also be set in a religious context, as by [Kenneth L. Gentry, Jr.](#)

(*Historical Suffering and the Postmillennial Hope*, *Postmillennialism*, 14 April 2012).

Indifference to non-human suffering: Equivalents to the forms of indifference to suffering noted with respect to humans are to be found with respect to the relationship of humans to animals -- and potentially to plants. Examples include:

- slaughter of species to the point of extinction, as in the case of the **bison**, the **moa** or the **dodo**. Arguably the process continues through overexploitation for food, destruction of habitats, and increase in pollution (*IUCN Red List Critically Endangered species*)
- housing of animals under inhumane conditions (intensive farming, zoos, as pets)
- cruel and inhumane transportation and slaughterhouse practices, including questionable hunting and fishing practices (horns, shark fins, etc)

There are many commentaries on the human-engendered suffering of animals and indifference to it, including:

- Larry Brown (*How can so many Christians be indifferent to animal suffering?* *Animal Liberation Front*, 25 January 2013)
- Michael W. Fox (*Animal-Insensitivity Syndrome: a cognitive and affective developmental disorder*, *Dr.FoxVet*, .
- Andrew Linzey (*Why Animal Suffering Matters*, 2009)

As argued from a vegetarian perspective, the unthinking consumption of animal products typically conceals an indifference to the degree of suffering associated with the manner by which they were obtained -- an indifference which is seldom questioned.

Curiously, whilst some ecosystems are explicitly recognized as "stressed" or "endangered", or even in process of final "collapse", there is little effort to infer any associated "suffering". It could be asserted that humanity is typically indifferent to the suffering of ecosystems unless they can be reframed as being of economic value (if only for purposes of tourism). Examples would include destruction of forests, extinction of songbirds, rendering rivers and wetlands lifeless, and the like.

In the light of the extent of human indifference to the suffering of non-humans, it is instructive to speculate on the indifference which "extraterrestrials" might consider appropriate in their dealings with "non-extraterrestrials" -- especially if their sensitivity in the matter is inspired by that of humanity (*Writing Guidelines for Future Occupation of Earth by Extraterrestrials: Be done by as you did ?* 2010).

Complicity of bystanders in suffering: standing by and doing nothing

Physical violence: The most striking form of indifference to suffering is that of the bystander who is witness to violence -- typically perpetrated on the vulnerable or defenceless. Examples include the following, inviting various reservations:

- parent striking a child
- human striking an animal
- harassment. whether male on female, homophobic, or bullying
- rape, as with various notable cases, including the [Richmond High School gang rape](#) (*Police: As many as 20 present at gang rape outside school dance*, *CNN*, 28 October 2009) and several in Delhi (*Delhi gang rape case*, 2012)
- mugging
- (attempted) murder, knifing, etc

Bystander attitudes have been variously discussed, notably by Maia Szalavitz (*What Bystanders Can Do to Stop Rape Why bystanders don't act when they see violent crimes*, *Time*, 11 January 2013; *Bystander Psychology: why some witnesses to crime do nothing*, *Time*, 11 November 2011). See also Stephanie Chen (*Gang rape raises questions about bystanders' role*, *CNN*, 30 October 2009).

A significant factor may be a reigning culture of **omerta**, especially in **no-go urban areas** (*Marseille : une médecin brise l'omerta*, *Le Point*, 16 juillet 2013; *Marseille: une mère brise l'omerta*, *FranceTVinfo*, 26 aout 2013).

Hazing rituals could be considered to be institutionalised approaches to bystander complicity in the humiliation of others, possibly associated with violence -- even resulting in death. Those responsible for the institutions may well be indifferent to the impact of hazing on some -- reframing the experience as a celebration of tradition and fortitude.

Incivility: Whilst seemingly of little consequence, incivility can be especially "wounding" to the vulnerable and the elderly. The most obvious example is the failure to offer to them a seat in public transportation -- when all seats are occupied.

Confidence trickery: Many situations in which con artists operate involve the presence of bystanders who may be more or less aware of the process through which the mark is duped. This may extend to miss-selling of objects as is typical of market situations and bazaars where it is essentially a case of **buyer beware**. Bystanders do not feel any obligation to warn the person being duped and may observe the process with interest, if not amusement.

A variant is evident in the case of other forms of miss-selling, as with the sale of toxic **financial derivatives**. Although any individual transaction is typically a process conducted with a degree of privacy, many institutions can be considered "bystanders" complicit in the failure to warn the gullible of the problematic nature of the sale (and the small print). Again there is no obligation for such institutions to intervene in the process, as was only too evident in the case of the processes triggering the financial crisis.

Schadenfreude: enjoying the suffering of others

It follows from the complicity of bystanders, as indicated above, that some derive a form of vicarious pleasure from observing that suffering -- whether harassment, bullying, or otherwise. Rather than being simply curious, as in the previous case, this then takes the form of pleasure, perhaps deliberately sought.

This pleasure clearly extends to that of violence in the media, which many welcome as entertainment -- irrespective of the degree of

violence. This may extend to acquisition of pornography involving violence, or even to [snuff movies](#).

A similar case is evident with respect to interrogation, however it may be "enhanced" to the point of being torture. Again this typically figures in the offerings of media entertainment. The nature of the pleasure is evident to a degree in the photographs released of those involved in the [Abu Ghraib prison abuses](#) -- and the humiliation and fear they sought to inflict as a feature of the enhanced interrogation which they were called upon to use by their superiors in the USA.

The vindictive justice evident in the legally acknowledged abusive treatment of Bradley Manning suggests that this be considered a form of Schadenfreude (*Bradley Manning's treatment was cruel and inhuman*, UN torture chief rules, *The Guardian*, 12 March 2012).

The potential for the enjoyment of suffering is more widely evident in power relationships typical of the workplace, prisons, the military and various forms of "boot camp".

The argument is continued in a second part: *Enabling Suffering through Doublespeak and Doublethink: Indifference to poverty and retributive justice as case studies* (2013) in sections on:

[Cultivating indifference to suffering through doublespeak](#)
[Enabling suffering through religious doublespeak](#)
[Enabling suffering through legal doublespeak](#)
[Enabling suffering through political doublespeak: Iraq vs. Syria](#)
[Exploiting suffering as a means of moral and emotional blackmail](#)
[Transcendent justification for indifference to the suffering of others?](#)

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