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Parsing Impact is Difficult and Important

25 September 2022

In what feels like ages ago, I wrote a reflection called “Parsing Intentions is Difficult and Important” about what a confounding thing intentions actually are. But the idea must’ve been simmering still in my head over the years because the flip side of it came to me in a flash. Parsing impact, whether for pride or accountability, is just as messy but we have to deal with it if we want to actually grow together.

I’m sure many of you will have been in some circle, group process, organizing meeting, or even romantic/friendship squabble and had someone wield a tool or phrase in a way that felt at odds with that thing’s purpose. The classic example of this is the “tenderqueer” archetype where they use social justice or trauma language in manipulative ways but I’ve also seen it happen with conflict mediation, communication, facilitation, or organizing tools more broadly. I’ve seen particularly men learn some technique like nonviolent communication and literally use it to evade accountability within minutes. Obviously this is a big deal with actively malicious actors, but it’s equally as brain melting when reasonably well-intentioned people do it just because they don’t have a strong awareness

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or self-control around the ways their trauma and mental illness manifest as reactions to things. Worst of all, it can be really confusing and delicate to call out in the moment.

Level one of awareness in these domains is the person who believes only their intentions really matter. This is endlessly annoying. “I didn’t meannnnnnnn to be racist. Don’t you know I’m a good person????”. Or played up a bit: “I didn’t wantttttt you to be harmed when I kicked you in the face. It just happened like that! Not my fault really because I was thinking happy thoughts!”

So when this person gets in some situation that forces them to grow, usually the next step is the intent versus impact discussion. I talked about this in the prior essay so I won’t dig into it much but suffice to say: Intention can impact.. well... impact but also, impact definitely matters more than intent. Most people only really get this far in thinking about it though. However, I think there are some finer lines here than we’re used to acknowledging that could prove a bit spicy but are realllllly important if we ever want to escape the rut of shit communication and accountability that we as a species, but also within political movements, have fallen into.

I’ll use a situation that every queer or longterm activist has seen or had happen directly (or likely done ourselves on some scale!). Let’s call the first person the “Bad thing doer”. Now the bad thing that the BTD did, might not even be that bad. It might not be bad at all. It could be pretty bad though too. But the impact is disproportionately colossal. Introducing..... the Bad Thing Experiencer. The issue is that BTD may have made a mistake, but what they probably didn’t see coming is that the BTE (who may even be someone they deeply love adding to the betrayal noise) is about to have a trauma and mental illness response that is wildly disproportionate to the Bad Thing itself. In anarchist and some other activist communities the BTE will often call for a formal accountability process or at least somehow leverage the language of accountability and violence to try

to express just how bad they felt. They may even wildly distort the facts of the situation to better explain (to themselves especially) just how bad they felt. In non radical queer communities this just turns into tons of drama and gossip and accusation mud pits. Either way, the resulting community and individual emotional damage can be deeply disturbing and take years to untangle if it even ever is.

So the BTD may have done something bad, and that bad thing may have triggered the response the BTE had, but is it really their fault? Are they responsible for that impact? Obviously not. Or at least not in full. Who or whatever it is in the BTE's head that made them that delicate and hyper-responsive in this area is clearly mostly to blame. But they're probably pretty far away in time and/or space from whatever is happening. So the only one to take the hit is the BTD.

This could even be something like someone says something slightly transphobic, it hits my central nervous system, and I respond with the wrath of every trans ever harmed anywhere. It feels as if this person invented transphobia *and* kicked my dog (and i don't even have a dog). Another obviously fertile territory for this kind of thing is jealousy in any relationship, but especially in the context of non-monogamy. "You actually have a crush on them? I feel like I'm dying and it's your fault for hanging out with them when you knew it could make me have a freak-out!".

So these scenarios make part of the impact question visible but there are other examples that I think apply to an even broader swath of people. Seemingly most people experience considerable amounts of shame in their lives and some people experience tons of it inexplicably haunting their every waking moment. And what the fuck even is shame? The sense of being permanently bad? Original sin but somehow even *more* vague? Weaponized internalized isms? Whatever it is, it feels bad as hell and it ruins people's lives and sense of self-worth. But one of the common impacts of people with a strong shame

response is to interpret legitimate critiques as an attack on their fundamental character (there can also be neurodiversity stuff in here). One person says “Hey man fuck you *that was shitty*.” the recipient hears “*you are* a worthless piece of shit go kys.” Obviously this kind of shame response is way outside of the control and responsibility of the first speaker even if they made their point without coddling the receiver.

What these two example scenarios have in common is obviously that there was an impact beyond anything the initial person should meaningfully feel bad about or be held accountable for. What they also have in common is a recipient person who failed to hold themselves accountable for their own reaction, however urgent and natural it felt at the time. And like, who among us doesn’t get the plight of the recipient? Big feelings? Shame? Triggers? Sheer terror? Yeah it be like that. And for sure the trauma done to us was not our fault so how could our trauma responses be our responsibility? And this is where it gets tricky because, while our internal response may not be our fault, how we handle it does fall under our personal responsibility. We have a duty to learn about ourselves — our weaknesses, fear, and dark brokenness — if only to better protect those we love and interact with. But it’s also critically important in order to grow in compassion for our weird little hearts and brains.

So while parsing intentions is messy, parsing impact has got to be just as hard. Because while a person’s trauma and mental illness may not be our fault, loving someone also means learning to step around their landmines (for both people’s sake ☒). And at the end of the day, who really cares about strictly categorizing fault? It becomes basically impossible when you get into the chaotic complexity of like second order impacts as well (ie. the ripples of our actions). It’s a fool’s errand and a hotspot for brain worms. But, and this is a big but, while impact is more important than intention, we have to all be really brave when it comes to owning our shit on every side of a conflict.

I have no idea how to cleanly parse harm done from pre-existing mental illness and trauma. It’s much easier to fall into things like Fundamental Attribution Error (“i had a bad day but you’re a fucking demon” or conversely “They have a lot of hardship and i am just scum”). But to the extent we can do the work of empathy and wade through our own shame in order to get at some meaningful vulnerability, guilt, and empathy, we may be able to better transcend conflict, be accountable, care for ourselves, heal relationship trauma, and learn about each other on deeper levels.

But anyways, if you hated this essay it’s not my fault because I’m like really perfect actually.