

“The Bystander Effect”: Thomas Merton and Social Psychology

By **Ann Gelsheimer**

To put it in concrete terms, the Christian is not only one who seeks the expansion and development of his own individuality and the satisfaction of his most legitimate natural needs but one who recognizes himself responsible for the good of others, for their own temporal fulfillment, and ultimately for their eternal salvation.¹

As a citizen of Toronto, Canada, I have been shocked to see the increasing number of poor and homeless people in this prosperous city. According to the Toronto Disaster Relief Committee, the tens of thousands of people without housing and without adequate food and health care constitute one of the largest and most serious national disasters that Canada has ever faced. Spokespersons for Health Providers against Poverty assert that politicians, bureaucrats, and members of the health professions are “blatantly unwilling” to combat poverty in this province as the leading preventable cause of illness, including a higher risk of cancer, heart disease, and diabetes as well as mental health problems and school related difficulties.²

Yet in spite of how visible this problem has become – it is difficult to not notice the many homeless people of varying ages on the streets of Toronto seeking assistance from passers-by – municipal, provincial, and federal governments have done nothing substantial to address the problems of poverty or homelessness. Sadly, ongoing poverty and homelessness such as is found in Toronto can also be seen among large, prosperous cities elsewhere in this world. Theories and research from social psychology, which help to explain from a psychological point of view how it is we may be able to live with chronic poverty and homelessness among our neighbours, provide a pertinent and suggestive context for observations from Thomas Merton that further address the moral and spiritual aspects of this situation.

Bystander Apathy

The so-called “bystander effect,” also known as “bystander apathy,” is an interesting theoretical place to begin our consideration of why help is not always forthcoming from society when a person or group of persons is obviously in need. The initial study of this phenomenon was prompted by a sensational *New York Times* story describing the murder of Kitty Genovese in front of her apartment building in 1964. Although the attacker left the scene twice and the assault took over half an hour to complete, there was little assistance offered to the young woman from the 38 neighbors who witnessed the assault. The apparent callous apathy of these 38 bystanders became the focus of national attention and psychological investigation. In the first study of bystander intervention in emergencies in

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1968, researchers noted that the presence of other people who could respond to an emergency appeared to reduce each individual's feelings of responsibility and lengthened the time before he or she responded to a person in need.³ More recent research summarized the surprising social phenomenon this way: "the larger a group of bystanders is, the less likely any one bystander is to offer a victim help in an emergency."⁴ Although personality and background do not seem to predict helping behaviors in actual emergencies, investigators found that an increased number of bystanders facilitated helping when the group was highly cohesive and particularly when being socially responsible was a valued group norm. Given these findings, I wonder if indifference or lack of a helping response to so many in great need in our cities might be said to indicate a lack of both cohesiveness as well as an ethic of social concern or responsibility at a societal level.

Other factors that increased the probability of bystanders becoming involved in assisting a person in an emergency include the expectation that one will be interacting with the same group of bystanders again in the future,⁵ and the experience of eye-contact between a bystander and the victim/person in need.⁶ For example, a gaze shared between a victim and an observing woman bystander actually reversed the bystander effects that typically occurred when the victim did not look at the bystander in the experiment. One possible explanation is that making eye-contact may function to establish a coalition or emotional connection between a victim and bystander. Perhaps it is an effort to avoid this coalition and the resultant feeling that one should offer assistance that prompts passers-by to avoid the gaze of a homeless person when he or she is clearly asking for assistance on a street corner.

One explanation for the bystander effect is that there is a diffusion of responsibility. "As the number of people present in a situation increases, each individual feels less compelled or responsible to help. In fact, with so many people present, an individual might just assume that a victim is receiving help or that help is already on the way."⁷ Social influence and pluralistic ignorance explanations reflect the idea that people look to others to evaluate a situation and take their cue from the inaction of others. Confusion of responsibility is another possible explanation that suggests people avoid helping so that they will not be seen as the perpetrator of the victim's pain and suffering.

From the perspective of these social theories and research studies, there are many possible explanations for why individual members of society may not move to engage with the problems of poverty and homelessness. There may be a sense that we as individuals are not responsible for taking action because there are so many others witnessing the problem also (diffusion of responsibility). And with so few people speaking up, including our elected officials, it is easy to get the message that there is no disaster in progress (pluralistic ignorance). Or perhaps just the thought that one is part of a society with a government responsible for addressing social problems may be enough to "prime" many of us for inaction. We leave the social problems to the elected officials to deal with; of course, our representatives take their cue for action and involvement from the public, so this is an unhelpful social "prime."

Empathy Avoidance

In trying to understand why people often fail to respond to need, researchers suggest that a motivational process may lead people at times to avoid feeling empathy for those in need. They called the process empathy avoidance, which they defined as a "motive to forestall feeling for another in order to escape the motivational consequences of those feelings."⁸ It is possible that unresponsive bystanders may not "simply be insensitive, fail to notice, or diffuse responsibility. They may be actively motivated to avoid feeling sympathy or empathy" (Shaw *et al.* 879). Basically, people understand that if they feel empathy for the need of another person, this may evoke the desire to help that person, so the avoidance

of empathy serves to prevent the potentially costly motivational consequences of those feelings. These researchers predicted that empathy avoidance was mostly likely to occur when one knows in advance that there will be an opportunity to help a person in need and that the help will be costly in some way such as time, effort, emotional distress or arousal, money, or opportunities missed while helping. The results of their research supported their theory, although the actual emotion people were avoiding was not clearly differentiated as empathy, distress, or sadness. In summary, they observed that the two conditions for empathy avoidance are frequently present in everyday life, not only when someone directly asks for our assistance, as may happen when we pass a homeless person on the street, but also when we “know of a costly need that we could and possibly should do something about” (Shaw *et al.* 887).

From the previous research on the impact of sharing the gaze of the victim, it would seem that turning away from meeting the gaze of those in need on the street may be a means of empathy avoidance in order to prevent the consequence of helping that person. It is interesting that in his classic study of obedience to authority, Stanley Milgram also observed his subjects avoiding the gaze of those persons to whom they were instructed to give electroshock, noting that the subjects often turned their heads in an awkward and conspicuous manner to avoid making eye-contact with the recipient of the shock. Even though his subjects explained they were uncomfortable seeing the suffering of the other person, the majority still continued to provide the shocks.⁹ While we may not see ourselves as deliberately causing suffering to people living in poverty and homelessness in the manner of Milgram’s subjects shocking victims, we are now entering into the moral dimension of the choice to turn away from so many who are in great need.

Moral Disengagement

Research on social cognitive theory and moral disengagement provides a helpful explanatory model of how members of an economically prosperous society that ascribes to moral codes guaranteeing basic human rights for all persons could simultaneously allow the continuation of suffering for so many due to poverty and homelessness. According to social cognitive theory, moral agency is grounded in a self-regulating system based on moral standards that have been learned. “People regulate their actions by the consequences they apply to themselves. They do things that give them satisfaction and a sense of self-worth. They refrain from behaving in ways that violate their moral standards, because such behavior will bring self-censure.”¹⁰ But this system only works if the positive or negative emotional responses to our own behavior are activated. It is also possible to maintain our moral standards in spite of our contradictory behavior by choosing to disengage some of our internal controls. The four basic methods of disengaging self-sanctions include reconstructing the conduct (i.e. “This is really a noble act because . . .”); obscuring personal causal agency (i.e. “I am not really responsible because . . .”); misrepresenting or disregarding the injurious consequences of one’s actions (i.e. “There was no harm done here because . . .”); and vilifying the recipients of maltreatment by blaming, devaluing, or dehumanizing them in some way (i.e. “They are their own worst enemy because . . .”). Within these four categories of moral disengagement are many different strategies such as moral justification, euphemistic language, advantageous comparisons, and disregarding or distorting or discrediting evidence of the consequences of one’s actions. “The disinhibitory effects of the various forms of moral disengagement have been extensively documented in the perpetration of large-scale inhumanities” (Bandura *et al.* 366). Not only are individuals able to maintain their socially respected and personally gratifying moral standards, but through the use of one or more of the various methods of moral disengagement, they do not need to experience guilt or feel the need to make amends for their inhumane conduct. The same mechanisms

can be applied to the larger social context also, affecting how we view the inhumanities perpetrated by others. It appears that the displacement of responsibility not only weakens restraints over one's own behavior but also lessens concern over the suffering of others. "Collective moral disengagement can have widespread societal and political ramifications by supporting, justifying, and legitimizing inhumane social practices and policies" (Bandura *et al.* 372). It seems to me this speaks directly to the ongoing governmental policies and practices maintaining poverty and homelessness in large, prosperous cities like Toronto as well as the public acceptance of this status quo.

Moral Hypocrisy

In considering the social cognitive theory of moral disengagement, I could not help but think of moral hypocrisy as a kind of "have your cake and eat it too" type of morality. One has to wonder at what level we may be aware of performing any of the handy methods of disengaging self-sanctions. How do we know when to do these slick cognitive moves without retaining a self-damning memory of having done so? One way to appear moral to oneself while violating one's moral standards to serve self-interest is to engage in self-deception. The goal of moral hypocrisy can be attained by manipulating the cognitive data so as to "avoid confronting the discrepancy between one's self-serving behavior and one's moral standards."¹¹ One possible way to do this involves the use of affective alarms to suspend cognition. Basically, affective cues warn us of thoughts to avoid – in effect, "Don't go there!" By attending to the emotional cues and not analyzing their source, the thought process can remain strategically incomplete – a state of "suspended cognition" (Batson *et al.* 534). Researchers have discovered that subjects forced to make moral choices while sitting in front of a mirror generally engaged in less moral hypocrisy, as if they could not face seeing themselves act immorally when able to observe themselves in a mirror. Of course, some individuals have a higher tolerance for behavior-moral discrepancies, which is to say that when they do something immoral, they acknowledge it for what it is without self-deception or hypocrisy. Most frightening, however, is how hard it often is to distinguish moral hypocrisy from moral integrity. Morality is often only a convenient mask for an underlying self-serving motive. Individuals sitting in front of a mirror still labeled their self-serving choices as the most moral choices when fairness as a value was not emphasized in that situation. They adjusted their moral standards to be in line with their behavior in order to serve their own interests. This finding is particularly disturbing because it is so similar to situations of everyday life in which people are making moral choices all the time. A comparable situation might be a business or government environment in which executives or officials are accountable for decisions (similar to the research subjects sitting in front of a mirror) while relevant moral standards are not stated in advance (i.e. fairness and honesty are not emphasized as values). In these everyday situations, not only is there likely to be a less moral outcome, but there will likely be a transformation of moral standards in the direction of self-interest. Finally, if self-awareness/accountability alone does not produce moral integrity, how can we know when the appearance of moral integrity is actual or if the behavior is merely the least-costly way to appear moral as a disguise for the morally hypocritical?

So far, we have considered a few of the possible psychological mechanisms by which we may choose to ignore immediate and widespread suffering without perceiving ourselves as morally impoverished. Through choices such as turning over responsibility to a group, avoiding the gaze and resulting emotional connection with someone who may require a costly response from us, and cognitively reconstructing situations to justify our failure to help while maintaining our high moral standards, we are able to believe ourselves to be "innocent bystanders," accepting and remaining inactive in the face of suffering on the scale of a national or perhaps global disaster.

Merton's *Conjectures*

In his life as a contemplative within a monastic tradition that precluded most forms of active involvement in the world, Thomas Merton struggled to discern the moral responsibility of the “bystander.” Like the social psychologists already cited, Merton saw our tendency to react at times with the passivity of a “zombie,” but he was also acutely aware of the social and political context of this apathy. From his perspective during the 1960s, the whole world was erupting in the greatest revolution in history, a “profound spiritual crisis.” It appeared to Merton that “All the inner force of man is boiling and bursting out, the good together with the evil, the good poisoned by evil and fighting it, the evil pretending to be good and revealing itself in the most dreadful crimes, justified and rationalized by the purest and most innocent intentions.”¹² Merton understood that this time of global human spiritual crisis manifested as a “basic distortion, a deep-rooted moral disharmony” (*CGB* 55) against which even love itself seemed to have no power.

Social psychologists have observed the use of collective moral disengagement in the perpetration of large-scale inhumanities, and it is on this subject that Merton's reflections are particularly compelling. In keeping with the previously described cognitive distortions employed in moral disengagement and the self-serving alteration of moral standards by the morally hypocritical, Merton perceived in the world a collective “tyranny of untruth” confirmed by power, which required submitting to plausible and useful lies, creating obvious contradictions that required greater and less plausible lies in order to maintain the view of ourselves collectively as holding “the monopoly of all truth, just as our adversary of the moment has the monopoly of all error” (*CGB* 56). “What we seek is not the pure truth,” Merton explained, “but the partial truth that justifies our prejudices, our limitations, our selfishness” (*CGB* 65). In the process of manufacturing the untruth, Merton explains, language itself has been so misused, even spiritually defiled by the slogans and programs of the unscrupulous as they seek to justify even the destruction of the whole world. The result is, as Bonhoeffer observed shortly before his execution by the Nazis, “A time of confirmed liars who tell the truth in the interest of what they themselves are – liars. A hive of murderers who love their children and are kind to their pets. A hive of cheats and gangsters who are loyal in pacts to do evil. Ours is a time of evil which is so evil that it can do good without prejudice to its own iniquity – it is no longer threatened by goodness” (*CGB* 54).

At this time of moral disharmony, untruth, perversion of language, as well as violence and destruction, Merton as a Christian understood that love, both for God and for others, is the basis of Christian morality and our door to recovering the truth. We must learn to love our deluded fellow man as he actually is. He explains, “this alone can open the door to truth. As long as we do not have this love, as long as this love is not active and effective in our lives (for words and good wishes will never suffice) we have no real access to the truth. At least not to moral truth” (*CGB* 57). Love is also the basis of Christian social action. In light of the belief that God became man, that every man is potentially Christ, that Christ is our brother, Merton asserts we have no right to leave our brother “in any form of squalor whether physical or spiritual. In a word, if we really understood the meaning of Christianity in social life we would see it as part of the redemptive work of Christ, liberating man from misery, squalor, subhuman living conditions, economic or political slavery, ignorance, alienation” (*CGB* 69). Thus, the message of the Gospel requires that we spiritualize political principles in order to ensure each person, whether Christian or not, is given circumstances in keeping with the dignity of a daughter or son of God, redeemed by Christ, and liberated from all powers of oppression. “In such a context,” Merton says, “political action itself is a kind of spiritual action, an expression of spiritual responsibility,

and a witness to Christ” (CGB 69). So what of the poor and homeless? Merton observed that “Never before has there been such a distance between the abject misery of the poor (still the great majority of mankind) and the absurd affluence of the rich” (CGB 60). In his book *Love and Living*, Merton wrote that Christian persons reach maturity with the realization that if people are suffering and dying in Asia or Africa, others in Europe and America “are summoned to self-judgment before the bar of conscience to see whether, in fact, some choice or some neglect on their own part has had a part in this suffering and this dying, which otherwise may seem so strange and remote” (LL 152-53).

It is clear now from Merton’s reflections in *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* that ignoring poverty and homelessness at home and abroad is antithetical to the Christian ethic of love for our brothers and sisters. The frightening fact, according to Merton, “is that one can think himself a ‘good Catholic’ and be thought one by his neighbors, and be, in effect, an apostate from the Christian faith” (CGB 95). Such a lack of care for others becomes possible to a practicing Christian and indeed to any “moral” human being only in so far as we distance ourselves from the truth of our actions through the pursuit of partial truths and the use of language to mislead and disguise. The avoidance of empathy or compassion through blind adherence to unjust social norms or customs and the use of cognitive distortions also help mask the true impact of our choices while preserving our sense of self-righteousness and morality. But Merton warns us that “gestures of conformity” such as attending church do not make anyone a Christian, “and when one’s actual conduct obviously belies the whole meaning of the gesture, it is an objective statement that one’s Christianity has lost its meaning” (CGB 95). To ignore the law of love in defence of social customs that are cruel, unjust, or inhumane gravely violates the Law of Christ, and to excuse those who do this is a form of pseudo-charity that “is responsible for an awful proliferation of injustice and untruth, under the guise of Christianity. The best that can be said of these poor men is ‘they know not what they do’” (CGB 96).

Will Anything Make A Difference?

Researchers have argued that bystanders play a central role in the establishment and maintenance of human rights abuses and that the concept of bystander should also encompass groups and institutions ignoring the suffering of others in their own country and elsewhere. I agree with this assertion and wonder what hope there is for change. In light of theories of social influence, the individual sometimes seems lacking in agency and responsibility when confronted by powerful situational factors. From the perspective of social cognitive theory and such concepts as emotional avoidance, moral disengagement, moral hypocrisy and self-deception, how do we begin to face up to what is really going on within our own minds and hearts as well as within society?

All is not bad news, however. There is ample evidence that most people resist behaving punitively even in response to repeated authoritative commands if the situation is personalized, allowing them to see their victim or requiring them to inflict pain directly rather than remotely (Bandura *et al.* 364-74). Increased research into the power of humanization is needed to clarify how the affirmation of common humanity can bring out the best in others. The closer one feels to another, the more likely one is to put oneself in the position of the other, fostering a sense of commonality and compassion for the other and increasing the probability of prosocial/helping action.¹³ “We-ness” – or the social categorization of another as part of one’s own group – is central to the establishment of interpersonal relationships, and it is this group level of categorization that influences the probability of help being offered.¹⁴ It is this group level of categorization that influences the probability of help being offered. A sense of shared identity (and other social category relations) are more important for increasing helping behaviors after

natural disasters than geographic proximity or emotional reactions. From these research findings, we can see that it is through a process of identification with the other as part of us personally, or part of our group, that the probability of helping behavior is increased. Both of these approaches are antidotes to the strategies of emotional avoidance and moral disengagement that would have us avoid an affective response or engage in cognitive distortions such as dehumanization in order to justify not providing costly assistance to another.

From a specifically Christian perspective, the sense of oneness that is so essential is found in the belief that all persons were made in the image of God and have been redeemed in Christ. For all his ability to see the darkness in our hearts and actions, Merton held an optimistic view of the human race because he believed God chose to take on our humanity in Christ. In his famous passage about his experience in Louisville, Merton wrote: “There is no way of telling people that they are all walking around shining like the sun. . . . There are no strangers! . . . If only we could see each other that way all the time. There would be no more war, no more hatred, no more cruelty, no more greed” (CGB 141-42). He also maintained that the deepest law of our nature is the Law of Love. “Our nature itself inclines us to love, and to love freely” (CGB 106).

Finally, even when we are on trial at the darkest times, such as during the events of World Wars I and II, we have the merciful option of receiving the light of truth, judging ourselves by this light, and making the necessary changes. Repentance and *metanoia* (inner change), both personally and socially, are merciful options according to Merton as long as we are willing to at least try to seek the truth and be reborn in the Spirit. Until the Parousia arrives, we remain in a time of development, choice and preparation – “a time of decision” (CGB 108), says Merton. And the good news of the Gospel is that we can respond freely to the redemptive love of God in Christ: “I can *now* rise above the forces of necessity and evil in order to say ‘yes’ to the mysterious action of Spirit that is transforming the world even in the midst of the violence and confusion and destruction that seem to proclaim His absence and His ‘death’” (CGB 113).

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