

Luna Maltseva

12 May 2024

Why Did Individuals Suffering Injustice Resort to the Coping Patterns They Did?

Every person requires a metaphysical haven to continue operation. Analogous to how one's physique necessitates rest, so must there be a secure retreat for one's mind. This mental refuge often takes precedence over one's physical needs: while the complaints of the body can be silenced with fulfillment of physiological needs, one is stark naked against the startling shriek of the mind. Simultaneously, it quickly becomes apparent that there can be no railing, shield, or barrier to protect the mind from the ever-present hostility surrounding every individual in a society. Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* and Franz Kafka's *Metamorphosis* provide classic examples of individuals trying to escape from reality—albeit for different reasons. *Notes of a Native Son* by James Baldwin and Hannah Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem* demonstrate that this escape from reality rarely benefits anyone, and especially not the individual. From bell hooks' "Choosing the Margin as a Space of Radical Openness", Silvia Federici's *Caliban and the Witch*, and Leo Tolstoy's *Hadji Murad*, it is revealed that this escape from reality needn't be harmful—and can be, in fact, altered. All of the characters' reactions—recoursing into action, feigning ignorance, and trying to escape reality (broadly, coping mechanisms)—are attempts of soothing their internal mental anguish. The synthesis of these texts reveals how one develops their fortifications, whether one can redirect their fury to a different cause, and how wrong one can be when evaluating something as safe. In an attempt to create a mental safespace from the

injustice they suffered with coping mechanisms, individuals perpetrated their own doom precisely because they did not rationalize their emotions.

An individual falls into a coping pattern in order to survive. The adoption of a coping mechanism is a result of a transient peak in external pressure. This encounter of a watershed moment scars an individual mentally: it alters one's behavior, forcing them to be accommodative of their injury, similarly to a fresh cut that commonly disturbs its owner. The imprint of this cut forever remains on the mind, turning into a scab and fading into a scar—yet unlike a faded scar, the painful response it fires back upon any interaction never loses in intensity. To protect and shield oneself from this agonizing mental anguish—a force that can wilt and kill a person like a deadly disease—the individual resorts to various patterns to soothe, redirect, or embrace the pain. In *Nervous Conditions*, for instance, Tambu comments that, “Each [member of the family] retreated more resolutely into their roles,” believing that this pulling away was strengthening them, when, actually, “for each one of them, it was a last solitary, hopeless defence of the security of their illusions” (Dangarembga 138). This withdrawal is every person's attempt to distance themselves from their source of worry (injustice), and by doing so placate their inner turmoil. At the time, these reactions are merely a way to subdue and control the pain, but as the pain continues building up internally, soon these behavioral patterns solidify and conjoin with their personality, becoming the sole way for the person to function. Since the individual has no other way to deal with their inner ramping-up firestorm, then the only way for an individual to survive is to plunge headfirst into soothing—irrational—behavior. What significantly worsens the situation by developing the individual's addiction to the coping mechanism is that these behavioral patterns (though initially they may seem estranged to the individual) quickly begin to

feel familiar and *safe*. As these behaviors provide the person with the ability to stand straight, unbend despite the challenges, to ignore and dismiss the pain and to continue day-to-day operation, they are codified by the individual as *safe*, even though more often than not they are a hopeless trap. Exactly like Tambu's family members, Gregor Samsa in the beginning of the *Metamorphosis* drops his responsibility by hiding behind only-ifs, "If it wasn't that I've held back on account of my parents, I'd have given in my [resignation letter] notice long ago" (Kafka 30). It is precisely this behavior that led him to metamorphose into a "monstrous vermin": the burning out of his finite resources that came from his unwillingness to shed this coping pattern. Though none of Tambu's relatives metamorphosed, their pulling away is much like Gregor's isolation in his room. By associating safety with a sense of stability, the erected safeplace serves not only as a way to cope, but *as a way to live*. While it is fairly obvious that this *way to live* is more of a way to *stay alive*, it nevertheless becomes the founding pillar of an individual's identity—something they won't be able to live without if they are stripped of it. It is then that the coping mechanism becomes a mechanism to survive.

A coping mechanism as a survival mechanism is a death mechanism. The individual is incapable of grasping the detrimental effects of their coping mechanism because the coping mechanism becomes a part of *them*. As the control mechanism is merging with the individual's identity, the separation between the psyche and the coping pattern fades—the two eventually becoming inseparable. It is at that moment the individual becomes blind to the self-abuse stemming from the internalized *safespace*. Since the individual will not (or rarely will) dispute their core beliefs (this happened, therefore that is how I react), they will be devoid of any suspicion that it is unhelpful if not unhealthy. Having incorporated a hatred towards white people

due to racism, James Baldwin's father repeatedly insists that "the best thing was to have as little to do with [white people] as possible" (Baldwin 6). It is obvious that he never questioned this assertion, holding onto it even despite the fact that full-on estrangement from society leaves one to fight for survival alone. Nevertheless, that fighting for survival is infinitely more preferable for Baldwin's father, as otherwise he would have to entrust his life to people that he vehemently despises. Once set in their way, the person begins treating this newly adopted survival strategy as their dearest possession, a possession for which the individual would go to war with others for. The individual begins to view their coping pattern as a haven, a safespace—as a way to numb the pain of being alive and avoid unpleasant reality. They commend it to the extent that if another person were to try to obstruct the individual from it, the individual would vigorously oppose them and would do everything in their power to remove themselves from that person. This removal need not be physical by nature, for "as far as Eichmann was concerned,[] as long as he was capable of finding [] in his memory [] an elating stock phrase to go with them, he was quite content, without ever becoming aware[]" (Arendt 33). Countless times during Eichmann's trial he was able to subvert reality and place himself back in the familiar times of the Reich through using phrases that (in his own eyes) put him in a cordial and honorable light. Similarly, Baldwin's Father dared not face the current reality or attempt to change his views, adhering to his once acquired notion. This dislocation thereby nullified any repentance that must have arisen upon being tried for the murder of 6.1 million people. Eichmann and Baldwin's Father, left to his own devices (and it was impossible to deprive him of them), carried their survival mechanisms to the grave, not letting anyone dare set them off from that course. It is because of the damage done

in isolation, where no soul can reach to help the person, that the so-called “survival mechanism” powered by a coping pattern is, in fact, a “death mechanism.”

The only way to survive under a familiarized death mechanism is through mindfulness. Coping mechanisms are enslaving because they are the subconscious’ unquestionable first go-to response—if the immediate response is withheld, one will be able to break free of it. Though many individuals of any given stigmatized group face partial treatment, not all of them react to injustice as unhealthfully as Baldwin’s father or Eichmann—with complete isolation. The reason those individuals refrain from self-damaging behaviors is because those individuals strove to dismantle sources of injustice instead of themselves. While it is apparent this fixation on resistance still is a coping mechanism—it distracts individuals from paying attention to the quality of their lives, instead focusing on others’ quality of life—it is most certainly a far preferable alternative to the destruction of the self. bell hooks, for instance, regards struggle as simultaneously unpleasant and pleasant, “We know struggle to be that which is difficult, challenging, hard and we know struggle to be that which pleasures, delights, and fulfills desire” (23). The unpleasant physical nature of struggle is diminished by the much desired vision of a brighter future. To prove the proposed hypothesis of “now for the sake of the future,” on a much simpler accord serfs in medieval ages went against their landlords of an immediate urge to ease their life, “‘labor services’ were the burdens that most immediately affected the serfs’ lives and [so] were the central issue in the servile struggle for freedom” (Federici 27). The serfs’ and black people’s ability to risk their current well-being for the sake of a possible better future life is not much too distant from Baldwin’s father’s ability to risk his current well-being for the sake of a *plausible* better future without white people. Practically mirrored in their conditions, the

difference between these reactions is insubstantial. It is therefore apparent that in the worst case scenario, one can at least redirect their fury onto other (worthwhile) avenues, preventing damage to themselves. Yet if the difference between doing good and bad is simply a matter of shifting focus, then it must be crystal clear that one's existence sans this borderline coping behavioral pattern altogether is much more desirable. Nevertheless, it is quite obvious that society will be devoid of injustice only in a hypothetical scenario, as for injustice to not exist no individual is to have any leverage over another—and that is impossible if the country is to be kept in order. As the coping mechanism serves first and foremost as the sole shield from that injustice—if an individual is ever to break free, they must subvert the urge to resort to the coping mechanism, instead settling on a less injurious shield against injustice. Battling against the urge is draining, as is seen on the example of Butler in *Hadji Murad*, who had eventually given into irrationality: “Two or three times Butler left the tent with his hand gripping the purse in his trousers-pocket; but at last he could resist the temptation no longer, and despite the promise he had given to his brother and to himself not to play, he began to bet” (Tolstoy 87). Such defeats—Butler's succumbing to addiction, bell hooks being silenced for speaking out, and the serfs being punished for going against their landlords—however, serve as no reason to call resistance off and give up on one's dreams of breaking away from the death mechanism. Though it is with considerable difficulty that one adheres to the rational side, it is the only way to power through one's demise.

When constructing a safespace from mistreatment through a coping mechanism, one dooms themselves to hell because they do not comprehend any less injurious strategies. Though one becomes an object of an unhealthy behavioral pattern in an attempt to survive, the

individual's life—much contrary to living—becomes a death. Yet the victim always fails to observe the detrimental effects of their newly acquired mask as one cannot perform cross-examination on an element that is part of their identity. That is the reason that coping mechanisms are so enslaving—it is because an individual treats it as their greatest friend and companion, one to which they turn immediately and unquestionably. However, if one is able to overcome the immediate reactions, one will be able to break free and instead of surviving begin living life.

Works Cited

- Federici, Silvia Beatriz. *Caliban and the Witch*. Autonomedia, 2014.
- Baldwin, James. *Notes of a Native Son*. Penguin Books, 1995.
- hooks, bell. "Choosing the Margin as a Space of Radical Openness." Routledge eBooks, 2020, pp. 80–85. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429355363-17>.
- Tolstoy, Leo. *Hadji Murad*. The Modern Library, 2003.
- Kafka, Franz. *Metamorphosis*. OUP, 2009.
- Dangarembga, Tsitsi. *Nervous Conditions*. Graywolf Press, 1988.
- Arendt, Hannah. *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. Penguin Books.