Reclaiming compassion
Auschwitz, Holocaust remembrance and social work

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Introduction

[There are those] who will feel that the Holocaust, like the destruction of the Temple, belongs only to history—it won’t affect their life. I think it’s wrong because the Holocaust was not a Jewish problem … I think the Holocaust was a universal problem

(Survivor testimony 0590 1995)

Religions and spiritualities have long been centrally concerned with the experience of suffering. For Judaism, this experience – and the endeavour to ‘make sense’ of and endure it – has had great prominence. Jewish history is replete with the experience of unearned suffering, often on a massive communal scale, with none more extreme or extensive than the Holocaust. Holocaust remembrance in the hope that such an event never be repeated is central to Judaism and undertaken through a range of Holocaust museums throughout the world, including the Jewish Holocaust Museum and Research Centre [JHC] in Melbourne, Australia.

Outside of Israel, Australia has the highest number of Holocaust survivors (per capita) (Paratz and Katz 2011) and the greater portion of these women and men settled in Melbourne. Since its establishment in 1984, the JHC has recorded the testimonies of over 1,500 of these survivors (JHC 2016a) as part of its commitment to ‘combat anti-Semitism, racism and prejudice in the community and foster understanding between people’ (JHC 2016b). These testimonies are supported by a wide range of artefacts that have been collected, archived and displayed by the Centre in its museum. The Centre also offers education programmes for primary, secondary and tertiary students – almost 21,000 students participated in those programmes in 2015 (Fineberg 2016). This work is not undertaken alone. The Centre is supported by an active, engaged community, both in its day-to-day operations and in the wide range of events and activities it facilitates.

The critical tradition of social work is also centrally concerned with unearned suffering – both in terms of assisting people to endure it and with its prevention. As a discipline, social work emerged out of the miseries of Industrial Revolution England, where so many people, displaced by unprecedented, far-reaching social and economic change, sought to ‘make sense’ of – and survive – those changes. Since that time, social work has expanded the scope of its concerns to
understand and address the suffering often experienced with those who differ in terms of ability, age, class, gender, race and sexuality. Social work has sought to respond to the ‘pain’ suffered at the ‘nexus with social structures’ (Baines 2007: 191).

My work as a social work academic seeks to address those forms of thought that prevent the recognition of the personal impact of seemingly distinct, ‘external’ processes and structures. In my research, I have drawn on Marx (Fox 2015) to better comprehend how bodily experience affects agency and how a wealthy nation like Australia can dismiss the pain suffered by those experiencing poverty. That same question – how could bodily pain be so consistently ignored – led me to the works of the German social theorist Theodore Adorno, who considered that the devaluation of the body played a key part in enabling the Holocaust (principally through the suppression of compassion). As Scholar-in-Residence at the JHC, I am currently testing Adorno’s ideas about compassion against the survivors’ testimonies and considering how other aspects of Adorno’s work might contribute to further collaborations with the Centre and similar organisations.

**Adorno, social work and the Jewish Holocaust Centre**

The JHC and the critical tradition of social work are both concerned with the cultural failure evidenced by the Holocaust and the need to promote a culture that, at the least, prevents its repetition. Testimonies and historical accounts of the Holocaust repeatedly refer to it as ‘unimaginable’ – that, in Germany, a place so deeply invested in so much that Western civilisation prized (and still prizes), culture could fail to prevent mass-murder on an industrial scale. One survivor, in his testimony recorded with the JHC, warns us against taking a similar comfort in the safeguards of our culture and political and legal systems today. He cautions others not to be complacent in a country like Australia ‘because they are born here, and they’ve got all the rights in this country under the constitution’. He reminds us that ‘We also had rights. We also had a constitution. We were also free people’. Germany and those countries it occupied in the Second World War, such as Poland, were also democracies and subject to the rule of law in the 1930s, with a rich public culture:

That country [Germany], that intelligent nation, which gave the world the biggest philosophers. They gave us Beethoven and Mozart and Schubert and Schumann. We had Heine and Nietzsche. We had Karl Marx and Rosa Luxemburg and we had Adolf Hitler, and have had all these people who were prepared and ready in the name of their culture to murder innocent people.

(Survivor testimony 0441 1993)

The failure of modern culture to prevent the Holocaust became one of the key concerns of the Critical School of Social Theory. The critical tradition of social work, like many philosophers, sociologists and psychologists, draws its roots from that school of thought, which originated in the 1930s in the Institute for Social Research at Frankfurt University, Germany. As both the time and place suggest, the Institute and its members were profoundly affected by the rise of Nazism and the Holocaust that followed. Theodore Adorno was a key member of that Institute and was forced to flee Germany after the Nazis banned the Institute, and his ability to work as an academic, given his Jewish heritage, but his influence after the Second World War was significant. He was then actively and prominently involved in public debates in Germany about collective responsibility.

Adorno was born in Frankfurt in 1903. He received his doctorate in philosophy in 1924 and
then moved to Vienna to study Schonberg’s revolutionary new approach to musical composition. In 1931 he joined the Institute and began the work for which he is famous. Adorno drew on both philosophy and music throughout his life. The manner in which his thought draws deeply on the intellectual and the artistic is a large part of what provides its richness and potential to contribute to both social work and the JHC.

Adorno regarded the Holocaust as evidence of Western culture’s failure to achieve its central goal – the promotion of civil or civilised behaviour and the exclusion of barbarism. In his view, the Holocaust reflected long-standing features of Western society and required a radical revision of its foundations in order to prevent the recurrence of similar catastrophes. For Adorno, the Holocaust, as symbolised by the death camp Auschwitz, was not an historical aberration: it was ‘not unique but, horrifyingly, exemplary’ of Western civilisation (Bernstein 2001: 395).

He saw the same tendencies reflected in other disasters or threats of his time, such as the colonial conflicts of the 1950s and 1960s (Adorno 1973, 2001a, 2003). He did not consider that Western society had progressed past these tendencies. Rather, like Max Horkheimer and Walter Benjamin, two other central figures in the Institute’s founding work, he regarded the belief in progress as enabling past suffering to be forgotten, and even rationalised in the service of ‘higher’ goals (Adorno 2003: 23). Horkheimer (1995: 138–9) felt this so strongly that he said ‘we are forbidden any such consolation about the world’. Instead, as Adorno (1973: 18) expressed it, we are obliged to make ‘suffering eloquent’ and look for its causes and their continuation in contemporary culture. So imminent was this threat in Adorno’s eyes, he argued:

> The premier demand on all education is that Auschwitz not happen again … Every debate about the ideals of education is trivial and inconsequential compared to this single ideal: never again Auschwitz. It was the barbarism all education strives against. One speaks of the threat of a relapse into barbarism. But it is not a threat – Auschwitz was the relapse, and barbarism continues as long as the fundamental conditions that favoured that relapse continue largely unchanged. That is the whole horror. The societal pressure still bears down, although the danger remains invisible nowadays.

*(Adorno 2003: 19)*

### Anti-Semitism, racism and Western thought

For Adorno, the Holocaust was enabled by what he called ‘identity thinking’ – the modern Western confidence that objects are ‘identical’ with our concepts of them (Jarvis 1998: 177). He argued that ‘identity thinking’ was always an incomplete account of its object and that it failed to consider what was outside its concepts, which Adorno called its ‘residue’ (Adorno 1973: 5).

For Adorno, the treatment of an object in this way involved doing violence to its ‘residue’. In his view, the Holocaust was founded on this violence: there ‘identity thinking’ enabled Jewish and other peoples to be solely considered in terms of narrow, incomplete stereotypes.

This ‘identity thinking’ reflects contemporary Western society and some of its long-standing approaches to the world: in particular, the conception of any thing – and, especially after the Enlightenment, the self as a thing existing-in-itself with an ‘essence’ or ‘substance’ without any dependence on any other thing. In everyday language, it is the idea that every thing has its ‘nature’. We can trace the influence of this kind of thinking back over 2,500 years to pre-Socratic thought. However, ‘notwithstanding … changes in terminology, the emphasis [has] remained on some separate, unchanging quality that gave a being continuity and rendered that which is changeable … ephemeral [and] inessential’ (Fox 2015: 8). This approach to conceptualisation has been further promoted by capitalism’s processes of commodification, which treat
any thing, regardless of those involved in its production or use, as the absolute thing-in-itself and able to be exchanged without any reference to those relationships. Most recently, neo-liberalism has extended this alienated, atomistic approach to the world throughout much of public policy and public life.

This notion of an essence or substance is the grammar of Western thought, a structuring of how we form concepts of the nature of a thing – what we treat as part of its lasting nature (its ‘essence’) and what we treat as inessential or optional. This approach to conceptualisation, counting some aspects and not others, authorises the neglect of those other features or characteristics. It encourages a kind of hubris: in particular, it enables violence to be done, and not recognised (or, at least, not admitted). To treat a thing by reference to only some of its characteristics – especially if it is forced to conform to that limited vision – is to tear that thing apart. It is to hammer a square peg into a round hole – and to chop, bludgeon or tear away some vital part of that peg in order to make it fit.

This conceptual violence enabled anti-Semitism to characterise Jewish people (and others) with reference to some characteristics and ignore others, even when those characteristics, such as the shape of a person’s nose, were repeatedly contradicted by experience. It is a violence that continues today. It enables asylum seekers arriving in – or even approaching – Australia to be considered as ‘queue jumpers’ and ‘illegals’ and the Australian government to claim that its actions in preventing them coming to Australia’s shores are decent and humane.

Suppressing compassion

In Adorno’s view, this violence was not only applied to others but to the very notion of the self. The West has long identified the human ‘essence’ with the mind, soul or other non-corporeal substance, and discounted, devalued and disciplined the body. So central has this view been that Adorno and Horkheimer (1997: 231) called it the ‘underground’ history of the West.

Adorno saw Western culture as built on the domination of our bodies, and of the balance of the physical or material world, with the essence of – the best of – our humanity then located elsewhere, in a thing we called reason. Over time the meaning of that term, and even where and how we discovered it, has varied, but since the Enlightenment, reason has been treated as something independent of our bodies, including our emotions. To be ethical, moral or just made the domination by reason an ideal: we secured our better selves (and better behaviour) through discipline, control or, to use Adorno’s (1973: 363, 2005: 274) term, ‘cold’, reason.

Adorno was concerned that this emphasis on disciplining our non-rational selves – including our bodies – subtly enabled other kinds of violence, including that of the Holocaust. In part, that discipline might be seen to extend to the direct, physical violence meted out by the Nazis, both inside and outside the camps, but what Adorno was principally concerned with was the violence we first do to ourselves in disciplining our own bodies and reactions, especially those of compassion that might otherwise prompt us to reach out to those who are suffering.

‘Never again’: suffering and compassion

In the light of Western civilisation’s failure to prevent the Holocaust, Adorno (2001a: 116) argued that ‘Hitler has placed a new imperative on us; that … Auschwitz should not be repeated’. The ‘old’ imperative was the philosopher Kant’s ‘categorical imperative’; the unconditional obligation that human beings, as rational creatures, should only act in ways that could be universally accepted (Guyer 2006). Adorno (2001a: 116) insisted that it was ‘impossible to found … [the new] imperative on logic’ as ‘pure’ or abstract thought lent itself far too easily to
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rationalisation, that is, to the circular reasoning that characterised ‘identity thinking’. Instead, Adorno insisted that the West needed to revise its treatment of the human body. He (2001a: 117) thought that the only reliable foundation for ethical or moral conduct was the body, in particular our bodily or ‘gut’ reaction to others’ suffering, and that ‘the true basis of morality is to be found in bodily feeling’ – that ‘morality … lives on in openly materialist motifs’.

Morality is fundamentally concerned with the just or fair treatment of others. It involves both the recognition that others are entitled to that treatment and that the obligation to do so applies to each of us in some unavoidable, undeniable way. In Adorno’s view, that recognition is founded in our shared experiences of bodily pain. Within the materialist tradition of thought, the experience of bodily pain is the very basis for our experience of our selves as individuals (see Fox 2015 for a detailed consideration of this aspect of the materialist tradition). It is how we discover we are distinct from the world and begin to develop our consciousness and concept of our selves. It is an experience that precedes speech. From our earliest moments, bumping our heads on tables and chairs, we discover a world that is resistant to us, one that is distinct from us. It is an experience that is often revisited, if only through minor bumps and bruises, throughout the rest of our lives. It is a universal experience, a part of our humanity that all of us can recall and relate to. Adorno considered that we recalled this early, prelinguistic experience of pain when witnessing another’s suffering. In his view, this recollection created an involuntary empathy. It provided a motive to care about the impact on the other person – and a connection with, and sense of common concern for, the other person.

One of the promotional posters for the JHC refers to ‘history you cannot erase’ and features an image of a person’s forearm, on which a number had been tattooed. Tattooing prisoners was a common practice in the Auschwitz camp. Newly arrived men and women, already stripped of their humanity in many ways, were further reduced to mere ‘specimens’ (Adorno 2001a: 108), with the tattooed number thereafter being used instead of their names. It is an image of very personal, intimate, suffering. The image is followed by an invitation: ‘To find out what really happened, visit our museum and ask a survivor.’ The survivors’ witness is central to the work of the JHC and like organisations: it provides the Centre’s most compelling influence. As part of their education programme, survivors recount their experience of the Holocaust. They speak of their childhood, their families, the actions taken by the Nazis, their survival and their losses. They reflect on the causes of the Holocaust and the risks of its repetition. Often their accounts are vivid and painful, notwithstanding the years that have passed. For several years now I have brought social work students to hear the survivors’ stories and the students consistently refer to this encounter as one of the most powerful experiences in all their studies.

‘Never again’: the role of art

However, the time fast approaches when the survivors will no longer be available to make this contribution, and the work to develop other influential forms of witness is a key concern of the Centre and similar institutions. Adorno’s interest in the arts and aesthetic theory may be of relevance here. Adorno saw certain forms of art, particularly Modernist works with their emphasis on the combination of clashing images in the form of montages, as having a similar potential to the direct witness of suffering to ‘shock’ a person out of ‘identity thinking’. This may appear to be contradicted by Adorno’s (2000: 210) widely criticised statement that ‘to write poetry after Auschwitz [was] barbaric’. However, as Adorno (2001a: 111) later stated, this was not a blanket condemnation of art, but only those forms that evaded confronting suffering.

Adorno drew these ideas from Walter Benjamin. Benjamin (1999: 2479) had reflected on the desensitising effects of modern life at the turn of the twentieth century, and considered
how one could be ‘shocked’ – startled – into seeing the world afresh and experiencing it more fully. One of his most famous examples was the sight of someone in a crowd, and the frisson of recognition that lingers long afterwards. Adorno later wrote of the memories evoked by the names of places one had visited as a child. There was something potentially transformative about the juxtaposition of the familiar and desirable against the strange and unrelated. Both Benjamin and Adorno thought this same kind of productive shock could be made by works of art, particularly in the form of Modernist collages. They saw the promise of those collages residing in the way in which they could bring different, apparently unrelated, even clashing, images and ideas together – and thereby prompt the person viewing them to discover connections she or he had not previously seen.

In Adorno’s view aesthetic experience could prompt involuntary change – that such experience was ‘an involuntary adjustment to something extra-mental’ (Adorno 2006: 213). He (1997: 331) defined this ‘aesthetic comportment’ in terms that shared an emphasis on the pre-linguistic experience that grounded his interest in reactions to witnessing others’ pain. For Adorno, our aesthetic capacity was ‘the capacity to shudder, as if goose bumps were the first aesthetic image…That shudder in which subjectivity stirs without yet being subjectivity is the act of being touched by the other’.

These strategies are already at work at the JHC and similar institutions. They form one’s first encounter with the Centre, even before one enters its doors, through the Andrew Rogers’ sculptured columns, the Pillars of Witness, which comprise 76 panels, each displaying images of the Holocaust, worked into the exterior fencing and gateway. One cannot enter the Centre without first passing by that imagery. That same kind of encounter also features within the JHC’s museum. One prominent exhibit features a clear plastic tube containing small buttons in an amount representing the 1,500,000 children killed in the Holocaust. That shower of coloured buttons brings to mind the many clothes to which they were attached, and moments of ordinary, innocent, buttonings of shirts and blouses and coats – everyday acts of care and love – but its positioning, in the midst of the account of the murder of so many children, shouts the grief of loss. It makes ‘suffering eloquent’ (Adorno 1973: 18).

‘Never again’: rational analysis

This is not to say these collages – these artefacts and artworks – guarantee change. The ‘gut’ reaction to witnessing suffering or encountering a powerful artefact may prompt one to act, but does not ensure that one does so. That impulse can be, and often is, suppressed. The Holocaust is itself evidence of the extent and efficacy of that suppression. One survivor’s account suggests that ‘coldness’. She spoke of a German walking through a ghetto and finding some children on the street. She said:

Very often Jewish children would come … to beg, and they … were just about dying. They would sit [in front of]…the houses, most of the time silent. Everyone saw them, but this time a German walked to them and said ‘Oh, I can’t look. It’s inhuman, how you suffer.’ Then he picked up a gun [and shot them].

(Survivor testimony 0295B 1993)

Adorno was well aware of the limited potential of the experience of ‘shock’. He believed that we could never do without ‘the strength of the subject’ (1973: xx) – that is, the power of critical analysis. For Adorno, aesthetic experience – even the experience of another’s suffering – was necessary to prompt or open up the opportunity for different thought, but was never enough
alone. It needed to be built upon by means of explanation and evidence — and some indication of a better response.

The JHC’s education programme draws on the power of aesthetic experience, and then builds on that to engage participants in critical reflection. One of the first things presented in that programme is an image of the Melbourne Cricket Ground [MCG], a major local sporting venue with nation-wide recognition as the site at which many key events are held (and often televised). Given Australians’ love of sport, the MCG is a very familiar, celebrated sight. JHC presenters use an image of the MCG with a capacity crowd (which is approximately 100,000 people), and then present multiple copies of that image to convey the magnitude of the Holocaust (60 pictures of the MCG, filled to capacity, represents 6,000,000 people). These images of the MCG — an ordinary and celebrated thing — are used with great impact to quantify the extent of the killings, and to demonstrate how truly comprehending that horror exceeds the grasp of numbers. It provides the kind of ‘shock’ Adorno believed aesthetic experience can offer. It opens up discussion.

The discussion that then follows centres on the presenter asking a relatively simple question: which race am I? That discussion, which begins with a simple concept, then proceeds to explore and critique it, concluding that there are no ‘races’, only the one human race. It is an example of just the work that I think Adorno had in mind for education after the Holocaust: taking an idea that suggests an essence or nature and deconstructing it so as to demonstrate, by reference to its own components, its insufficiency.

This kind of experience is one of the great potentials of Holocaust education. Confronting the suffering it involved, and discovering its connections to something so normal, so proximate, often leaves people lacking adequate words. Adorno suggests we need to build on that in order to overcome ‘identity thinking’: that we need to develop a sense of ‘fallibility’ (2001b: 169) in relation to our understandings of the world, and, as he put it, to give ‘primacy to the object’ (2008: 200). What he meant is that we should not presume to know the object of our attention — and, above all, to know each human being we encounter — but to try to see all their dimensions. To return to the metaphor of square pegs, it is to see its shape, and not just that it fits the loose category of being a peg.

This is very different to popular notions of reason or knowledge. It is not the confidence that, through observation and experimentation, we can discover objective, universally applicable knowledge (in other words, the positivist idea of knowledge). It is rather a consciousness of the inadequacies of our ideas, knowledge and classifications. It is to accept uncertainty, and a much less powerful, confident, convenient approach to the world and others.

This is not an easy perspective to grasp or act on. However, I think Adorno (Adorno 1973: 207) provides some guidance through his repeated references to the ‘bilderverbot’ — the Jewish prohibition of images of God. Within the Jewish tradition (and others) any such image would be inadequate to capture something that, by its very nature, transcends our world and our abilities. However, the absence of those images does not prevent one seeking to work toward the ideal of a good life, but presents it as an ideal that, even partially understood, is so meaningful as to encourage a lifelong striving to fulfill it.

Adorno’s treatment of the bodily or ‘materialistic motif’ as the last foundation for morality presents a similar ideal: the elimination of bodily suffering. It presents an aim that, even though it only captures part of our humanity, goes so deeply to the quality of our lives — and the massive failure of our world to date — as to make a lifelong struggle to reduce it, however limited our understanding, a worthy goal.
Conclusion

Many of the West’s most influential philosophers, including Kant, have devalued compassion as a guide to appropriate behaviour, yet valuing compassion has long been central to many religions and spiritualities. It is also a prominent part of Holocaust remembrance and research. Despite the failure of so many people to act to prevent the Holocaust, organisations like the JHC record the many instances in which some people did in fact intervene. Many survivors’ accounts include at least one instance in which a stranger spontaneously sought to help them. The exceptional nature of these acts can prompt their treatment as a matter of character, as something founded in the ‘essence’ of those people. However, Adorno suggested that these acts were not solely a question of character, but cultural. He sought to explore the extent to which Western culture enabled or restrained those acts – and what might be required to make them more commonplace. This may seem unrealistic or naïve, yet the JHC and similar organisations have also celebrated those instances where whole communities acted to save other people. They celebrate the rescue of Jewish people by the Danes, who ‘in a coordinated operation supported by the vast majority of the … population’, transported most of their Jewish peoples to neutral Sweden (Friedlander 2007: 547). They hosted a major exhibition documenting the actions of the Muslim majority in Albania, who saved all the Jewish people who lived, or sought refuge, in that country (JHC 2016c). These collective acts suggest other, different, potentials, even within Western culture, and that those acts might be borne of everyday beliefs and their practice.

Adorno suggests that the limitation of collective compassion – solidarity – is closely connected with the effort to dominate the body. He also suggests that the very limits to that repression – the involuntary moments where we are prompted in other directions – remain with all their potential and locates that possibility not only in the direct expression of suffering but in its sensual representation. In the shared commitment to ensure the Holocaust and its like never happen again, critical social work and organisations like the JHC might best borrow from endeavours like the education programme at the JHC, with its promising combination of both aesthetic and intellectual engagement.

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References

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