Dirty Words: Discursive Generativity & Social Stigmata, Murder & Capital

Dave Selsky

The great epochs of our lives are the occasions when we gain the courage to re-baptize our evil qualities as our best qualities.
—Friedrich Nietzsche[i]

To the best of my knowledge, Nietzsche wasn't a psychopath, and exactly what sort of "madness" it was that gripped him is uncertain—we may, in fact, never know. Kevin Dutton opens chapter five of his book, *The Wisdom of Psychopaths*, with the above quotation from Nietzsche's *Beyond Good & Evil*. This may have been just an attempt at profound window dressing for his general thesis that it isn't *always* bad to be a psychopath, but I believe it goes deeper than that—and as in most instances, and especially in Nietzsche, it is worth asking exactly what is meant by "great". The subtitle of Dutton's book is *What Saints, Spies, and Serial Killers Can Teach Us About Success*. So my first question is, "what do you, Kevin, mean by success?" My second question, then, is "*what* exactly (and *how*) *are* we talking about [it]?" It seems relatively clear to me that Dutton's aim is to combat the stigma surrounding psychopathy; to generate a discussion with a view to a better understanding of what precisely, it means, its origins, and how it can be as adaptive in our modern world as it likely was in the shadows of human prehistory. But some of his examples (Wall Street trader, Special Forces personnel) leave me as cold, or colder, than the popular media image of the psychopathic serial killer (in the case of this paper the character Patrick Bateman, from the 2000 film *American Psycho*, will serve as archetype). Psychopathy may well have been adaptive (according to Dutton) in the Paleo, Meso, or even Neolithic periods of human evolution. It

would have been, as it were, a "necessary evil." I intend to argue, however, that the operative word is not "necessary", but in fact, "evil"—all philosophical digressions about objective morality aside.[ii] The discourse Dutton creates in his book assumes that the world still needs (some) psychopaths, and that we need to recognize the *functional* variety and distinguish them from the dangerous ones. I will argue that, conversely, since the emergence of complex society has precluded the danger of violent death (from *other* species), and even Dutton's own Game Theory example shows that cooperation as a general rule is the best possible strategy, that it is only the fostering in contemporary society of what is generally accepted as the worst in us (avarice, hatred, covetousness) that maintains psychopathy's adaptiveness.

"All human life is sunk deep in untruth"[iii]: Stigma & The Popular Imagination

I have all the characteristics of a human being; flesh, blood, skin, hair; but not a single, clear, identifiable emotion, except for greed and disgust. Something horrible is happening inside of me and I don't know why. My nightly bloodlust has overflown into my days. I feel lethal, on the verge of frenzy. I think my mask of sanity is about to slip.

—Patrick Bateman[iv]

Of course I don't have my underwear. I'm definitely not wearing my underwear.

—Raymond Babbitt[v]

The gap between the scientific/medical discourses of mental illness in general and popular discourses is variable. Sometimes it is wide, the popular imagination projecting a largely inaccurate picture. Sometimes it is much narrower, perhaps only reimagining genuine

difficulties as endearing or inspirational. Social stigmata, on the other hand, are virtually always negative. The sources of socially constructed stigmata are also variable. In the case of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), there is a small media component; the 1988 film *Rain Man* (or the 2009 film, *Adam*) for example. Raymond Babbitt, the titular character in *Rain Man*, is represented as at times tragic, at times comic, but he is always only the object of his brother Charlie's designs, and the recipient of either; derision, anger, or sympathy. In the end, the realization that Raymond is the mythic Rain Man of Charlie's youth evokes a somewhat "magical" transformation in how Raymond is viewed by his younger brother, but Raymond is never fully subjectivized—he remains irrevocably marked by his diagnosis. It is worth noting that in the example of *Adam*, 11 years later, the narrative has changed somewhat—the very core of the narrative is the becoming subject of Adam. Nevertheless, in both films—and indeed likely in all films treating mental illness—there is an element of generalized social disapprobation and discipline; the social marking of the *other*.

This marking—literally *stigma*—of the socialized body, although often problematic in many contexts, is very much a part of sociality as such. To wit, the social is predicated on norms. Norms are how we communicate, work in concert, and generally cohere in groups. Every social species is subject to norms, and those norms need regulation. Michel Foucault presents biopower in 1979[vi] as a relatively new form (or mode) of social control; however, I claim that biopower is very much the foundation of norm regulation in all social groups. Before this gets out of hand, let me sum up. The *form* of social disapprobation as diffuse social control is a basic structure of which popular discourse is an extension. Popular media both reflect and enact the popular imagination vis-à-vis (e.g., autism, psychopathy) whatever aspect is being presented and

consequently subjected to the public for social control. This, of course, has varying effects in a society where biopower is not in fact the dominant *mechanism* of social control. With the inception of the judiciary, hospitals, police, and the state, feelings of disapprobation are left aimless, and manifest in unfocused, confused pockets of fear, which take on the socio-politically problematic character we see in our contemporary context. On average, people can be mean.

Although these films both address the difficulties of life with or surrounding autism, they cannot represent the full complexity of such a life, and they fail to provide any more than a superficial glimpse of the disorder. This snapshot leaves a gap where actual knowledge of the disorder and its causes and effects might go a long way to staving off the "idiot" or "abnormal" stigmata, the misunderstanding of socially disruptive or awkward (read: deviant) behaviour often exhibited by those "on the spectrum." As David Farrugia notes, parents of autistic children were able to combat, and even neutralize, both *enacted* and *felt* stigma by strategically constructing an identity for both them and their children based on medical knowledge of their child's disorder, "a subjectivity that is constructed as a different kind of normality,"[vii] as opposed to the alien alterity engendered by ignorance which feeds the xenophobic undertone of most stigmata surrounding mental illness in general. Similarly, Dutton deploys a medicalized discourse of psychopathy with a view to the same end.

This phobic trend with regard to the popular conception of mental illness can largely be attributed to media. "For example, one study found that 72% of those dramatic characters on prime time television who were portrayed as having a mental illness were associated with violence and evil."[viii] And whether or not media is the *prime* influence, "[s]tudies conducted around the world have

consistently found extreme prejudice against people with mental disorders. This prejudice manifests itself in the forms of social rejection and discrimination."[ix] Social rejection can take many forms (as can discrimination), but perhaps the most common form, at least with regards to more "severe" disorders such as schizophrenia or anti-social disorders (including psychopathy), is a conflated fear and hatred. That is, fear which may result in a reaction manifested as hatred. Perhaps this is a lingering aspect of the universal ignorance of mental illness that preceded scientific psychology, before "religious explanations were replaced by scientific [ones, when] people were labeled 'witch' or 'heretic,' put on trial, virtually always convicted, and put to death."[x] This method of dealing with non-conformists was not limited to the mentally ill; some of the witches and heretics executed were those who held beliefs that were divergent from the ruling ideology, the Church, under whose aegis up to 100 000 alleged witches were persecuted and often executed.[xi] Regardless, the general feeling towards those deemed "severely mentally ill" in particular psychopaths—since that *is* by and large the *what*—is fear.

Systemic Violence: A Critical Intervention

The representation of the psychopath in *American Psycho* is perhaps the best for examining the popular image in conjunction with Dutton's prevailing sentiment on the subject. The titular character, Patrick Bateman, is a Wall Street executive who allegedly engages in extremely violent acts of sex and murder on an increasingly frequent basis. The parallel between his day job and nightly escapades is both eloquently and sardonically expressed when a model he meets at a night club (who he will later kill) mishears his statement that he works in "murders and executions" as "mergers and acquisitions" (his actual job), and says that she doesn't believe him when he says that he enjoys it, because everyone she's met who does that

sort of work dislikes it. Not because the image of Patrick Bateman is entirely inaccurate, but because Dutton's thesis is that psychopaths sometimes excel in the contemporary world, I would argue that three out of the four main examples of modern *functional psychopath* that Dutton presents (finance execs, Special Forces Operatives, and lawyers—least of all) are in fact only functional because our current social system is inherently violent, and therefore these professions have a place that is, not necessary, but contingent on the nature of the system in which they function.

Slavoj Žižek distinguishes between two classes of violence, *subjective* and *objective*. According to Žižek,

> Subjective violence is just the most visible portion of a triumvirate that also includes two objective kinds of violence. First, there is a "symbolic" violence embodied in language and its forms.... Second, there is what I call "systemic" violence, or the often catastrophic consequences of the smooth functioning of our economic and political systems...[S]ubjective violence is experienced as such against the background of a non-violent zero level. It is seen as a perturbation of the "normal" state of things. However, objective violence is precisely the violence inherent to this "normal" state of things.[xii]

That is, our very way of life here in the West functions on a system which visits innumerable violence's upon millions of people; simply to maintain the order, comfort, and convenience we so depend on. This "objective violence is invisible" because, not only does it generate the "zero level" background,[xiii] but because, for all intents and purposes, *we are* that violence. Dutton's thesis begins to

degrade when we consider that psychopaths are adaptive only because there is money to hoard, foreigners to kill, and criminals to prosecute and defend. The only example Dutton puts forth which is genuinely useful outside the matrix of an inherently violent system is the example of the surgeon; not quite a cold-blooded killer, but just cold enough to make the cuts that matter without pesky emotions getting in the way. But this need not be left to chance. As Dutton demonstrates in the lab, a transcranial magnetic stimulation (TMS) unit, aimed at the amygdala, "the brain's emotional control tower,"[xiv] would make any med student emotionally fit (read: cold) enough for big league surgery. Well trained, psychologically "normal," medical professionals could be temporarily made into cold, "supersane"[xv] super-surgeons at the flip of a switch.

Conversely, there would be no need for cutthroat CEO's or stock traders whatsoever if we weren't running the zero sums game that is capitalism. In fact, it is Dutton himself who slips the knife between the ribs of his own argument. When he brings game theory into the fold, he shows that in general, in a competitive or cooperative scenario cooperation is the clear winner. In the example of the game theory program tournament, set up by Robert Axelrod of The University of Michigan, it is the program submitted by the University of Toronto's Anatol Rapaport, whose default setting is cooperation, which was the decisive victor.[xvi] Anthony Wilden takes up this example in *Man and Woman, War and Peace: The Strategist's Companion*:

> Rapaport's program—based on all players pursuing their own self-interest—is called Tit for Tat. The rules of the TFT strategy are two: Cooperate on your first move. Then repeat whatever move the other player makes. If the other defects, then you defect; if the other

> cooperates, then you cooperate. *True self-interest is self-and-other-interest*.[xvii]

Lewis Thomas, whom Wilden quotes extensively, concluded his discussion of this example of computer modeled behaviour thus: "Taken to its logical, ecological, and long-range conclusions, the still-dominant ideology of the 'survival of the fittest' would inevitably result in the momentary survival of a single supreme species," in this case, of a subset (i.e., psychopaths), "followed by its complete extinction."[xviii] The curious, and very telling, crux here is that Dutton reads the results of Axelrod's tournament as a triumph of individual self-interest tout court, and individually self-interested calculation, as opposed to of self-and-other-interested reciprocity. Dutton seems to adhere to a "social contract/autonomy" model of society, rather than the "always already social" model that his own evolutionary argument supports. Wilden's point is that even in the throes of competition, we are acting within a cooperative framework. Cooperation is fundamental not only to survival in the social context, but to competition itself, no matter how brutal or friendly.

It may be more than fair to say that the notion that the inherently anti-social nature of psychopathy is *intrinsically* adaptive, at any level, is problematic. In fact, in a social species, *anti*-social individuals are by *definition* non-adaptive. Conversely, autistic persons are, at worst, differently social. All those stock traders and executives might find themselves jobless if they woke up in a non-zero sum society. Likewise, soldiers, including Special Forces, would be obsolete in a society where cooperation has found a foothold. With no "enemies" to murder—and make no mistake, political spin aside, it *is* murder—the soldier's utility would be lost.

I stated previously that Patrick Bateman was the best example of psychopathy for analysis alongside Dutton's thesis. This is because Bateman provides us with an example of subjective and objective violence in a mutually reinforcing relationship—the wealth and status he enjoys enables his murderous drives, and the psychopathy behind those drives facilitates success in the business of generating his wealth. He is a literal embodiment of a "cycle of violence." In a great many cases, those on the Autism spectrum for whom the disorder does not severely impede basic functionality, can lead perfectly fulfilling and productive lives in virtually any form of society, and the eradication of the stigmata which surround them can only lead to an overall benefit, reducing social anxiety overall by eliminating mental illness sufferers as sources of anxiety. But contrary to Dutton's positing *wisdom* onto the psychopathic personality, there is no reason why one should *not* fear the kind of person prone to, even excelling at, violence, subjective or objective.

Conclusion

Where there is the tree of knowledge, there is always Paradise": so say the most ancient and the most modern serpents.

—Friedrich Nietzsche[xix]

The discourse called *The Wisdom of Psychopaths* simply fails to see that erecting a weak defense of knowledge about *good* versus *bad* psychopaths is still no better than an ad hoc defense, one which—barring mandatory psychiatric evaluations including fMRI scans for every single person—requires violence—murder or capitalism—in order to be activated. And what's more, the objective violence doesn't even count, isn't counted as such, and is in fact the golden calf of Western democratic capitalism. We worship violence—and this is not at all a controversial statement. As much as it is true to say that psychopathy

continues to be adaptive in certain cases today, is it not also true then, that the stigmatic fear of the bearer of such an emotional void is therefore also adaptive? Dutton is here merely speaking the sociolect of those whom the "functional" psychopath can only help. I have my reservations as to whether Dutton would look so fondly on this evolutionary remnant should the icy banker foreclose on *his* mortgage, or the even icier eyes of the assassin were his last vista. He has the luxury of being a beneficiary of capital and not a victim; the author of a book about, and not a statistic of, psychopathy. Although not exclusively, these facts cloud his perception, and therefore his discourse is also clouded. It's true that psychopaths have found niches in the world we've built. And it's true that we can open a discourse where, in a violent world, they can be called "successful." My question is: if that is the case, should we not consider whether we've built the best world we could?

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Notes

[i] Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale (London: Penguin Books, 2003), 97.
[ii] I feel it's worth mentioning that objective views of morality, and therefore social norms and subsequently deviance, fall prey to what I call the *a priori* fallacy. That is, the notion that morality—and the social in general—has a state outside of human consciousness, that it is something immutable, or at the very least pre-existent, by which we grade action and/or thought, when in fact it is a singular, *sui generis* property. We are literally making it up as we go along. And this would hold true for the greater sociality as well. Even consciousness itself—for we are not possessed of consciousness, we find ourselves in it, or rather, we *are* 'it.'
[iii] Friedrich Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human*, trans. Marion Faber & Stephen Lehmann (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press: Bison Books, 1996), 37.
[iv] *American Psycho*, directed by Mary Harron (Edwin R. Pressman Film Corporation, 2000).
[v] *Rain Man*, directed by Barry Levinson (Guber-Peters Company, 1988).
[vi] Michael Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics*, trans. Graham Burchell. Picador, New York. 2008.
[vii] David Farrugia, "Exploring Stigma: Medical Knowledge and the Stigmatisation of Parents of Children Diagnosed With Autism Spectrum Disorder," *Sociology of Health & Mental Illness* 31, no. 7 (2009): 1024.
[viii] Tami Bereska, *Deviance, Conformity and Social Control in Canada*, 3rd ed. (Toronto: Pearson Canada, 2011), 215.
[ix] *Ibid*. 215-216.
[x] *Ibid*. 218.
[xi] *Ibid*. 259.
[xii] Slavoj Žižek, *Violence* (New York: Picador, 2008), 1-2.
[xiii] *Ibid*. 2.

[xiv] Kevin Dutton, *The Wisdom of Psychopaths* (Anchor Canada, 2013), 145.
[xv] *Ibid*. 127.
[xvi] *Ibid*. 93-94.
[xvii] Anthony Wilden, *Man and Woman, War and Peace: A Strategist's Companion (New York:* Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1987), 90.
[xviii] Wilden cites the article in text as the August 1984 issue of *Discover*, but gives no full citation. And *Discover*'s online archive extends only as far as 1987.
[xix] Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil IV:152*, trans. Helen Zimmern, Project Gutenberg, 2003. http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/nietzsche/1886/beyond-good-evil/index.htm