

On Hate

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Introduction

There is a word that sits in the centre of our moral vocabulary like a stone in a stream, worn smooth by millions of hands yet sharp enough to cut. That word is *hate*.

Walk through any online comment section, switch on any news broadcast, sit in any staffroom or pub, and you will encounter it within minutes. Someone *hates* a policy. Someone *hates* a celebrity's haircut. Someone *hates* an entire group of people they have never met. The word is deployed with the careless frequency of confetti at a party where nobody is quite sure what they are celebrating.

This essay is an attempt to look closely at that word, and at the thing behind it. What does it mean to hate? How does it differ from its semantic neighbours, such as enmity, aversion, dislike, or distaste? Are *hate* and *hatred* identical, or does the noun form carry a weight the verb merely gestures at? What does human psychology tell us about the origins, the mechanisms, and the propagation of hate? Is hate a social virus, and if so, through what vectors does it travel? How does moral panic amplify and distort it? And finally, what might be done, at individual and collective levels, to stymie its more harmful effects?

These are not abstract questions. They bear directly on how we understand political polarisation, the treatment of minorities, the erosion of public discourse, and the strange pleasure many people seem to derive from expressing hatred toward those they have never encountered. To understand hate is not to excuse it. It is, rather, the first condition of being able to respond to it wisely.

Development

Naming the Thing

The philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein argued that the meaning of a word is its use in language. If that is so, then *hate* is a word under considerable strain. It is asked to carry the weight of a fleeting mood, a lasting passion, a political category, a clinical diagnosis, and a legal term of art, often within the same paragraph.

When a footballer tweets that she *hates* losing, and when a fascist manifesto declares that the speaker *hates* an entire ethnicity, the same word is at work, but its meaning, its force, and its consequences could not be more different.

Psychologists have attempted to bring order to this chaos by distinguishing between *hate* as a state and *hatred* as a disposition. Aaron Ben-Ze'v (2000), writing in the journal *Ethics*, proposed that hatred is a chronic, stable emotional orientation toward a target, whereas hate episodes are specific instances of intense hostility that flare up and subside.

Think of it as the difference between a river and its occasional floods. The riverbed shapes the water; the water wears the bed. A person who is dispositionally hateful may not be in a constant state of fury, but their default orientation toward certain others is coloured by a stable negative evaluation that is resistant to change.

This distinction matters enormously. When we say that someone *hates* a television programme, we generally mean they dislike it intensely, perhaps with a theatrical edge. When we say that a society *hates* a particular minority, we are saying something far more consequential: **that there exists a settled disposition, reinforced by social institutions, cultural narratives, and repeated acts of othering, to regard that group with contempt, fear, and the desire for exclusion or harm.**

The word *enmity* comes closer to this second sense. Enmity is a prolonged and embedded hostility, an antagonism that becomes part of the social fabric. The etymological root, from the Latin *inimicus* (not a friend), points toward the idea of an enemy as someone who stands outside the circle of moral concern. But enmity, in its classical usage, typically implied a relationship between identifiable parties, each aware of the other's opposition.

Hate, as it operates in modern societies, is frequently more diffuse. It does not require personal acquaintance. It can be directed at a category of person, at an abstraction, at a symbol. This generalisability is one of hate's most dangerous features.

Distaste and *dislike*, by contrast, are relatively anodyne. They denote mild to moderate adverse evaluation without the accompanying motivational engine that pushes toward action. I may dislike the taste of olives or feel distaste for a particular style of architecture without any inclination to harm olives or demolish buildings. These states are self-contained and do not easily metastasise into hostility toward persons.

Hate is different. It carries with it what psychologists call *approach motivation*: the desire to move toward, confront, or eliminate the object of hate (Mackenzie, 2015). This motivational component is the feature that transforms a feeling into a potential act, and that makes hate not merely a problem of language but a problem of ethics and public safety.

It is also worth noting the peculiar grammar of hate. The verb *to hate* is one of the few emotional verbs in English that can be used reflexively, as in *I hate myself*, without necessarily implying self-harm. This reflexive use points to something important: hate can turn inward as readily as outward, and the relationship between self-hatred and hatred of others is a theme that runs through the entire history of psychology, from Freud's concept of the super-ego to contemporary research on internalised oppression.

The Architecture of Hate

What, then, is happening in the mind when a person hates? The psychological literature is rich and sometimes contradictory, but several themes recur with sufficient frequency to be treated as well-established.

Firstly, hate involves a **distinctive cognitive appraisal**. Unlike fear, which appraises its object as dangerous and to be avoided, hate appraises its object as *worthless or contemptible* and to be confronted or eliminated (Rozin et al., 2014). This evaluative dimension is important: hate is not merely a reaction to threat. It is **a moral judgement**, however irrational, that assigns its target to a lower order of being. When this appraisal becomes generalised to entire groups, it provides a psychological licence for cruelty that mere self-interest could never justify.

Secondly, hate is characterised by a specific affective signature. Research by Brian Parkinson and colleagues (2005) using principal component analysis of emotional episodes found that hatred clusters with **contempt and anger** in a distinct region of emotional space, separable from fear,

sadness, and disgust. What distinguishes hatred from mere anger is the presence of *contempt*: a mixture of anger and disgust directed at a target perceived as inferior. Contempt is, in the phrase of the psychologist Paul Ekman, the emotion that most strongly predicts moral condemnation and the withdrawal of moral concern.

Thirdly, hate is remarkably resistant to counter-evidence. Once a disposition to hate is formed, it tends toward what psychologists call *confirmation bias* on a grand scale: every piece of evidence that seems to support the hatred is seized upon, and every piece that contradicts it is explained away, dismissed, or used as proof of the enemy's cunning. This **resistance to revision** is not unique to hate, but it is unusually strong in this domain, not least because the hatred is often anchored to identity. To revise one's hatreds is, for many people, to revise one's sense of who one is.

Fourthly, and perhaps most importantly for understanding hate at the societal level, hate is *contagious*. Drawing on the concept of emotional contagion from social psychology (Hatfield et al., 1993), researchers have shown that hostile emotions can spread through social networks with remarkable efficiency. When a prominent figure expresses hatred toward a group, the expression serves as a **social permission structure**, legitimating and amplifying latent hostilities in others. This is not metaphor. Neuroimaging studies have shown that observing another person express hatred activates the same neural circuits as experiencing it firsthand (Singer et al., 2004). The boundary between hearing about hate and feeling it is far more porous than we might wish to believe.

Moral Panic and the Social Virus

The sociologist Stanley Cohen, in his seminal 1972 work *Folk Devils and Moral Panics*, described the process by which societies create, amplify, and respond to perceived threats. A moral panic occurs when a condition, episode, person, or group is defined as a **threat to societal values and interests**. The reaction to the perceived threat is often **disproportionate** to the actual danger, but the very disproportionateness is a clue to the deeper social function being served.

Moral panics are fertile ground for hatred. When a society experiences anxiety, whether economic, cultural, or existential, it needs somewhere to direct that anxiety. The construction of an *enemy* serves to focus diffuse unease into a concrete object of opposition. **The enemy becomes a container for fears that might otherwise have no clear target**. And once the enemy is constructed, hatred follows with a terrible logic.

The classic template is the scapegoat mechanism, analysed with great power by the anthropologist René Girard (1972) in *Violence and the Sacred*. Girard's argument, which has been borne out by research across anthropology, history, and social psychology, is that violence tends to be redirected toward a substitute victim when the original source of conflict cannot be confronted directly. The substituted victim, the **scapegoat**, absorbs the accumulated tensions of a community and is then expelled or destroyed, temporarily relieving the social body of its anxiety. The horror of this mechanism is that it works in the short term. The relief is real. And so the pattern repeats, generation after generation, with the identity of the scapegoat changing to suit the prevailing anxieties of the age.

In the contemporary media environment, moral panics are not merely amplified; they are *manufactured* at an industrial scale. The 24-hour news cycle, the algorithmic promotion of engaging (which is to say, **enraging**) content, and the structure of social media platforms that reward strong emotional expression with greater reach, all create conditions in which hatred can spread faster than any public health intervention could hope to contain. The phrase *go viral* was once purely medical; it is now almost exclusively social.

What is crucial to understand is that the hatred generated in this way is not merely expressed; it is *produced*. It is manufactured, packaged, and distributed by an industry that profits from the raw material of human anxiety and tribalism. This does not absolve individuals of moral responsibility for

the hatred they express. But it does suggest that the appropriate responses extend beyond individual virtue to encompass the structural conditions that make **mass hatred profitable and effortless**.

Why Is Hate So Irrational?

It is a striking feature of hatred that it so frequently defeats its own purposes. People who hate a group often harm themselves in the process: they sacrifice relationships, opportunities, and peace of mind for an abstract conviction that their target deserves suffering. **The hater is, more often than not, the primary casualty of their own hatred.**

This irrationality demands explanation. Several factors contribute to it.

As the psychologist Jonathan Haidt (2012) has argued, moral reasoning in human beings is largely *post hoc*: we construct rational justifications for intuitions and emotional responses that originate elsewhere. **The hatred comes first; the reasons follow.** This is not unique to hatred, but the strength of the emotional commitment in hate makes the motivated reasoning particularly extreme.

Hate is frequently anchored in *identity fusion* (Swann et al., 2012), a process by which individuals come to feel that their **personal self is psychologically merged with a group**. When a person's sense of self is fused with a group that defines itself partly or wholly in opposition to another group, any challenge to the enemy is experienced as a challenge to the self, and any attack on the self is experienced as justification for attacking the enemy. The result is a feedback loop in which the hatred grows without limit.

Hate can serve as an *existential anchor*. In conditions of uncertainty and meaninglessness, the clarity of hatred provides a kind of psychic stability. The enemy is clear; the response is defined; the world makes sense in terms of us and them. This is why hatred is so often intensified in periods of social upheaval: the greater the uncertainty, the greater the hunger for a **simple story in which one group is unambiguously to blame**.

Finally, there is the neurochemistry. Hatred, like other strong emotions, is mediated by hormones and neurotransmitters, including testosterone, cortisol, and norepinephrine, which increase arousal, sharpen perception of threat, and reduce activity in the prefrontal cortex, the region responsible for long-term planning, empathy, and inhibitory control (Banks et al., 2007). In states of hatred, quite literally, the parts of the brain that might tell us to stop are less active than the parts that demand we continue.

Responses

If the spread of hatred is a form of social pathology, what might be done?

At the individual level, the evidence points toward the effectiveness of *perspective-taking* and *extended contact* (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). Simply encountering the perspective of the hated other, even through imagined interaction rather than actual encounter, has been shown to reduce prejudice and hostility. The mechanism is not merely cognitive (understanding the other's viewpoint) but affective: the imagination of the other's inner life appears to activate the same neural circuits as actual empathy.

At the institutional level, the most effective interventions appear to be those that *reduce relative deprivation*, *increase economic security*, and *strengthen social safety nets*. These are not soft or sentimental recommendations. They rest on extensive empirical evidence that the social conditions most hospitable to mass hatred are those of **material insecurity, perceived unfairness, and the breakdown of communal structures** that provide meaning and belonging. People who feel secure in their person and their community are far less susceptible to the appeal of scapegoating than those who are economically and existentially anxious.

At the level of public discourse, the most important intervention is *precision of language*. When every disagreement is described as *hate*, the word loses its power and its moral force. The inflation of ‘hate-talk’ does not merely dilute meaning; it actively impairs our ability to identify and respond to genuine hatred when it appears because we have become habituated to its casual use. A society that uses *hate* to describe a bad restaurant review has left itself morally unarmed against those who deploy it to describe an entire people.

But at the deepest level, perhaps, we need to cultivate what the philosopher Martha Nussbaum (2016) has called a *culture of respect* for the irreducible complexity of every human person. Hatred is, among other things, a **failure of imagination**: the reduction of a whole human being to a single attribute, usually the attribute of belonging to a category that has been socially constructed as threatening or inferior. The counter to this is not merely tolerance but the active, disciplined practice of seeing persons where categories are all that is offered.

Conclusion

Hate is not one thing. It is a word stretched over many experiences, from the mild irritation of a passing aversion to the industrial-scale cruelty of a genocide. What unites these experiences, in their more extreme forms, is a constellation of cognitive, affective, and social processes:

- the appraisal of a target as **contemptible**,
- the **motivational** push toward confrontation,
- the **resistance** to counter-evidence,
- the **susceptibility** to social contagion, and
- the **anchoring of identity** in opposition to an ‘other’.

Hate spreads, as all viruses do, through channels that sustain it. Moral panic provides the fever. Algorithmic media provide the vector. Economic insecurity provides the susceptibility. And the casual, unreflective use of the word in everyday discourse provides the cultural soil in which the virus takes root.

Understanding this is not the same as condoning it. But it is, at minimum, the first step toward the kind of honest, informed, and sustained response that the problem demands.

Coda

Wittgenstein ended the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* with a sentence that is often quoted but rarely reflected upon: *Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent*. He meant it as a stricture on philosophy. But it speaks also to our subject. Hate is, among other things, a failure of silence: an inability to sit with complexity, ambiguity, and discomfort without rushing to a verdict, assigning blame, and reaching for the word that closes rather than opens.

Perhaps what is most needed, in the face of a hatred-saturated public culture, is not more speech but more of a particular quality of speech: quieter, more precise, more willing to sit with difficulty. **Not the performative outrage that the platforms reward, but the patient, unglamorous work of understanding.**

That work begins with the word itself. Let us be careful with it.

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