

## **I'm okay, you're nothing, it's boring**

On October 1, 2017, Stephen Paddock opened fire from a hotel window in Las Vegas on an audience at a music festival, killing 58 people and wounding over 400 before taking his own life. Once again a mass shooter was discovered to be a poorly socialized white male; but in this case, at 64 years old, he was even older than George Sodini and in an age bracket notably low in violent crimes.

Like Sodini, Paddock was friendless and even more incapacitated for empathic relating to others. But surprisingly, in terms of the typical profile of such perpetrators and our hasty generalization that they are low-functioning "losers," Paddock was wealthy and had long been living the life of a high roller. He had a girl friend, albeit one he treated brusquely; and he spent his days and nights in glamorous Las Vegas casinos gambling with avidity, if not with any of the usual signs of enjoyment: he preferred video poker machines so that he did not have to interact with people at all – not even dealers of cards at casino tables.

Paddock spent lavishly on good food and Vegas nightclub entertainments while Sodini languished at home chewing his knuckles; and he seemed to relish the gambling scene, playing the machines doggedly while Sodini exuded torpor and laziness. Paddock nonetheless resembled Sodini in the emptiness at the heart of his existence.

He did not even have gambling buddies – he was antisocial to a pronounced degree and changed his address with great frequency for no apparent reason. His two marriages were short-lived and childless. He took no interest in politics, played no sports, and purchased large numbers of guns preparatory to his carefully-thought-out massacre but did not otherwise fit the description of a gun enthusiast. He had no purpose to his life that a normal person would recognize as worthy or psychologically sustaining in a healthy way, and he possessed no recognizable set of values that elicited from him any sort of commitment (other than the pursuit of wealth). Ordinary gamblers are susceptible to the hook of a "variable reinforcement schedule": this describes the situation where players are bound to win from time to time but the next time is always random. What pulls them in is the excitement they feel while the bet is riding. Raking in the pot elates them; losing desolates them; either way, while waiting for the outcome, they are momentarily "alive" – sometimes excruciatingly so. Paddock seems to have reduced even the thrill of victory and the agony of defeat to a bare minimum of animation, celebrating his biggest winning hands alone in front of a machine. Perhaps on the night of his mass shooting he simply chose to gamble for much higher stakes in hopes of experiencing a much greater rush of excitement.

Sodini, with his sporadic displays of empathy and sensitivity, seems far more evolved than Paddock. He also has comprehensible grievances, however tinged with self-pity: he is thwarted in his desire for a sexual relationship. He exemplifies the plaint of all who have a grudge against life or against others: "This shouldn't be happening."

To imagine confronting Paddock with the evidence of the immense amount of pain he caused to people completely unknown to him is to pick up the wrong end of the

stick. He had *never* cared about other people even when he did know them. He never had cared if they lived or died. You would have to have asked him ahead of the slaughter, "What's in it for *you*?" The answer, I think, is that the concert-goers were like action figures on a real-life video screen. Racking up a high score was a challenge, because the responses of real people are more unpredictable than those of icons; and the ante is upped when real police are sure to get involved. He must have had more fun than he had had in a long, long time.

It was a challenge for George Sodini to find something to do to make himself feel alive, but finally he contrived his "exit plan" and he had a project. Paddock by comparison was in perpetual motion, but he was on a treadmill. One challenge for us is to try to understand how our supposedly affluent society can be incubating such spiritually impoverished individuals, so isolated and alienated that there is no one who even knows about their condition, much less how to treat it.

Sodini was not at the banquet, knew it, and resented it. Paddock believed that he was at the real feast – what else is the glitz and glamor of Las Vegas if not the American Promised Land? He was a winner and he was sure that he was envied by the losers. But the feast he frequented was *ersatz*, and with such inner resources as he possessed, he was never going to discover the whereabouts of the actual banquet of life. There was a void at the heart of his "success," and his imagination was so contracted that he could not picture any way to fill it other than by going for the modern record for the number of casualties that a mass murderer can inflict.

The loser and the winner were brothers under the skin:

## Sodini

I'm not OK, you're not OK (you disrespect me),  
it's not OK (it's boring and demoralizing)

Relates to others with great difficulty

Isolated, lonely, aware of his loneliness

Arrogant but unsuccessful, craving sex but  
putting off women, low self-esteem

## Paddock

I'm OK, you're not OK (you are negligible, a  
loser), it's OK but it's boring, unless . . .

Does not relate to others at all

Isolated by choice, not consciously lonely

Arrogance cubed, money, success, a girlfriend,  
high self-esteem . . . and emptiness

The money quotes about Paddock, such as they are:

- A casino host in Reno: "You could tell that being in that high-limit gambling environment would lift him up. He liked everyone doting on him."
- His brother Eric: "He likes it when people go, 'Oh, Mr. Paddock, can I get you a big bowl of the best shrimp anybody had ever eaten on the planet and a big glass of our best port?'"
- An old high school classmate, who remembered him cheating to try to win a science competition to build a bridge of balsa wood without staples or glue. Paddock used glue and extra wood. "Everybody could see that he had cheated, but he just sort of laughed it off. He had that funny quirky smile on his face like he didn't care. He wanted to have the strongest bridge and he didn't care what it took."

If we allow for the undoubted effect on him of copy-cat contagion, we have his pathogenesis down – taken aback, perhaps, that such small causes can have such large consequences.

It does not take much in the way of material success, it would seem, to mask signs of psychopathy in our society. Paddock's existentially empty life – pursued so compulsively and exhibiting so little affect as to even cast its overt hedonism into question as anything that he enjoyed – raised no warning flags because he paid cash

for his expensive pleasures, on time and without haggling, and treated his renters decently. These were as many signs of maturity as the culture required of him. His symptoms were thoroughly occluded by his meeting this low standard of respectability. With that set of values and that soul, he passed for normal right up to the day of his death.

George Sodini understood himself to be a damaged personality, as did Charlie Roberts, the killer of the Amish schoolchildren. Other men who have targeted women considered their murders to be "political" in some sense – like religiously motivated terrorists, they saw themselves as performing exemplary acts of resistance to injustices. But killers like Stephen Paddock, who have no philosophical rationale or personal grievance at work and feel no remorse of any kind for their victims even as an exercise in abstract intellectualization, challenge us as the hardest cases when we try to deny the existence of an inherently evil nature that is intractably "given." What is the phenomenology of the ice-cold killer incapable of empathy or remorse? A quick detour into the behavior of master forger and double-murderer Mark Hofmann may illuminate how Stephen Paddock thought about his victims.

Here I will employ my own semantic distinction between two terms that are often collapsed not only in popular journalism but in the theories of professionals. Perhaps over-influenced by etymology, I treat *sociopathy* as a pathogen creating havoc within the social body, and *psychopathy* as a pathogen infecting the psyche of the afflicted individual. In the first case, the social world is the patient and the sociopathic individual is the disease; in the second case, the psychopath is the patient and an unidentified

pathogen that infects his psychological world. These are radically differentiated conditions – apples and oranges.

The sociopath will not assimilate to respectable society: he sets himself against its values, having his own values that can be summarized as "ethical egoism." He believes, with actual philosophical rigor (if never articulately expressed), that the only good is what is "good for him," and furthermore that this is the covert ethic of every human alive. He views himself as one of Nature's aristocrats: by his moxie and, if necessary, brutality, he is the fittest to survive socially; but polite society has set up a combine to thwart him. By acting as a herd, life's weaklings and losers hold back evolution's winners. Such a man is "antisocial" when viewed by the herd; but within the subculture of other tough guys, he may be socially acceptable and gregarious, bonding with others of the criminal class and enjoying his idea of good company. Naturally he is selfish and dangerous to others, although he may understand people better than the narcissist and be less self-deluded about his motives. Obviously he is unconcerned with the effects of his actions on others – he is given to criminality without any qualms and he is decidedly unempathic toward his victims. But unlike respectable narcissists, he would say so. And it is important to note that his values are extremes or parodies of conventional values: in our society, success is often gained by ruthless self-aggrandizement and money may be worshiped as the arbiter of value and the definitive confirmation of achievement. The sociopath's personal policy toward his neighbors emulates our foreign policy toward other countries. He is a nation with a population of one, practicing *Realpolitik* and "My country right or wrong."

The psychopath is much farther from the center of "normal humanity" (however

we may wish to define that term and surround it in irony quotes). He is typically a loner and altogether unable to care about other people and their feelings, even if he is married with children. But if he is bright, his powers of observation acquaint him with the needs and desires of those others. He picks up on how easily people can be manipulated according to their vulnerabilities. Like many other members of the human race, especially in an affluent society, he has time on his hands; but lacking any gratifying connections to other people, he is highly susceptible to feelings of boredom. Predation is interesting to him. Since he is unencumbered by empathy and moral conscience, other people, in the chilling phrase of one researcher, become "food" to him. It is diverting to have fun and make money duping them and dominating them. In contemplating more serious crimes, which carry extreme penalties if he makes mistakes leading to his arrest, the psychopath enjoys the element of danger as an fillip to his interest, a greater challenge to his intellect and skill.

The majority of psychopaths do not kill people – they meet their needs for distraction and entertainment otherwise. For instance, they often know, from observation, how to get sex; and their partners may be none the wiser. Living as we all do in habitats constructed by language, a victimized woman make take the psychopath, as we take most people, at his word; and he may be a consummate liar. While most of us try to make our words be true to an adequate expression of our thoughts and feelings, psychopaths regard words purely as tools – as instruments for working their will.

Coleridge famously – or infamously in my view – diagnosed Iago as suffering from "motiveless malignancy," even though Iago reveals his plausible motive to Rodrigo

in the first minute of the play: he has been passed over for promotion. "Malignancy" is an interesting term, however. Malice and hatred are bound to be motivated – these feelings are implanted in us by the actions of others. Malignancy is a permanent trait. Therefore it is, in a sense, motiveless by definition. After engineering Cassio's drunken beating of Rodrigo and Othello's subsequent demotion of Cassio, Iago has achieved the ruin of his rival and is poised to succeed to the position he had coveted. But he continues his vengeful plot, at ever more risk to himself. Why? Because he enjoys the sport of improvising each next step as opportunity presents. Consider his line when he realizes that the first light of dawn is impinging on the night when he has gotten Rodrigo thrashed and Cassio cashiered: "Pleasure and action make the hours seem short."

Perhaps it is Iago's perpetuation of his plot beyond the achievement of his promotion that Coleridge found motiveless. Coleridge's imagination failed him here: while Iago has indeed attained his professional goal, he has not yet avenged the insult of having been passed over for promotion in the first place. But it is not only Iago's resentment is not yet exhausted – there is in all of us, according to the critic William Hazlitt, "a natural tendency in the mind to strong excitement, a desire to have its faculties roused and stimulated to the utmost." If such a mind becomes untethered from "the restraint of humanity, or the sense of moral obligation, there are no excesses to which it will not of itself give rise, without the assistance of any other motive, either of passion or self-interest. Iago is only an extreme instance of the kind; that is, of *diseased intellectual activity, with an almost perfect indifference to moral good or evil.*"

That a murderous psychopathology may have its ultimate origin in simple

boredom is demonstrated by Hazlitt's continued analysis of Iago: "he is quite or nearly as indifferent to his own fate as to that of others . . . and is himself the dupe and victim of his ruling passion – an incorrigible love of mischief – an insatiable craving after action of the most difficult and dangerous kind." Such a person "stabs men in the dark to prevent *ennui*."

This last statement is stark and disturbing and even astonishing. It brings us to Mark Hofmann, whose exploits have been written about by Robert Lindsey in *A Gathering of Saints* (Simon and Schuster, 1988) and Simon Worrall in *The Poet and the Murderer* (HarperCollins Publishers, 2013).

Hofmann was a precocious child whose parents were devout Mormons. Very early in his intellectual development he saw through the absurdity of Mormon mythology and coincidentally discovered that he had a gift for forgery. His most spectacular coup was faking a manuscript that purported to be a hitherto undiscovered poem by Emily Dickinson – a forgery so masterful that it fooled the world's leading expert on Dickinson's handwriting. Hofmann was able to emulate both her highly idiosyncratic lettering and her highly original poetic style. But this foray into the arcane world of literary scholarship was an exception – most of his efforts combined his talent for forgery with his contempt for the Church of the Latter Day Saints. He created numerous documents that the church purchased from him, paying a pretty penny. These documents contained scandalous information that the church wanted to sequester from all prying eyes. Hofmann loved the money – like Stephen Paddock, he used these windfalls to live the life of a high roller. But knowing that these large amounts of money were discreet bribes provided him with the ancillary satisfaction of

proving to himself the rottenness at the core of the religion that he hated.

Hofmann's expensive self-indulgences eventually led him into debt at a time when one of the collectors of Mormon memorabilia who had been gulled by him was becoming suspicious. With characteristic ingenuity, Hofmann murdered this buyer with one homemade bomb and set off a second in the home of the buyer's chief rival. The second bomb killed the rival's wife instead, but did not affect the success of the diversionary tactic – the police immediately looked into the two men's antagonistic relationship for clues and had no suspicion of Hofmann. However, the next day, another bomb in the trunk of Hofmann's car accidentally detonated, injuring him and blowing the lid off his plot.

Having so carefully covered his tracks until the accidental detonation revealed them, Hofmann at first denied responsibility for the bombings and hoped to brazen it out. But when the accumulation of evidence against him became overwhelming, he confessed without any shame or remorse. He told the lead investigator – and here we come to the heart of psychopathy – that he was bewildered by the attention paid to his murder victims: "I don't feel anything for them. My philosophy is that they're *dead*. They're not suffering. I think life is basically worthless. They could have died just as easily in a car accident. . . . I don't believe in God. I don't believe in an afterlife. *They don't know they're dead.*"