

Why we respond and why we turn away: A special issue.

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On the 6th of September 2019 a group of thinkers and educators from fields as diverse as psychiatry, law, psychoanalysis and politics gathered in Dublin Business School to share ideas about how as a society and as individuals we respond to human rights violations. Called "[Why we respond and why we turn away: Human rights abuses in a changing world](#)"¹ the daylong event provided an opportunity to explore not just what human rights abuses are occurring, and what we might do about it, but to also ask why? Why do some humans risk their lives, and endure pain, suffering and humiliation to end the suffering of others when at other times we turn away from doing even very little to help those sitting next to us? It may be that in our hyper-connected modern world we are overwhelmed with the number and variety of calls for help we are now exposed to. The complexity of our globalised economic system combined with unprecedented access to information about it mean that every choice we make from what to spread on our toast in the morning², to where and for whom we expend our labours³, to what we consume as entertainment⁴ has the potential to have an impact on lives around the world. Maybe this complexity and challenge is not new, and that would-be philanthropists have always been beset by risk of getting it wrong and the din of competing demands. As Thoreau comments in his 1854 book 'Walden'⁵ "There are a thousand hacking at the branches of evil to one who is striking at the root, and it may be that he

¹ 'Why We Respond and Why We Turn Away: Human Rights Abuses in a Changing World', Fri, Sep 6, 2019 at 10:00 AM | Eventbrite link.

² May-Tobin, Calen. "Palm Oil: From Plantation to Peanut Butter." Union of Concerned Scientists, February 25, 2014. <https://blog.ucsusa.org/calen-may-tobin/palm-oil-from-plantation-to-peanut-butter-420>.

³ Monshipouri, Mahmood, Claude Emerson Welch, and Evan T. Kennedy. 'Multinational Corporations and the Ethics of Global Responsibility: Problems and Possibilities'. *Human Rights Quarterly* 25, no. 4 (3 November 2003): 965–89. <https://doi.org/10.1353/hrq.2003.0048>.

⁴ Sinnreich, Aram, Mark Latonero, and Marissa Gluck. "Ethics Reconfigured." *Information, Communication & Society* 12, no. 8 (2009): 1242–60. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13691180902890117>.

⁵ Thoreau, Henry David. "WALDEN." *Walden*, by Henry David Thoreau, 1995. <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/205/205-h/205-h.htm>.

who bestows the largest amount of time and money on the needy is doing the most by his mode of life to produce that misery which he strives in vain to relieve. It is the pious slave-breeder devoting the proceeds of every tenth slave to buy a Sunday's liberty for the rest" (pg 57).

Despite the complexity of our lives, the cacophony of calls for help, and the discouragement of the seemingly insurmountable task, sometimes a particular call demands our attention. This conference was inspired by the story of Loujain al Hathloul. Described by Amnesty International as "one of the most prominent and outspoken women human rights defenders in Saudi Arabia"⁶. She was detained for 73 days after challenging the driving ban by attempting to drive from UAE into Saudi Arabia. After her release, she went on to stand for election in Saudi in November 2015, at the first opportunity for women to stand and vote. Her name was never added to the ballot. Her courage in publicly criticising both the (now ended) driving ban and the male guardianship system as well as actions such as posting a picture showing her face and hair in public have earned her not just further detention, but torture.

To stand up for what is right fearing imprisonment and torture is one thing. To do it a second time knowing those fears are well founded takes unimaginable courage. How and why does one person become a Loujain al Hathloul when most of us do not? This is the question that first prompted our desire to bring together specialists in a wide range of subjects touching on human rights for this special edition.

Much like the conference day, our call for papers for a special issue of Studies in Arts and Humanities attracted a diverse set of perspectives on the topic of human rights in a changing world. Each contribution dealt with the issue posed in a unique way. In their paper 'Is There A Human Legal Right To Mental Health?', Brendan D. Kelly, Richard M. Duffy and Gautam Gulati discussed the question of whether there is a right to health; specifically addressing the issue of mental health. Kelly and colleagues reflect on the complex nature of introducing a rights and legislation-based approach to provision of healthcare. Although they raise potential difficulties, such as the conflict between freedom and treatment with regard to serious mental health issues, they suggest that such an approach can still be useful and beneficial. To develop this reflection, the authors consider the recent move in India to introduce a legislation which entitles every member of the (very large) population to government funded mental healthcare. This paper offers a thoughtful examination of the potential challenges of implementing this legislation (e.g., cultural patterns, resourcing) but also recognises the opportunity that exists. Kelly and colleagues acknowledge this step as ground-breaking and suggest that its implementation will shed much light on the application of human rights to the issue of mental healthcare.

Focusing on a more specific aspect of psychological health and functioning, Kate Carr-Fanning's paper 'The Right to Dignity or Disorder? The Case for Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Diversity' reviews the labels and frameworks applied to Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), with a particular focus on mental disorder and neurodiversity. The application of such frameworks is considered in terms of how they can contribute to human dignity, and therefore human rights. An important consideration of this paper is the manner in which we use labels and how they can have negative implications for those labelled. Moreover, the socio-cultural aspect of labelling and conceptualising disorder / neurodiversity has an impact on how a condition is

⁶ Amnesty International. "Loujain Al-Hathloul." Amnesty International USA, 2020. <https://www.amnestyusa.org/loujain-al-hathloul-saudi-arabia-detained-since-may-2018/>.

perceived, and therefore affects identity and social participation. Carr-Fanning explains how, rather than persisting with a medical model which focuses on the individual as problematic and in need of cure, structural disablism allows us to reframe ADHD in terms of how societal structures and environment can be problematic for the person. Such an approach considers acceptance of diversity, appropriate support, and environmental accommodations.

Emma Farrell wrote a reflection piece on the conference, titled ‘On Encountering the Difficulty of Reality: Philosophical perspectives on why we respond and why we turn away’. She considers the central theme through the lens of Cora Diamond’s perspective (proposed in the 2003 paper ‘The Difficulty of Reality and the Difficulty of Philosophy’⁷). This perspective considers how we deal with realities that are extremely complex, painful, difficult, or overwhelming. Stemming from the discussions on the conference day, Farrell applies Diamond’s perspective to three specific aspects, namely, the human right to health, the right to asylum, and the right to autonomy. For example, this paper considers how we can deflect from the “horror of displacement” with rational and ethical arguments. These responses may spare us the difficulties of dealing with the realities of suffering whilst also indicating the limits of our capacity to understand certain events. Ultimately, Farrell argues that Diamond’s perspective provides a means for us to turn towards the difficulties of reality; to recognise our limits.

Joanne Conway’s paper ‘Love Thy Neighbour’ examined the central question of the conference ‘Why do we respond and why do we turn away?’ from a psychoanalytic perspective. Conway explores the tension that exists between the questions (why do we respond? and why do we turn away?) by reviewing the ideas proposed by Freud’s work ‘Civilisation and its Discontents’⁸ and considering Lacanian concepts of contemporary psychoanalytical discourse. This paper is written as it was presented to the audience on the conference day. According to Conway, Freud’s perspective suggests that it is not natural or innate for us to be good or moral, but instead we are conflicted because at the unconscious level we have an aggressive conflict, which can account for violence and cruelty, as well as self-destructive behaviours. Conway suggests that to pronounce that acts of violence are attributable to evil, anomalies, or pathology, is to turn away from what confronts us. Furthermore, she suggests that the writing of human rights into law is evidence to demonstrate that it is not in our nature to value our neighbour as our equal. An important aspect of development is to regulate the aggressive and libidinal impulses so as to achieve care, love, and belonging. However, this paper argues (rather chillingly) that these drives can return to the surface, when otherness is detected in an individual or group. Conway ends her paper with a warning of sorts, stating that, from the psychoanalytic perspective, that which is denied will repeat. She leaves us to ponder the question; how can we respond?

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⁷ Diamond, ‘The Difficulty of Reality and the Difficulty of Philosophy’.

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