

Overcompensation: A vice or a virtue?

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Preface

This short paper will try and address some points of interest to me regarding the social impacts of overcompensation based on my personal readings and observations. I am by no means an authority on the issue at hand and anyone wishing to correct any inaccuracies they find here may wish to do so by email or private message (PM).

Introduction

I have long been intrigued by the concept of overcompensation, even before reading up on its definition in the fields of psychiatry and anatomy. It correlates so beautifully with the nature of humans to sometimes go to the extreme when either aiming for a goal or after reaching it. What interests me is how it can be both a vice and a virtue depending on its application.

Definition

Compensation is the act of giving something to balance a loss [Longman]. It is what an oppressed person asks from his oppressor and what the victim asks from the criminal. The thing that is given in return is usually not greater in magnitude, neither in moral nor materialistic terms, than the original crime. Similarly, in the field of psychiatry, compensation is defined as an unconscious tendency to balance undesirable behaviors with desirable ones. In essence, both definitions carry a common meaning, which is that the act of compensation replaces an unsatisfactory circumstance with one that is satisfactory.

Such a system seems extremely logical and socially acceptable because of its moderation. At the far end of its spectrum, though, lies a more extreme version known as overcompensation, which can simply be defined as “excessive compensation”. In social or judicial terms, it can be exemplified by a victim of a punch returning the attack by firing a bullet. The loss inflicted upon the initial victim, which may have been a black eye, was not balanced by the firing of a bullet, but rather, it turned the criminal into the victim and the victim into the criminal.

The psychiatric definition also changes from the one mentioned earlier to “an attempt to overcome a real or imagined defect or unwanted trait by overly exaggerating its opposite”ⁱ. So now, instead of a student who is bad in Mathematics trying to be good in it, heⁱⁱ strives to be the best Mathematician the world has ever seen. Such different applications of the concept of overcompensation is what this paper aims to discuss.

Examples from society

Throughout history, many schools of thought rose and gained popularity amongst the people and an equal number fell through the ground and became nothing but ink on paper. What most of these schools have in common is the desire to correct a social injustice by implementing points in an agenda. However, the problem arises when the desire to change the social condition of the oppressed turns him into the oppressor. In such a system, the loss is not balanced, and thus cannot be considered fair and just. Examples are plenty from recent history and can be observed in many of the schools of thought that were formed in both Eastern and Western societies during the past two hundred years in response to the injustices suffered by either the financially poor majority or the lower class minority. Additionally, almost every example of ethnic cleansing or genocide during this same period seems to arise from a party's thirst for overcompensation.

Therefore, it can be said that a people, with aspirations for social change, regardless of whether they are right or wrong, who punish an entire class of a population in order to balance out years of injustice upon them, are not acting according to the moderate concept of compensation. One example that comes to mind is that of the struggle between the working and middle classes. The centralization of social and political powers in the hands of the middle class led to the formation of a number of parties, rightfully seeking social change. In some of those cases though, the answer was to collectively punish the entire middle class in an attempt to balance out the injustices committed by a few against the working class. It seems to be a natural human tendency to want to go overboard with righteousness when combating a social, or any other, ill.

Examples from psychiatry

The psychiatric definitions mentioned earlier revolve around a person's internal struggle to succeed in life and be in a satisfactory state. This idea of overcoming one's own inferiority complex by striving to get better is what the Austrian physiologist Alfred Adler (1870-1937) calls overcompensation and forms part of his theory of "Individual Psychology". In his writings and talks, Adler makes the point that every person feels inferior to an extent, just as the child may feel inferior when he looks out to the world of superior adults around him. It is that sense of inferiority that motivates a person to get better.

An interesting comparison that Adler makes is one with the human anatomy. His theory is that every person is born with some organs that are weaker than others, which is why so many young children have a sickness in one part of their body or another. The way to combat this deficiency is through one of two ways: Either the organs overcompensate by growing in size and aiding the weaker ones, or the person can physiologically overcompensate [Boeree] by feeding positive signals into their brain and effectively removing them from the negative state they are in [Robbins]. In the former case, a person with blood deficiency may have an overcompensating heart that is larger than the normal size and pumps more blood to the body.

Physiological overcompensation is today considered a new science and has proven to be a very interesting field of research and application. Books such as “Unlimited Power” by Anthony Robbins promote the wonders of Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP), which is a science that makes note of the power of a person’s physiology in being able to succeed in anything. The secret is to overcompensate for any deficiency, organ or otherwise, by programming one’s mind with a constant stream of positive and motivational signals. A simple technique that anyone can try to prove that the mind and body are indeed linked is this: When you are in a depressed state, your head and shoulders face the ground, your back is slightly bent and your walk may be slow and lifeless. To exit this state of depression, push back your shoulders and head so that you are in a straight posture, look up and walk in a steady and rhythmic pattern. You have altered your physiology, however, your state of mind has changed too. One may wish to read up on the lives of people like Theodore Roosevelt and Abraham Lincoln to see how these less-than-fortunate people managed to greatly influence their societies.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the extremist application of overcompensation is what I see as a vice. Socially, nothing positive is achieved when the criminal and victim swap places. On the contrary, the cycle of injustice is given an unnecessary boost and made to last longer. The extremist application of physiological overcompensation is equally undesirable, because it replaces a person’s inferiority complex with a superiority complex. Yet again, nothing is achieved. In fact, the social implications and dangers of someone who has a superiority complex are much more explicit and dangerous, because their effects reach out beyond one’s internal psychology. The reason it does that is because it feeds on the belittlement of others in order to conceal the inferior behaviors of a person.

It may seem paradoxical to state that overcompensation can be moderate, but in fact, that is how I see it. The ideas of recent social scientists and physiological authors and lecturers all flow in one direction and are in agreement about the great benefits of moderate overcompensation. Therefore, in my opinion, a successful society made up of successful individuals can only be formed when each one of those individuals goes through an internal as well as a physiological journey of overcompensation to better themselves.

References

1. <http://www.ship.edu/~cgboeree/adler.html>
2. *Unlimited Power*, Anthony Robbins, 1997.
3. Longman English Dictionary, 1992.

ⁱ <http://www.cogsci.princeton.edu/cgi-bin/webwn?stage=1&word=overcompensation>

ⁱⁱ “he” should be taken as meaning “he or she” throughout the paper.