

PARENTS

WHEN WE HARDEN ourselves, break the surface of appearances, we find ourselves face to face with biology—and so also in the case of parents. It takes years for children (that is, everybody) to see through childhood, those hazy years of wanting and growing, moving from suspicion to knowledge, the whole tinged with a presence that never wavers, that is close by even when brutal or estranged. The voices, the gestures, the rhythms, the commands—who can sort them out? Many children never do: the demands and the gifts are too harsh. No child ever does it all.

But this sense of incompleteness also mirrors in consciousness the necessity of nature. For the main answer to its own puzzle is there, we recognize, in the question itself: *someone* must give creation a push and the wherewithal—and that, after all, is what we name as parent. This makes parenthood as well as the child himself a biological event, and few would quarrel with the justice of that claim. Yet this cannot be the whole of the matter; we see this quickly with the imagined existence of children born without parents. Let us—their creators—not worry how it happens; they step into life: healthy, active, intelligent. To make certain of their independence, let them be born as biological adults, with a language, with professions, with techniques for survival. The one thing they lack, that they have no means of looking back on or discovering, is a set of parents. They are not orphaned, not adopted; they simply do not have origins. All that we ask of them is that they should go about the business of living.

As slight a request, it turns out, as to live and sport in the thin air of Everest. For what would we do if literally we had to make ourselves? Could a person spin himself of whole cloth? The evidence is all the other way. Orphans never, in the whole of their lives, accommodate to the loss; and children who discover the imposture of adoptive parents seek perpetually for a glimpse of biological reality. It matters little to them what brutality or misery stood at their beginnings—and why should it? They search not for kindness or generosity, not even for penitence or love—only for the evidence that they have antecedents. Only then can they escape the suspicion that refuses to quit—that having first created themselves, they must, through the rest of their lives, go on doing this.

Invidiously, cruelly, intolerantly, we do not speak of adults whose parents die as orphans. This is partly because adults have lost the anticipation, the disarray of the child: they are too tired, fed too much by a sense of self, to feel the absence of others exactly as their own. But more important, they have memory, the recollection of origins which although only a myth—painted, shaped—supports them in their age.

Sartre, that courageous figure of the intellect and spirit, gave a new sense to the concept of freedom and the life of the individual—and then, dizzied, sat down to write his autobiography. One volume of it was enough for confirmation; he would never write the others. This was the volume in which he wrote about his parents.

SILENCES

Was it self-absorption or despair? We probably shall never know, for after a time the man who had once spoken openly and willingly stopped doing so; thus there was no occasion on which this question would readily come up. He was, he and his associates knew, quite busy: papers, letters, appointments. He had, as these accumulated, as his reputation grew, begun to talk more quickly, abruptly, always about to go on to something else. Then, sometimes, his acquaintances saw him just move his lips silently when they waited for an answer to their questions (they had before this given up expecting him to initiate conversations with them). And finally that stopped too, replaced by an intent and knowing look. It was clear that in these moments no discourtesy was intended. For when a questioner asked him why he did not answer the question that had been asked, he *would* respond, but in a raised voice, as if he were repeating what he had already said, with a note of impatience for the interlocutor who had failed to hear or grasp an answer already given.

It is faster, we know, more economical, to think than to speak; one might conjecture from this that, contrary to the usual histories of the relation, speaking preceded thinking. Like writing, thinking may have been added to speaking in order to extend its use (so when we criticize someone for not thinking before he speaks, it may be that it is not bad judgment or stupidity that we criticize, but only a devotion to the past, a rehearsal of the species-memory). But what are we to make of the phenomenon of this man who believed he was speaking the words when he was only thinking the ideas? Did he, we might want to know, believe

that *everything* he thought was also spoken? For then, instead of that character of privacy and silence of which he stood accused, the taciturn cover for which, with mingled respect and suspicion, he was known—on his own view of himself he would have been quite open and accessible, virtually transparent.

PARTIAL RECALL

John said to Jane, "Let's forgive and forget. I explained to you what I did, and you told me why you did what you did. I think that you were wrong, and you probably still think that I was wrong. Let them cancel each other out—that's for forgiveness. And then, once we forgive each other, there's little left of what happened (in itself it didn't amount to much anyway); we may as well forget, too. We can act as if it had never happened—that's a way after all, in which it *might* never have happened."

But Jane objected one time more. "I agree with what you say about forgiveness—since even if you were wrong (I still think you were), it doesn't make much difference now. Your intentions were good, as were mine; we've talked about what happened, and no great harm came of it anyway. Surely, then, we ought to forgive each other. But it's not possible or even right simply to forget. Shouldn't we remember how the disagreement came up, what we found fault with each other *about*? That way, the next time something like this begins to happen, we can try to avoid it. Experience keeps a dear school, after all—but then, we should learn from it, shouldn't we? Even for what we need to know about ourselves and our relationship—we *ought* to remember. And anyway, it's no good pretending that forgetting is voluntary. The surest way to remember is to try not to; you know that as well as I do. With forgiving or without it, memory holds on—so let's agree; we forgive, but not forget."

Have they omitted something, this John and Jane, always so thoughtful, so prudently reasoned, so amiable towards each other? Perhaps only the likeliest of the combinations, one that would surface twenty years later in a form muted, so delicately extended, that the most devoted connoisseur of the art of the psyche could yet fail to recognize its origins, to see that in it, too, the present had had a past. I speak of the possibility that they—John, or Jane, or even, harmoniously, the two of

them at once—might indeed forget, put the history of their ideas aside, out of sight, but then discover that something else had lingered on. To forget, that is, but not to forgive.

FILIAL IMPIETY

“Every craftsman loves the work of his own hands more than he would be loved by it if it were to come to life.” So the asceticism and humility of Aristotle show through the profusion of his thinking, his unwillingness to call anything in the whole of nature alien to him. A creator wills his own existence in what he creates; it is no wonder then that what he creates could never, even with life of its own to spend, even with a large and generous sense of indebtedness, match that will.

The wisdom here is exemplary and chilling. For if Michelangelo’s ardor would never have been requited by the Sistine Chapel, nor Mozart’s spirit by *Don Giovanni*, the spirit of the lover come to life; if Flaubert’s passion for Mme Bovary could never have been returned, no matter what words he, her creator, forced her to utter (was it this inequity that led him, dying, to curse her willingness to survive him?)—why should we others feel slighted when we encounter the same evidence in the one test to which many of us have ready access? We would love them anyway, after all—since they are, undeniably, our children.

CATCHING A FISH

We think of pain as expressive, noisy, distorting. Some people are better at concealing it than others, but even then we believe that we can recognize the concealment. We should be aware, however, of the terrible mistake we may be making with such confidence in our power of interpretation, in the reading of signs. We know, for instance, the tradition of artistic creation, according to which internal pain offers itself to the outer world as beauty. This example, admittedly, is superficial; often what it claims is not true at all, and at best it is idiosyncratic, overdetermined. It is more than we need, in any event, since we can readily imagine that pain may be so great as to freeze or immobilize expression: agony in the register of silence. And we say—yes, we recognize this, too: the lines or contortion of a face, the eyes rolled upward,

and so on. But here, again, our expectations may be too full, too dramatic. What, more simply, if certain moments were so painful, frozen by a thrust of a present that destroys the future, that only the expression of normalcy itself could remain for them as a face?

We should, in fact, hardly expect anything more than this when pain is final, when it excises even the possibility of an alternative. But then, if this is so, surely we need to look again at the faces around us, those which we otherwise glance over as untouched, mute, expressionless.

SAMENESS AND DIFFERENCE

The lines are drawn around anti-Semitism in strong and fixed contours, without nuance, with little room left to doubt what they are pointing at: the Jew, the anti-Semite, the bystander who soon discovers that even in that role there is no innocence. But it is a mistake to conclude from such patterned constancy that imagination is not at work here, that the sameness in so many dispersed acts of violation has been only imitative, banal, predictable. The imagination, it seems, needs only a bit of matter, the slightest friction, to begin to secrete the layers of its pearl. All that it requires is an occasion, *any* occasion, including, we have to admit, those of evil as well as good. It is not necessarily moral light that brings a glow to the imagination.

So, consider the list of 22 restrictions imposed on the Jews in Hamadan, Persia, 1892. Most of the rules are conventional, borrowed, probably not very interesting even in their first appearance—expressions of mere spite or nastiness, striking out. Thus, Regulation 6: “Jews are required to wear a badge of red cloth.” Or, Regulation 7: “Jews are forbidden to build houses taller than those of a Muslim neighbor.” Regulation 16: “The Jew cannot put on his coat. He must carry it rolled under his arm.” But one item in the series shows an understanding of culture and personality that draws on almost untouched reaches of the spirit, areas that the twentieth-century invention of social science only approaches in its will to anticipate the extent of human action. So, Regulation 5: “Jews are forbidden to wear matching shoes.”

The reader with a practical turn of mind could understand this as only another, slightly ironical form of taxation: the Jew must buy two pairs of shoes in order to have even one; or, conversely, as a joke on excesses, the Jew cannot have one pair of shoes without having two. But

the impulse of the imagination is always more than utilitarian—and so here, too, with its proposal to violate the familiar order. Why should it be, we hear the unspoken question, that we insist that pairs should be similar, symmetrical, like? We know this custom immediately in our clothes: gloves, socks, sleeves, trouser legs. And even there, of course, we are imitating nature itself which is the most persistent spokesman for likeness, in its very invention of the pair: hands, legs, cheeks, eyes, eyebrows, breasts. To see the one of any of these is to predict the other—a constancy that does not trouble even the strongest admirers of difference and originality. Even where there are more than pairs (toes, fingers, teeth), we recognize still the control of symmetry, a subordination to the principles of analogy. Nature itself thus seems committed to an economy of repetition; burdened by the need always to invent, to make its own way, it seems then to crave familiarity, regularity, an order that provides comfort and at the same time discloses a character of careful deliberation, adherence to the principle of equity.

Only the freak, the grotesque interrupts that order—and the Muslim clergy of Hamadan who set the regulations prove that man can also will and create the incongruous, discover the means of lopsidedness and its indignities. They might, those vendors of religious artfulness, had they been more interested in logic, have also decreed that the mismatched shoes should be forbidden to walk together. (That rule, too, would later be imposed on the Jews, but with little art, presented directly as cruelty.) Perhaps only the innocence of a child could heal such violations—not by preventing it or avenging it, but by absorbing it. I once asked a young boy how it happened that one sock he was wearing was white and the other one brown. “Oh, that’s the way they are,” he reassured me; “I have another pair at home just like it.”

POINTING

Philosophy has spent much of its wonder on intentions. The will, for Kant, is what ethical action is: consequences come and go, but none of them endures, none marks a sufficient starting point. Intentions, on the other hand, what the person willed to do: these remain after the act, even, because of the breach they make in time itself, after the life of the agent himself.

It is just this idea of separation that has troubled the philosopher

recently. Because if an intention is separate from its consequent action, it also ought to have a place, a moment of its own—and where, we ask, is all that located? In the mind? At some hidden point in the line of action? Nothing visible answers.

There is a malady in which, some have claimed, we may find the cure for such questions: like many cures, however, it seems to act slowly, to require more than only the assent or conviction of the patient. The doctors recognize a distinctive motion which they name the “intention tremor.” With this condition a person, normally with steady hands, not nervous or distraught in any apparent way, concentrates on a particular object, focuses on it, grasps or reaches for it or only, perhaps, points at it: he *intends* it. Then the tremor appears.

We may well be inclined to say that for this person as he acts, his intention is there, in his hands: the tremor, it is claimed, is unfailing as well as unmistakable. And surely hands do express designs and efforts more than any other part of the body, more even than the face, which remains, after all, however mobile its features, fixed always in one place. But if we incline in this direction, we have also to decide what shall be said for those people, the rest of us, in whom the tremor does not appear. Not, obviously, that we have no intentions—since with this, the field of innocence would be enlarged beyond conscience. One means of saving appearances would be in the claim that the intention tremor reflects truly what those of us without it have successfully learned to conceal. But that, of course, would be to say what is already well-known, and not only about intentions.

NOVELTY

We have been tested for survival, the biologists say, and not been found wanting. At least we have survived the competition for being born: many others would have wished to stand in our place.

A strong argument, this, even with the appeal to vanity that colors a puritan monochrome: we are obliged to prove ourselves before we are born. The fact of life itself is thus a claim of merit; and the evidence for the claim comes from two sides, the first with a full hand of examples—opposable thumbs, posture erect, the tongue collaborating with the larynx. Who could have invented these singly, let alone in the conjunction of one body? And there, in fact, is also the evidence from

the second side. For although we may at times imagine to ourselves local improvements: a few inches off or on, a sharper, even a third eye—we do not think here of a different *kind* of body. Even when we wish for wings or claws, the thoughts pass quickly, children of circumstance and need. Those changes, we recognize, are borrowed from familiar bodies—birds, cats—not from figures of our invention.

It seems then that we ought to be content when we cannot imagine an alternative. And in general we do not balk: the body takes up the space of thinking as well as of acting. Thus, it is perversity as much as an impulse of the spirit that leads us all to affect one moment that is in no way bound to survival, that even our genius for procreation has not the slightest chance of transmitting, that seems to have nothing to do with biology. This invention is sufficiently remote from the probabilities insisted on by life to seem mere chance—were it not for the constancy of its appearances. Admittedly, we should not place much weight on this constancy, this repetition; it may in fact prove only how difficult and rare it is to be original even when we aspire to that ideal, even after we admit the importance of stepping outside the determinations of history and biology.

The only other explanation for death, it seems, is simple curiosity about what stands on the other side. And curiosity, we understand, is for biology even more improbable an event than originality.

CHILDREN AND ADULTS

Vice and virtue are usually opposed to each other as if each were only one thing. But although there may be one way to be good or to do right, it is clear that there are many ways to do wrong; this, rather than ignorance or the will to cause harm seems, in fact, to be the attraction of evil.

And so, also, not least, with adultery, as it is counted among the large and destructive vices. Adult adultery and child adultery, I call two of those varieties. In the first adultery, of children: the act is committed for another end, to rectify the past, if only in pleasure, and thus to address others as well as oneself. The principal future for such adultery, of course, is disclosure: the beginning privacy of the act is consummated openly, when someone else knows, is made to know. This is a way, after all, to public status, to pain, to the dissolution of marriage (not any one marriage, but all marriage), to ends foreseen by all human beings.

And then there is adult adultery which comes close, by that inversion of history which we preserve as irony, to the traditional ideal of marriage: two become one, not by man to be put asunder. A commitment so hedged by circumstance that the adulterers are aware, even those who do not spontaneously think of death, that the relation, the act, will die with them, known only to them, valued by the two of them alone. No progeny, no witnesses. The passion they have for each other can never be fed by the looks from outside which spur on most human efforts—not approval, not disapproval, not even mere curiosity. The history of the relation is entirely internal: no letters, no traces (for writers of history, it would not be history at all). Seclusion is a condition for openness between the pair; disclosure would make the passion impossible. So this adultery is held aside, in a space and time severed from the world; the cuts remain always open, the bruising of touch is their one but constant reminder of the world's body. The one possible breach in this relation is that the two people may come to think of it as a dream. Then, too, of course, they would not be separated, and some couples have even preferred to think of themselves in this way.

(I do not deny a third possibility, the adultery of piety—where one person gives himself to another with no hope or expectation of return. It is an adultery of humility, this; there is nothing to be known or disclosed, for there is no act of joining—only the opening of a self and the impression it leaves, on the other person, on the bed. Very few people are capable of such giving; few are able to be recipients, moving neither to invite nor to direct, still less to take. There is a reasonable question whether these figures should be called adulterers at all: the one obviously has no commitment to violate, the other deprives marriage of no thing.)

A FIT CRIME

And what if the idea of punishment preceded, not followed wrongdoing? See how we accept one piece of the temporal order as the whole: first, crime—then, punishment. But for the species, at its beginning, this history is reversed: first, the prohibition, the legislation of punishment—and then the crime.

Looking backwards, one can easily understand this relation of cause and effect: prohibitions breed temptation even when their objects would not. (There could have been nothing special, after all, about one piece

of fruit in the midst of a large and ripe garden.) Temptation, desire, start from the sense of a mingling: a present which is yet alien, distanced. Desire becomes stronger, more urgent, as not the one, but the two sides of the prospect are real. Punishment, then, has at least the attraction of reality, and not only for the masochist: few moments in the net of experience are more decisive than pain. Even mere names draw on this power of ratification. Call someone a criminal—and it requires in that person rare asceticism not to give a part of himself to the name. Those who believe that titles or names are tokens of a world already fixed invoke the myth of a linguistic paradise. When the criminologist tells us, then, that a thief who is caught is more likely to repeat his crime than one who is not, we may object that he could know this only by magical vision—and yet we believe him anyway. Why should they, *anyone*, not live out the role which society, with its machines and weights, gives them?

One important question, however, is left by this understanding. For if, historically—anthropologically, psychologically—prohibition and punishment precede crime, we can no longer claim that they have been designed to deter crime, not even, more simply, to right the balance of injustice. What remains of their origin, in fact, is precisely the lack of a cause—testimony to the lure of absence, and then to the difference between man and nature. Thus we understand that in a world where everything was permitted, where everything was given, something would yet be missing: the lure of prohibition.

We see how powerful the attraction here can be when we realize that God Himself has not been exempt. Certainly He gave no reason for bringing prohibitions into the world; the first one, placed in Eden together with its many trees, is not even named among His creations. It is reasonable to suppose that He did not want to be questioned about this, that He Himself may have desired desire.

ALONE

There was once a man who prided himself on his sensitivity and his powers of empathy. He often boasted, in fact, that he not only could tell what his acquaintances and friends were feeling as he met them on the street or as he stood chatting with them—but more than this, that he felt their feelings, actually *felt* them. On a number of occasions he was

even heard to say, with a half-laugh in his voice, that he often could not tell whose feelings he was feeling—his own, or those of the people he was with.

This was no smiling matter, I pointed out to him when he repeated this remark to me, the half-laugh still in his voice, in what turned out to be our last conversation. It might have something to do, I suggested, with the complaint he sometimes made that he did not enjoy solitude. Had he not said that when he was alone he felt quite empty?