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## The Filial Art

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**ABSTRACT** *Psychological or political criticism of the parent-child relation presupposes a normative account of that relation. Such an account is here provided. The normative account can shed most light when the parent-child relation is presented recognizably, not in Utopian disguise. The purposes of reasonable people partly depend on their interpretations of those of their parents. This is so whether such people accept or reject any particular parental purposes. The filial art sticks to the project of working out the enacted interpretation—until it gets it approximately right. There is a corresponding parental art, neither compensatory nor sacrificial.*

Is the disquiet of the parent-child relation intrinsic? If the relation perforce involves two-sided usurpations, then it would improve only as parent and child became *less* parental and *less* filial, until the outraged feelings each has occasioned are blunted or transferred to foreign fields.

That would be one way to grow up, one way out of the moral disequilibrium of the relation. But it is a way out that frustrates a different order of hope, viz. that there might be an appropriate way to honour one's mother and father.

Let us take the path that is nowadays less travelled on, and assume that there is such a human norm. Let us also assume that implicit respect to the norm has been paid by all legitimate criticisms of child and parent abuses. Let us try to discover the nature of that norm. Surely it would be a great thing to have a corrected view of what the parent-child relation might be as a voluntary practice, since so much of our sense of iron fate is bound up with filial memories.

Any attempt to see how the filial relation would go on the right track, must have in view the corresponding track for the parental relation. Either both must be adversaries, or neither need be. So we will here take the corrected viewpoint of parent and child alternately, as we go forward. We must begin by clearing away some of the misunderstandings that make this sort of discussion, when it begins in personal life, ordinarily a rather surly one.

Children are sometimes made to feel that they have been a terrible burden to their parents. On the other hand, parents may go into communicative contortions to relieve their children of this natural feeling. Again, children may shut down the communicative valves altogether, so as not to be assailed by the painful sense that they have been a burden.

Accordingly, it should be noted at the outset that one's being in the filial condition is, at minimum, not a matter for one-sided (parent-to-child) reproach. One can't get here or stay here without a great deal of more-or-less voluntary parental cooperation. Behind the socialisation process to which one was subjected stood the norms of culture, which parents interpreted to their off-spring in line with their own apprehension of and capacity to secure *what they, the parents, wanted*. A parent-child family is not merely a set of brute, natural facts. It is also the complex

of already-worked-out beliefs and desires without which one could not begin to believe or to desire. For the newborn member of those cultures which support parent-child families, such a complex of achieved beliefs and desires is the stable sense of things. It is the complicated 'thing' in experience which is stable, and gives to the vector of desire its origin.

Granting that one must have come into being in the context of a network of desires and been, consciously or unconsciously, 'wanted', one can't generate full-fledged filial virtue just out of paying these desires back in kind. "You've put up with me; so I'll put up with you," is not a promising beginning for the filial art. One might just as soon say, "You allowed me to get going; so don't object to what I do now". Or, "You didn't love me enough; so I won't love you enough". Perhaps one's parents were mistaken to 'want' one, or to want those things that provided the context in which one could come to be. Perhaps one would be in error to want children of one's own. *For what* was one wanted? And what estimate is one to put on that?

It won't quite do to get dismissively commonsensical at this point and say that people are 'normally' expected, having themselves begun in families, to start new ones. Ours is a reflective species, and with us the reproductive instinct tends to be tempered with second thoughts. Raising children is psychically and materially taxing. The more reflective assessment would have to take this into account, along with the reproductive instinct. It might go on to suggest that the compensation for the outlay will, nevertheless, materialise over the long term, as children learn how to use one's affection, and return it reliably. While the self-replication or emotional 'immortality' they provide is not literal, one's children may eventually be to one what one's parents were, a stable thing in one's experience. They may take care of one's old age, get the harvest in, take care of the accumulated investments. While it's true that one can't take them with one—the accumulated investments that is—insofar as parent and child have begun to feel identified with one another, one hasn't wholly left them behind either. If such are the motives ordinarily given for having children, then they are, successively, first sacrificial and then self-regarding. Together they might be summed up as the willingness to make a heavy investment, in the belief that it will pay off.

If we are to situate the filial art in the context of actual experience, it will be vital to know whether we got here as a consequence of certain illusions inseparable from the exercise of parenthood. Our future conduct will depend on figuring out how much disillusionment our very being must comport for our parents. For the filial art cannot have an intelligible *areté* if its first and last task is to mitigate an ineluctable disappointment. What then is the most reasonable way to view the situation of parent and child?

Are the parents *right* who believe they have made a canny sacrifice that will probably pay off? The answer to the question is no. They are not right. The trouble with taking the businesslike view of parenthood is that the 'investment' constituted by pregnancy, childbirth and childrearing, involves the risk of irreversible loss of autonomy, at least for one parent. If the father assumes anything like equal responsibility in the investment, it becomes as demanding a business as he could choose. It could be compared to running a small family restaurant. You can't leave your cares at the corporate office. The gains remain highly uncertain. They can fail to materialize. They can become something much worse than what one had at the outset. Parenthood is not a canny investment.

If the gains in parenthood are separable from it, but the sacrifice it involves is not,

then perhaps the sacrificial view of parenthood would be the safest one to take. Parents at least would be safe from disappointment, geared for the worst. Children, however, are not made safe from a sense of guilt which is both ominous and exasperating, ominous because it saddles one with a debt intrinsically unpayable, exasperating because it makes one secretly suppose one's parents to have been fools. On the sacrificial view, the 'deaths' of the parental purposes would seem to be required as the backdrop for their 'resurrection' in the ruthlessly new purposes of the child. (A Johanine phraseology begins involuntarily to shape itself.) But what could move a sane person to *wish* to play the part of the corn of wheat which "if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit" [1]? It may be that in the course of parenthood one is forced to become that corn of wheat, but never, not even in Hegel, can the self which seeks to find its own way in the world candidly *desire* its own supersession [2].

If self-supersession is not candidly desirable (in the sense of advantageous, or in the sense of psychologically possible), then the parent who claims to have undergone that experience must be regarded as a victim, or confused. If the parent claims, further, to have desired *that* experience, he or she must, I think, be regarded by the child as a hypocrite. To regard one's parent as a victim, a confused person, or a hypocrite, is sometimes unavoidable. But it is not a good beginning for the filial art.

But perhaps a filial *art* does not need to be practiced at all in the usual cases. Suppose we decide instead to assume that some irreducible portion of benevolence is to be found in most of the human race. Along the same lines we might further assume that in the most decent people benevolence has the most general extension, and in all but the worst it extends at least to their nearest relations. Given all these pleasant assumptions, it is the solitary egoist whose posture would need to be explained, not the affectionate son, daughter or parent.

Nevertheless, in the most affectionate of families, it happens even to small children to feel that the affections expected of them are somehow false [3]. A child may feel that he has *acted the part* of the good child and that, drawing from the same emotional reserves, he could have acted a quite different part. It is true that moods of alienation may not be the privileged indices to the human condition that existentialists take them to be. Yet the fact that private impulses of withdrawal are well within the spectrum of childish possibilities is enough to disturb a sensitive child's complacency with regard to his *sentiments*. When such a child gets older, and finds that his own course inevitably separates him from his family's in certain respects, a mere smiling complacency would be ruffled some more. At that point, philosophic recourse to Bishop Butler's moral sentiment of 'benevolence', or to its positivistic, genetically-delivered counterpart, 'altruism', will not do [4]. That is, it will not cover the complex case with precision. One wants to have one's own unitary self, if possible, and not two selves, the child's and the adult's. One wants to do right by one's family, but to do it without either the helpless hypocrisies of childhood or the cool priggish refusals of adulthood. In sum, what one really wants, by way of honouring one's mother and father, turns out to be something rather difficult. For that reason, it seems best not to build our account upon unanalysed family affection. A filial *art* would still seem to be called for, even in the most attractive family albums.

Where then should we begin? Clearly, we wouldn't be here to be having the discussion at all if our parents hadn't put us here, in the usual way, and if they or parent-substitutes hadn't brought us along in the usual way. Yes, but perhaps some other way of doing that might in future be found. Perhaps a substitute procedure

would be better. Perhaps all of us should be regarded, provisionally, as the victims of a primitive reproductive strategy. Apart from the brute facts of our being here, what would it be best for us to believe about those brute facts, and what would it be best for us to desire with regard to them?

In human beings, beliefs and desires are not fully felt as discrete pulsations of experience. On the contrary. It would seem that we the agents choose to act on our beliefs and desires in the light of *an implicit story* that we tell ourselves while we're busy finding it out: the story of our lives [5]. We are perhaps not always referring to this story or thinking about it. But, over the long pull, we come back to it. We may be incorrect in our memories or biased in our interpretations. But this fact is less important subjectively than the fact that our errors are not in principle incorrigible, and we know it. For this corrigibility of our stories works as a kind of demand on us, that our stories be not idly spun out, like fantasies. They must insert themselves within the resistant framework of nature, whose lessons await us, and within the larger structures of significance which are supplied by the culture. The cultural instruments and exemplars are also open to challenge by the sense-making individual, from within or without the culture. There is, then, a sense-making feature of human motivation, quite different from hunger or thirst, or from reproductive or aggressive dispositions, considered as innate. Sense-making involves transposing one's present beliefs, desires and projects backward into the memory strata, to discover where and why they started, how they looked then, how they continued or were corrected. And one projects them forward toward the visualized future, to see how it all may yet work out.

There is no sincere and reasonable alternative to making these interpretive tie-ups between one's past and one's future. If one supposes otherwise, one must have a *reason* to think so. If it's a good reason, then it would make one's life fall under a story-teller's experientially testable explanation after all, viz. that the kind of life one has lived is the most reasonable kind accessible to anyone who is in similar circumstances. If one has a *senseless* reason for refusing to make tie-ups between one's own past and future, does one then want to hold that one should, as a rule, make one's interpretations of life, or withholdings of interpretation, for a senseless reason, rather than a sensible one, other things being equal? And if this refusal is made for *no* reason, does one want to hold that, in general, given the accessibility of reasons for interpreting one's life passages, and the accessibility of reasons for occasionally withholding the interpretations, one should nevertheless do either sort of interpretive work *without* reasons? At this point, one has taken moral argumentation about as far as it will go. The war against making sense goes on outside the boundaries of moral (and other) dialectic.

If reasonable and sincere people make incessant tie-ups between their pasts and their futures, does it follow that they must try to make out the wider connections, between the human past and future generally? Is *generational continuity* a necessary condition for the working out of one's life story? For if it is, we would have the first part of the framework of voluntary and sense-making practices in which to set our account of the filial art. The rest of that framework would be put into place if we could be satisfied that the *sustained personal relation* between parent and child is a necessary condition for the working out of one's life story in the best way. But let us examine first the question of generational continuity.

The impotency, from the standpoint of the self working out its life story, of any other situation than the one of generational continuity, can be seen from the following thought-experiment. Suppose that one knew one's own generation to be

the last generation of human beings (let us say with Kant the last generation of 'rational beings') anywhere. Since the human future could not now give extensibility to one's self-explorations, one might then turn about and try, provisionally, to have them refer back to the human past. One's discoveries, say, about the significance of one's own motivations—as seen in one's actions and their consequences—could be used to reinterpret the indefinitely receding precedents for such human efforts in the past. It is clear from the example, however, that one continues to rely on the work of parenthood done by one's predecessors.

Let us, accordingly, make a more drastic supposition. Past and future generations are erased from memory and expectation. Nothing that our people will *have to know* will require them to decipher complex historical antecedents. We equip them with ready-made technology and language. We programme them for cooperation. We give them the means for supplying their basic needs. We make them members of an absolutely unique, but communicative, generation of human beings. We can assume about our imaginary people that, because they are sincere and reasonable, they will at least try to make connections between past and future. But they can only make short-term connections. All their particular projects must be terminal, like the life of their community. Now, can we picture these people taking time off from their projects to ruminate, or share ruminations, about those first formless surges, and corrected beliefs and desires, out of which their present projects took shape? Wouldn't there be about them all a sense of hurry, and a 'what's the use?' atmosphere? These people cannot think of the findings they secure as available *from here on*, or even as having been in principle available to their predecessors (as when we say it is 'too bad' that previous generations of women had to suffer so in childbirth). But without that backward-and-forward-looking possibility, would they return in the same way to their present projects, correcting them, seeing them through to final form, thinking about their implicit significance? It is perhaps not absolutely inconceivable that members of such a group could do all that. Imaginary people can be imagined to do anything. But it is surely psychologically improbable that they *would* do all that, if they were otherwise people like ourselves.

In brief, generational continuity seems to provide the nutriment of human self-curiosity, without which we would not quite feel like pursuing our stories, even in this present tract of time.

We return to the second question, which is whether the parent-child relation as we know it is the best way to provide the experience of generational continuity. For there are those who contend that it could be better provided on some other plan, like Plato's plan of state-run crèches, state-authorised eugenics, and generalization of the parental and filial ties. It is not at all clear that such drastic schemes would be practicable technically, or erotically, nor that Plato thought they were. But those who want to get to work on constructing the more hygienic system, where the child, however wise, would not know its own parents intimately, would be obliged first to show that the filial art here alluded to is unobtainable. Failing that, they would have to show that adequate Utopian substitutes can be found for it. Failing that, they would have to show that the filial art is in any case morally outvoted by the evils to which family life also gives rise, and which could be absolutely prevented by some other system.

Meanwhile, and *jusqu' à nouvel ordre*, I think it may be provisionally conceded that for us the best available instrument of generational continuity remains the family. We now have a broad and reasonable framework in which to set our account of the filial and corresponding parental arts.

The discussion that follows will focus mainly on the child and mother. For a skeletal account of the parent-child relation and its excellences, only one parent is needed. To pick out the mother is to target for inquiry its personal elements, leaving out of the inquiry that part of the parental role reserved for the transmission of values that have authority for the culture. The distinction is a rough and ready one. In fact, both parents transmit both kinds of values, personal and official, nor can a sharp line be drawn between the two kinds. The difference would be one of tone and emphasis. One could say that in the mother's case, the culture's values tend to be more obviously *personalised*, and that that is the main difference. (To say that mothers have been excluded from important forms of power, targeted for never-outgrown infantile resentments, made aware of the outside world primarily through its impingement on their bodies rather than through its intersection with their own voluntary work in the world, is perhaps another way of saying the same thing. One is still saying that the culture's values have been personalised in the mother, but now saying it in line with an argument whose purpose is specifically feminist. Our purposes in the present inquiry would certainly be congruent with those of feminism, but not with its purposes only [6].) Finally, it is plausible to select the maternal parent for special emphasis because she is after all *likely* to be putting in the longer hours, as a parent.

By and large women bear, for the *going on* of history, a hinge responsibility. In turning back their own desires, so that these mesh with the not-yet-elaborated nexus of future desire which is the new child, they are at minimum confirming the human ground of human life. The mother-child relation compels emotion more continuously than other relations. This is not because it 'prefigures' something better than itself (the imagined better thing being pictured in religious, or millenary-political, or anarchic-erotic terms). Such a prefiguring would be emotionally equivocal at best, suggesting as it may that the actual mother should be got out of the way, if the maternal quality is to emerge without admixture. Nor does this relation compel continuous emotion because men and women sometimes deck it in displaced sentiment. Such a sometime bedecking could but obscure the sentiment which must be native to the relation. Nor is it because the mother, as mother, is without important political power. By and large, I think that the pity of the child for its mother is a sentiment extrinsic to the relation as such. Nor is it because frustrations natural to the infant's condition are by him imputed to the mother, as *the* force of nature in his life, for good and evil. The child does not remain an infant forever. He can if he tries grasp the limitations on his parent's power, natural and social. Rather the mother-child relation is so moving because it is the most directly historical of human relations.

The rivalries of siblings, which seem to take up so much memory room in the generational archives, are by contrast *second-order* historical relations. The brother who wrestles with brother for parental attention deflects himself from a task independent of the fraternal struggle: assimilation of the past bases for his separate vector of desire. The rival should get on about his own business. If he does, he will probably be counted a more charming child, since he will interfere less with his parent's attempts at her own self-recovery. The story in Genesis has the historical sequence approximately right: the child first recovers what we might call—simplifying the story's ambiguities—*its* birthright, and only then receives the (parental) blessing. Parent and child combine to construct their mutually sanctioning relation, and actually it needs the cooperation of both to function in full measure. It also needs a culture which tacitly permits a prolonged, voluntary cooperation between

parent and child, without predetermination along excessively standardized lines. Then the child to a degree 'mothers' the mother, to a degree filiates itself, and so forth.

In fact, it may be the archetypal human relation, an artful accommodation to the impact of desire which has imposed the relation on them both, and as such friendship and lovership may host the same pattern. That the mother-child relation was historically the organizer of other adult relations for our species has been suggested [7], but the suggestion is speculative and has not much to do with the point we are making here. It is not what happened 'in the beginning,' but how one interprets it, that determines the further course of self-inquiry. Interpretation is logically prior to what happened in the beginning, as well as being indefinitely self-correcting, which an original happening certainly is not. Since human action can always be traced to an interpretation or a misinterpretation, whereas it cannot always be traced to an original happening, in history it is more important to know what happened 'subsequently' than to know what happened 'first'. Maternity happened 'first', biologically, and may or may not have been the 'first' occasion for social organisation, but it is with part of the range of 'subsequent' interpretations that this discussion is concerned.

How then shall we interpret what the mother does, if we want to keep in view an ideal standard? We must first allow as legitimate a preoccupation with the child's safety. There will be little or nothing on which to practice an art if the present relation should be deformed or ended by some preventable accident. We subsume under this head not only directions about when to cross the street, but all warnings about how to behave, since it is a hard fact, not an old wives' tale, that a person whose behaviour is unacceptable will not be given safe-conduct through the maze of social life. Before some strata of interpreted memory have sedimented in him, the individual can't even discern in himself a native grain, a theme, a distillation of plausible hints for the future. The child has only what one might call a virtual self, and the mother must both protect and relinquish him in his task of forming a real one. So 'a mother's tears' and 'a mother's prayers' for her endangered child must have in view only so much of his safety as the child himself will need for his eventual fidelity to his own stirring concept [8].

The unfavourable supposition about motherhood, that it *must* tend to be possessive and manipulative, that it must try to see in the child a substitute for its own missed personal desires [9] and thus crave for the child a safety fatal to the child's originality, simply assumes a motherhood which has not mastered its own art. To assign such a character to motherhood *per se* is like assigning brutality to the art of watch repair.

The heroic images seem to me closer to the art of motherhood: Demeter, for example, sorrowing in the open, or Rachel weeping for her children. In the fullness of the feeling they celebrate, such images resemble the art, whereas I think the Freudian patchquilt shows almost a failure of feeling. In the tears of pure *pietas*, pity and piety, reverential pity, as a mother might shed on the heroic occasion, there is an entry into the interrupted quest of the child. Death has veiled the quest. Behind the veil is either conquest or disappointment. We shall not know. Death has left the child alone with its secret. The suffering of the mother on such an occasion is paradoxically a kind of historical activity, by which she undertakes to prolong the hidden aftermath of the child's quest in the world, among the sounds of the world, out of which his quest has taken him. We presume that the Freudians would take the sorrowing mother to be someone who simply cannot let go [10]. If they took



Michelangelo's *pieta* figure that way, the friends of Freud would have missed the generosity which is the hidden essence of the icon: *she let him die*. She let him die his own death, which is to say, she let him be. And what she amplifies, in the hearing of the world, are *his* passions, with a sympathy which we call—wherever we meet it—'maternal'.

When a tie of any kind is humanly justifiable, it may be interpreted in speech in such a way as to show the sense of it, or the purpose of it, in line with other purposes that can be shown to make sense. The biological relation is not lastingly justifiable except in terms of some such interpretive speech. If, therefore, the connection with the parent (or with those who have played that part for the child) is expressed by the child as a practical refusal of the parental purposes, such expression also "justifies" his filiation—justifies it to himself as much as his expression of agreement with the parental purposes would have done. His derivation from another is, presumably, thereby seen to be the primitive occasion for his delivering the personal history of himself.

The friendship of children to parents, and of men to gods, is a relation to them as to something good and superior; for they have conferred the greatest benefits, since they are the causes of their being and of their nourishment and of their education from their birth . . . [11].

What can parents summon to justify the burden of their parenthood in the case where their purposes turn out to conflict with those of their offspring? Or what about the case where the child tries to improve on the parents' accomplishments, and gets no further than the poor imitation of them? For that matter, is not the child who extends the parental purposes in the world taking from the self in which the purposes originated some of the length of its self-inquiry, if only by reminding the parent that he or she can't cover the whole territory opened up by his or her purposes? What is there, native to the parental option, which can justify parenthood to the parent?

By parenthood the parent learns in reverse what the child learns: that someone can 'begin' from him or her. Human relations are in large part traceable to human beginnings. The lesson may be lived in the passive mode of being overwhelmed by it, or in the active mode of taking the fact as continuous with one's adult purposes. The real parent-child relation is a deep adult relation, so deep that it is begun at the mortal fundamentals of human relations. (We may call those *persons* deep who try persistently to tell themselves their own stories: that is, to find their way along unbroken memory threads to memory's beginnings, so as to make better sense of where they are now. We may call those *relations* deep which form important segments of such memory threads, important for one's self-delineation in the present.) Does providing the early memory segments for a child's deep relations bring some advantage [5] to the parent which could not be got in any other way?

One cannot count on an ulterior advantage, but one may with an effort realise an intrinsic one. The parental relation *will have been* deep. One may say it is deep in the forward-going direction. Having converted herself into a 'past' from which someone else may begin, the parent still continues, by word and deed, to represent the significance of that past to the person whose formation incorporates continuous interpretation of that represented significance. One can scarcely think of any other human relation where the parties must be so directly and legitimately influential on one another. Clearly, then, that relation also allows to the parental purposes a proximate, forward-going field in which those purposes may try themselves.

The decision as to whether or not to be a parent is one that requires a calculation of the economy of one's forces. But whether or not one does it by means of parenthood, the depth-sounding self requires deep relations against which to try the whole length of its purposes. Like the filial art, the parental art is the art of trying to understand one's deep relations. There is within the parental art the same subtle conformity to the other's purposes and telling tension of purposes that the filial relation holds. The child's purposes go forward into the world in ways which serve to illuminate one's own contrasting ends. If the child outmatches one at one's own game, then one's limitations as a player become inescapable to one's own subjective view. One has then some felt obligation either to get better at one's own game, or else to find out by what tug in another direction one has been kept from full realization and, if need be, explore *that*. If one escapes all these felt obligations, then one has played the parent only in a truncated sense.

One's own child summons one to pay the full cost of being oneself. Apparently and in the world's eyes one works to support one's children. Actually and in one's own eyes one works to support oneself in the light in which one's children place one. That is, the activity that one has found appropriate to oneself will sooner or later, with any luck, be rewarded enough to keep one going. One's near and dear ones are a trial of whether that activity is indeed what one wants. This is not to say that one's children are necessarily an exhaustive trial of one's purposes or a fair trial; but they are a trial at one's present depths. One may find that one's activities have led oneself and one's children out of their depth. Well then, that too is trying and a trial. One may find that one's children concur in one's purposes and seem to confirm them; then there are depths beyond the present ones still to be tried.

Children are not the moment of truth. One either purposes to meet such moments or one does not. Children are a trial of one's purposes, nothing further. They do not sanctify unholy purposes nor profane true ones. They try, in the fire and water of their deeper or shallower purposes, one's own. The child is of advantage to the parent in that it permits this elemental trial. The child both unleashes and harnesses the parent's self-inquiry. The parent first harnesses and then unleashes the child's. This part of the tie between parent and child could not conflict with the most voluntary and well-thought-out purposes that either might have. Insofar as parent and child remain conscious that the self is the product of a humanly-maintained relation between the voluntary purposes definitive of one's life and the involuntary beginnings suggestive of one's problematic in life, this part of the tie is the acknowledged bond or debt between them. The debt is to be honourably paid off in conscious solicitude and conscious support. We can call this a sacred duty, or a natural happening, or the happening of the parental and the filial arts, but insofar as it happens, the parent is the safeguard against the child's frailty, and the child the surety of the parent's old age.

What the parent-child relation has that other deep relations lack is the conviction of ineradicability. One sees that especially in the attempts of either relative to deny it. For example, a child may try to stress the involuntariness of his first relation by way of arguing for some subsequent relation as his first relation by way of arguing for some subsequent relation as his first relation *of choice*. "I never asked to be born," the child may argue, meaning probably, "I never asked to have my first long-term relation by a relation *to you*". The protest is potentially dizzying. For the protester may then come to ask himself, "In what traceable history of relations am I placed? In what first conscious relation did that history originate? What, along the

historical line of my purposes, has prompted the purposes I am now expressing? Where did I—the 'I' recognisable by these purposes—begin?"

For the sake of argument, let us align our sympathies wholly with the protesting child and admit that a first relative can try to put one in a first relation which is not just misguided and unsuitable, but wicked. The child can come to protest against this relation drastically and legitimately, as soon and insofar as he comes to understand it. Yet this protest, which colours his beginning in life, is also the first intelligible expression of his purposes. If the protest happened late in childhood, or only in adulthood, it is still the corrective of those purposes which ran on before the protest had sharpened and found its voice. The protest is, then, a part of the timbre of his voice, and he can never speak with his own voice till he reflectively admits it, traces from it *some* of the rest of what he has had to say and do in the world, and moves on from there, to pay whatever he can pay innocently of the debt a child owes to its parent. To fail to do at least that is to fail in respect of the minimal quantum of filial piety.

The example is an extreme one. However, the necessary incompleteness of filial refusal even in the worst case may serve to show how inappropriate it is to attempt it in the more malleable cases. All the possibilities of refusal, from implacable resentment to neglect or crime change nothing of the permanent attributability of parents and children to each other.

Should the child's rejection of the parent become the rigid effort to substitute another 'first relation' for the parental one, he will be making the taxing mistake of seeking to blanket the historically actual with the merely preferable. But the child cannot know what it ought to prefer for the future, until it understands what it *has* preferred, and why, in the still-to-be-interpreted past. And this the child gets hold of partly by recalling what its first relatives preferred in its experience of them, and why, and so forth.

The eradication of the storied backdrop of desire is to the resolving of its contradictions as brain surgery is to the resolution of personal conflicts and censorship to the disentangling of knots in a culture's history. It resolves nothing. It simply effaces the evidence [12].

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## NOTES

[1] *John* 12: 24.

[2] In his unpublished *Jugendschrift*, 'On Love', HEGEL writes as if the child is the token of the lovers' union, but a token that eventually breaks away and shapes its independent career. In his late, published work, *Philosophy of Right*, one becomes a parent for reasons having to do with one's stake in social or ethical existence. It is true that for Hegel any intelligible, long-term choice involves a sacrifice of the merely private impulses. But neither in the *Jugendschrift* nor in the late work is the sacrifice of individual aims marked off as a special feature of the parental calling. See HEGEL, G.W.F., 'On Love' in *Early Theological Writings*, tr. KNOX, T.M. (University of Chicago Press, 1948), pp. 307f; also HEGEL's *Philosophy of Right* (1821), tr. KNOX, T.M., (Oxford University Press, 1952), paras. 163, 173, 177.

[3] See JEAN-PAUL SARTRE's recollections of childhood in SARTRE, J.-P. (1964) *The Words* tr. FRECHTMAN, B. (New York, George Braziller) for a dazzlingly overstated illustration.

[4] See JOSEPH BUTLER, *The Works* (1751) (Oxford University Press, 1849), vol. I, p. 322, and vol. II, pp. 4f, note b, 91, 132. Note, however, Butler's care not to make benevolence 'the whole of virtue',

- vol. I, p. 319. Evidences of a genetic derivation for altruism are given in Singer, Peter (1981) *The Expanding Circle: Ethics and Sociobiology* (Oxford University Press), ch. I, 'The origins of altruism'.
- [5] That one ought to view one's life as a story, and live in such a way that sense can be made of one's story, are fundamental ethical claims. That the working out of one's story is of intrinsic (as opposed to competitive or instrumental) advantage to a human being is a further ethical claim. These claims are additionally argued for in my book now in progress. *A Good Look At Evil*.
- [6] See in EISENSTEIN, HESTER, (1983) *Contemporary Feminist Thought* (Boston, G. K. Hall), for detailed accounts of feminist thought along these lines, especially pp. 76f on Adrienne Rich, pp. 85f on Dorothy Dinnerstein, and pp. 91ff on Nancy Chodorow.
- [7] See for example EIBL-EIBESFELDT, IRENAUS (1970), *Ethology: the biology of behaviour*, tr. KINGHAMMER, E. ERIC KINGHAMMER (New York, Holt, Rinehart & Winston), pp. 349, 442.
- [8] In this connection, recall Ambrose's benevolent disclaimer to the mother of Augustine: "Which when he had said, and she would not be satisfied, but repeated more earnestly her entreaties, shedding copious tears, that he would see and discourse with [AUGUSTINE], he, a little vexed at her importunity, exclaimed, 'Go thy way . . . for it is not possible that the son of these tears should perish' " See *The Confessions*, Book III, ch. xii, tr. PILKINGTON, J.G. in *Basic Writings of Saint Augustine*, vol. 1, Ed. Whitney J. Oates (New York, Random House, 1948).
- [9] On his compensatory view of motherhood, Freud writes, with uncharacteristic euphemism, "A mother can transfer to her son the ambition which she has been obliged to suppress in herself, and she can expect from him the satisfaction of all that has been left over of her masculinity complex." See FREUD, SIGMUND (1933) *New Introductory Lectures in Psychoanalysis* in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works*, vol. 22, tr. STRACHEY, J. (London, The Hogarth Press, 1964), p. 133. Cf. also pp. 100f and 128f. A crisp summary of Freud's view is in HORNEY, KAREN (1939) *New Ways in Psychoanalysis* (New York, W. W. Norton) p. 103.
- [10] See however MELANIE KLEIN's gentler modifications of Freudian doctrine in KLEIN, MELANIE (1936) *Love, Guilt and Reparation* where she finds that mother and father can normally want to allow the child room to develop its own personality and an independent life, in KLEIN, M. & RIVIÈRE, J. (1964) *Love, Hate and Reparation*, (New York, W. W. Norton pp. 76-82. I am grateful to Graeme Marshall for calling the Kleinian revisions to my attention. However, it remains unclear to me whether Klein's findings on the Oedipal conflict would, if true and consistent, support or undermine the basic Freudian doctrine. She finds that "Guilt . . . leads to the reparative tendency and arises during the first few months of life in connection with the earliest stages of the super-ego." See KLEIN, M. (1948) 'On the theory of anxiety and guilt' in *Envy and Gratitude and Other Works* (London, The Hogarth Press, 1975), p. 38. Compare also KLEIN, M. (1927) *Early Stages of the Oedipal Conflict in Love, Guilt and Reparation and Other Works* (London, The Hogarth Press, 1975), pp. 187-90, 192f. Freud's contrasting view was that libido has a marked temporal and causal priority over the elements that make for conscience. Compare FREUD, S. (1931) *Female Sexuality*, op. cit., vol. 21, pp. 225-45. For Klein's differentiation of her claims from Freud's, see 'On the theory of anxiety and guilt,' pp. 26-29, 40f, and 'The development of mental functioning' (1958) in *Envy and Gratitude and Other Works*, pp. 239-44. If Klein is right that libido, thwarted libido (or 'aggression' and 'death instinct' as she sometimes prefers to say), compunction about preserving the libidinal object, and guilt about harming the libidinal object all *interact* at the earliest discernible moments of infancy, how could one show that they are not simply equiprimordial in human beings? What she seems to me to have actually found out is that very young children are liable to get affectively overwhelmed, but also given to remarkable feelings of compunction and conscientiousness. It is not my task here to consider what residual truth can be allowed to the original Freudian doctrine, or to its revisions in Klein, Horney, Adler, Reich, Jung, Binswanger, and the rest. What the doctrine and its revisions do that bears on this discussion is at least make *deprivations* of the filial and parental virtues emphatically familiar to us, and offer partial explanations of those deprivations. In contrast, I am concerned here to clarify the virtues themselves, and show how their practice comports with the task of making one's own life make sense. Whether the task of implementing the virtues overtaxes human powers is an empirical question. Obviously I think it does not.
- [11] ARISTOTLE, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1162<sup>a</sup>4-7, tr. ROSS, W.D., in *Works*, vol. 9 (Oxford University Press, 1925).
- [12] Earlier versions of this paper were given to the University of Sydney's Department of General Philosophy, the Philosophy Department of the University of Melbourne and the Philosophy Department of MacQuarie University. I am grateful to members of all three departments for their constructive and thoughtful discussions of the paper. I should also like to thank JOHN BACON for many suggestions and criticisms and MICHAEL STOCKER for his questions on the role of history in ethics.