

Children as Moral Observers

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In this century of the child, there is little left, it seems, to say about what does or does not happen to the young. If we are to believe some of the more resolutely theoretical child psychoanalysts (and how can anyone ever actually prove them right or wrong?) a baby of six months or eight months has a good chance of being, from time to time, in the midst of a depression, of experiencing envy, or, less ominously, knowing gratitude. There is, Melanie Klein tells us, a “paranoid position” for infants a spell of strenuous distrust with regard to the world. Psychoanalytic critics of that (mostly English) school of child analysis have wondered why their colleagues have been so willing to connect infantile life with words such as “envy” or “gratitude” or “depression,” in the absence of the kind of scientific effort Anna Freud has so shrewdly and so tactfully called “direct observation.” But even if a group of intensely speculative psychoanalysts have let themselves get carried away; have resorted to nothing less than a series of wild or exuberant flights of fancy; have imposed their theoretical will, so to speak, upon babies not yet able to speak or understand words, hence tell what is on their minds or comprehend what is on the minds of those around them — still, it will surely be of some significance for those future social historians who will be trying to figure out this age, that such a line of conjecture could not resist the youngest of the young, and could be offered to the world in the name of science itself.

There is little, in fact, that we haven’t allowed children to be quite congenial with, psychologically. We are proud, these days, that we know how many-sided our boys and girls are — how lusty and truculent, how competitive and jealous, how cunning and devious. Their eyes miss little, we tell ourselves; their ears are always open — at night, even, when the slightest noise in the

house might well get connected to this or that notion of a given child's. There are not only Oedipal complexes, but pre-Oedipal "issues"- again, backward the clock, so far as our sense of what matters psychologically. And we are by no means confined to the house with respect to those old Greek triangles of passion, once somewhat aristocratic with respect to antagonists, but now updated for each and every household, no matter the region, race, culture, language, historical or social experience — or so some psychological theorists would have it. The nursery, the neighborhood, and, not least, the schools are also full of psychological nuance and subtlety, a constant, everyday psychodrama only waiting to be interpreted by those who are "trained," those who have what is called the "theoretical equipment" believed necessary to do descriptive and analytic justice to an extraordinary psychological complexity: what, in sum, used to be passed off as "childhood," or as the first years in someone's "life."

No child simply "plays" anymore, or just happens to get into a fight, or develops an innocent crush or an occasional grudge that gets chalked up to the consequences of childish games — not if some of us who get called "experts," and many of us who are anxious indeed to get called "psychologically sophisticated" are to be heeded. And the same goes for boys who end up on athletic fields or in gangs or for that matter with a hobby, a consuming interest, or for girls who do or don't (it makes no difference!) end up on those same fields, or who manage to find one or another kind of company, or involvement of the mind. We are sure, those of us who claim to know so much about the mental life of children, that there is a lot going on; and it is a life that is only partially apparent. Underneath, deep down, below the surface (so the imagery goes) there are — what? The answer is an astonishing richness of emotional experience: angers and resentments, hopes and fears, attachments and losses, dozens and dozens of anticipations, and one dread after another. Even the healthiest of boys and girls (a description fewer and fewer of us dare assert

for our children, because we are mere laymen, mere mothers or fathers or schoolteachers) are, surely, in possession of that famous “seething cauldron” of instinctive energy. Does not our very humanity offer it to us? It is an energy which presses relentlessly upon us; an energy which we learn to resist, to shape and mold, to allow furtive or guarded or only limited expression; an energy we end up, even before we go to kindergarten, censoring, or feeling ashamed to have; an energy which haunts us at night, as if determined, in weird or violent or tempestuously erotic dreams or nightmares, that we be reminded (again, at eight or nine, never mind eighteen or nineteen, or through all the decades that follow) how vulnerable we are to a powerfully assertive and complicated emotional life referred to abstractly (and these days, altogether commonly) as “unconscious” in nature.

Put differently, twentieth-century children (that is, ours who live in the Western democracies, and especially, the United States) are regarded as extremely knowing; as rather subtle observers of the adult world, not to mention their own generation; as quick to spot any number of attitudes, emotions, preferences or outright prejudices in other people, large or small. Those same children are considered continually resourceful in their acquisition and use of psychological knowledge. They cultivate allies, plot against enemies, cling to attachments, harbor resentments, and constantly, no matter what, keep trying to figure out where they stand vis-à-vis just about everyone they meet.

There is a distinct sense in which they may be regarded as social and political observers; their minds have every intention of maintaining a certain emotional *status quo*, or of fixing up a (perceived) injury to a former balance of forces, or of achieving, finally and for good, what hasn't up to now been, but what ought be, so the child believes — and such aspirations are the result of taking stock of things, judging who is friendly or not so friendly, or, indeed, quite unfriendly, and how so-and-so rates in someone else's eyes, and on and on. True, we are talking about not the

manipulations of our Congress or the U.N., but the politics of the nursery, the playground, the classroom or the schoolyard, not to mention the family dining room or living room or bedrooms. But the central thrust of today's psychology acknowledges every subjective and more than a few objective elements of so-called adult political life to be at work among children.

Who, these days, after all, would be surprised at the notion of children as quite able to bargain, threaten, cajole, beg, calculate, join with others for various reasons, bear grudges, even plot, lie, resort to violence? Every schoolteacher who has taken his or her fair share (if not dose) of "educational psychology" courses, every parent who has read one or another of the books that claim to give us a splendid view of "child growth and development," knows full well the intricate texture of a boy's or girl's mental life — so much so that even "experts" claim to be puzzled as they tell us of the many kinds of fantasies entertained, the puzzling variety of behavior demonstrated, all in response to problems or issues which themselves seem frustrating if not impenetrable in their diversity and complexity to the adults who study them, write about them, never mind treat them.

As for anyone who wants to come along and say that life, even psychological life, can't be all that complicated, and especially since it is *small children* whose thoughts are in question — well, there are sufficient resources in the contemporary language of psychiatry, or in the common expressions of our particular culture, to slap a wrist or two, if not send the pitiable individual to a corner of some room. *Naïve* would be one banishing word; others might be *old-fashioned*, or *simple-minded*, or, God forbid, *unsophisticated*. If necessary, there always are the big guns — phrases resonant with Calvinist condemnation, but a Vienna rather than Geneva version of the saved and damned: the person in question has "resistance" to seeing the obvious, is "blocked" in so doing by "conflicts," needs "help" to do so, is "working out" one or another "problem" by not recognizing and acknowledging the perfectly obvious.

An entire essay could be written on that last line of thinking, if not judgment — the ways not a few of us have put psychology and psychiatry to moral use: a means of applauding or roundly condemning those we happen to like or dislike. All too many don't even admit (at least to others, and, incredible to say, not even, maybe, to ourselves) that we do, indeed, have what used to be considered the common human inclination to gather gradually, in this life, a number of preferences, one way or another, with regard to people, places, things, or ideas, ideals, viewpoints. Instead, we talk about “value-free” social science or psychology. We insist that we want to understand, only understand. We claim that we have rid ourselves of our “hang-ups,” and so are in a position to see those of others, everywhere in evidence. But we do not get excited; do not show ourselves to be “emotional” or “over-involved,” not to mention angry at or passionate about something. The point is to be cool; to be warily noncommittal; to nod knowingly, get the other person to talk; to listen to him or her or them (in one of those countless “groups” that cover certain areas of America's human landscape) and only after a respectable length of time, to come up with a pointed interpretation: you seem to be saying *this*, or I hear you saying *that*, or you've got “work” to do on one or another score. And Lord, if the person takes issue with the remarks or even (the poor lost soul) dares strenuously disagree: he or she is “upset,” is obviously having “trouble,” and needs, of course, what we have: our way of looking at things, our way of talking, our way of deporting ourselves.

It is not new, naturally, for some people to set themselves apart from others, even do so smugly and stupidly; and do so by using a particular language, resorting incessantly to code words and phrases, and assigning blame to others for a certain manner or posture. But now our American children, in large numbers, are caught up in such a development — and we tend to regard those children as, again, not unlike us adults who are so commonly told we have “problems,” and ought go “talk with someone.” That is

to say, young people are not only felt to be full of dozens and dozens of attitudes and insights with respect to the way people behave, and why; those same boys and girls (how strange the jeopardy that goes with such complex awareness!) are declared to be in a constantly changing, even escalating struggle. Each year or two, we remind ourselves, there are new hurdles, new sources of anxiety and apprehension to overcome. One cannot take for granted “emotional growth,” or something called “human development.” It is best that we be ever alert, and, under optimum circumstances, ready to intervene, if not devise (what else?) various “preventative measures.”

Here is Anna Freud, in *Normality and Pathology in Childhood* (1965), writing about what became called, by the 1930's, a “psychoanalytic education” for children:

At the time when psychoanalysis laid great emphasis on the seductive influence of sharing the parents' bed and the traumatic consequences of witnessing parental intercourse, parents were warned against bodily intimacy with their children and against performing the sexual act in the presence of even their youngest infants. When it was proved in the analyses of adults that the withholding of sexual knowledge was responsible for many intellectual inhibitions, full sexual enlightenment at an early age was advocated. When hysterical symptoms, frigidity, impotence, etc., were traced back to prohibitions and the subsequent repressions of sex in childhood, psychoanalytic upbringing put on its program a lenient and permissive attitude toward the manifestations of infantile, pregenital sexuality. When the new instinct theory gave aggression the status of a basic drive, tolerance was extended also to the child's early and violent hostilities, his death wishes against parents and siblings, etc. When anxiety was recognized as playing a central part in symptom formation, every effort was made to lessen the children's fear of parental authority. When guilt was shown to correspond to the tension between the inner agencies, this was followed by the ban on all educational measures likely to produce a severe super-ego. When the new structural view of the personality placed the onus for maintaining an inner equilibrium on the ego, this was translated into the need to foster in the child

the development of ego forces strong enough to hold their own against the pressure of the drives. Finally, in our time, when analytic investigations have turned to earliest events in the first year of life and highlighted their importance, these specific insights are being translated into new and in some respects revolutionary techniques of infant care.

When she is through with that important summary of one segment of our recent social history, she hastens to add this pointed comment: "In the unceasing search for pathogenic agents and preventive measures, it seemed always the latest analytic discovery which promised a better and more final solution to the problem."

And she does not shirk a candid appraisal of what did not, finally, prove to be possible :

Above all, to rid the child of anxiety proved an impossible task. Parents did their best to reduce the children's fear of them, merely to find that they were increasing guilt feelings, i.e., fears of the child's own conscience. Where in its turn, the severity of the super-ego was reduced, children produced the deepest of all anxieties, i.e., the fear of human beings who feel unprotected against the pressure of their drives.

Moreover, she offers an almost Sisyphean comment — as if it were, alas, a bit of the folk wisdom we ought, by now, have thoroughly absorbed into our heads: "It is true that the children who grew up under its influence [that of a "psychoanalytic education"] were in some respects different from earlier generations; but they were not freer from anxiety or from conflicts, and therefore not less exposed to neurotic and other mental illnesses."

After her last card gets played, the hope is, no doubt, that we will walk away properly chastened: "This [result] need not have come as a surprise if optimism and enthusiasm for preventive work had not triumphed with some authors over the strict application of psychoanalytic tenets."

Miss Freud, one presumes, is not operating or writing out of

the netherworld of neurosis, negative transference, and resistance. She has spent a lifetime with children, and given them credit for a good deal of feisty shrewdness; a never-say-die capacity, in most cases, given any chance at all, to respond intelligently and with great agility to whatever stress comes their way. In the book from which the above quotes are drawn, she is not by any means turning on her own profession, or offering a counsel of despair. She is, indeed, cautioning her particular audience (mostly child psychoanalysts) that they have, eagerly or reluctantly, become foils in a given era's messianic hopes, if not fantasies. And she is, too, at other points in her book, quite honorably willing, in a most forthcoming way, to acknowledge that one never does, really, know — not even if one is Anna Freud — how any child will turn out. A lad who seems exceedingly troubled, at age A, may end up rather well off, psychologically, at age B. And vice versa — since it is no rarity to find children certified by “experts” as “normal” or “well adjusted” who end up, later in life, a holy mess, or, at best, dull and dreary members of “the human race.”

Such ironies of life, the unpredictability of things, the continual complexity of childhood, the inconsistencies and contradictions and paradoxes and ambiguities that plague the young and their all-too-attentive elders — in all that one finds the stuff of a grand novel: *Middlemarch*, say, or *War and Peace*, whose creators knew better than letting the life of any character, or any statement about this world, be presented as *the* truth, as an unqualified approximation of *everything*. Still, with respect to children, and that abstraction about their time as such — namely, “childhood” — one wonders whether Anna Freud's recital of illusions spun and illusions rent, expectations raised, then dashed, only to give way to new ones, will prompt the kind of detached, wry, self-critical scrutiny she may have had in mind for herself, for all of us caught up with theoretical ambitiousness, and, not least, with a desire to lend ourselves to the priestly as well as the intellectual purposes of a certain kind of society — highly industrial, given to intense con-

sumerism, all taken up with science, skeptical about religion, and preoccupied with the here and now, not to mention the self.

Since our children are credited with such enormous emotional depth, since they are known to us as sharply perceptive, insistently questioning, extremely artful, if not sly and cunning, when it comes to sizing up people, their motives and hang-ups, their lusts and hates and worries, then why ought we not wonder whether these young ones, too, may have been noticing some of the things Miss Freud has asked us to realize? And whether they, too, may even be capable of the kind of self-distance she has managed and asked us to begin trying to achieve? Moreover, speaking of ironies, psychological and historical, it is rather a strange turn of affairs that has us, today, least inclined — disinclined, really — to allow children the very attributes another, earlier age freely granted them: the ability (the *responsibility*) to make moral distinctions, to assume moral burdens, to ready themselves for moral initiatives.

By now it is a commonplace, courtesy of Philippe Aries, in *Centuries of Childhood* (1965), that a while back (in the Middle Ages, say, and well into the Renaissance) children were generally treated as young adults. They were so dressed, so addressed. They began work around the time we think of sending our sons and daughters to elementary school! In this century, right now, if one wants to get a bit of a reminder of that “distant past,” one can visit the camps where migrant farm families work. There, one will often enough, too often by far, I regret to say, see children of seven or eight not attending school, and working hard, sunup to sundown, as harvesters. They are certainly treated as adults, albeit not the most favored ones, by any number of men and women around them — not only parents, but growers, foremen, county officials, and so on. In any event, Aries makes it quite clear that the issue is psychological as well as cultural, material, economic — a notion, in other times, that a *person* who is eight or nine is quite able to fend for himself or herself when it comes to

matters of the mind and heart and soul. To be sure, infants require what we know or should know they do — loving care, and no small amount of discipline. But “the age of reason” was set at seven back then, and that meant a conviction on the part of bigger and older human beings about the psychological competence, in many respects, of smaller and younger ones. By seven and beyond, one was supposed to know not to lie and cheat, not to disobey, not to get carried away with one’s own whims and fancies to such an extent that one neglects one’s obligations and duties, which have been handed down, and which therefore will be, it is assumed, self-evident.

Nor need we retire to the past, call upon earlier generations, for testimony about a particular point of view. It is a paradox — our contemporary estimate of the moral intelligence of children. On the one hand, we declare them wise almost beyond belief; on the other hand, we grant them scant tendency for ethical reflection, emphasize the animal-like, instinct-ridden, impulsive side of their lives. And don’t pay as much attention as we might, for all our widely proclaimed preoccupation with their lives, to what they might let us know, indeed what they have already told us. In the face of my persistent *psychiatric* curiosity (how were those black children caught up in the severe stress of Southern school desegregation managing during the early 1960’s?) boy after boy and girl after girl had another kind of story to tell me, as in this instance — New Orleans, 1961:

I don’t know why they say all those bad words. They tell me they’re going to kill me, every day they say so. There’s one lady, she’s big, real big, who swears and swears. She gets red in the face. She might be getting sick, the way she looks. There’s a man, and he calls me nigger, nigger, nigger; he just keeps repeating the word. Every once in a while, he says nigger *girl*, nigger *girl*! When I look at him, he starts swearing, like the fat lady. When I don’t look at him, he doesn’t swear too much. I saw him once drive up; he was “late.” He started shouting at me: “Why are you so early?” I wanted to turn and tell him that I wasn’t early;

he was just late. But you can't say a word. People like him, people like her — they're not good people. They're bad people. They're looking for some poor colored person — like me! — to put all the blame on, the blame for what they've done.

I don't know what to think about those people in the crowd. All I know is that the minister is right, when he says there is a Devil, and he's around, and you have to stand up and say you're on God's side and not on the Devil's side. When I walk by the crowd, and they say all the swears to me, I try to smile, and think of Jesus. Didn't He hear people say a lot of bad words? My mother has told us to think of Jesus, and I do. My father gets mad; he'd fight them back, the white folks. But I can't do that. I'm only one person. The federal marshals they have with me, guarding me — they're white, and they would probably leave me and join the mob, if there was a big fight.

I don't want to fight, anyway. We're told in Sunday School to "turn the other cheek," and I know how: you pay no attention to the rotten apples in the barrel, and you keep reminding yourself that there are lots of good apples. My grandmother says that's what to think, and I try my best. I told her once that maybe there are a lot more rotten apples than good ones. She asked me how I knew! I said I wasn't sure, but I thought the people who show up every morning weren't so "special." My grandmother says they *are* "special," but they look to me like the people we see on the bus, and downtown in the stores. *You* make a wrong move on the bus or in the stores, or *anywhere*, and you're in trouble. It was my grandmother who used to tell me that, before they decided to pick me for the desegregation — to go to that white school. When I reminded her once, she said hush. She said I have to be strong, and I should believe there are good white folks. But where are they?

If you ask me, we're here so God can find out how strong we are. If we pass, if we prove ourselves, then He'll open up the door; and when we die, we'll live all the time. That's something I think about, too — God and His smile. The minister says Jesus smiled at a lot of children. I've wondered at times if He is watching, when they take me to school, and all those people say I'll die. I'll be killed, pretty soon, so I'd better watch out! I dreamed once, and in the dream God was there, and He told me He *was* watching, and not to worry. I felt better then. I was sure He'd do

something, if the mob got real bad. Even the federal marshals are afraid it will get worse. They've got a lot of plans, about what to do, if "they" try this, and if "they" try something else. The marshals have a list of what to do, and they have a map, and they have a lot of phone numbers, and they have their guns—you can't forget the pistols! I guess only Jesus Christ, our Lord, didn't need the police protecting Him; but like my daddy says, even He had a lot of trouble, and they did get Him, or they tried to, and that was the worst day, *ever*.

As one listens to such remarks, made over a day or two of conversations, in the context of discussions obviously generated by the press of a traumatic and continuing "social reality" (not to mention a "racial reality" of a rather long-lived nature) one finds it rather too easy for sympathetic pieties to come forth: that lovely, frightened, brave girl, experiencing each and every morning, each and every afternoon, the persisting, nasty, brutish venom of a vicious and stupid mob — and one undeterred for longer than was either necessary or just by a complacent, a blind, an outrageously short-sighted, narrow-minded political authority, that of the city of New Orleans, that of the state of Louisiana. Now it is different—and one hastens to add, to insist, that today's mobs are mostly northern; and not a few have appeared in the city of Boston, which has, for generations, sent finger-pointing social critics south.

Still, the question here is not regional self-righteousness, or the ironies of history, but rather the nature of childhood thinking. We had best listen to that seven-year-old black girl, born of parents who had no formal education to speak of — and these days, alas, they'd be called "culturally deprived" and "culturally disadvantaged." And as we do so, we'd best keep in mind this: her comments are by no means the special insights of a remarkably gifted child, a one-in-a-million bequest of "nature" to this world of ours. Do we really need a so-called "expert," parading his years of "research" with various American children of different

sorts (with respect to age, racial or social or regional background) to tell us what has been appreciated over and over again by parents and grandparents and older brothers and sisters and schoolteachers and scout leaders and athletic coaches and ministers and doctors and nurses — by anyone who has occasion to have a talk or two with a child, to watch and listen while a child looks and hears and speaks with statements and questions, with comments and asides, with speculations and affirmations and refusals and objections and hard words and sneers and occasionally a hue and cry or a catcall? Do we really need, more precisely, yet another of our secular “authorities” to tell us that children, young children indeed, definitely do possess a moral sensibility, an increasingly well-muscled notion of right and wrong, and, yes, a yearning that justice be done?

The nods may be forthcoming to that question, but with them, soon enough, one can anticipate the demurrers. We are told, repeatedly, that children aren’t really “moral” or “ethical” in their thinking; they are moralistic, rigidly intent on obeying perceived rules and regulations, responsive to their own literal-mindedness, and, not least, to a “primitive” kind of conscience, the demands of a “super-ego” fiercely intent on dealing with those purely instinctual forces which threaten to overwhelm all of us, whatever our age. For years, as a resident in psychiatry and child psychiatry, and later, while attending psychoanalytic seminars in New Orleans (where I was also watching children such as the one just quoted go through the hurdles of extreme social disruption and historical change) I heard about the “archaic” super-ego or the “inflexible” one. And later, by theorists such as Lawrence Kohlberg, essentially the same point would be made: true, children of seven or eight, for instance, may mind their p’s and q’s, may demonstrate at almost all times a fastidious intention of being found on the “right” side of just about any contest, and may let everyone in sight know how submissive they are to adult authority. But there is, in such behavior, no real critical thought, no effort to weigh

and sift matters, judge them on their merits with care and concern. “Not to reason why, but to do and die” — a child’s “charge of the light brigade,” we have been told, under the aegis of that greatest of personal tyrants, the negative aspects of the so-called “internalized objects,” or, collectively, the super-ego, whose stern, unqualified, ever-demanding voices become for each child a mandate.

Now, there is no doubt that children certainly do show themselves, time and again, to be as compliant as can be — sticklers for what a parent says, what a teacher requires, rather than human beings anxious to scan a particular scene with notions like “justice” or “equity” or the Bill of Rights in mind. But so do the rest of us, at various moments in our lives — even those men and women we all tend to consider moral giants. Gandhi, for instance, could at once be a leading ethical protagonist of this century, yet also be cranky, teasing, even mean-spirited, as his followers and sympathetic observers, no less, have reported. Only an idolatrous fool would want to deny anyone, however impressive and singular his or her life, a good quota of “neurosis” (Freud) or “finitude” (Tillich) or flawed humanity (Tolstoy), or maybe just plain old sinfulness (the Bible).

Twentieth-century psychology has told us nothing if not the universality of mental conflict, of qualities such as “aggression,” “narcissism,” “ambivalence,” and to mention a trait referred to earlier, an “envy” which the English psychoanalyst Melanie Klein has speculated to be present almost at the very beginning of our lives. Is anyone to be excepted from such a generalization? Not Freud, I fear, and not Einstein and not Dr. Schweitzer and not Dorothy Day, and not any of the Old Testament prophets, and not the Christian saints and martyrs, and yes, not even Jesus Christ himself, whose willingly assumed humanity made him, too, heir to the flesh, so to speak. Is not that the lesson of the Cross — Christ’s last moments of loneliness, of radical doubt, of profound and terribly anguished distrust? He had been “forsaken” — or so

he believed, for those awful moments. Those of us who read the Bible are surely meant to be reminded that if no less than the Messiah, God's "only begotten son," should not be able to contain a piercing cry of abandonment, then the rest of us are going to come up, inevitably, with our fair share of apprehensive, suspicious, quite mistrustful responses.

The issue, finally, is one of proportion, of balance. How significantly, how frequently, do children get to the moral heart of things, as compared to adults? I suspect the answer is that the texture of a person's moral life is not by any means necessarily a function of his or her age. I have to ask that the young witness summoned earlier be given her day in court, and I have to insist, again, that she is not at all alone, so far as her "morality" goes. There she was, after all: vulnerable and harassed without letup. There she was, black and poor and living in the deep South at an unfavorable moment in that region's history — a moment the brunt of which she took on the chin every day for a whole school year. If one examines the record of her various observations, as her parents and neighbors and relatives and friends and teachers heard them, as I happened by extreme good luck to do likewise, one realizes the extent and depth of her moral vision, her moral analysis. She was, without a question, able to understand the pain and hurt and consequent blindness and malice in her tormentors. Understand, but not excuse; she witnessed evil and called it that. She could, that is, transcend her own predicament, connect what she was experiencing to what others all over the world, and in other times, have had to go through.

A Christian child, she remembered Christ's travail. A black child, she was able to remember and keep on noticing the injustices historical fate has visited upon her people. She did not become a prima donna, for all the cameras that dwelt upon her, for all the police and marshals who had to escort and guard her. She was able, against high odds, to do a bit of demonstrating herself; she became a moral match for the segregationist demon-

strators who paid her such fierce mind. She was modest, quiet, unassuming, not without a sense of humor about the reason for her celebrity or notoriety. She even understood the different ways various New Orleans people viewed her. She was, in other words, sociologically as well as ethically astute. I don't know who holds the keys to the cabinet which contains scrolls that are handed down to the morally reflective, the morally "mature," and I rather suspect that the issue, as so often is the case, turns out to be one of power — the theorist's desire to decide who deserves his or her approval, accolade: a given psychological designation. But any scheme or hierarchy that leaves this child out, or arbitrarily or with condescension consigns her to a moral "lower depth" or an ethical embryo, a state of early "development" in such matters, ought be itself scrutinized very closely, to say the least.

In twenty years of so-called "fieldwork" with American children of all backgrounds, I have heard ethical reflection put into questions — endlessly, it seems, questions. And to ask one myself: why not? Here is a Louisiana white child, a boy of nine, talking about the same racial conflict that bore down so cruelly on the black child quoted above:

How did all this happen? I asked my daddy, and he said he didn't know. Why don't they settle the fight, and let us go back to school? At first I liked being home, but now I'd rather be back in school. I wonder sometimes: what did God mean, when He made the colored, and He made us? He must have had a reason, I'm sure. You wonder what's fair. That's what the minister asks about everything, and when he asks it, I ask, too — what's fair for the white and fair for the colored? I asked our Sunday School teacher and she said it beats her, and I asked my daddy, and he said the only fairness you'll get is in Heaven, and my mother, she said you have to be as good as you know how, and I guess she's right. I asked her how you know if you're being good, and she said you just know. I hope so.

A mother with a Kantian perspective! A child grappling with the rights and wrongs of society, and with his own mind's various

moral perceptions. I don't see why that child's questions have to be "explained" as a "reaction formation" against "aggression," as a "displacement" or "sublimation" connected to one or another Oedipal difficulty. I wonder, too, whether that child's cognitive faculties will be any sharper when he is forty than they already were when he was yet to be ten. Nor is any college psychology professor or psychiatrist likely to do much better than this boy, of a working-class segregationist family, all too easily categorized and dismissed by my ilk as "redneck." Who will ask to be called that child's superior when it comes to reflecting about the nature of injustice, or dealing with the tension between a political reality and a Christian ethic, or considering the matter of ethical standards—how we get them, realize their character, hold on to them?

Sometimes I wonder whether the course of moral development in childhood and adolescence isn't precisely the opposite of that outlined for us by many of our psychological theorists. I do *not* mean that children are born "good" or "pure" or splendidly responsive to *any* social or cultural mandate. I do *not* mean, in the tradition of Rousseau's *Emile*, or maybe, the tradition of his interpreters, that infants, toddlers, schoolchildren are *only* demonstrating that they have been victimized if they show signs of being mean or nasty or self-centered or pushy or grabby. It is *not* a matter of innocence and purity being gradually, during childhood, defiled; nor is it a matter of almost infinite possibilities being slowly curbed, undercut. Whether one subscribes to the biblical story of Original Sin, or sees that account as a metaphor of sorts, or insists upon "aggression" and "narcissism" as inevitable elements in the makeup of anyone and everyone, the issue for every child and every parent remains the same: how to come to terms with each other, and together, how to make the inevitable accommodations that "life" in one way or another requires?

As mothers and fathers know, as doctors know, and as infants and older babies get to know rather quickly, there are limits to this

world, flaws in it; there is, too, fate and chance, good luck and bad luck, and always, mystery. One can eat only so much without getting sick. One can scream only so much without getting hoarse. One can flail about only so long without getting weary or exhausted. Day is followed by night. Health is interrupted, even under the best of circumstances, by illness. Accidents happen, even to the most circumspect or cautious. Day after day children learn all that, and sometimes know it better than those of us who get so wrapped up in our various determinisms (culture as against drives, society as against the individual, the id as against the ego, the child as a flexible innocent and the child as an untamed animal or as yet another of God's budding sinners) that we overlook the body's givens and the world's as well, the mix of determinate and indeterminate — and how the proportion varies! — that each of us lives with, starting when we're born.

It is in the nature of human beings, through language, to take stock of things, to look around and ask, to come up with answers. We are the self-conscious ones, the creatures who know that there has to be a last breath and live under the shadow of that knowledge. Such an existential banality is never, it seems, connected with the lives of children — not (in contrast) the case with many other banalities, derived from economic materialism, psychoanalytic speculation, social meliorism, behaviorism, utopianisms of all sorts, as well as theological interpretation. Well before children go to school, they know how to speak; indeed, the linguistic capacities of the young child are astonishing — and one would think, reason to stop some of us in our tracks as we spell out all that children don't know, can't comprehend, aren't able ethically to mull over and ask about. Can there be any "morality" without language? I don't know, but that is a reasonable subject for discussion; we get close indeed, doing so, to an important issue in child development and moral development both. And we don't need any new and expensive studies to tell us that language is the great acquisition (its precise biological and psychological origins

still a mystery to us, for all the theories) of preschool children.

Have we watched closely enough how that language is used in those childhood years, or have too many of us been interested in other matters: the emotions that exert themselves upon children, or the habits they learn, or the games, the gadgets, the things they can manipulate — their so-called skills? Even those of us interested in the “reasoning” of children often show our interest in such a way that the child is pushed into a corner of sorts; we present the boy or girl with “problems” to solve, or we take note of responses to certain questions we have asked, and from our tests decide that a child of such-and-such an age is, or is not, capable of dealing with this or that moral problem, not to mention challenge to his or her reasoning ability. I have no wish to dispute the value of accurate cognitive assessment of children; or for that matter, careful (and restrained and tactful) emotional assessment, as done with special distinction, over these past decades, by Anna Freud and her coworkers at London’s Hampstead Clinic. But no series of tests or interviews were meant fully to circumscribe the particulars of this life we live, whether it be that of an adult or a child.

As every psychiatrist knows (or ought know) the entire apparatus of diagnostic tests and evaluations and interviews gives only some sense, at best, of certain clinical issues in a person’s life. Similarly, with cognitive appraisals — of intellectual function, of reasoning ability, and so on: an individual’s manner and competence in that regard are *somewhat* appraised. When moral questions are connected to intellectual ones — by intellectuals who have devised modes of testing for what they are looking for — then we are, again, faced with a series of intellectual (and maybe, moral) questions *ourselves*: what precisely are we *trying* to find out, and what *are* we finding out, and what are we *not* finding out, and what may we well *not* be in a position to find out — that is, by administering tests to children?

Even as a street-smart ghetto child, or a child from a culture

not our own (that of the psychological observer) may challenge us to devise new ways of responding as observers, as analytic researchers, and, one hopes, as human beings, so any child's moral *life* may require us to have a few thoughts about the all too convenient, and perhaps arbitrary or categorical manner in which we define and assert a young person's (or an adult's) powers of moral analysis, let alone the way he or she is spending time on this earth — to the good or to the bad. When one hears, day in and day out, children all over the world trying to understand the rights and wrongs of the world, speaking of what ought be allowable or seemly, referring to what is unfair, mean-spirited, unbecoming — then one wonders whether a new frontier of the super-ego needs exploration, a frontier of territory not so harsh, forbidding, or reflexively punitive; and whether, also, a few more (a lot more, actually) studies of what children do, *in fact*, manage to say and achieve for themselves ethically ought also be launched, and, perhaps, carried out, though in situations not of our (the researcher's) manufacture, but rather in situations which are determined by life itself.

In the summer of 1979 my two sons, both teenagers, and I happened to be in Soweto, South Africa. We were talking with the black children there, in schools and in homes. We also talked with white children, of both Afrikaner and English ancestry. Here is part of what one black child of eleven told us:

One day, I'm ready to go die for my people. It's that bad. We are treated like dogs. My mother says no, but I say yes, that is how they treat us, the white people. The next day, I feel sorry for them. When I go to Joburg [Johannesburg] I look at the white people, and there is fear in their faces. They can't see us, but we see them. They don't want to see us, but we have to see them! I hope, some day, God helps us settle this; He will have to come down here again, and open a lot of eyes! I believe He might get hung up on the cross again!

I don't know how to label this child psychiatrically or cogni-

tively; he is an “adequate” student, his teachers told us, and no one in Soweto, including his parents, has complained of his “behavior.” While others discuss what is and is not possible with respect to “moral development” for him and the many children like him all over the world, one can only sit and wonder about his remarks — the patience, the thoughtfulness, the righteousness, the good and clean anger, the indignation, and, too, the sadness: a spirit, already, of resignation which is not unlike that shown us by someone believed by many, over the generations, to have been our Savior. And across town, so to speak, in the important, modern, thriving city that boy mentioned, a white boy only a half year older speaks:

A lot of people worry. They ask: will there be more trouble in Soweto? I hope not. We should give the people there something. I don't know all they need, but they need a lot. Our maid is a good person. She says not to worry; there won't be more trouble. My father says there *will*. My mother says she hopes and prays there won't be. It's too bad when people don't trust each other. I can understand why there's trouble in Soweto; they are poor there, very poor. If I was a poor person, I'd want to get more for myself and my family — my people. But you don't go and rob. There are a lot of burglaries. I would never steal. Maybe, if I was very poor, I might — if I was hungry; if I was a father, and my son was hungry, or my daughter. I would still feel bad, though, if I had to do it.

A child caught in a terrible historical tragedy, and not unaware, by any means, of its true nature. He muses, moves back and forth in his loyalties, shows compassion, fear, a high regard for his own fortunes, a decent sense of how ill it fares for others, a respect for laws, and an uneasy sense that they are, for many, almost beside the point, because a brutish and “separate” existence compels obedience to one law only, that of survival, hence the thievery, and hence the distinction between one person's ordinary temptation to steal and another person's desperate belief that there is little choice *but* to do so. I don't believe that such a “mere

child,” as some might have him, is all that far removed, in his moral sensibility, from his great countryman Alan Paton.

There is no use rescuing children from one set of unqualified generalizations (with respect to their limitations), only to strait-jacket them with another absolute or two. I am not suggesting that children are born sages. I know that they aren't what Wordsworth occasionally heralded them to be: wonderfully spirited souls with scarcely a mean bone in their bodies. Children can be callous, spiteful, utterly (for moments and longer) wrapped up in themselves, and unresponsive, it seems, to anyone's code of honor — the case even for very well brought up and quite “normal,” intelligent children. Those same children, however, can also be thoughtful, kind, sensitive, and sensible — earnestly anxious to do right, to be fair, to give (and give of themselves) liberally, even altruistically. And *some* children (please don't ask for a percentage; I'm not sure whether we'll ever know how to find out an exact number) are rather often as just described — fine, fine human beings a lot of the time, in the way they think of and get on with others.

What, then, is one to conclude, if anything? If children are not angels and not devils, they sometimes are — again, what? Well, they are like their parents and teachers and other adults; they are a mixture of things — including, emphatically, as one element, the ability and willingness to be attentive observers of the human scene, and subsequently as well as consequently, moralists. Henry James gave us in *What Maisie Knew* precisely that, a child who was energetically prepared to watch, to take continual notice, to surmise, and, finally, to conclude — as to facts, yes, but also as to the moral dimensions of a particular situation. So too with the haunting adolescent Portia Quayne, in *The Death of the Heart* — Elizabeth Bowen's attempt to show us that a child dropped into a moral vacuum will, in time, drift and roam and equivocate as the rest of the (London, haute bourgeoisie) crowd manages to do. And those children Dickens gives us — their wickedness laced

with gentleness, or vice versa! They are children abused (*Oliver Twist*), children awaiting their destiny (*Great Expectations*), children caught in the crazy turmoil of a law that does its fair share of generating crime (*Bleak House*); they are, in sum, evidence of a Victorian novelist's determination to give us nothing less than a shrewd, tentative, *balanced* judgment on the matter of what obtains, morally, in the minds of children.

It is a balance, a sense of proportion, we ought strive to attain for ourselves as we think about our sons and daughters—our future of sorts. For Dickens the boy Jo stood for something in all of us, young as well as old—a moral possibility that takes the form of, again, attentiveness:

And there he sits, munching and gnawing, and looking up at the great Cross on the summit of St. Paul's Cathedral, glittering above a red and violet-tinted cloud of smoke. From the boy's face one might suppose that sacred emblem to be, in his eyes, the crowning confusion of the great, confused city; so golden, so high up, so far out of reach. There he sits, the sun going down, the river running fast, the crowd flowing by him in two streams—everything moving on to some purpose and to one end—until he is stirred up, and told to “move on” too.

So it went for a child over a century ago; and so it goes for countless children today. They are not only told to “move on” by policemen; parents, teachers, guidance counselors, child psychiatrists—they all, too, tell children to do that: tell the young to “grow up,” to stop worrying about our Sowetos, about the many injustices of this world. Or worry *a bit*—and again, “move on.” And then *we* decide that only a few of *us*, the much older, can see as Jo did, and respond to what is seen as he did. Unquestionably Jo was no moral philosopher; nor are most of us, including without a doubt our children. But there is within many of them, as within many of us, a redemptive side: eyes that can sustain a spell of moral vision, ears that can pick up the ethical heart of a given matter. Of that we can be sure; and, therefore, be both hope-

ful, because of the moral possibilities in this world, and full of sadness, because so often those possibilities are wasted, or, more forcibly, crushed outright.