



Sana
Sheikh

Inner Conflicts

INNER CONFLICTS

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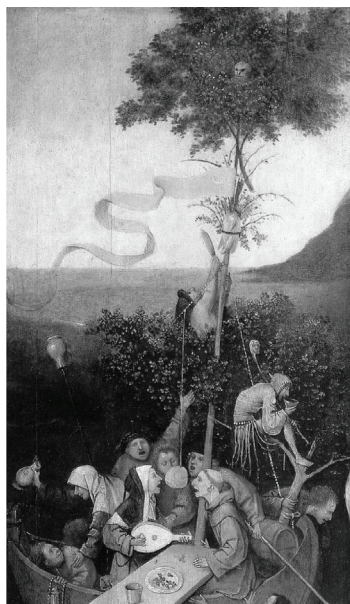


Fig. 1. Detail from Hieronymus Bosch, *Ship of Fools* (1490–1500)

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Inner Conflicts

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Introduction

Over the course of writing this book, I've been occasionally asked about it. My answer—that I was working on a study of our inner conflicts—was typically met with one of two reactions: a piqued interest, or a strong look of distrust. A friend—a union organizer—expressed a pronounced irritation at the prospect of an entire book devoted to the responses he received most frequently from workers and which frustrated his organizing efforts: “I’m not sure,” along with, “let me think about it.” For him, they were pitiful and maddening equivocations that resulted not from a corrigible lack of political education but from a more fundamental hesitation of which he was greatly suspicious. The former, most often women, showed an almost prurient curiosity, as if I were about to disclose secrets long kept hidden from them. They wanted me to tell them more, in a hushed tone.

Both reactions, it seemed to me, intuited a danger—either to be wary or get a thrill out of—in examining our inner conflicts: that, by peering into them, we may fall in and become entrenched, unable to pull ourselves out. Confidence and convictions would be lost. The result would be confusion, not greater clarity. The ethical, and political, implications would be enormous, because, of course, we aren’t the only ones affected by our doubts, our second-guessing, and our indecision. The trouble with inner conflicts is that they aren’t so inner at all. They are entangled with the outside world, involve other people, and are shaped by conditions that we have little say over. To say that I’m writing about inner conflicts is to only name one side of the story. In this sense, the book is just as much about the presence

of outer conflicts as inner ones—where the two meet, or overlay one another—and assumes the psychoanalytic perspective that any confrontation always carries risk.

The book takes a psychoanalytic approach, by which I simply mean that it attempts to acknowledge the unacknowledged, to make conscious what is unconscious. Its purpose is akin to therapy: to unpack and, like analysis, free associate to our inner conflicts, and contend with whatever unseemly consequences come up. Indeed, psychoanalysis has never promised a cure that brings about only good feelings. Sigmund Freud, in his early work, famously wrote that psychoanalysis's modest aim was to attain ordinary unhappiness.¹ Later, he noted that he wanted to move the patient from the pleasure principle to the reality principle² and, in *The Ego and the Id*, that psychoanalysis “does not set out to make pathological reactions impossible, but to give the patient's ego freedom to decide one way or the other.”³

The “freedom to decide one way or another,” implies a question yet to be answered. My patients often ask themselves questions they don't have answers to: What should I do? What is the right thing to do? What do I do when I don't know what to do? In this sense, to be conflicted is to simply have a question—though there are many ways to question, and many forms of questioning, a plurality underscored in the book's name. Again, as in therapy, where every session is distinctive and also part of a larger process, each chapter in the book stands on its own but also builds upon and gains depth from the others. You can read one without needing to read the previous ones. The book is not a systematic or a comprehensive review of the literature. The chapters comprise the personal, and the idiosyncratic. Like inner conflicts themselves, they are all pieces of a puzzle that don't fit neatly together.

It may not be surprising that most psychotherapists responded with a knowing nod when I told them about my book project. The notion that our conflicts are the source of pathology—in other words, where there is a symptom, we will find a deeper conflict—was nothing new for them. It is well known that, yes, inner conflicts are distressing and that the patient will wish to resolve all of theirs—a wish that, of course, is pure fantasy that the course of therapy will help reveal. Only then can the patient

move towards a condition that we may call healthy, which most psychotherapists would say is a tragic but ultimately empowering journey.

The lack of foreclosure in our inner conflicts is what many psychotherapists mean when they say a goal of psychotherapy is to learn how to live with one's ambivalence. Ambivalence, a word synonymous with inner conflicts in the psychotherapy world, was almost the name of this book because of its central role in psychoanalytic thought and many Western schools of psychotherapy. It predates "inner conflicts," historically speaking, first used in early twentieth-century European psychiatry and is, aptly, where the book begins. But the word doesn't capture the varied ways conflicts present themselves to us. Its lay usage today, to mean indifference, also counters a central claim of the book: that our inner conflicts don't mean we are apathetic—rather, their presence is an indication that we probably care too much. Feeling conflicted is not an abrogation of one's relationship with the world, as the union organizer feared, but an engagement with it.

Another friend—an activist—said he was wary of the use of "conflict" in *Inner Conflicts*. The word, he told me, downplayed the reality of power, the existence of oppressors and the oppressed, by implying that the rival factions stood on equal footing. In the analogy, the psychotherapist was a mediator who negotiated between the opposing parts of the mind under the naïve assumption that the battle was being fairly fought. He looked at me with concern, as if he wondered whether my stance as the unbiased third party, with my reference to conflicts, failed to acknowledge the internalized oppressive forces within my patients, because to be neutral is certainly to take the side of the oppressor. My friend's critique of "conflict" seemed also to implicate my use of the word "inner" in *Inner Conflicts*: Is the patient's suffering coming from within, or without? Who's fighting whom exactly? What does it look like to liberate oneself from oneself? The book contains a few case studies of patients I've seen for psychotherapy (anonymized and written as composites to retain confidentiality), who struggle with these questions of possession and identity.

It appears to me that people don't have a problem so much with the notion of inner conflicts than the meaning ascribed to them, to the language, ethics, and politics that surround them. Our relationship to our conflicts is just as relevant to their understanding as the conflicts themselves. Look closely at anything for a sustained amount of time and an unsettling experience will unfold: Long-held associations will detach from the object. Therapy, put too simply, is a practice of dismantling through the act of paying close attention. It is what the book also hopes to do. Along with any disquiet that may take hold, the book is a reorientation towards the conditions necessary for that sought-after ordinary unhappiness, and the freedom to decide one way or another.

Notes

- 1 Josef Breuer and Sigmund Freud, "The Psychotherapy of Hysteria," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 2: *Studies on Hysteria (1893–1895)*, ed. and trans. James Strachey with Anna Freud (Hogarth Press, 1955), 305.
- 2 Sigmund Freud, "Some Character-Types Met with in Psycho-Analytic Work," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 14: *On the History of the Psycho-Analytic Movement, Papers on Metapsychology and Other Works (1914–1916)*, ed. and trans. James Strachey with Anna Freud (Hogarth Press, 1957), 312.
- 3 Sigmund Freud, "The Ego and the Id," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 19: *The Ego and the Id and Other Works (1923–1925)*, ed. and trans. James Strachey with Anna Freud (Hogarth Press, 1961), 50.

Ambivalenz

Psychiatrist Paul Eugen Bleuler spent the first twelve years of his career at the Rheinau Asylum in the Swiss canton of Zurich. The structure sits on a small island on a bend in the Rhine, which, between the eighth and late nineteenth centuries, housed a Benedictine monastery. Only a few years after the dissolution of the abbey, its baroque pear-shaped domes and white stucco walls were opened to the sickest people of the canton. These new monks, excised from society and cloistered on the grounds, formed a different sort of order with their own liturgy and chants and metaphysics. Bleuler lived on the island with the new residents and oversaw their care. He played a pastoral role in the asylum and did not seem to mind when the residents and fellow staff called him *Father*.

From the Rheinau and, later, as the director of the nearby Burghölzli Asylum, also built on the grounds of a former monastery, Bleuler came up with three words that would change psychiatry: *Schizophrenie* (schizophrenia), *Autismus* (autism), and *Ambivalenz* (ambivalence). For Bleuler, these terms were deeply connected to one another, though, over the course of the following century, they drifted apart and took on their own meanings. The first two formalized as their own psychiatric diagnoses, while ambivalence strayed and settled into popular, lay usage.

In the asylum's refectory, a patient brought a spoonful of soup to his lips and paused. Unable to open his mouth, he placed the spoon back down on the plate, took a moment, and tried again. Everyone had already finished dinner and left, while he had yet to begin eating. Another patient repeatedly asked Bleuler

if he could be released from the asylum. Again and again, he pled his case like a prisoner in front of a parole board until his request was finally granted: He was to be discharged. The patient cursed the decision upon hearing it, arguing that he was not ready, that it was a mistake! He was not well enough to leave just yet. A third patient demanded Bleuler give him work, something to do, some purpose that would pull him out of idling in the wards, only when granted, he began to holler in outrage, claiming abuse and exploitation. A fourth was convinced that Bleuler was secretly poisoning him, but the more he feared Bleuler, the more strongly he clung needily to him. A fifth patient, a mother, alternatively wept and laughed after she murdered her child.

From these clinical observations, Bleuler came up with *Ambivalenz* as a scientific proposition, a conjecture about the structure of the mind: that it comprises *ambi-* (both) positive and negative *-valenz* (forces). Desire and repulsion, love and hate, belief and disbelief: These are fundamental forces within the mind. They may clash, or, at other times, simply exist side by side. One pole may come to the fore while the other sinks to the background, like a seesaw. As with most psychologists and psychiatrists, Bleuler drew from the natural sciences of his day and used an amalgam of metaphors from chemistry and physics to explain what he meant by this new word. He saw mental processes as though they were chemical elements: The tension between positive and negative charges attracts, repels, and balances the two forces, and is necessary to hold the atom together. And, in another sense, they resemble the properties of mechanical objects: The friction from opposing forces creates the controlled, refined movements of the mind. Ambivalence, in this original sense, refers to the tension within the mind required to keep it running properly.

The patients at Rheinau and Burghölzli, from Bleuler's perspective, suffered from an unhinging of the two parts of the machinery of the mind—those afflicted had, in his words, “lost their unity.”¹ In their cases, the two sides of the mind did not interact; rather, they were split off from each other, a notion Bleuler thought important enough to place into the very name of their condition: schizophrenia. Cruelly, the etymological

meaning of schizophrenia is only retained in the word's pejorative uses, while hollowed out of the formal diagnosis long ago.

Bleuler rarely wrote more than a few sentences about his patients, so we know little else about the mother who murdered her child, or the man who clung to the doctor he believed was slowly killing him, or the prisoner who refused the freedom for which he fought so dearly. Did any of them find unity? Did they reconcile their desires? Because it's all well and good that atoms and machines require opposing forces to work properly, for they don't feel these forces, but people do. People want and they don't want. People believe and don't believe; they are propelled by desire and repelled by the same object, swayed back and forth by taboos and temptations and forbidden fruits, pulled and pushed in opposing directions that seldom brings about a final resolution.

Bleuler's ambivalence was, in fact, inspired by reading Freud's *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* in which Freud mentions a "pair of opposites."² Freud, on his end, found Bleuler's *Ambivalenz* to be an "excellent term"³ and made it central to the project of psychoanalysis: the study of a mind in conflict. By doing so, Freud took ambivalence out of the asylum, lay it on the couch, and extended its use beyond schizophrenia to understand pathologies, and more prosaic states, of all kinds. Ambivalence, indeed, has ventured a long way from where it first came about.

* * *

Psychoanalysts are quick to note that ambivalence in psychoanalysis means something different from its ordinary use. Salman Akhtar cautions, "one thing [...] must always be kept in mind, and it is that ambivalence is not the same thing as having mixed feelings towards someone."⁴ Adam Phillips similarly writes that, "ambivalence does not, in the Freudian story, mean mixed feelings, it means opposing feelings."⁵ Both Akhtar and Phillips quote Charles Rycroft, who writes that the psychoanalytic use of ambivalence "refers to an underlying emotional attitude in which the contradictory attitudes derive from a common source and are interdependent, whereas mixed feelings may be based upon a realistic assessment of the imperfect nature of the object."⁶ For

Jean Laplanche and Jean-Bertrand Pontalis, ambivalence entails a “basic opposition” that “is to be found in different sectors of mental life.”⁷

Why do these psychoanalysts think it’s important to emphasize ambivalence as the presence of opposing forces, and to distinguish it from mixed feelings? It seems a bit strange, especially if one stops to consider what it means to have opposing states of mind. The opposite of the desire to escape the asylum is the desire to stay, which is an example of dueling motivations, what Bleuler called *ambitendency*—a simple enough idea. It’s harder to point to the opposite of a feeling: Is happiness the opposite of sadness? Or, anger? Fear? Guilt? Or all of them? Freud declared the opposite of love to be hate, not fear; the latter he thought was a projection of hate. But can’t fear just as easily replace either emotion in the love-hate pair? Bleuler tells us that the mother who killed her child both loved and hated them, but was she scared of them as well? Did she kill her child in a fit of paranoia?

Any analogy between emotions and atoms, or chemical compounds, or mechanics, is bound to have its limits, so perhaps these psychoanalysts are, rather, pointing to something else: to the moments when logic breaks down. I can sit down and read a story and enjoy one part of it and dislike another, and say that I had mixed feelings about it, and that would all be very sensible. But Bleuler’s *Ambivalenz*—ambivalence as a pair of opposites—is different: The pieces of the pair don’t fit. They form a fundamental disunity at the center of the psyche. And this definition of ambivalence is important to psychoanalysts because it deepens the narrative. One of Bleuler’s patients, to paraphrase, told him, “I am a human being but I am not.” Anyone could utter words of a similar, contradictory structure: I am reading but I am not; I am writing but I am not; I am listening but I am not. And with a statement qualified by its negation, the story changes and another element of meaning is added.

Psychotherapy relies on the plurality suggested by this account of ambivalence. Those who work with suicidal patients know that no matter how strongly someone wants to end their life, there still exists debate: a part of them, perhaps disavowed and hidden somewhere, but a part of them, nonetheless, wants to live. Ambivalence hands the therapist a searchlight to track

down the disunity within the patient and pull it into consciousness. People often say that if someone really wanted to die, they would be dead already, but this idea rests on a false distinction between the “truly” suicidal and the ambivalently suicidal, and doesn’t recognize that ambivalence exists in both of them. Completing suicide says less about their commitment to ending their life and more about method, chance, and circumstance. Ambivalence is a matter of tenuous commitment, another way of saying that an opening exists for things to be different, that hope endures even as the noose is tied around one’s neck. Rycroft wrote that ambivalence is interdependent: The stronger one side is, the stronger its opposing force will be, meaning that life is still incredibly important for the suicidal patient. It is the reason one is able to step back from the ledge.

Ambivalence is also what renders change so arduous and complicated. “There is something peculiarly sticky about ambivalence,” write psychologists William R. Miller and Stephen Rollnick, “take a step in one direction and the other starts looking better.”⁸ In the treatment of addictions, it is well known that if the therapist takes the side of change—in this case, of recovery—the addict will dig their heels deeper into the side of staying right where they are, to continue using.

Bleuler observed that his psychotic patients often did the opposite of what he requested from them: Patients would say, yes, certainly, to all of Bleuler’s questions when the answer was clearly no; asked to raise their arms, they would lower them; instructed to walk down the hall, they would sprint in the opposite direction. If psychiatry is a form of reparenting, as psychoanalysts may say it is, it is natural to expect there to be rebellion in treatment. Bleuler was like a loving but strict father who imparted structure and order needed for the child’s development: He demanded complete abstinence from alcohol for all patients and staff at Burghölzli, a strikingly puritan act for someone living in an old Benedictine convent. The patients’ small uprisings against their father were a reminder of their reliance on him. Self-assertion risks losing our relationships, whether they be with our father, our doctor, or with our addictions. When dependent, we lose ourselves to the other, forgo our sense of control and autonomy, and, as a result, too often resent and blame the other for our need

of them. This is a bind—what psychoanalyst Jessica Benjamin calls a bond, a fundamental ambivalence in our relations with others, the gluing of oneself to another—and what makes ambivalence, in Miller and Rollnick's words, so sticky.

Ambivalence is a complicating factor, opening up our options and rendering change difficult at the same time. Not only a pathology of the few, the interdependence of ambivalence, the seesawing within the individual, plays out in all of us. However, if we were to return to the asylums, to the original meaning of Bleuler's *Ambivalenz*, and take a closer look, we may find that the ambivalences of everyday life hold deeper meanings about our relationship to ourselves and to the world.

* * *

Schizophrenia, and psychosis more broadly, are conjectures about one's relationship to reality. Their study requires psychiatrists to depart the empirical grounds of medical science to tread on thornier ones typically inhabited by metaphysicians and spiritualists, to speculate on the nature of reality: on how one knows what is real and what is not, what is a hallucination and what is a perception, and who gets to decide the answer to these questions, and by what means. Bleuler was no exception and came up with his own term to state his position on the matter: autism, a word with its own fraught history that also bears little resemblance to today's usage. "The most severe schizophrenics, who have no more contact with the outside world, live in a world of their own. They have encased themselves with their desires and wishes (which they consider fulfilled)," writes Bleuler in *Dementia Praecox; Or, the Group of Schizophrenias*.⁹ From the Greek *autos*, meaning "self," Bleuler saw psychotics as encased in their own mind, residing in a world of their own.

Ambivalence in psychosis plays out within this autistic encasement. Bleuler witnessed a psychotic patient in the asylum who was struggling with suicidal urges: A vision of a bright, sunlit window invited him to approach and jump out, though when he tried, he found it impenetrable.¹⁰ There was no inner turmoil, no battles of thoughts and feelings, no flurries of self-questionings—rather, the patient's ambivalence over ending his

life was given form through sight and touch as the inviting yet impassable window.

Law professor Elyn Saks, in her memoir on living with schizophrenia, *The Center Cannot Hold: My Journey through Madness*, also unpacks the ambivalent meanings infused in her psychotic experiences, splattered across an encasement that she could only marginally see through. Saks's most powerful delusions came out when she entered psychoanalytic treatment. Her psychoanalyst, whom Saks refers to as Mrs. Jones, had her come to the office several times a week and follow the sacrament of free association: to say whatever came to her mind. Psychoanalysis gave Saks, for the first time, a place to reveal to another person her internal experiences, no matter the content, which created for Saks a feeling of closeness, and dependency, on Mrs. Jones. Mrs. Jones began to hold significance in Saks's life: In other words, she transformed into an object of Saks's psychotic ambivalence, which Saks voices during a session:

Saks says: "I know you say you are my analyst...But I also know the truth. You are an evil monster, perhaps the devil. I won't let you kill me. You are evil, a witch. I'll fight."

Mrs. Jones replies: "You have hateful feelings toward me, Elyn. You hate that I know things that you don't know. You hate that you feel you need me. You put your hateful feelings in me and that's why you think I am dangerous. You fear that bad part of yourself."

As Saks's attachment to Mrs. Jones grew, so did her hatred and terror of her: "She is evil and she is dangerous. She keeps killing me. She is a monster. I must kill her, or threaten her, to stop her from doing evil things to me. It will be a blessing for all the other people she is hurting."¹¹

But killing Mrs. Jones would mean losing her forever. Saks struggles with the ambivalence of her desire to love Mrs. Jones, to be dependent upon her, and to somehow also control her so that Mrs. Jones will not abandon her. In an attempt to have it both ways, she makes a plan: "I will kidnap her and keep her tied up in my closet. I will take good care of her. I will give her food

and clothes. She will always be there when I need her to give me psychoanalysis." Saks returns to Mrs. Jones's office:

Saks says: "I will not let you go on vacation this year. I have a weapon. I will take you to my room and put you in my closet. You will stay with me. You will not have a choice. I won't let you go. Throw. So."

Mrs. Jones, unmoved, replies: "You feel absolutely dependent on me, like a baby, and that makes you angry. You imagine ways to keep me near you, and some of these ways have violence in them, so that you will show me that you are stronger than I am."

Mrs. Jones was not a doctor. She didn't prescribe remedies of employment, physical activity, or abstinence from drink, as Bleuler did. She entered Saks's encasement of monsters, witches, kidnappings, and murder, and didn't budge or run away frightened. She was a totemic mother: She took in the assaults Saks threw at her and, through her interpretations, gave them a structure. She was what psychoanalysts call a container for her patient's delusions. "I was falling apart, flying apart, exploding—and she gathered my pieces and held them for me... Mrs. Jones was the glue that held me together."¹² William Butler Yeats's poem is made Bleulerian: Saks had lost her unity, her two poles had long dislodged, and Mrs. Jones was the tether in the center that brought them back together.

In psychosis, the self and the world align perfectly: Bleuler's dislodged pair of opposites renders life enchanted and horrendous, where love is endless and rage is unmitigated, and one's fears and deepest, most secret shame, are given forms that mirror their intensity. Otherworldly creatures—angels and devils, heaven and hell, saviors alongside beasts and other menacing creatures—fill up the autistic encasement. Whoever thought of opening an asylum in an old monastery rendered spatially the overlay of spirituality and insanity, a blurring of the two which one of Bleuler's most prominent students, Carl Jung, could not ignore.

The bizarre and supernatural occurrences in psychotic ambivalence, as Saks details in her memoir, seem unrelated to the ordinariness of ambivalence most of us feel, with its dithering, second-guessing, and muddled thinking. For psychoanalysts, the difference concerns the difference between psychosis and neurosis. Neurosis, in today's lay usage, is a nebulous word, most often used to mean the presence of a general psychological problem, or some form of mental distress. But in the old, baroque nosology of psychoanalysis (a nosology that can still be of some use to us) neurosis holds a particular meaning: It exists in opposition to psychosis and comes about from a very different set of circumstances, when the autistic encasement bursts and an external world enters the frame.

This more muted condition reckons with a Cartesian reality: a confrontation between our inner lives, with our desires and fantasies and ambitions, and the external, material conditions around us—our physical surroundings, our corporeal flesh, and other people, with their own desires and fantasies and ambitions. Take, for instance, the conditions in psychotherapy. While I may feel wholly attuned and empathetic to the patient who sits in front of me, I can never directly access their inner experience, struggles, or pain. I cannot fully know when my patient lies to me, or when her thoughts are left unsaid. We may talk in great detail about their ambitions, hopes, and fantasies, and spend sessions envisioning the life they want to build for themselves. All the while, our external surroundings and circumstances, indifferent to our plans, may at any moment wipe them away.

The problem is not with the existence of a material world, but with the juncture at which it constrains our inner lives: a collision of psychic and material structures. If our minds existed alone, we would fully control our actions and our circumstances—which is to say, there would be no impositions. If we lived in an entirely material world where everything was already determined, we would have no agency or control, and thus no responsibility to make the correct decisions. Ambivalence would not be a problem in either case. The two colliding with each other, on the other hand, creates a swirl of openness and constraint that defines neurotic ambivalence—what Simone de Beauvoir called the condition of ambiguity—when questions on

how to live present themselves: What should I do? What is the right thing to do?

Neurosis and psychosis, according to Jacques Lacan, differ in the sense that the former questions and the latter answers. “The psychotic *knows*,”¹³ writes Lacanian psychoanalyst Bruce Fink. A special, often singular understanding about the world characterizes their delusions. On the other hand, “doubt is the very hallmark of neurosis.”¹⁴ And though they are certainly not immune to hallucinations, paranoia, or other fantastical thoughts, neurotics inevitably question their experiences: Did I just see that? Or, am I being paranoid? Bleuler noticed an indifference amongst his patients in the asylum when faced with their contradictory beliefs or behaviors. They didn’t seem to mind the contradiction, to make attempts to resolve it: They knew what they knew, and that’s all that mattered. Psychotic or not, we all act in contradictory ways, hold all sorts of contradictory beliefs, and don’t seem bothered by it. But point out an inconsistency in a neurotic’s behavior and some dissonance will bubble up, and an endeavor will be made to tamp down the disagreeable sensation.

Saks faced a bind felt by many who live with a serious mental illness: Life without delusions existed only when on a potent antipsychotic that came with serious side effects, like the twitches and jerking movements of tardive dyskinesia. She felt, in Rycroft’s words, a bind based on the realistic assessment of the imperfect nature of the medication. Tolerating the side effects was one thing, but having to take the medication one day after the next also meant admitting that she could not function on her own. Saks depended on the medication for her lucidity, but loathed this dependence, just as she feared dependence on Mrs. Jones in the depths of her psychosis. But no longer psychotic, her ambivalence looked very different: It was now about reckoning with the limits imposed by external conditions. In conversations with the psychiatrist who prescribed her medication, she tried to resolve her ambivalence through compromise, to convince him that she could implement changes in her life that would help her manage without medication, or find a dosage low enough for her to feel less reliant on it—all unsuccessful attempts to negotiate a way out of her bind. In the end, Saks struck a deal with herself

to continue the medication at the same dosage until she finished law school, with the plan to stop once she graduated: "It's just about being able to study. I'm not sick, I just need some help so that I can study."¹⁵

Saks could not have it both ways. She could not both do and not do, take the medication and not feel its side effects, depend on it and not—just as the suicidal cannot both stay alive and kill themselves. It's one or the other: The inner conflict and turmoil are the aftereffects of confronting reality and its limits.

Some may say that neurotic ambivalence is more than the problem of limits, that really it arises from too many limits. Criticisms of the psychoanalytic distinction between psychosis and neurosis point to the implied valuation of the latter condition: If one were to struggle with a problem, most of us would rather it be a neurotic than psychotic one. But, among the critics of psychoanalysis, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari offer a reversal of this appraisal: It is the neurotic who is encased in their mind, bound by the oppressive limits that they've imposed on themselves. Meanwhile, the psychotic is free of these mental constraints. "A schizophrenic out for a walk is a better model than a neurotic lying on the analyst's couch. A breath of fresh air, a relationship with the outside world," the authors write in *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*.¹⁶ If neurosis is the problem of too many limits, psychosis may then be the problem of too much freedom—which may be why many psychoanalysts refuse to analyze with psychotic patients, out of concern that its free association would be too unraveling. Most psychoanalysts would not have made Mrs. Jones's risky decision to have the psychotic Saks undergo analysis. Instead, what is offered is a type of containment that looks very different from her treatment with Mrs. Jones—a psychiatrist told Saks that she could benefit from a straitjacket, that the constraint would be containing, like a security blanket—in an asylum, or with the injection of Haldol or another sort of antipsychotic. The neurotic, on the other hand, is in less need of constraints; they impose too many on themselves already. What they could benefit from is the unraveling; in other words, to be a little bit more like the psychotic and to spend, in Deleuze and Guattari's words, less time analyzing themselves and more time outside, living in the world. Ambivalence may

be the problem of limits, but that doesn't mean they need to be so limited by it. They need to not mind their contradictions, or be bothered so much by them; in effect, they would do well to reimagine their relationship to ambivalence.

* * *

Over the last century, the asylums familiar to Bleuler closed down. Their inhabitants were released, with the plan to integrate them in to the rest of society. In the United States, the rise of neo-liberal policies meant that their freedom came without adequate provisions.¹⁷ In the years that followed, the rates of homeless people with severe mental illness surged. No longer cordoned off, they sat in plain view on the streets, in the middle of cities. As the opioid epidemic in the country took off, they were joined by those who suffered from serious addiction. Community mental health centers opened as a tepid response to these problems but have had little ability to treat either wave in any substantive way. With the deinstitutionalization of asylums, the community mental health center became a site of unwitting integration—a blurring of the line delineating psychotic and neurotic conditions—as these centers were charged with seeing patients along the entire spectrum of psychiatric ailments.

In the clinic where I work—at one of these community mental health centers—I see patients with psychotic symptoms alongside those who come in with complaints of depression and anxiety. I see young adults with suicidal ideations, and patients who are willing to gamble their lives away daily with fentanyl—all in the same office, many on the same day. With each patient, I do what many therapists do and look for the binds that entrench their conditions and that could provide for a way forward. In this way, more differences than similarities across patients present themselves in the clinic.

Freud indeed seems to have made Bleuler's "excellent term" a universal condition. And while universals connote abstraction, looking through the lens of ambivalence helps bring out the particularities of the individual and helps make them more real; in this case, theory doesn't reduce but expands meaning. For Bleuler, ambivalence was part of the machinery of the mind, a

product of evolution that assisted human survival, while Freud and the psychoanalysts who came after him brought in the role of circumstance: the presence of a mother, and a father; the implications of sex; and the meaning of relationships, of power, or of larger historical and political structures in which individuals are nestled. My patients and I consider these circumstances as part of an ongoing dialogue in which we each take different sides over the course of treatment. Just as tension makes for good literary narrative and propels a story forward, ambivalence makes people's lives inherently interesting. Part of my job is to make the patient interesting to themselves, by showing them that, within themselves, there is always another side to the story.

Notes

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Doubt

Success wrecks, to paraphrase Freud. Amidst the rubble, we find failure. For every job offer, college admission, award, grant, and other form of recognition or prestige, a greater number receive a notice of rejection. In this game of winners and losers, doubts take hold.

I listened every week to my unemployed patient ask questions with no answers. I watched her as she looked for a framework to grasp her failures. It kept her up in the late hours of the night. Her mind was like a motor that wouldn't shut off—as if, if it stayed on, and kept running, she would eventually find the solution to whichever problem her mind was consumed with at that moment, in the middle of the night, in her bed. This search went nowhere but in circles. She felt, as a result, that she had little to show for the years after she had left her doctoral program in philosophy. Her bullying advisor, who had made fun of her in front of the department at a weekly colloquium, was only one example of the many hostilities that eroded what little self-esteem she had before she entered the program. Her worries about her ability to handle the demands of the program had ballooned, and then compressed into acute panic attacks. She had stopped going in to the department and asked for extensions to finish her coursework. It came as little surprise when, in her fourth year, the program informed her that she shouldn't bother to prepare for the qualifying exams because she wouldn't pass anyway. So, she had quietly left. Back at her mother's home, with the intention to get back on her feet, she spent her days helping care for her brother with special needs. Financially supported for the first

few months by unemployment insurance, this meager assistance was long gone. She dropped off from the metrics for measuring unemployment rates, officially out of the labor pool.

As an attempt at a fresh start, she enrolled in a master's degree at a for-profit college, where she took online courses on web design. "I thought it was a practical choice, a repudiation of the ivory tower, but now I wonder if I made the right decision," she told me. What was meant to be a one-year program had now turned into three, a result of her inability to turn in assignments on time, if at all. She had multiple withdrawals from courses and leaves of absence, all of which grew her student debt. "When I was young," she told me, "everyone told me that I was the smart one, the one who was destined to be a success. Now I'm thinking of dropping out again, but I don't think I can handle another failure. I don't know what to do."

Doubt is an active, though not always productive, deliberation among choices either seen as incompatible or which produce unknown consequences. This deliberation can easily slip into rumination: The mind moves from one option to the next, unable to rest. We don't know, but not out of apathy or a lack of effort; rather, we are often desperate to grasp a hold of the correct solution, or the right answer, and this desperation mires us further in the very doubt we want to resolve. Doubts about what to do, indecision about what choice to make, uncertainty about what the future holds, are tied to doubt about our abilities and our prospects; in other words, they become a self-doubt. These doubts and self-doubts create a maze in which we can easily lose ourselves. But, if we follow down its winding path, we may find some answers hidden in the unending questioning, a bit of clarity in all of the doubts.

* * *

"My relationship with confidence has always been tenuous," my patient said to me. "It comes and goes. I second guess myself a lot." Insecurities reside in our imaginations of others. She compared herself to everyone she met, comparisons that were predictably skewed in their favor: The cohort of graduate students in her old department were close to finishing their degrees and

struggled to compete for the few academic positions left in their field. "At least their hard work is bearing fruit, they're on their way to completing their doctorates," she told me, and quickly added, "of course, prestige and degrees don't matter, but what I really envy is their sense of purpose. I wish I had just a tiny bit of their self-assurance and belief in what I am doing." She compared herself to her idea of me: someone she saw as secure in herself, in the value of her work, whose outward steadiness in each session my patient took as a reminder of what she lacked within herself. She compared herself to her peers in her online classes, people she had never met in person. Her anxieties constructed their imagined characters from their few email exchanges and online discussion posts: an outline of figures in her mind who, with little effort, turned in assignments on time, were savvy enough to have already sent out resumes to prospective employers, and had a sense of self-efficacy that matched the practicality of their career goals.

She compared herself to famous academics and intellectuals, and brought up Sylvia Plath: "She was gifted and tortured, while I'm just tortured," she said. The comparison colored her view on Plath's famous fig tree metaphor from *The Bell Jar*, in which the young writer looked up at the ripening fruits on the branches and saw the trajectories her future could take: a famous poet, brilliant professor, beloved housewife, Olympic champion, traveler, editor, artist, and the list goes on. Enticed by them all but unable to pick only one, she watched each wrinkle and, one by one, fall to the ground. The tragedy of lost time and the desire for everything only to end up with nothing escaped my patient, who saw Plath's metaphor instead as a luxury problem that sat in stark contrast to her own predicament. She asked, "is this what the problems of successful people look like? They have so many opportunities that it's hard for them to only pick one. But I look around, all I see are myriad ways to fail."

She was incapacitated by the fear that the sting of prior defeats would occur again, which only made failure more likely. She procrastinated, failed another class, and fell deeper into student debt. Her self-doubts were again reinforced. But she had not completely given up; otherwise, she would have already dropped out of the online program. A part of her wanted to finish what

she started. Vacillating between belief and defeat, she was stuck in the crevice between the two. The inhibition was overwhelming. It was pathological. It was a case of what Freud called obsessional neurosis, a condition he also had referred to as *folie du doute*, or doubting mania: “The predilection felt by obsessional neurotics for uncertainty and doubt leads them to turn their thoughts by preference to those subjects upon which all mankind are uncertain and upon which our knowledge and judgements must necessarily remain open to doubt.”¹ For Freud, those afflicted with obsessional neurosis are most susceptible to latch onto objects that are by their very nature uncertain. The ambiguity inherent to memory, for instance, is leveraged in its descendent, obsessive-compulsive disorder: Did I turn off the stove before leaving the house? Did I lock the door? Did I lock it properly? Compulsions can easily set in, to check, recheck, and check again in a miserable effort to free oneself of those doubts. Others may prefer to intellectualize and fixate on life’s existential, metaphysical, or ethical ambiguities, as *The ICD-10 Classification of Mental and Behavioural Disorders* describes: “Sometimes the ideas are merely futile, involving an endless and quasi-philosophical consideration of imponderable alternatives.”² What is real, and what is not? Can we know anything at all? Is my blue the same as your blue? What is right and what is wrong? Why do we ask questions that have no answers? These were the questions that first drew my patient to study philosophy, though she told me that to take them too seriously in certain academic circles risked a flurry of smirks and eye-rolls. “I’ve found that a genuine interest in skepticism is viewed as suspect, dismissed as juvenile, or dilettantish,” she said. “But I think about these questions every day. I think about the meaning of life while I’m cutting vegetables for dinner.” It was like an earworm, a part of the intrusive soundtrack of her mind.

Self-doubts leverage the ambiguity inherent in the unknowableness of one’s own abilities and the future: Can I succeed, or will I fail? For some, the compulsion is to work harder, and longer, to assuage these intrusive fixations much like the obsessive compulsive, who washes their hands to ward away fears of possible contamination. For others, like my patient, the response is to shrink away. Psychologists go back and forth about the value

of self-doubt, whether it motivates or stagnates a person. Many believe self-doubt fosters a critical awareness of our deficits and propels us into action, but too much self-doubt—when it's felt excessively—simply overwhelms and debilitates us under its magnitude.

The aim, then, is to feel the right amount of doubt: not too much, not too little, but the peak of an inverted, U-shaped curve. However, like many ideas about normality and pathology, this one seems circular, for how else may we distinguish excess from moderation other than when something is or is not a problem for us? If we trade in quantitative distinctions for qualitative ones, and look instead at the meaning we make of our self-doubts, we may see that their difference lies in the type of stories we tell about ourselves: whether they point to parts of ourselves we feel we need to mold better, or to something immutable festering within us. For my patient, the story included the passage of time, which forms each person's history, and a turning point sometime early in graduate school when she began to notice her failures crystalize and cast a shadow over the future she imagined for herself. "I would like to think that I used to take criticism well," she said to me, "and use the possibility of failure as an opportunity to push myself. Now, it just wears me down."

Economists tell us that the longer a person is unemployed, the less likely it is that they will reenter the workforce.³ When I listen to the news each month as the unemployment rates are broadcast, I wonder about the people abstracted in the figures. How many of them have internalized this setback and, as each day passes, feel the increasing strength of their doubts weigh on them? "I didn't think I was this mentally fragile," said another patient of mine, months into receiving his unemployment checks. "I've been unemployed before, but not for this long. It makes me feel really alone. And the longer it goes on, the worse it gets. Your confidence erodes." He noticed a sinister flipping of the script: As time stretched on, the self-doubt that came from the setback began to be seen as the reason for the setback. Cause and effect became muddled. The longer he was unemployed, the more prospective employers, and even people around him, people who knew him, started to assume that there was something wrong with him, or that he was not trying hard enough.

Insecurity is an easy target of blame for a person's misfortunes: It runs up the spine of achievement, woven into every rung of the academic and corporate ladder. Take the problem of confidence, or, rather, the lack of it, among girls and women in male-dominated fields, a problem that makes an appearance in the popular discourse every few years. Expressions of timidity and hesitation are taken as evidence of an insecurity that stalls women's ascent in the corporate world, prevents girls from entering the more lucrative and respected STEM disciplines, and contributes to the wage gap between women and men. Journalist Kathryn Schulz observes how "disarming, self-deprecating comments (e.g., 'this could be wrong, but...', 'maybe I'm off the mark here...') are generally considered more typical of the speech patterns of women than men,"⁴ and are disparaged as reasons for these gendered discrepancies.

"Do men doubt themselves sometimes? Of course. But they don't let their doubts stop them as often as women do," write Katty Kay and Claire Shipman in "The Confidence Gap," a cover story for *The Atlantic* magazine.⁵ Kay and Shipman ascribe workplace inequities in part to what they call women's "acute lack of confidence" and give cautionary tales of women who seem to reveal this flaw: "One male senior partner at a law firm told us the story of a young female associate who was excellent in every respect, except that she didn't speak up in client meetings. His takeaway was that she wasn't confident enough to handle the client's account." This senior partner's notion of confidence, which he equated with speaking up, stood in for the associate's ability: She wasn't competent enough to handle the client's account. Confidence means competence, which makes sense, in a transitive way: If doubt leads to inaction, and inaction shows incompetence, then doubt indicates incompetence. It communicates ignorance, taken as an indication that we don't really know what we are doing and, as such, are not capable to make decisions. Which, of course, is not true: Women tend be less confident about their abilities even when they are just as, and often much more, qualified as their male counterparts.⁶ Corporate feminists find this data particularly maddening; for them, it is all the more reason women should change the way they comport themselves, and increase their self-assurance so

that it better aligns with their abilities. Calls are made for women and girls to appear more self-possessed, stop apologizing, lean in, speak up, and demonstrate the same sort of arrogance that is taken as confidence when displayed by men—only then may the glass-ceiling shatter.

What makes something a problem? And where, and with whom, does the problem lie? There is a normality with which we treat expressions of femininity, by any gender, as objects for scorn. I asked my patient about whether she has ever felt her self-doubts to be a womanly form of weakness, which she answered with a brief return to the time when she was leaving her doctoral program. She told me that she could have appealed the graduate training committee's decision. "I think I was passive, I just left quietly. Should I have fought back? I don't know." She didn't say much more about that time. "I want to put it behind me," she says. Though, of course, she has not put any of it behind her.

* * *

"I think a lot about Descartes," said my patient at the start of a session.

How appropriate, the patron saint of doubt. He doubted beliefs about the world the way she doubted her ability to do anything productive. But René Descartes's obsessional doubting formed the basis of modern philosophy. In casting doubt over each of his beliefs, he thought he could place into sharp relief truths about the nature of the world and not, famously, tricks played on him by a demon. His doubt was industrious: an asset, not at all a problem.

But Descartes's doubts seemed more like they were part of an intellectual game. He didn't truly, as in, emotionally, doubt his own existence the way obsessional neurotics doubt themselves. He never really worried that a demon was playing tricks on him. He was confident in his philosophical project. While the obsessional neurotic vacillates between belief and disbelief, he was swift in his rejection of beliefs that were "not completely certain and indubitable"⁷ and, in fact, held a fairly low opinion of the type of doubt that plagues the obsessional. He didn't even call

it doubt—a word he saved for his philosophical method—but a vitiated *irrésolution*.⁸

My patient had identified with Descartes, and saw both herself and him as intellects asking the hard questions until she came to the realization that, unlike her, he had answers. And upon this recognition, her image of him turned from a fellow companion in philosophy, a link affixing her internal life to a grander intellectual history, to another embodiment of everything she should be and was not.

She said that she often imagined herself in a scenario described by Descartes in his *Discourse on Method*: A traveler is lost deep in a forest. He looks around but can't see a way out. What should he do? For Descartes, the answer is simple. The traveler "should not wander about turning this way and that, and still less stay in one place, but should keep walking as straight as he can in one direction, never changing it for slight reasons even if mere chance made him choose it in the first place; for, in this way, even if he does not go exactly where he wishes, he will at least end up in a place where he is likely to be better off than in the middle of a forest." The debilitating effects of irresolution will ensure that we will never find our way out of the forest. The only thing left to do is to take a deep breath, steady ourselves, and walk straight ahead. Though we can't predict how long it will take, or what we'll encounter along the way, and the closest path out of the forest may have been only a few feet behind us, the longer route is preferable to meandering back and forth. With this advice, Descartes enters the territory of self-help, the domain of working through those self-doubts and building, or rebuilding, the confidence to get on with our lives. It is one of his personal maxims: "Even when no opinions appear more probable than any others, we must still adopt some; and having done so we must then regard them not as doubtful, from a practical point of view, but as most true and certain, on the grounds that the reason which made us adopt them is itself true and certain."⁹

For Descartes, "by following this maxim I could free myself from all the regrets and remorse which usually trouble the consciences of those weak and faltering spirits who allow themselves to set out on some supposedly good course of action which later, in their inconstancy, they judge to be bad."¹⁰ With these harsh

words Descartes lays bare what the corporate feminists only intimated: The fluctuations and hesitations of the doubter reflect a weakness that needs remedying. Resolve is like a muscle one builds through the miserable discipline of strength training. For him, this simple maxim, realized by the lost traveler who walks steadfastly in a straight line, ought to be sufficient to overcome the symptoms of obsessional neurosis.

There was a silence. She blinked, looked away, and said:

It all sounds so simple, but it's not. I don't even know what it means, walk in a straight line. Just finish this program? Or quit, and get a job? I am so lost; I don't even know which direction to go straight towards. It's not only about this program, or about a job, but about how I go about everything. I don't know how to disentangle what I want from what society wants for me, and I'm so angry that I can't tell the difference. Other people seem to have no problem. They're agile, nimble, they jump over puddles, they so easily wipe the mud off themselves and keep going, while I'm crouched in fear. Once bitten, twice shy. I need someone to grab hold of my hand and help me out of this forest.

Descartes equated irresolution with an excessive concern over making the wrong decision, what we would today call a fear of failure. A fear of failure is often simply a fear of shame. And, in a society that is convinced it is a meritocracy, shame is the loneliest emotion. It cuts us off from our relationships and hides us from ourselves. It takes work to share our shame with others. My patient reached out to the few people in her life to open up a bit and talk, and she told me that it helped. "It's nice to receive some validation from others, but why can't I give it to myself?" She looked to books and mantras and audiobooks, and to me, for suggestions on how to manage and, perhaps, overcome her indecision. And they all had suggestions: take deep breaths, write a pro/cons list, act confidently and let the feelings follow, and so on. And they weren't entirely unhelpful. They worked, but only for a short while; the doubt always returned. As when one wave crashes, another is sure to follow; the calm moments in between are tempered by the knowledge that reprieve is short-

lived. Acutely aware of the pattern, my patient asked another question: "Is this self-sabotage?"

It's a question I've heard asked many times, by patients exasperated as they witness their life repeat on loop, or in the stillness of the waters when they feel they are nearing some kind of truth. The question's ubiquity reminds us of the achievement of psychoanalysis in retaining its hold in today's cultural narratives of the human psyche. It also underscores the individualism of our tendency to blame ourselves for our lot in life. Psychoanalyst Otto Fenichel called "occupational inhibition"¹¹ what we would now call a fear of success, in which the hesitations and timidity of endless doubts and self-doubts repeatedly, and intentionally, either keep success just out of reach, or, should one achieve it, promptly throw it away. These are the people Freud described as "wrecked by success."¹² Stories of self-sabotage—when the intransigence of a symptom indicates not a problem of deficit, but a problem of desire—fill the therapy room: A dutiful daughter, pushed by her parents to transfer to a college closer to home, was unable to choose among the courses for the upcoming semester. She nit-picked, vacillated, and procrastinated until, inevitably, the classes were all full. A son sacrificed his adult life caring for his ailing parents, but, after their deaths, he couldn't decide whether to sell their home or his own apartment, which costs him thousands in rent and mortgage payments every month. In each case, the indecision was decisive in its wreckage. The minor doubts over whether the stove was indeed turned off, the grander doubts over the nature of our existence, and the painful self-doubts are all, in Lacan's words, doubts that are "displaced and unrecognizable."¹³ It is only within the wreckage that we find hidden a more fundamental doubt about the situation, and about others.

Take the insecurities expressed by girls and women in achievement contexts. If their competence is not in doubt, could their self-doubting indicate something else? Psychologist Georgia Sassen wrote that girls' and women's hesitations are reactions to "the great emotional costs at which success achieved through competition is often gained—an understanding which, though confused, indicates some underlying sense that something is rotten in the state in which success is defined as having better grades than everyone else."¹⁴ Sassen's allusion to Hamlet, another

one plagued with doubts, is appropriate in her argument that within doubt hides a critique over what it means to play the game. Doubts, displaced and misplaced onto oneself, are a way to rebuke, in this case, the zero-sum nature of academic and corporate achievement in which, if you win, someone else loses. Although women are less likely to negotiate for a higher salary, to ask for raises, promotions, or bonuses, if these inactions stemmed only from insecurity—if women unequivocally believed they were, in fact, not good enough—they wouldn't consider the gender gap unfair, and would find it understandable that these successes are instead conferred to their male counterparts. To chase raises and negotiate for more pay is to play the game, but failure to do so hints at a doubt, not about oneself, but about what is required to prosper like the men. In doubts and indecision hides a critique against the culture of achievement and success.

Self-doubt means that one's relationships with others, and with society, are full of doubt. The way we relate to ourselves is predicated on the way we relate to others, and is reminiscent of the first instance of insecurity: in the mother–infant relationship, when the newborn infant is first separated from its mother. “Unable to distinguish temporary absence from enduring loss,” psychoanalyst Alain de Mijolla writes, the infant “behaves as if it is never going to see her again.”¹⁵ The separation is overwhelming for the infant, until the mother returns and, over the course of repeated separation and reconnection, trust—which is just another way to say consistency—is built. Though the mother leaves so that she may attend to needs other than those of the infant—her own, perhaps—any relief she may feel in her respite is qualified by the guilt, or resentment, from hearing her infant's cries. This quintessential maternal ambivalence renders true, perfect consistency impossible. There will be lapses in her prompt return, delays from which the infant learns important lessons: that a world separate from the infant exists, that the infant's desires and those of its mother do not perfectly align, and that there are small cracks between them, empty spaces within which lies uncertainty. The infant will have to learn how to trust in the presence of uncertainty; in other words, learn what it means to be in a relationship. But if the mother never returns, or, if her

return is capricious, the cracks will deepen, run down to hit something vital, and widen to yield a gaping hole.

This type of insecurity—the presence of the gaping hole, and the threat of falling into it—resides within the zero-sum logic of achievement, tied to the machinery of capitalism. It is often lauded as a strength, the risk of failure and the prospect of success taken as great motivators, while conveniently forgetting that we are moved by principles that go beyond pleasure and pain, and that we have the capacity for dissent. Psychoanalyst Rachael Peltz's essay, "The Manic Society," uses as a metaphor an image of a large freeway during rush hour, crowded with individual commuters trying to get to work on time: "Traffic seemed to epitomize the worse aspects of modern life—being on your own, trying to get ahead, and feeling frenzied and thwarted by the mass of other cars."¹⁶ The manic driver is fully immersed in the rat race, overworked, overproducing, speeding and recklessly weaving through the congestion as if the return of their loving mother depended on it. If we look around for the chronic, stuck self-doubters, we would more likely find them still at home, having opted out, unable to participate out of fear that they may crash, or turn into collateral damage. Their absence questions the whole logic of the race—and, yet, in their unceasing anxieties, they indicate that their inner lives are just as consumed by it as the manic drivers. Psychoanalysis has taught us that when things aren't what they appear to be, we may find a deeper conflict: one that critiques but, ultimately, protects the entire state of affairs.

* * *

My patient stared idly at her computer monitor in another attempt to get ahead, and then logged off. She enjoyed the time she spent with her brother. The severity of his autism precluded him from communicating to her words of support or validation. The inferred masculinity of her career attempts—analytic philosophy and computer programming—sat in contrast to her role as his caretaker. It's easy to romanticize the latter as a feminine antidote to the former, though it was not enough for her to live contently.

I asked her whether her indecision, self-questioning, and years of on-and-off schooling were, in a way, a refusal to fully play the game. She remained quiet for a few moments and then told me that when she was a teenager her mother would ask her questions after school, seemingly innocuous ones about how her day went, what she learned in her classes, and so on. My patient, during these years of teenage strife, had a habit of responding with flippant and, at times, outright petulant remarks, which she had confused with irreverence and wit. Her mother, unable to recognize her confusion, instead interpreted my patient's responses, as many parents do, as acts of unwarranted aggression. It may have been, my patient conceded, that the large, gaping hole in their relationship had something to do with this misunderstanding. Regardless, as a result, an argument between mother and daughter inevitably ensued. My patient, from her perspective, felt there was no answer her mother would find acceptable and soon learned, as many teenagers do, that she could break this ritualistic torture if she responded instead with a simple "I don't know," or, at other times, a quick shrug, to her mother's questions. Though not entirely happy with this maneuver, her mother had nothing more to say and the conversation would typically end there. My patient's expressions of not knowing communicated that she knew full well the answer. It was a refusal to engage that, at the same time, protected and kept the peace, however precariously.

Descartes wanted to help the lost traveler, and himself, escape the clutches of irresolution. His advice acts as support, to bolster and guide the doubter through the forest, to shore up their self-worth and help them place one foot in front of the other until they, inevitably, fall down again. And that's something. On the other hand, if we unravel the doubt, and self-doubt, we may lay bare the contradictions underneath. This unraveling is scary, because the narratives about what we want, the projects we hold dear—achievement and success—are questioned and our commitments are risked. And the risk may be too great for us to take. Sometimes it's safer to just question ourselves.

Notes

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Dilemmas

A thought experiment: You are a hypothetical person in a hypothetical scenario and are presented with two choices. Each choice is destined to bring about some harm. And, naturally, you can only pick one of the two. What do you do?

In philosopher Philippa Foot's trolley problem, a runaway tram heads towards five people. Its driver can steer the tram onto a second track and kill only one person, or do nothing and run over the first five. In William Styron's *Sophie's Choice*, Sophie has to decide which of her two children should die and which one should be allowed to live. If she refuses to choose, both will be killed. In Fyodor Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*, Ivan asks his younger brother whether he would torture an innocent child if it guaranteed world peace and tranquility for all eternity.

Moral dilemmas like these require us to imagine a situation in which we are confronted with only terrible options. Psychologist Carol Gilligan called them sick situations,¹ and it's easy to see why: All of the choices presented result in something sickening. They barely feel like choices at all.

Thought experiments like these are easy to criticize. They don't mirror everyday life. They place us in unrealistic and, at times, outright bizarre situations. But what makes them sick situations is what makes them akin to real life dilemmas: The inadequacy of the available options has us not so much torn among the options but repelled by all of them, and yet, we have to choose. Take our first-past-the-post electoral system, where we often encounter the forced-choice structure of dilemmas: Should you vote for the lesser-evil candidate? Or your conscience? Or

avoid the polling stations altogether? Sick situations take the daily binds of life and amplify them; in doing so, they magnify for us the cruelty of our limits—which is difficult to ignore, for instance, in the crying baby dilemma:

It is wartime. You and your fellow villagers are hiding from nearby enemy soldiers in a basement. Your baby starts to cry, and you cover your baby's mouth to block the sound. If you remove your hand, your baby will cry loudly, and the soldiers will hear. They will find you, your baby, and the others, and they will kill all of you. If you do not remove your hand, your baby will smother to death. Is it morally acceptable to smother your baby to death in order to save yourself and the other villagers?²

When forced to consider whether to smother one's baby or have enemy soldiers kill an entire village, it would be reasonable to feel a sickening number of emotions: fear over the approaching soldiers, who are about to inflict death and destruction; rage over one's own impotence, over the absence of any real choice; helplessness, and disillusionment, that one lives in a world in which this impossible position is possible; guilt—overwhelming, illogical guilt—over one's role in causing pain and death; and grief over the immense loss. Moral dilemmas such as these are constructed as a way to figure out what is the right thing to do, though it would be odd to come out of the situation, regardless of the decision made, feeling morally right or good. Any sane person would feel awful. Nothing about the situation is right in any real sense of the word.

Most of us are lucky, for we will never have to choose between the lives of our children, or whether to run over one man to save the lives of five others, or to smother an infant for the greater good, but dilemmas—whether real or hypothetical, whether about killing to save lives or about who to vote for—are by definition dilemmas because they refuse resolution. The conflicting feelings, the back-and-forth, the anxieties and disappointments, the guilt coupled with anger, the confusion and contradictions: they are what trap us between the rock and hard place of sick situations.

“Moral dilemmas are terrible in that they entail hurt,” Gilligan writes. Their either-or formulation “leaves no room for an outcome that does not do violence.”³ It’s easier to see actions as either entirely right or wrong: Our task would then simply be to delineate one from the other. Every dilemma would have a solution, a right answer and one or more wrong answers. There would be no true, genuine dilemmas at all. But, in sick situations, our decisions are made more difficult. We look at our options, and contend with the evils in each one—and, it seems, the more strongly we care about doing the right thing, the more strongly the irrevocability of the dilemma presents itself. To acknowledge and feel the conflict in moral conflicts is a difficult position, but it is part of our ethical response, integral to our capacity for care and concern.

* * *

One may say that the job of moral philosophers is to help us through the sick situation, to guide us out of our dilemmas, to bring clarity and resolution. What do they advise?

Take, as an example, the case of abortion. A favorite in moral philosophy, it has a built-in either-or structure, perfect for debating, distilling, and testing out abstract ideas about right and wrong. Foot came up with the trolley problem as an analogy to the problem of abortion,⁴ a test of whether it is ethically permissible to “kill” (abort a fetus; run over one person) if it is merely a side effect of trying to save the life of another (the mother; five people on the track)—a debate in largely conservative and Catholic circles that presumes the question of abortion in other contexts—say, if I just don’t want to have the baby—is already settled.

Of course, the debate is not settled. Gilligan took on the problem of abortion to find the feminine voice in moral dilemmas, describing the case of Cathy, a nineteen-year-old woman contemplating abortion, who struggles with the conflict between her loved ones’ wishes and her own. Her family wants her to keep the pregnancy, but Cathy does not:

I don't know what choices are open to me. It is either to have it or the abortion; these are the choices open to me. I think what confuses me is that it is a choice of either hurting myself or hurting other people around me. What is more important? If there could be a happy medium, it would be fine, but there isn't. It is either hurting someone on this side or hurting myself.⁵

The typical utilitarian philosopher, who cares about reducing the overall harm in a moral dilemma, would approach Cathy's dilemma in manner similar to the either-or thought experiments and advise her to choose the lesser-evil option. "Well, Cathy," the philosopher may begin, "which option would cause the least amount of harm?" The discussion would turn to defining the meaning of harm, and, once agreed upon, the amount of harm in each of Cathy's options would be estimated to establish whether Cathy should have an abortion.

The utilitarian approach, like many moral philosophies, once having decided upon the right answer, would find irrelevant any uncertainties, regrets, or guilt that Cathy may hold; the right answer is the right answer regardless of one's feelings about it. One approach, called moral hedging, however, tries to cleverly incorporate Cathy's uncertainty into the equation:

If an agent thinks it is more probable than not that doing A is better than doing B, it may still be more rational to do B, if the difference in moral value between doing B and doing A is much greater, on the supposition that B is better, than the difference between doing A and doing B is, on the supposition that A is better.⁶

The translation being, as the name indicates, that you should hedge your bets. In Cathy's case, moral hedging dictates that she weigh the possible moral value for each available course of action and calculate their difference. If there is even a slight possibility that having an abortion is more wrong than giving birth to one's baby, Cathy should not have an abortion. Akin to Pascal's wager, the notion that belief is form of betting and atheism is a gamble not worth taking, moral hedging appears to give a way out of

the sick situation. Its formula feels clean and almost elegant in its simplicity, bringing a sense of clarity when we are most confused. It is alluring but proves quickly dissatisfying, not only because we may be suspicious of that elegance, or because it is entirely risk-averse and inherently conservative, but because it attempts to resolve the moral conflict by hedging away from it.

By rendering moral decision-making into a type of mental math, we are able to circumvent our messy feelings altogether. Doubts are quelled and certainty regained. Good and bad are separate again, bad is cordoned off, and a connection to the ideal is reestablished. There is in fact a right action. I now *know* which choice to make. I feel secure and approach dilemmas in my life as if they were math problems and keep my baby to term. For what is more comforting than logic? Logic I apply to the trolley problem and conclude that killing is always prohibited, even if I let more people die. Or, depending on my calculations, I instead declare that killing one person is always better than letting five people die, and say it with great confidence. I can decide that it is my obligation to cast my ballot for the lesser-evil candidate, or to vote my conscience and go with the third-party candidate, or assert that voting in a rigged system is useless. With whichever decision I make, and with whatever argument I use to justify it, I am saying that every dilemma has a right answer, and I take comfort in choosing that answer. Philosopher Ted Lockhart called this the binary hypothesis of morality, that there is always one right thing to do, that “actions cannot be partially right or wrong, but must be either right or wrong *tout a fait*.”⁷

But notice how easily the discomfort of the sick situation returns: Was the other option better? Would that have been the right thing to do? Regrets very quickly replace assurances, for these questions were never really answered, or, at the very least, never answered in any satisfying way. The right-wrong binary, in its simplicity, shores up our certainty but ultimately cuts our experience down the middle in an all too crude way. It turns out that rather than resolving the dilemma, we were simply avoiding it.

Take another thought experiment: the Heinz dilemma, which dominated child development research in the 1960s and '70s. The protagonist, Heinz, is a married man with a dying wife. In

desperation he steals a lifesaving yet prohibitively expensive drug from a pharmacist who was unwilling to lower the price. Should Heinz have stolen the drug to save his wife's life? It is another sick situation, a dilemma similar in structure to the previous thought experiments, though the Heinz dilemma feels much easier to answer: Of course, he should save his wife. This is, in part, because the dilemma was developed for children, some younger than ten, to rate their capacity for moral reasoning. The creator of the Heinz dilemma, psychologist Lawrence Kohlberg, asked children for the reasoning behind their answers and privileged explanations based on universal principles of right and wrong. So, for example, Heinz was indeed right to steal the drug: The obligation to save a person's life outweighs any obligation over respecting others' property. Heinz must aid his ailing wife even if it requires breaking the law and stealing from someone.

Gilligan was a student of Kohlberg and noticed that some of these children, particularly girls, gave answers not based on obligations, duty, or reducing harm but instead that indicated an underlying conflict: "He really shouldn't steal the drug, but his wife shouldn't die either."⁸ "You would be morally right to steal but it's still wrong, so don't."⁹ Contradictory and confused, these children's words communicate a sense of being trapped in the middle of competing moral demands. Kohlberg and his colleagues dismissed their answers as not comprehending the structure of the dilemma. Other children tried to search for a third option: "You could talk the druggist into letting you pay later."¹⁰ "If Heinz and the druggist had talked it out long enough, they could reach something besides stealing."¹¹ Uneasy about having to choose between two bad options, these children attempt to subvert the either-or logic of the dilemma and put forth a third option to avoid harm altogether. Not overtly illogical as the previous responses, theirs nevertheless still reflect an unsettled point of view over what Heinz should have done. They are clearly invested in resolving the dilemma but don't follow the either-or rules of the thought experiment, and are thus denigrated by its creator as not yet fully developed in their moral reasoning abilities.

But, perhaps, these children's answers are just ineloquent expressions of grappling with all sides of Heinz's predicament.

The Heinz dilemma appears to be a simple one, but deceptively so. Their responses shed light on pieces of the situation that went unnoticed or were quickly dismissed: that there is real anguish in being forced to steal—even if it is to give a loved one appropriate health care—and there should be a better alternative that doesn't cause so much pain. In this sense, the children's desire for Heinz and the pharmacist to talk it over is not a failure to understand the task's parameters but an imagining of a world that rejects the binary of the dilemma, in which the combination of necessity and conversation may save a life. The presence of conflict in sick situations means that one is taking them more seriously, as if actual people's lives and actual consequences are at stake, as Gilligan describes: "Considered in the light of its probable outcomes—his wife dead, or Heinz in jail, brutalized by the violence of that experience and his life compromised by a felony record—the dilemma itself changes."¹² Heinz cannot come out of the situation unharmed. When the likely consequences are articulated, things are suddenly made real, and thornier.

Approaching dilemmas not as abstract hypotheticals but as if they were embedded in the urgencies and particularities of life makes things more complicated. Take, for instance, a robbery at a Rite Aid in Philadelphia in 2019.¹³ Security footage shows a man go up to the cashier with a note: "Give me all the money. I'm sorry, I have a sick child. You have fifteen seconds." No gun or other weapon is visible. The man hands the note to the cashier, who takes a moment to read it, steps back, perhaps in shock, or fear, and opens the register, placing a couple of small stacks of cash in a Rite Aid plastic bag. Police describe the suspect as "a black man in his 30s or 40s, 5 feet, 10 inches tall with a mustache/goatee and thin build." As he walks out, the plastic bag clenched in his hands, he turns to the cashier and appears to thank them.

A real-life, modern-day Heinz. Many more questions than answers come up compared to Kohlberg's thought experiment: Did this Heinz really have a sick child, or is he lying? Unlike Kohlberg's Heinz, he didn't steal medicine, only cash—was the money to pay off medical bills? Medical equipment? Does it matter? Does it matter if the Rite Aid Corporation is out a few hundred dollars? "You have fifteen seconds" seems like an idle threat made more out of desperation than aggression, but what

would have happened if the store clerk refused the demand? The police are now after our modern-day Heinz. The video shows him place his hand in the pocket of his hoodie during the robbery, which could be interpreted as holding or faking a weapon. As with Kohlberg's Heinz, he is taking serious risks, for robbery is a felony carrying up to seven years in prison in Pennsylvania. An armed robbery charge would make the sentence more severe.

We are not what thought experiments are trying to be. While they are easier to treat with the same intellectual detachment as math problems, when found in the drama of real life and concerning real people, especially those we genuinely care for, their burdens are more difficult to brush off. With real life we can also more easily question the parameters of the dilemma: that no one should be put in the position of having to choose between stealing and saving a loved one. The context more clearly allows us to watch the security footage and say with outrage that a privatized, profit-driven healthcare system needs to be abolished for forcing these dilemmas onto people, and agree with Senator Bernie Sanders when he shared the news story on social media and captioned it: "This shouldn't be happening in the richest country on Earth."¹⁴ And that we should work towards this aim, for healthcare as a human right, for Congress to pass the Medicare-for-All bill, so that a note like the one our modern-day Heinz wrote would make no sense. And that it would be a good thing, even an obligation, to render the dilemma obsolete, for there should be no more Heinzes in the future.

But this doesn't help our modern-day Heinz. It shouldn't be this way and yet it is. Our heart breaks because we see his predicament, a forced choice over whether to steal or watch his daughter stay sick, and, perhaps, get sicker. The Rite Aid cashier is now placed in a position to decide whether or not to report the robbery; our Heinz's friends and family, those who know about the crime, have to choose whether to help him, placing themselves at risk, refuse to get involved, or even consider reporting him. The mere existence of the dilemma, regardless of Heinz's decision, ripples through the lives of others. The outrage of what should have been and what should be is coupled with anxiety and depression about what actually is the case, the reality of this situation right now.

Thought experiments imply science, though, in essence, they are stories. They build a world with a logic of its own, their protagonists nested uncomfortably within. The storyteller assembles the pieces, choosing which materials go in and which are left out of the narrative. An audience listens and suspends their disbelief. When a story is retold, as with the news story of our modern-day Heinz, an opportunity arises to bring to the foreground the parts that may have been previously neglected, parts that bar us from coming away from the thought experiments with either ease or self-satisfaction.

An episode of the NBC television series, *The Good Place*, retells the story of the trolley problem to contend with the violence of the dilemma. It begins with a moral philosopher (played by William Jackson Harper) who is attempting to teach the trolley problem to a reformed demon, played by the actor Ted Danson. With a blackboard and a diorama, the philosopher lectures with little result. The Ted Danson demon doesn't seem to get it, and complains that "it's just that it is so theoretical." He then adds, "maybe there is a concrete approach," and, with his demon powers, transports them to an actual runaway tram heading towards five people. He tells the philosopher, "I made the trolley problem real so that we could see how the ethics would actually play out!" With the pressure to make a decision within the next few seconds, the philosopher is paralyzed with fear: Do nothing and kill five people, or steer onto a track and kill one person? He intellectualizes the problem, "Well, it's tricky, on the one hand, if you ascribe to a purely utilitarian world view..." but doesn't get to finish his thought, because the tram has just run over the five people. As the trolley screeches and halts, blood and bits of the workers' bodies are everywhere. The demon asks, "So, what did we learn?" The philosopher cries: "This is awful."

The Good Place is a comedy series, so the blood and guts are there for laughs, intentionally fake, splattered on the poor philosopher's face—and his face, in exaggerated shock, reminds us not to take any of this seriously. Like thought experiments, comedy diminishes the actual stakes of the dilemma: that the philosopher has just killed. Jokes both reveal and conceal uncomfortable truths. *The Good Place* acts out the violence of the trolley problem and, at the same time, insists that the violence is inconse-

quential. Later, we learn that the demon had reverted to his old demon ways and was intentionally torturing the poor philosopher by forcing him to live through the thought experiments he was teaching. The episode ends after the demon apologizes to the philosopher and says that he still has much to learn about human ethics. Comedy is, by definition, bound to a happy ending and hides in plain sight what is important: that this demon, by creating the first-person immediacy of the dilemma, has taught us more about the trolley problem and its cruelty than anything written on a blackboard.

Humor lightens sick situations and the burden of its heavy emotions. But take another thought experiment—this time, with the crying baby dilemma—and humor no longer has a place in the story. Historian Svetlana Alexievich, in *The Unwomanly Face of War: An Oral History of Women in World War II*, describes a true account of a Soviet partisan camp in Poland under attack by the Germans. While the partisans hid from the Germans in nearby swamps, a baby among them began to cry:

The baby was hungry...It had to be nursed...But the mother herself was hungry and had no milk. The baby cried. The punitive forces were close...With dogs...If the dogs heard it, we'd all be killed. The whole group—thirty of us...You understand?

The commander makes a decision...

Nobody can bring himself to give the mother his order, but she figures it out herself. She lowers the swaddled baby into the water and holds it there for a long time...The baby doesn't cry anymore...Not a sound...And we can't raise our eyes. Neither to the mother nor to each other.¹⁵

The notion of dilemmas does not capture what just transpired. Words in moral philosophy—utilitarianism, deontology, good, bad, right, wrong—have little relevance when reading, much less living through, the events Alexievich records. None of the partisans are able to order a mother to kill her own child; in shame, and in silence, they avert their eyes. War is littered with sick situations, and the typical decisions are approached as calculations to lessen the body count—and, at other times, to increase the

body count. But its sickness floods the partisans as they watch a baby drown, and I am left wondering how the commander feels. Is what happened too big for ethics? Are the feelings elicited too much? Are they getting in the way? All of it seems exactly what ethics needs to confront, to hold and let fully sink into its theories.

"I build temples out of our feelings... Out of our desires, our disappointments," writes Alexievich.¹⁶ Temples are sacred buildings. They are not places to play games. Alexievich places the Soviet partisans' account alongside countless other women's voices, to retell the story of war from what she calls a man's story—of strategy, operations, winners, and losers—to a woman's story: of relationships, intimacies, and pain. She follows a path similar to Gilligan's, who retold the story of Heinz in the tentative but caring voices of the girls in Kohlberg's study. Both retellings ask what we missed. And both point to women's and girls' versions of the story, not as the answer, but as guides to lead us to them, to shed light on the missing pieces. Foot ends her essay on the trolley problem with a revealing admission: "The levity of the examples is not meant to offend."¹⁷ Thought experiments can illuminate oversights in one's thinking and uncover inconsistencies and even hypocrisies, but the discrepancy between what makes them difficult and the levity with which they are described indicates that there have been pieces left out—pieces critical enough, as Foot admits, to cause offense.

Sick situations make people sick. In the novel *Sophie's Choice*, Sophie Zawistowska is an alcoholic, traumatized after the impossible decision she was forced to make at Auschwitz. She was given seconds to choose whether to have her son, Jan, or her baby daughter, Eva, sent to the gas chamber. William Styron describes with much pathos the sick result: Sophie's tendency towards self-destruction, with too much whiskey and in a relationship with an unhinged and abusive lover that ends in a double suicide. Sophie, our modern-day Heinz, Alexievich's Soviet partisans, even the philosopher who killed with the trolley—all of these people likely need psychotherapy.

As a psychologist, I imagine sitting with each in session. I think of what psychoanalyst Melanie Klein called the depressive position: the loss of the ideal, the recognition of the limits, the

shortcomings, of the situation as it is. Klein believed that it is a developmental achievement for the child to learn that there is no all-good mother or all-bad mother, but only one mother who is both good and bad. The child gains the ability to transform the either-or into both-and, rendering objects as an inseparable mix of good and bad. An unsettling depressive anxiety sets in. I think of what psychologists call depressive realism,¹⁸ the tendency for those who are mild or moderately depressed to be more accurate in their judgments and predictions of future events than those who are not depressed. It is an idea that aligns with our intuition that, in sadness, one is privy to difficult truths about the world. By virtue of their ability to hold the bad, these depressives have presumably gained insight into stark realities the rest of us prefer not to see.

Klein's depressive position is not like Freud's melancholia, or what we today call major depression: It is not an illness to be cured. Sophie turned all of her feelings inwards and sank into hopelessness, drinking, and suicide. But the depressive position is when the patient holds the entangled mix of both good and bad: the recognition of failing in some way and the realization one did all that one could.

In psychotherapy, my job is not to make everything all right because everything is not all right. It is to confront the questions that gnaw away: What was the right thing to do? Did I make the right decision? What have I done? Questions that carry over into the aftermath of the sick situation and continue to push and pull the patient, back and forth, from right to wrong, from conviction to self-doubt and regrets, from blaming oneself to blaming the other, from anger to guilt back to anger, in fruitless attempts to find the one correct answer. Our modern day Heinz included an apology in his note to the Rite Aid cashier, an indication of his conflicted feelings in the sick situation. If we were to sit in therapy and if he were to ask me whether he made the right decision, to steal for his daughter, I could not give him a yes or no, either-or answer. I would most likely do that irritating thing therapists do and throw the question back at him: "What do you think, Heinz?" A question to remind Heinz that he knows more about his situation than anyone else, that there is no authority in or outside the room who holds the right answer, that we should

be suspicious of anyone who claims otherwise. To move our Heinz from the either-or structure of the dilemma to the both-and of the depressive position; not to have it both ways, but to mourn the ability to have it fully one way.

Klein called the depressive position “a melancholia in *statu nascendi*,” the first time the child mourns the all-good, ideal mother, “namely, love, goodness, and security.”¹⁹ In psychotherapy, working through grief occasions a mourning of that ideal, a loosening of one’s tight grip on the idealized image of the lost love object, towards a muddled, but truthful, picture that captures their beauty along with their deepest flaws. To mourn the right answer is to mourn one’s relationship to love, goodness, and security. If all love is ambivalent, all ethics must be ambivalent too.

But say I sit in session with Alexievich’s partisan commander, the one who ordered that the mother kill her infant, and say he insists he made the right decision and holds no guilt, no self-doubt, over it. He made the calculations—thirty lives, one crying baby—and the answer was clear. His conscience is clear. In this case, we may have sympathy for the commander, but wouldn’t we feel as though there was something absent in his articulation of his experience?

Sick situations are emotionally taxing, especially when we feel threatened, when someone or something has elicited our insecurities, or when we are in a vulnerable position. In these moments it makes sense to look for ways out. It is alright for me to return to the ideals in my mind—like how a child may imagine her all-good mother in fantasy—offering me comfort and something to aspire to when I need it most. But demanding the ideal from reality, from others, and demanding it from oneself is another thing, because these demands always come at a cost. In Klein’s words, “the beautiful picture had been dissociated from the real object.”²⁰ But what about the ugliness that remains—where does it go? Discarded onto others? Onto oneself? Onto objects that are then reviled, feared, and loathed. A local television channel in Philadelphia, KYW-TV, asked bystanders for their opinions of our modern day Heinz’s actions in a way that harkens back to Kohlberg’s interviews of the young children. A Rite Aid customer, Peachola Lamkin, tells KYW-TV, “Just because you have

a sick child, there's no reason to rob a store." She adds, "I don't know if he was armed but he put the store workers in danger. He put himself in danger because the police could've come in and killed him and then his kid wouldn't have had a father." Police Captain Sekou Kinebrew also had thoughts on our Heinz's decision: "We certainly understand that people have needs. That's just not the way to go about fulfilling those needs."²¹

Lamkin voices a quasi-utilitarianism of sorts, pointing to a counterfactual in which more harm could have been caused by our Heinz's actions, while Kinebrew refers to rules that were broken (and later goes on to note that our Heinz should have instead sought out social services). Neither is strictly wrong, which is exactly the point: our Heinz took risks, he broke the law, there were downsides to his decision, as there would have been if he had not decided to steal. But by reinstating the right/wrong binary, Lamkin and Kinebrew choose to deny his dilemma. There is a certain cruelty in the clarity and assuredness of their responses. Kinebrew comes close to acknowledging the dilemma in his vague reference to our Heinz's needs, but by adding, "that's just not the way to go," he immediately disregards those needs in favor of an abstraction ("the way"). "The blind willingness to sacrifice people to truth," Gilligan writes, "has always been the danger of an ethics abstracted from life."²² Abstracting a universal ethics, like Klein's dissociating a beautiful picture from reality, always risks cruelty. Both require us, in some respects, to not see what is in front of us.

It makes sense to treat people in sick situations with empathy and compassion. To blame them unequivocally privileges rules and theory over people. But I don't mean to say that we should excuse people merely because they are in tough spots. The complexities and uncertainties of dilemmas are frequently invoked to exculpate real perpetrators of injustices and crimes. "Difficult decisions have to be made" and other such sayings are too often used to absolve those in power of their actions to exploit, oppress, and kill. Taking my own anguish as assurance of my virtue and as an excuse for any violence I may cause is just that—an excuse. A way out, acknowledging the difficulties of the depressive position as a way to flee from the depressive position. Excuses are

exits, sometimes needed to get through the day, and at times used to escape accountability.

* * *

In *Sophie's Choice*, after ultimately choosing to sacrifice her daughter to save her son, Sophie admits to carrying an inner conflict years after Auschwitz: "In some way I know I should feel no badness over something I done like that. I see that it was—oh you know—beyond my control, but it is still so terrible to wake up these many mornings with a memory of that, having to live with it."²³ One side of Sophie takes the voice of moral philosophers who say that for dilemmas in which a person is stuck between a rock and a hard place, in which the bad in each option is the same, either option is permissible. Neither is prohibited, the person just has to pick one. Sophie had no ability to do the right thing—indeed, there was no *right* thing in her situation—and so she should feel no badness, no moral responsibility, for what unfolded.

Sophie's choice, of course, is no choice at all. Just as Heinz's dilemma is a result of the history of a country that refused his family the necessary healthcare, Sophie recognizes that there were forces beyond her control that threw her and her children into an impossible situation. These forces were not only the immediate conditions—her arrival at Auschwitz, or the Nazi doctor who demanded she send one of her children to their death—but those part of a larger history: of wartime, and of the rise of fascism across Europe. The important question, from this perspective, isn't whether the driver of a runaway tram ought to kill one or five people. It's to ask: What were the conditions that placed the driver, and others, in harm's way in the first place? The point here is to notice the impersonal things—the underfunding of public transportation, or the safety of the driver's working conditions—and to have our ethics envelop questions of political and material history.

And yet, another side of Sophie is oblivious to all that, and holds what she calls a "badness"—a guilt felt first thing in the morning. Guilt doesn't care much for the logic of philosophers, or for the conditions of history. It doesn't care for the idea that

“ought” implies “can.” Guilt defies laws of physics and space and time; it plays back the memory of the sick situation, on repeat, and conjures alternate scenarios of what she could have done or should have done, however impossible it may have been, to save her daughter. Guilt comprises another history: in this case, the attachment between mother and child.

According to Klein, the developmental origin of guilt lies in the depressive position, when the infant aggresses against its mother and realizes, for the first time, it is hurting the person it loves. Sophie’s case is inverted: The mother realizes she has hurt, in the worst possible way, a child she loves. Though her aggression is forced by circumstances greater than her, from Klein’s perspective, questions arise about the mother–daughter relationship, even unspeakable ones we have no right to ask her, such as why she chose her daughter and not her son to die. An intimate history is found between Sophie and Eva, from well before they arrived at the camps, a history that Styron doesn’t tell us much about—about their bond, or the inevitable maternal failures, or mis-attunements, in their relationship. They are only hinted at in Sophie’s torment.

Sophie may vacillate between these two sides—blaming history, and blaming herself; logic, and emotion—but neither alone tells the whole story. Instead, the moment in which she is able to hold the contradictions within herself is the tragic ethical moment: None of this is how it should be, and it’s certainly not what we want it to be, but it is where we are right now. The sick situation is not an illness to be cured. It is not something to work through and have resolved. Having made a decision, we return to the depressive position—early in the morning—and fully feel the sick limits of that decision.

Notes

- 1 Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development* (Harvard University Press, 1982), 104.
- 2 Fiery Cushman and Joshua D. Greene, "Finding Faults: How Moral Dilemmas Illuminate Cognitive Structure," *Social Neuroscience* 7, no. 3 (2012): 269.
- 3 Gilligan, *In a Different Voice*, 103–4.
- 4 Philippa Foot, "The Problem of Abortion and the Doctrine of Double Effect," *Oxford Review* 5 (1967): 5–15.
- 5 Gilligan, *In a Different Voice*, 80.
- 6 Andrew Sepielli, "What to Do When You Don't Know What to Do When You Don't Know What to Do...," *Noûs* 48, no. 3 (2014): 521.
- 7 Ted Lockhart, *Moral Uncertainty and Its Consequences* (Oxford University Press, 2000), viii.
- 8 Gilligan, *In a Different Voice*, 28.
- 9 James Rest, Eliot Turiel, and Lawrence Kohlberg, "Level of Moral Development as Determinant of Preference and Comprehension of Moral Judgments Made by Others," *Journal of Personality* 37, no. 2 (1969): 239.
- 10 Ibid., 229. This quotation is a paraphrase by the authors based on the children's responses.
- 11 Gilligan, *In a Different Voice*, 29.
- 12 Ibid., 101.
- 13 Howard Monroe, "'I'm Sorry, I Have a Sick Child': Police Searching for Suspect Who Robbed West Oak Lane Rite Aid," *CBS News Philly*, January 7, 2020, <https://philadelphia.cbslocal.com/2020/01/07/police-west-oak-lane-rite-aid-robbery/>.
- 14 Bernie Sanders, *Facebook*, January 10, 2020, https://www.facebook.com/story.php/?story_fbid=2769686476419672&id=100044424909727.
- 15 Svetlana Alexievich, *The Unwomanly Face of War: An Oral History of Women in World War II*, trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (Random House, 2017), xxxiv.
- 16 Ibid., xxi.
- 17 Foot, "The Problem of Abortion," 15.
- 18 Lauren B. Alloy and Lyn Y. Abramson, "Judgment of Contingency in Depressed and Nondepressed Students: Sadder but Wiser?," *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General* 108, no. 4 (1979): 441–85.
- 19 Melanie Klein, "Mourning and Its Relation to Manic-Depressive States," *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 21 (1940): 126.
- 20 Melanie Klein, "A Contribution to the Psychogenesis of Manic-Depressive States," *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 16, no. 1

(1935): 154.

21 Monroe, “I’m Sorry, I Have a Sick Child.”

22 Gilligan, *In a Different Voice*, 104.

23 William Styron, *Sophie’s Choice* (Vintage Books, 1979), 538.

Compromised

For Freud, symptoms, dreams, and even small, everyday blunders, what he called parapraxes, arise from the fundamental conflict between what people desire and what is demanded of them. They are due not to the conflict itself *per se* but formed out of the questionable ways the mind grapples with the conflict: by making compromises between the two sides. What Freud called compromise-formation is only one—though, likely, the most well-known—of many ideas that consider psychopathology as an outgrowth of some dubiously negotiated conflict. The following is a case study of a patient whose conflicts, and attempts at compromise, pertain not only to his desires and what was demanded of him, but also to his sense of self. Over the course of his treatment with me, the ramifications of the compromises he made unfolded, and he was, ultimately, faced with the choice to further entrench himself in them or to try to do things differently. This is K.

* * *

K was coiled up in his chair, his body curled awkwardly over the arm rest, and his slight build struggled with an invisible torment weighing on him. His family knew that he was living with a roommate to split the rent, but they did not know that they were lovers. He omitted this detail to his family as a form of allegiance to them. Doing otherwise, he was certain, would have been seen as a betrayal in their eyes, not only a violation of an old moral code but of identity: one entwined with the idealized

comforts of their old home, the one they left in Bangladesh—in contrast to the strange ideological lands of the West, where they now resided. So K took the detail and, on certain days and times and in certain places, he hid it from plain view.

Neurotics are good at sorting things. They are exceptional at keeping secrets. They sort and sort and move things around, into separate compartments, and out of sight. But, more and more, K's boyfriend prodded K, and asked him whether he had disclosed to his parents the true nature of their living arrangement—that they were not simply roommates—and, if he hadn't, when exactly he planned on doing so. His boyfriend was sympathetic to K's plight, as anti-gay sentiments were still more prevalent than not, even in the coastal region of the country where they lived, and conceded that coming out to his parents would indeed involve an undertaking for K. In the end, however, the two loved each other and to take the steps to acknowledge his truth would ultimately set K free—well, his boyfriend didn't use those exact words, K told me, but something to that effect. K's boyfriend increasingly initiated conversations of this general form, which K said had the opposite effect of their intention: Pained to see his boyfriend hurt over the reality that he would not be accepted by K's parents, K avoided talking to him about the dilemma altogether.

On the weekends K took the bus from his apartment to visit his family across town and, as he traveled between these two homes, he played the very common role of existing as two people in one. The bus shuttled him back and forth from these two points almost every weekend. He took a different one to the clinic, which was out of his way. In our sessions, as on the bus, the conversations zigzagged to preserve the separation between K's compartments and were instead mostly about the demands of his coursework at the local community college, the hours at his full-time work in its IT department, and the stresses of having to balance the two. Contorted and arched over the clinic's small office chair every week, his body voiced an anguish that had me wonder whether his torment was due to the intractable conflicts that brought him to therapy or merely a result of the way he was sitting. If only he could figure out how to sit more comfortably, I

thought, to see the reality of the chair and settle into it, the issue wouldn't resolve but at least the situation would feel less painful.

Hiding pieces of our lives—sex, most notably—in various compartments is commonplace, a way to smooth over the rough edges of living. K was more obvious in his compartmentalizing: Others noticed, namely his boyfriend, and objected to K's behavior. More than once, his boyfriend told K that he hid fundamental parts of himself from certain people, which, his boyfriend went on to conclude, meant that K didn't really know who he was. K admitted that his behaviors changed drastically as a result of where he was and whom he felt he had to please, an indication that he hadn't sufficiently differentiated himself from others. This, taken with his youthful appearance, had the effect of making him appear like a teenager, though a careworn one who often told me he felt very old. Developmental psychologist Erik Erikson wrote that an "optimal sense of identity [...] is a feeling of being at home in one's body, a sense of 'knowing where one is going,' and an inner assuredness of anticipated recognition from those who count."¹ For Erikson, identity is an object within us that, like an anchor, secures us in a place and role in society. Its development requires a reasonable integration of the different parts of one's self, one's experiences, and, ultimately, a synthesis of one's life. But K worried that any anchor in him would be too heavy and would risk him sinking down into the waters with it. The problem for him was precisely that others were implicated, and, rather than provide him with an assured recognition, these people had their own agendas about who K should be.

Psychoanalyst Donald W. Winnicott's work on early mother-child relationships warns of the effects of impingements—when the caregiver insists on prioritizing their own needs over those of the child. Though their presence is required to help the child gently enter into society, impingements harness the other's needs onto the child's developing self, thereby stunting its growth. Integration cannot occur: The child's sense of self, what Erikson called ego identity, is not given the opportunity to form into a whole, to give them the critical sense of continuity and sameness across time and contexts. And though, for Erikson, issues of self and identity cross the lifespan, they pose a particular challenge during adolescence, when questions about one's role in society

are made explicit—a time of crisis that, if not resolved, creates a confusion, what Erikson called a “war within themselves.”²

K described his parents as we do the people most important to us: as flat, one-dimensional characters, with a total absence of nuance, similar to the way we talk about ourselves. As a result, it was difficult from K’s descriptions to get a sense of them aside from as caricatures: his mother as intensely religious, who followed each family member around the house reciting prayers to protect them from the evils the day would bring; his father, authoritative in his absence, at work for most of the day all week and on most weekends. When at home, the silence would turn into an eruption of loud arguments between his parents, the last one in which his mother threw a plate straight at his father. Their home was a place K fled from, and on the times he checked in, on the weekends, he played a peacemaker.

The reprieve he felt when he spent time with his boyfriend contrasted with the tumult at his family’s home. K was able to describe to me his boyfriend and moments with him with a sharpness missing when speaking about his parents. In this compartment of his life, K was comfortable almost all of the time. The exceptions came in unexpected impingements: typically, when K was resting and, as a result, vulnerable. One evening, he and his boyfriend were laying on their couch when his boyfriend sprung onto K the story of a mutual friend of theirs, someone who had recently come out to his conservative family. His boyfriend told K that this friend had sat his parents down and disclosed the truth about his sexuality. The whole ordeal was trying, and the fallout lasted months, with one excruciating conversation after the next that left everyone shattered and in tears. But, in the end, his boyfriend went on to say, their mutual friend stood firm, stood bravely in his truth, and the parents ultimately came around. Though, granted, things were now not fully settled, at least there was an honesty between the two parties. K’s boyfriend did not speak much about his own coming out, which was full of love and warmth and the type of support that he knew was alien to K. K wished he could think like his boyfriend, in which truth, ethics, and love were aligned. These conversations were jarring reminders of the difference between them and their histories, in which K felt as though he were a teenager who, by hiding illicit

behaviors from his parents, underscored their authority over him.

He went on to tell me about a recent weekend when his boyfriend's sister came for a visit. K and his boyfriend took her around to historic sites and tourist traps in town, and one day their excursions included the contemporary arts museum by the docks. An exhibit there comprised of large, angular sculptures made of mirror, which reflected images of the viewers in all directions, and in one of these mirrors, K saw the three of them in reflection. His boyfriend and sister, standing side by side, made a beautifully fit, tall, and very blonde Nordic couple, and, he, in this reflection, dark and diminutive in comparison, looked like their adopted child from some third world country, saved from a life of disease and malnourishment. He smiled at the image as if it were a joke, but was clearly unnerved; it immediately created distance between himself and the activities and people around him, and reminded K that he really didn't feel at home anywhere. He wondered, as a corollary, whether his problem was that he didn't know who he was, or whether others really didn't know him. K felt a well-known conflict reminiscent of W.E.B. Du Bois's double consciousness, a two-ness produced at the juncture of where identities collide. This was an odd experience of misrecognizing himself as an object through the eyes of others: "[T]wo souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body."³ Competing impingements—which stretched beyond the depiction of Winnicott's early childhood years and poked K incessantly in his adult life—created this two-ness, which had a strange effect of also feeling like an in-between, a sensation of being neither here nor there.

Later, alone on the bus, zigzagging from school, to his apartment, to his family's home and back again, K hated that he had to think of the matter of identity at all. It felt constraining to him. He didn't want to deal with problems of culture, sexuality, race, or history, what he saw as small compartments that boxed him in too tightly. For him, identity seemed relevant only when one became a problem for others. "How does it feel to be a problem?" Du Bois asked.⁴ For K, it felt like developmental arrest, as the struggling adolescent he witnessed in the mirror, not fully emerged from puberty, wading through an unending crisis over

who he really was. He wanted to be like his white boyfriend, who existed above these puerile conflicts and was given the provisions to go on blithely through life as a universal, unmarked subject. He wanted to transcend his conflicts, to be transcendent.

But what he was doing is what most of us do with conflict, which is compromise, a diplomacy to avoid further destruction. Where there is compromise there is always a deeper conflict, an ambivalence, being managed, quieted, and quelled. Sitting down at the table, each side of the conflict achieves partial satisfaction, but only through ceding parts dear to them. In K's case, he is allowed to maintain a relationship with each person he loves but at the cost of personal unity. Agreeing to concessions is seen as a mark of maturity, essential for democratic life, but K's compromise—to compartmentalize himself—only compounded his sense of developmental arrest. As with any compromise, the question of whether he had given up too much for the sake of peace was continually present.

At a later session, K described an evening out in town with his boyfriend and some other friends. They had been drinking at a bar and, on their way to a club, the group stopped by a corner store to pick up some dubious prepacked sandwiches. Leaning unself-consciously on his boyfriend's side in front of the cramped refrigerated section, K felt hazy and warm from the drinks in him as he listened contently to the babble of his friends. And, then, another impingement came for K: When glancing down the aisle, K saw a man he recognized from the mosque. This man, middle-aged and, like K, Bangladeshi, was absorbed in the store's chips selection, and though it was unclear whether he had noticed K, unmistakably drunk and adjoined to his boyfriend, this man's presence quickly roused him out of his reverie, for the two worlds he was careful to keep neatly apart were about to collide. K told me, in that moment, he felt a strong urge to do whatever it took to prevent the imminent collision—otherwise, he sensed, entire worlds would be destroyed. He quietly removed himself from his friends, as though he were interested in the store's other offerings, and he moved along the aisles lined with plastic bottles of water and sodas, the candies and chocolates, the toiletries, and then the chips. It was a masterful performance that took him over to the middle-aged Bangladeshi man, where he

lowered his head slightly in deference and greeted him politely, albeit briefly, and then slipped out of the store.

Afterwards, outside, when his boyfriend asked where he had disappeared to, K was too embarrassed to admit what had happened and instead mumbled something about needing fresh air. And it was true: K desperately needed fresh air, for the incident left him rattled, that he could be made vulnerable so easily. The boundaries he built were assumed to be sturdy, but K was, in fact, living precariously. "That night, you were almost found out," I said to him. K shook his head. He insisted that he wasn't afraid of being outed in that moment; it was, rather, that he didn't have the heart. He told me that in the man's eyes was a look of kinship that would've broken immediately if he were seen so intimately with his white boyfriend. He said that his actions were propelled not only from fear, though, yes, certainly, there was self-protection in K's evasiveness that evening, for rumors spread quickly at his conservative mosque. K's actions also conveyed sensitivity and guilt. He acted to protect others, as K presumed this man would have become upset, even hurt, as a result of having misrecognized K as someone he was not. "As who?" I asked. "As, you know, one of 'them,'" he replied, with his fingers forming air quotes, his eyes widening ghoulishly in mock fright. K's knowing answer did little to hide the obvious: that he held a misplaced empathy for a man who barely knew him, and who would certainly reject K if he did.

K's conflict was not simply one of desire against demand. Rather, his desire—the most intimate thing, about who he loves, and how he loves—had also transformed into an ethical stance: that K ought to stand up for his sexuality, to live authentically and true to this essential part of himself and, taken further, to also pave the way for others like him. "The only thing of which one can be guilty is of having given ground relative to one's desire,"⁵ Jacques Lacan wrote. K could be accused of giving ground. Certainly, it felt like this to K, that a stronger version of him would have taken his boyfriend's hand, to walk up together to this man from the mosque and greet him proudly. His boyfriend would have praised it, and I too would have thought it an act of courage, to fully integrate into one truth.

But that evening, in that convenience store, K did not take a stand. His evasion was a lie, and in this way K lied all the time. Words and their omission created and enclosed the compartments of his life, to retain the people and objects most important to him. In that corner store that evening, there was no way for him to get out unscathed. And he realized that in every situation he lied, or omitted the truth, he did not go unscathed.

"I was caught in a dilemma that was new to me then but which since has become horribly familiar: the trap of adult life, in which you are held, wriggling, powerless to act because you can see both sides. On that occasion, as generally in the future, I compromised," writer Mary McCarthy confesses in her memoir.⁶ They are words which could have easily come out of K's own mouth. In seeing both sides, he submerged into the needs of people around him. The conflict did not feel like one buried deep within his unconscious; rather, he felt surrounded by it. It took up the air around him, so much so that he felt suffocated—and his maneuvers were attempts to find some air, to slip out of the corner store so that he could breathe.

Sigmund Freud and Josef Breuer use the word "conscience" to mean consciousness in their *Studies on Hysteria*, as their translator James Strachey notes. So, when they write of a double conscience, they were in fact referring to the nineteenth-century French hypnotists' concept of double consciousness (which was also the likely inspiration for Du Bois). Breuer and Freud describe how "the splitting of consciousness which is so striking in the well-known classical cases under the form of 'double conscience' is present to a rudimentary degree in every hysteria."⁷ This merging of conscience and consciousness felt apt for K, whose double consciousness presented itself like a double conscience, in which two warring ideals had taken over his mind. He felt, in acuity, the bind he was in and the repercussions of the compromise he had made, that the lies that protected were also the ones that ensnared him. In the muted dramatics of the corner store that evening, K's internal experience was like a hysteric, writhing in the trap of adult life.

K's anguish pressed up and collapsed into a depression. He became annoyed. He told me that he felt as though he was the target of attacks from all sides, the object of enmity from those

he loved. Why was he the one with all of the empathy? Where was theirs? He told me that, to be blunt, he was furious at these people, who through their love were imposing impossible demands on him. But rather than lashing out, K retreated to his bed, and cried and cried. He was playing a martyr, although it was not clear that anyone was better off for his sacrifice.

Several of my colleagues suggested that K could build strength through numbers. He could attend a group or a student organization, perhaps, to allow him the opportunity to meet some of his peers—by which they presumably meant other queer Muslims—with whom he could sit down, in a circle of faces similar to his, sympathetic heads bobbing up and down in validation, who could provide K with templates to help him carve out a cohesive sense of self from the muddle. But K shakes his head definitively at this suggestion: He knows enough people in similar situations. It's not like how it used to be, he said to me, when no one talked about being a gay man. To be invested in a compromise that comes at the cost of an integrated sense of self means that one will inevitably, and unendingly, feel misunderstood. They don't know what's going on at my home, that my parents are fighting like crazy people, he said to me. Dishes are being thrown across the kitchen in all directions—it's chaos!

He remembered as a child sitting at the family kitchen table, where his mother would teach him prayers from the Qur'an. The prayers were in Arabic, a language neither he nor his mother understood. It was nevertheless critical, his mother impressed upon him, that the young K pronounced each syllable in each prayer just right. Three letters in Arabic confused him the most: *kha*, *kaf*, and *qaf*, all of which sounded like minor variations of the Latin *K*. It was of immense importance to distinguish among these letters, his mother told him, that they were not interchangeable, and confusing them could alter the meaning of word—and therefore the prayer—though he would have had no idea in what manner since he didn't know the language. All young K knew was that mispronouncing one letter could void its entire recitation. As a result, the gap between how the letters were supposed to be pronounced and how he pronounced them seemed, for K, arbitrary, unknown, and yet extremely consequential—all

of which, together, created a sense of absurdity over the entire endeavor.

This gap between what is and what should be was familiar to K. It was where his anxiety lay and was emblematic of his interactions with his mother, and, now that he thought about it, increasingly emblematic of his relationship with his boyfriend. K told me he and his mother would speak on the phone every few days, which functioned as check-ins in which the two would chat briefly about K's work, his schoolwork, and, rather elliptically, the state of his parents' marriage. In the middle of these pragmatic conversations, K increasingly felt everything he omitted rise up from his throat in, perhaps, an attempt to bridge the gap through acknowledging and voicing some truth. He would open his mouth to give form to omissions, to produce words, but nothing came out. Tears formed in his eyes as he recounted to me the scenario, opening his mouth in reenactment of his phone conversations with his mother, and nothing coming out.

In short, sessions felt increasingly like an acute crisis. I told him it felt as though things were coming to a head. The compromises he had made, the compartments he had built, were not sustainable, that they couldn't last, all of which I told him in an attempt to make it easier on him through the alleviation of choice: to help him buy into a teleology, to feel that there was an end-point. It was fate to progress, developmentally, from adolescence and teenage strife onto adulthood and integration; it was the progression of life, to live wholly. "Let's play this film out, from start to finish," I said. "What does it look like? How does it end?" He looked at me as he tried to utter words that could appease me, but nothing came out. His mind was blocked, he told me; he wouldn't play it out for me.

K cancelled his next session and told me that he was unbelievably busy with his classes and his work and the obligations that came with both. My office was too far away for him to spend the time commuting over given his hectic schedule. The next several weeks went by in silence, the type of silence whose heaviness is reified later through hindsight. A message came from the hospital that one of my patients had been admitted to the inpatient psychiatric unit and that the patient was K. I found out later that his boyfriend had taken him to the hospital, concerned about K's

darkening demeanor. The concerns were well-founded, because K had been wanting to end his life. The social worker I spoke with over the phone, the one who was now in charge of the case, told me that he would likely stay in the unit for the week, for he was in a terrible state. She told me that he probably needed to have come here weeks ago.

I went to see him in the inpatient unit, several floors up from my clinic. There was a sterile buzzing hush in the common area of the unit where I waited to meet K, who was in the middle of a group therapy session. A supervisor once told me that group therapy was important in inpatient psychiatric units, as groups provide people with a sense of belonging at a time when they feel most like exiles from society. So, I waited. When the group session ended, K and I met in a private room. We sat face to face, and he sat back in his seat with his legs wide apart, in a detached calm that contrasted the way he sat in the clinic; it gave the impression that he was relieved over having been finally been caught and detained for his crimes, as though his guilt had risen from out of his unconscious and manifested itself as the locked ward. He recounted the events that brought him to this place: His boyfriend had found K in their bed, curled up and clutching his bottle of anti-depressants, and K admitted to him that he was considering taking them all at once, “they’re meant to relieve depression one way or another, right?”

Compromise suggests moderation, but when compromises are made in exigent circumstances, the results are too often nothing short of extreme. Compromises are maddening, for the peace they offer often appears worse than the damage of all-out conflict. It would have made sense, in this unit, for K to have been given pause, to reflect on how his compromises led him to this very place, and to renegotiate another way that would be less torturous for him. But in our conversation in the unit, K said that his family were, in fact, not aware that he had been admitted and assumed that his absence was a result of his busy schedule, with school and work, which was, apparently, something he told many people. He knew that his health insurance was not tied to his family’s, so there was really no way they would find out—just as they had no idea he had been meeting with me these many months. As with before, K temporized and said that he intended

to tell them what was going on, that he would deal with it all, just that it was not the right time, not in this defenseless state.

In the weeks and months that followed after his hospital stay, what transpired was entirely predictable: K's relationship became more fractured and his boyfriend ultimately ended it. His boyfriend told K that he could no longer continue to worry and play the caretaker, that K had professional help now and, also, he really needed to learn how to help himself. He said that K was holding back his boyfriend's own growth, and, in all honesty, all of these secrets made him feel as though K were pushing him back into the closet. K laughed incredulously as he recounted the scene for me. "He literally said that!"

In one view on the politics of compromise, negotiations are made in bad faith: The centrist who calls for a dialogue between each side has, in fact, a secret alliance with the status-quo, a form of conservatism too embarrassed, or too sly, to admit what it really is. The accusation of moral weakness against those who compromise is not that they are confused, but that, in fact, they very much know what they are doing and where their loyalties lie but want to avoid the repercussions of admitting it. This, perhaps, is what connects the act of compromising with the state of being compromised. In the heartbreak and in missing him, K nevertheless came to believe that his boyfriend, with his incessant prodding, represented K's own internal demand for an impossible integration of his compartments. The paradox of his boyfriend, as the unwitting symbol of this integration, was that, no matter what, K would lose something.

Paradoxes felt like cruel jokes to K, who, in the aftermath of the breakup had to take care of practicalities, to convert the study into a second bedroom and find a roommate to move in to help him with the rent. This roommate spent most of the time holed up in his room, so K barely saw him. K began working an extra job, delivering groceries to suburban homes, which took an absurdly long amount of time—as he didn't have a car and had to use the buses—and, as a result, was barely profitable. The effort his new work took out of him, with such meager rewards, along with the precarity of the job itself, felt apt for the way he navigated life. In the transition to being alone, in the apartment and on the bus, hugging large paper bags full of produce and

health food staples, while steadied, in some sense, on a new antidepressant, K had plenty of time to think, and to grieve.

He told me that, these days, he felt his surroundings differently. Since his discharge, he had been thinking about the group session prior to our meeting in the unit: The facilitator had passed around sheets of paper and color markers to the group members, who sat around a large table in the occupational therapy room. K remembered thinking that they all looked as though they were in some deranged school for overgrown children. The sheets were printouts of a large outline of a mask, like one of those old theater masks that come in a pair—one smiling and the other frowning, in comedy and tragedy—though this one was solitary, smiling vacantly without its morose counterpart. The facilitator said that this exercise was a meditation on the masks we all wear, the ones that help us navigate the world and yet create a sense of inner falseness. He told the group that they were to use the color markers to decorate and write on the masks attributes they believed described the metaphorical masks they wore in front of others. The group members wrote words like “confident,” “successful,” “happy,” and one, disconcertingly, K said, wrote “human.”

K told me that, as he looked around the room, he realized the impossibility of this exercise for him. It was entirely predicated on a notion that something different, and more real, lay underneath the mask. In this moment, the problem of identity returned to him. The exercise had brought him back to the question of who he really was: the masks, what was underneath the masks, what was him, and what was not. Winnicott never wrote of a mask but a false self, one that all too often covers up the essential, true self. Lacan, on the other hand, rejected the very notion of an essentialized, true self—it was all an illusion—and saw the task at hand to reconcile oneself to this sober fact. With the mask exercise in the inpatient unit, K saw this debate present itself and, with his refusal to participate, he put forth an argument that, rather than take a side or attempt some form of synthesis of the two, he was going to do what was most familiar to him and stand in between them.

He said that he began to recognize the value of authenticity as a form of tyranny, an external impingement that constrained

rather than liberated him. And perhaps this was the reason why he had hated taking identity too seriously, that it required a particular position from him. K said that he used to dislike how easily his beliefs and feelings changed depending on the context, in a seesawing, antipodal way. He felt like the most hardened skeptic when in the mosque, surrounded by devout Muslims, while, in front of his secular college peers, the urge to defend the notion of the sacred, and even of blind faith, would inevitably bubble up from within him. Contrarians, similarly, used to irritate K: those who reflexively and with unflappable pleasure took the side of opposition, and broke from consensus. Now, though, when their voices piped up to play the devil's advocate in conversations about politics, ethics, or whatever cultural issues of the day, he felt their presence not only as inevitable but with greater sympathy. He even felt some warmth towards them. By taking the other side, these contrarians were operating as one part of a larger whole—just as, within himself, skepticism was a necessary companion to his religious commitments.

It seemed as though K was throwing himself into the contradictions of life as a way to feel less suffocated by them. His refusal to take a side was an attempt at transforming his compromise into a form of defiance, which Winnicott believed was the antidote for the inner deadness caused by compliance, a way to enliven oneself. Nothing had really changed: He wasn't confronting anyone, hadn't said a word differently to his parents, and started dating again, a man he met in class. This was a position of defiance that operated within him, an internal shift imperceptible to those around him.

K left treatment soon after the break up with his boyfriend—too soon, given his recent hospitalization. He disappeared, as he had before, and my phone calls to him led only to his voicemail. I left a message to tell him that, if he wasn't to return, he should at the very least try to see a psychotherapist in a more convenient location, closer to his home, his school, or his work, perhaps. I wanted to tell him that defiance is all well and good, but compromises should make things easier. They should serve the person, not the other way around.

Notes

- 1 Erik H. Erikson, *Identity, Youth, and Crisis* (W.W. Norton, 1968), 165.
- 2 Ibid., 17.
- 3 W.E.B. Du Bois, "Strivings of the Negro People," *The Atlantic Monthly*, August 1897, 194.
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan*, book VII: *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis, 1959–1960*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Dennis Porter (W.W. Norton, 1992), 319.
- 6 Mary McCarthy, *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood* (Harcourt Brace, 1985), 189.
- 7 Josef Breuer and Sigmund Freud, "On the Psychical Mechanism of Hysterical Phenomena: Preliminary Communication," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 2: *Studies on Hysteria (1893–1895)*, ed. and trans. James Strachey with Anna Freud (Hogarth Press, 1955), 12.

Mutual Struggle

In a small city with a rising cost of living, foreign developers surveyed the up-and-coming downtown. They envisioned its potential to hold more fashionable, and lucrative, properties—which, if built, would come largely to the detriment of the existing residents of that part of the city. As a response to these encroachments, a local nonprofit organization hired a young community organizer to advocate for the needs of the existing residents. For her work, the organizer was recompensed with a meager wage.

This young organizer began her work by meeting with the various community groups in the area. She held countless meetings, scurrying energetically from one to the next. Most were scheduled late into the evening, so that people could attend them after work. She gathered the immigrant organizations, the local businesses, the environmentalists, and the unions, among others groups, to inform them of the development and to start a dialogue among them. And though each came with their own agenda, the presence of a common enemy aligned many of their interests, and on this basis they formed a coalition and devised a list of demands from the developer, a communal process the community organizer found beautiful.

Her efforts saw moderate success in drawing out members of the community who were troubled by the developer's plans to transform the city's downtown. The meetings grew larger, an impressive demonstration was held in the city square, a couple of progressively minded local politicians voiced support for the movement—a promising series of events that culminated in a meeting with the city's mayor. He told the coalition that he

understood their concerns and was committed to taking their demands seriously, words the organizer took as evidence that the movement's success was fast approaching. More meetings were scheduled, this time with an assortment of local politicians, city officials, and representatives of the foreign developer. Elaborate gestures of goodwill were exchanged, thoughts on next steps raised, follow-up communications issued back and forth. It was in this manner that months passed, and the obvious began to make itself apparent: that the officials were complicit with the developer's plans, for too much money was at stake, and their engagement with the coalition was simply an aesthetic display, a nod to the progressive identity of the city.

Contracts had not yet been signed between the city and the developer, though it was only a matter of time. As the blueprints for the new downtown circulated, the mood within the coalition darkened. Factions formed and infighting—about strategy, how much to compromise, how far the demonstrations ought to go—took hold. A couple of the groups, content that their own agendas were adequately addressed by the developer, reasoned that the coalition ought to go along with the plans: that they were, in fact, not bad at all. Arguments erupted; meetings were diverted. People left frustrated and deflated. The whole endeavor had become rudderless.

The community organizer had to continue her work under these new conditions: to fight for some percentage of affordable housing among the new condominiums, protect the local union jobs, retain the neighborhood park, and secure as many other scraps from the table as she could. Having only graduated from college a few years back, she had treated her work up to this point like a good student, duly following the steps she had been taught on how to build a movement. With it having stalled, though, she was now contending with events that defied linearity: she felt like they were going in circles, a form of motion for which she was wholly unprepared.

* * *

It was during this time she began to read a biography of the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci, whom, she was told, had thoughts

on the failure of a movement. She told me that this biography described Gramsci as “a philosopher of defeat”¹ and his life as “tragic and/or inspiring,” depending on who you ask.² She wondered which of the two—tragedy or inspiration—would be the fate of the coalition she helped bring together.

She read the biography before work, at the breakfast table along with her morning tea, and after work, in bed after the long, cumbrous evening meetings. She held up the book, its cover a youthful portrait of a steadfast militant with a distinctive mass of dark hair and delicate spectacles, with a conviction that studying the past would illuminate her future. She read the biography for the same reason others read biographies of great figures of the past: to see how they handled living. And though she said she wanted to be a student of history, I wondered how much 1920s Italy had in common with a liberal American city contending with the effects of redevelopment. “One hundred years apart, things are very different but also very much the same,” she answered. She went on to describe a world filled with possibilities: She told me how, after the Great War, the working class of Europe wielded a great amount of power, with strong trade unions, workers councils, and socialist papers. “People were organized in a way that’s unimaginable today. It was truly a remarkable time. History swelled towards proletarian revolution!” Her voice raised with excitement. But next came the more familiar part of the story: the rise of fascism, not only in Italy but across Western Europe, Benito Mussolini’s sweeping crack-down on the Left, and Gramsci’s twenty-year prison sentence as a political prisoner.

The organizer furrowed her brows. The story had reached the part that implicated her. With his imprisonment, Gramsci had to confront the turn history had taken, and to mourn a moment in time that would never return. Failure is a crisis of faith. In its aftermath, the organizer had to contend with questions about what to do next.

* * *

The organizer’s immersion in a history of defeat concerned me, as she was normally an indelibly optimistic person. Something

within her seemed to have shifted. She wasn't ambivalent about her commitment to fight against the profiteering developers. She was not confused about which side she was on. It was the utility of her actions she questioned, hamstrung by her position in a small non-profit organization that, she was coming to realize, didn't have the capacity, the power, nor the remit, to win all, or even the majority, of the coalition's demands—though, she added, she was at a loss for what else she could do to be more effective. It may sound very maudlin of her, she said, but, when reading of Gramsci's imprisonment, she was reminded of her own state of melancholic suspension: in between the overwhelming odds against them on one side and the increasingly contentious arguments splitting the coalition apart on the other, she felt enclosed by an insurmountable reality. As fewer community members came to her evening meetings, she imagined the new developments cropping up around the city square and surrounding her, gleaming brightly as they rose higher and higher towards the sky.

As a means to shake everyone, including herself, out of their collective stupor, she decided to take on the role of a cheerleader, renouncing the idea of an organizer, which seemed in that moment to connote the sterility of a filing cabinet: its purpose merely to compile, sort, and arrange, while remaining fundamentally empty itself. Cheerleaders, on the other hand, were full of unwavering vitality and loyalty, qualities she thought should be held in higher regard than they are these days. Their excitement existed irrespective of how well their team fared on the field, of how many deflated spectators left the stands. Her cheer, though, was not a steady one: She noticed it grew as the crowds dwindled at the rallies in the city square, worn out from her endless evening meetings, door knocking, and one-on-one conversations. She and the few other committed members left kept cheering. They screamed louder to divert attention from the coalition's diminishing support, to drown out the fading chants of those just going through the motions.

She was not having a manic response. She told me that she was conscious of what she was doing. The frenzied activity was not an attempt to deny the reality of the conditions around her. Rather, it was a form of persuasion, not to others, but to some vague cosmic arbiter who could be convinced by an impassioned

plea and the purity of her good intentions to change the course of history. She imagined herself like Gramsci before 1924, in a dynamism that propelled the movement towards a better and more just city. She played the vision in her mind like a movie, a fantasy she knew that, if she were to articulate to others, would be seen as incredibly naïve—and yet she could not let go of it.

* * *

“The challenge of modernity is to live without illusions and without becoming disillusioned.” The aphoristic nature of Gramsci’s writings makes it easy for those like the community organizer to pluck quotations out of their historical context and use for her own purposes. This one struck her because a life without illusion made little sense to her. How could anyone strive for anything without holding a few? Illusions are ideals: They offer inspiration when one needs them most, to carry on impossible tasks, to make new worlds possible. “Since I never build up illusions, I am seldom disappointed,”³ Gramsci wrote in a letter to his brother several years into his prison sentence. She squinted her eyes. “He thinks he has never built illusions?” Gramsci appeared to want to communicate a realism unfettered by desires and emotions. His words exemplify, in Marxist historian Perry Anderson’s words, Gramsci’s “stoical adjustment to the loss of any immediate hope of victory in the West.”⁴ But it was hard for her to believe him, not only because it was hard to believe anyone would be seldom disappointed in the face of crushing defeat, or after receiving a twenty-year prison sentence, but because illusions are needed in the work of revolutionary change. They may be leveraged to conjure a path forward when everything in reality insists otherwise.

Gramsci held several illusions in the first months of his imprisonment: He expressed confidence that he would be released early, within the next three years or so, and took his sentence as an opportunity to focus on his studies, pestering family and friends for books and writing material as if he were about to go on a retreat. As the years went on, isolated from the outside world and weathered by the harsh conditions of prison, as Mussolini’s power further consolidated, and with no indication

of an early release, the tone in his letters changed. He kept at his studies, but this illusion dissipated.

* * *

“Before, there was all of this love in the community. Now I feel it less and less, as though it’s all slipping away.” The organizer contended with the prospect that all of the work she had done, and what still needed to be done, could be for very little, while having to keep this fact from disarming her completely.

Disappointment and despair ossify into a rigid pessimism. She wondered why pessimism seemed only to exist in the projects worth pursuing. It’s a protective response, of course: a symptom of depression, an intellectualized analogue of hopelessness, pessimism is not the immediate response to failure but like a scab that forms over the wound itself, to defend the body from more hurt. It is the outward sliver of melancholy, a hardened surface that overlays the whole. But this metaphor of bodily wound as emotional wound is limited, because scabbing is a process of healing—new skin grows in its place—while pessimism entrenches us in the failures of the past by anticipating their return in the future. Because of this foreclosure, pessimism seems like an excuse to not try, for any effort is bound to fail anyway.

One curiously dedicated community member wore his pessimism like armor. This man was present at all meetings, at all actions and community events. The community organizer would watch him arrive early to the evening meetings and walk along the semi-circle of chairs she had carefully arranged to sit in the same spot at the very end. His presence was so unfailing that it felt inviolable to her, which led her to wonder whether he was, somehow, the source of the gloomy air—that, if she could only rid the meetings of him, the fog would magically be lifted. “Some say that it’ll get worse before it gets better,” he piped up at the end of one evening, “but it’ll probably get worse before it gets worse.” Everyone laughed, his humor resonating with the handful left.

Gramsci wrote of the “dark cloudbanks of heavy pessimism which are today oppressing even the most experienced and responsible militants, and which represent a great danger—per-

haps the gravest at the present moment—because of the political passivity, the intellectual torpor and the scepticism towards the future which they produce.”⁵ While the ardent pessimist was highly invested in attending the meetings, another member of the community retreated from them. This member said that she no longer read or watched the news, having decided that she would only attend to her private affairs—going to work, investing her energy in her children—in order to extricate the greater reality of the world from the confines of her life. She seemed to have taken the foreclosure of pessimism as a physical proposition and shut herself away from the outside world. This member lamented the state of things and adroitly connected global matters to the recent developments in the small city. It was as if she saw the larger context of the community’s struggles too clearly, like staring directly at the sun: The sheer force of truth was blinding. Her retreat into her home was an attempt to undo what she felt was done to her. This member told the organizer that she resented the entire notion that the personal is political. Whoever came up with it couldn’t have foreseen what they were unleashing: The responsibility is too much! How can a person live with a problem too large to resolve, hovering over them menacingly their entire life?

* * *

The organizer turned to one of Gramsci’s favorite aphorisms: “Pessimism of the intelligence, optimism of the will.” She chanted these words alongside others—organizers and activists and sympathizers like me—in unison, after lost battles and in moments of uncertainty. She repeated them, over and over, like an incantation to raise the dead—pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will—as if to conjure Gramsci’s ghost to lead the path forward, or wake the rest of the community up from its slumber. She held onto them to keep herself afloat.

Gramsci himself was fond of repeating these words in his notebooks and correspondences, words he made famous but were really those of Swiss writer Romain Rolland, who looked to capture the “natural bravery that is the flower of a good people.”⁶ We may read the quotation with an emphasis on its latter part: as

the will's victory, buoyed by the inherent goodness of optimism, over the dull and dour intellect. But Gramsci was a realist—remember, he insisted that he held no illusions—and wanted to take his pessimism seriously and use it for his own purposes. Writer Francisco Fernández Buey describes Gramsci not against pessimism entirely, but “against the pessimism of the will.”⁷ It is strategic to place pessimism in the intellect, to cordon it off, keep it from seeping into and corrupting the will. Otherwise, there would be only despair. As Gramsci explains: “I imagine the worst that could happen in order to summon up all my reserves of will-power to overcome each and every obstacle.”⁸ The two faculties, the intellect and will, are like Plato's reason and spirit: One seeks truth and the other rouses us into action. The quotation takes their differences seriously, not in an ontological sense but for practical use—to work in unison, to consider each worst-case scenario, to prepare for and fight against it.

But, of course, the intellect and the will cannot be cordoned off from each other so neatly. The boundary between the two is muddled, and their contents readily bleed into each other. Pessimism is more than imagining the worst-case scenario; it is the belief in it, and how does one believe in anything without some degree of will? And where else can optimism get its form, its structure, other than from the intellect? The quotation's conceptual problems hint that its appeal for those like the community organizer lies beyond the precise meaning of its words as though they were pieces of a puzzle. It is, rather, about a gestalt sense of the feelings they evoke, a groundedness that rejects the either-or of pessimism *or* optimism, intellect *or* will, and holds them in tension with each other without reconciliation.

It is part of Gramsci's use of contradictions in his work, what Anderson called Gramsci's antinomies. Antinomies, dualisms, dialectics. The organizer was aware of these notions, that they were tools to study history and other grand concepts that required an erudition she had not cultivated, all of which was fine with her because she had a suspicion that she wouldn't have found them helpful with what she needed to do anyway. But she admitted that thinking about them helped manage her insides. “We contain multitudes, that's what I've learned from you,” she said to me, and smiled.

The organizer looked around the communal space at the non-profit's office where she held the evening meetings. She turned to her colleague sitting next to her, another young organizer, who treated the work as a wholly administrative enterprise, as if winning were dependent entirely on matters of scheduling, adhering strictly to the meeting's agenda, and the quality of her notetaking. In front of her sat an older woman whom the organizer privately called the bulldozer. She equated antagonism with passion, disrupting the meeting with long, fiery speeches, and flummoxing her colleague's attempts to keep order. The ardent pessimist, meanwhile, leaned back in his chair with his arms crossed at the far end of the room. In each member the organizer saw a different part of a whole and mused: "How could it be any other way?" She realized that there was no transcending antinomies. It was just all fragments that the organizer tried to shepherd towards the future.

* * *

In his essay, "Gramsci and Us," sociologist Stuart Hall warns: "We mustn't use Gramsci (as we have for so long abused Marx) like an Old Testament prophet who, at the correct moment, will offer us the consoling and appropriate quotation." "Whoops," the organizer thought. Would Gramsci have disapproved of the organizer's use of his words? There is nothing wrong with a consoling quotation, a little comfort and warmth as respite from the harsh conditions of uncertainty, but she could not pretend that within them resided the solution to her problems. Hall wrote that "the whole thrust of [Gramsci's] thinking was to refuse this easy transfer of generalisations from one conjuncture, nation or epoch to another," and to look "unswervingly at what is different and specific about this moment."⁹

He goes on: "Gramsci gives us, not the tools with which to solve the puzzle, but the means with which to ask the right kinds of questions."¹⁰ What are the right kinds of questions? Questions we already know the answer to are not questions worth asking. The ones that need asking are those with answers we don't really know, the ones we have to figure out for ourselves without relying on prophets of the past.

“What does that even mean?,” the organizer asked. I thought a little and said that, perhaps, Hall wants us not only to attend to the similarities but also the differences between now and back then. She was quiet for a while, appearing pensive, and—though I was asking about the city’s history, which I knew little about—she started to tell me about her childhood: that, in grade school, she wrote letters for an international human rights organization as part of their afterschool program. The letters were to request the release of political prisoners from all parts of the world. The parameters were well-defined: She would write each letter by hand, often copied from the prewritten templates, place them in its pre-stamped envelope, and entrust the teacher to place it in the mail for it to be sent off to a faraway country to be read and considered with great import. As she completed the ritual every week, she imagined the impact of her letters. The cause and effect, her letters and the restoration of freedom and justice, was so clear in her mind that they became an obsession for her. A fantasy had been created, she said to me, that to be a responsible citizen of the world is to be a good student, to sit at a desk and carry out an assignment. She attended the afterschool program every week and wrote as many letters over the hour as she could. It was the start of her activist life.

People talk of how our minds cannot grasp the infinite, she went on to say, but what interested her more and more was the notion of limits. She said that they seemed to wedge themselves in the middle of cause and effect. More crucially, they presented a bind: Accepting the presence of limits risked giving into them, and she was unsure at which point recognition turns into resignation. On the other hand, to push against limits, to reject them, was a necessary condition for any sort of change to occur, but this stance required a denial of their constancy. It risked veering into madness, she said as she recalled how she felt alongside a handful of others as they bellowed in the middle of the city square. She wouldn’t mind the feeling of madness—just as she didn’t mind holding illusions—if it got her to where she wanted to go, but she feared this path would take her to the same place as pessimism: failure, this time as a result of losing touch with the real conditions around her. She told me about another quotation of Gramsci’s that had been on her mind: “The world is truly

great and terrible—it surrounds us on all sides with an immense great wall of space and time, against which we beat our head with no result.”¹¹ And another version he wrote just a few years later: “My practicality consists of this: in knowing that if you bang your head against the wall, it is your head that will crack and not the wall.”¹² In the first, Gramsci voices a pessimism that attempts to change the world are futile, even masochistic, while, in the second, he steps back with his use of the second person to counsel readers on the repercussions of holding illusions. The organizer took the passages together to mean that, in either case, the wall remained standing, tall and unassailable in front of her. Her thoughts, like most people’s, were recursive, and, in this moment, they were going over and over the predicament it presented to her: how to break it down rather than have her head crack open.

The organizer looked to Gramsci as an interlocutor of a sort in times like these, when she needed to steady herself in the face of limits. Her use of Gramsci was not only for mere consolation, as Hall suggests. In times of difficulty, people need others for support and, through Gramsci, she was part of an imagined community of militants, activists, and freedom fighters that spanned across history. She felt strongly that her use of Gramsci’s life was not part of a depressive condition that looked to the past at the expense of attending to what was required of her in the present. Instead, she said, the past fed her, nourished her, and stabilized her in her present.

* * *

The organizer had a hard time admitting that her use of Gramsci was, in part, a response to the difficulties in the real relationships around her. She had always considered herself as someone undaunted by the task of navigating the complexities of interpersonal interactions and took pride in associating with people from all walks of life, but the increasing discord among the coalition members left her bewildered. After particularly grueling evening meetings, she would consult me on whether certain members had undiagnosed personality disorders. Just because she agreed with them politically doesn’t mean she has to like their company,

she said. In fact, there were many moments when she could barely stand them.

One of these moments transpired in an otherwise typical evening meeting. The organizer was corralling the small group of attendees through a discussion on models of city development without displacement, when the bulldozer stood up from her chair and said she had to give voice to a truth that disturbed her from the very start of the movement: The organizer, working for the nonprofit, was not democratically chosen by the community to lead them and, consequently, did not truly represent the community. The organizer, having only arrived in the area for college, did not understand their needs at all and, she went on, was being paid for her work as an organizer, which, to the bulldozer, indicated that her intentions were not pure of heart and her actions merely a means to an end. All of this was to say, the bulldozer concluded, that the community simply deserved better.

She sat back down as others shook their head in silent disagreement, judging the bulldozer to be overzealous as was typical of her. It was not the first time questions of community and leadership and democracy were introduced and debated extensively, and so the administrator stepped in with a few perfunctory words of validation to appease the bulldozer and moved the group along to the next agenda item. The meeting continued while the organizer sat in silence, holding the impulse to defend herself against such preposterous allegations. She thought back to a more harmonious time in the beginning of the movement, when optimism had served as the secure bedrock for everyone working fairly well together. When the presentiment of defeat arrived, relationships fractured. They were now like siblings in a home that suffered from profound emotional neglect: Unable to fully comprehend or articulate the true source of their maltreatment, they blamed their suffering on one another. It was striking to her that the most palpable expressions of rage were not directed towards the entities they were fighting but themselves.

It is one thing to relate to others on their terms, as a psychotherapist does, but it's something entirely different to do so with an established destination in mind, as the organizer had to. She felt a conflict between the universal and the particular, a conflict that in relationships can also be described as one of dominance

versus mutual reciprocity. The bulldozer's remark that the organizer was treating the movement as a means to an end felt particularly cruel to her because it prodded this very dilemma within her. She knew how easily domination could win out—how, in the service of good, others may be transformed into objects to be used. It's so much easier, and swifter, than trudging through an inchoate mutuality, especially with people one doesn't like.

The presence of the dilemma itself was, for the organizer, just more evidence of the fracture within the movement, where ideas and people no longer aligned. She thought back to a prior meeting in which the ardent pessimist compared their coalition to crabs in a bucket: No lid is required to keep the crabs in the bucket, he had said, because they claw at and pull one another down in their individual attempts at escape. The notion of mutual struggle was made complicated in his analogy: Communalism had broken down at the very moment they needed one another most, and had been replaced with acrimony. Rather than view it as an unfortunate series of events, she wondered whether frustration, resentment, even rage, were necessary conditions of depending on one another. There was something about having to rely on another person that brought their flaws into stark relief, she thought. People were limited, and annoying, and she needed them. After sitting pensively for a while, she turned her gaze to the other members at the meeting with a newfound understanding: the actions of the administrator, the ardent pessimist, even those of the bulldozer, were, perhaps, all ways to respond to the complications of dependency. As she looked around, she felt it was this commonality that unified them and what, in a sense, made them a community.

* * *

Gramsci wrote about tending to sparrows in his prison cell. He kept two in succession, whose wings he clipped. The first sparrow was his favorite, whom Gramsci considered "proud" and, curiously, "eminently Goethean." But one could more honestly call this sparrow difficult: He did not let Gramsci hold him and, if the sparrow found himself in his hands, would peck maniacally at them to be free. He remained on the far end of the cell and

approached Gramsci's carefully placed matchbox full of hearty flies to eat only after Gramsci stepped away. Gramsci thought the sparrow died of a stroke, as he spent his last days paralyzed on his right side, dragging that half around the cell until he collapsed. The second sparrow Gramsci disparaged as "nauseating in his domesticity."¹³ Easier to hold and feed, unencumbered and uncomplicated in his needs, this sparrow stayed close to Gramsci, so close that Gramsci would accidentally kick the bird when he moved about the cell. This sparrow likely had a short life as well, from eating too many bits of soggy bread and burnt match heads that lay about the cell.

The organizer read Gramsci's story of his sparrows at a time in the movement when arguments swelled and dissipated, members arrived and left. She felt enough of a kinship with Gramsci at that point to see the sparrows as glaring symbols of what Gramsci wanted to be versus what he feared he was, that he held an ambivalence about relationships that mirrored her own.

Time moved faster as the coalition met with more city officials, some of whom agreed to support a modest number of the coalition's demands: a larger percentage of affordable housing units than initially proposed by the developer, some more jobs promised to local residents, a select number of the small local businesses subsidized, and one of the proposed parking lots converted to a public garden. It was an agreement that the city mayor flaunted as his own accomplishment—the bringing together of big business and community—and one the local nonprofit also celebrated as a victory. At some point during these months, the organizer finished Gramsci's biography. The work, though, was not finished: It fell on the community members to keep a vigilant eye on the development, to ensure that all parties keep to their respective promises, though what the community could do if anyone reneged on them was unclear. Priced out of the city, the organizer soon moved away, returning on occasion to visit and catch up with the members—or, at least, those with whom she had an amicable relationship—and counsel them in their mutual struggle, which continued.

Notes

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