

Filiation as First Foundation of Being-in-the-world*

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The filial dimension of man, so important in the concrete life of each person has paradoxically been, until recently, given little value by philosophers, as if the effulgence of the mind found it difficult to take into account the most concrete and the most profound realities of life. To be a human being is in the first place to have been born in body and in soul; it is to have been a child who has received everything from its parents and educators. Life begins in the family and it is called to flourish from there. It is in the family that life finds the original ground in which to take root and, in principle, the support for it to grow and be strengthened. It is from there that the child draws its reasons for living.

In the *Politics*, Aristotle claimed that man is the only animal to be given *logos*. That man is given *logos* indicates that he has a need for meaning, for reasons to live. In German, the expression “*raisons de vivre*” is rendered by the compound word *Lebensgründe*. This word indicates that the reasons for living are also the foundations of life, of being-in-the-world. Our most profound reasons for living are the first foundations of our life, those that support our desire to live and from which an intelligible order existentially unfolds for us.

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When the child is born, he is already provided with reasons to live. He has been permeated by these in the womb through the warmth of the body that bore him with love. At the very heart of this first night, he has heard the words of his mother, even of his father, as a call to being. The very effort of birth and the very first adaptations to the world demand that he rely upon these reasons for living, without these sufficing for all that. Birth casts him into the most radical poverty. It establishes him in the direst vulnerability possible, while opening up new wellsprings of love in the heart of his parents. Hence, the child assumes his place in the world all the better as he is reassured by the sweetness of the maternal breast and by the words of love, which confirm for him the goodness of being and reveal to him the gift that it is. The harsh rupture inaugurated by being born may thus be surmounted through the bursting forth of joy in being-in-the-world.

If it is interesting to undertake a phenomenology of intrauterine life and of birth, it is because these have an archetypal aspect for the adult as for the child. The life of the human being is filled throughout with ordeals, with symbolic deaths and resurrections. These may not be lived through without being linked to the foundation that bears—without a call that reassures and provokes, without in one way or another, consciously or unconsciously—the image of the mother or the father as an archetype of the love which sacrifices itself in order to give the other to himself.

The child precociously knows with a power of intuition originating in the clarity of his heart, that he received himself from his parents and from their mutual giving. He grasps with an extraordinary depth the power to engender and to save with which his parents are invested. He interiorizes this so profoundly that from the beginning, he attributes to it a divine quality. The paternal power is for him without measure, as shown in the story of this child who is shown by his father the sunset for the first time. Once the sun has set, the child naïvely asks him, “Do it again!”¹ To the

¹ G. Siewerth, *Aux sources de l'amour: Métaphysique de l'enfance* [To the Sources of Love: Metaphysics of Childhood] (Paris: Parole et Silence, 2001), 82.

child, his mother seems capable of satisfying all his needs and of delighting him out of any distress. He loves to take refuge in the cradle of her arms. Thus, there is no need to explain to a child what a “mama” or a “papa” is, to the extent that he receives from his parents the fulfillment of the expectations of his heart.

On the other hand, at some point he would have to understand how he was conceived and how he was born, that is to say, it would be necessary for him to objectify in his imagination and consciousness the mystery of his birth, the mystery of his donation. What is at stake is his own identity, which above all is a narrative identity. The story of how one came to be is recounted for the sake of enabling the child to sensibly experience himself in the pleasure of the story. The child, and likewise later the adult, must know in which soil he is rooted, in order not to feel as though he were merely being tossed about by the wind.

The genius of parental love is not only in banishing the ghostly shadows of the early years and veiling from their child an indigence which would otherwise incessantly keep him in anguish; it also furnishes the child with an essential interpretative key for welcoming and ordering his world. The house, the cradle, the meals, the care, the relationship with brothers and sisters—all these take form and meaning in his filial consciousness starting from the rapport which he has established with his parents. It is in the light of parental love that the child situates the events at home and progressively takes his destiny in hand. Very soon, in particular, he seeks to master himself in order to respond to the expectations of his mother and father, while for his part, teaching his parents to love and to guide him in a personal manner. It is from his filial consciousness, his awareness of being his parents’ child, that he receives and constructs his own identity, right up to its sexual dimension, as Freud has shown throughout his theorization, at least partially, with regard the Oedipus complex. His body becomes flesh and identifies itself by virtue of the maternal caresses illuminated by words of love, through physical contact in roughhousing with the father. In the relation with his parents, he is able to be “in their image” while becoming

himself. Such is the “miracle” of filiation rendered possible by the letting-go of the parents.²

The father and mother, in their irreducible difference and in their undeniable symbolic dimension, complement each other in their respective roles in order to make way for this miracle. Together they manifest transcendence towards and proximity with the other in the encounter from which the “I” emerges. Together, they separate the “already there” from the “not yet” of love. Together, they distinguish and sometimes fuse the provoking word and the enfolding embrace that reassures and satisfies. Filial consciousness is not a totalizing and reductive perception that encloses one in the circle of the home, to the extent that the manner of being of the parents manifests that each is in need of the other. This poverty in relation to the other opens a way towards the process of attachment and detachment, which constitutes, in the light of filiation, the crux of psychological and spiritual growth.

To reproduce is not only to conceive and to give birth, but also to educate. It is to give the other to himself, while providing him an indispensable support—a physical, psychological, and spiritual support—that the other needs in order to advance. It is one spirit, a single coherence, which must animate this enduring action. The parents guide their child all the better as they master themselves and are consistent in their behavior. And all of these come about not only through words filled with kindness and hope, but also by the corresponding bodily expression. In this sense, the mere substitution of science for physical love, for the parents’ gift of their bodies, such as is realized in artificial insemination, does not simply transgress the original gratuity of the gift, but also threatens the very spirit of the family as the place of gratuitousness and the gift, as the site where the expression of the body must reveal true love.

² We understand from those who have not known their genetic parents that they are in some way haunted by the question of whom they resemble.

The child must feel that his parents are not using him as an instrument of an impersonal will to power or to compensate for their own sufferings. If he feels loved for himself, and not despite himself, he would be able to happily accede to a gratitude for life given as an offering of self. Conversely, I recall meeting a child who could neither speak nor even stand upright simply because his mother needed a baby to cuddle in order to feel happy. Actually, parents cannot fulfill their proper vocation without a spirit of sacrifice that leads them beyond ordinary human comportment. Let us recall in this regard these very evocative words of Christ: “If you, who are evil, know how to give good things to your children...” (Luke 11: 13).

Filiation constitutes the principal prism through which the child receives himself as a being-a-gift. In being his parents’ child, he lives love and understands what love means. That is why filiation has to appear to him clearly enough as a gift. This perception of being-a-gift is meant to be continually confirmed and amplified by the assurance offered by the effusive warmth of the home, and also by the kindness of the law. The law is good and just when it leads the moral life to unfold as receptivity to love, as effort and as gift, and finally as joy of communion. Contrary to what one may still read today in a good number of psychological theories on the child, the latter may very early on have access to a spiritual apprehension of the grandeur of the gift. As in the example of a very young child who is given chocolate for the first time and who, after tasting it, then gives it to his father and mother for them to share in the pleasure of tasting such a treat—this little child saw with the greatest clarity that pleasure can only be true joy when it is the source of communion.³ He is able to read this in the heart of his parents even before they are able to explain it to him, provided that they themselves live their life and their mission as a gift.

³ Ibid., 52.

Filiation is for the child the place where his mind is opened. It is from there that he begins to comprehend the world. He needs to be initiated to life by being shown that his trust would not be betrayed. Filiation in effect establishes in his heart a boundless trust that allows him to be guided by parental power, through which he is assured that his parents are working for his greater good. It is this same benevolent power that, far from always keeping him in the same spaces—those of the home—allows him to venture into the world which beckons him to assume its dangers and ambiguities. But parental power may all the better be exercised only if it is conscious of its own limits, of its incommensurable poverty, and even more of its own dependence upon the One who embraces all of life's events in his providence. In this way, the child would be able to build his filial relation upon the most unshakable foundation, which will allow him to view with more equanimity the limitations of his parents, and thus also his own.

Filial consciousness is one of the elements that most determine a person's foundation. It is the first basis of one's being-in-the-world. Paradoxically, filial consciousness allows the child to rest in himself to the extent that he has been given to himself by his parents, conscious as they are of the gift that life is. As I have written in *L'enfant, maître de simplicité*, "It is only the unconditionality of the parents' gift that provides redemptive love to the filial-being of the child."⁴ In his poverty, the child longs to be considered as a person, to be loved not simply because he has been seen to conform to some criteria that have been fixed in advance. It is thus that one may be happily reminded of the fact that he possesses nothing that he has not gratuitously received, even his very being.

Although filial consciousness is unceasingly called to ripen and to reform itself, it shall always constitute the focal point from which a human being may begin to interiorly unify himself and form a perspective on life.

⁴ Thierry Avallé, *L'enfant, maître de simplicité* [The Child, Master of Simplicity] (Paris: Parole et Silence, 2009), 121.

Throughout one's existence, filial consciousness resonates in the heart of each person as nostalgia and as hope. It ensures the gratuitousness of being-in-the-world as much as it does the absolute dignity of each human being. It calls each one to a love that forgets itself in order to evoke brotherhood and communion.

In contrast, if a child is not welcomed as he is and as his heart expects, as a gift without measure, if he feels abandoned in the strangeness of relations tainted by indifference or falsehood, the foundations of his life are considerably weakened. "He may not for all that renounce the aspirations of his filial-being, but his desire lives a profound and painful contradiction. He will recreate in his heart parents of sufficient integrity to be able to assume a filial-being that functions as a bearer of his humanity and his absolutes."⁵ Such would be his reasons to live.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 70.