



## The Child Prodigy

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### The Mind as a Societal Resource

The problem of the so-called "child prodigy" suggests a family of images: what "society" represents in this case are its ways and means of thinking and feeling about giftedness and its enactments of these (collective) thoughts and feelings.

At first, the many versions of the "problem" of gifted children seem to be organized around an ambivalence towards distinguishing and stratifying persons on the basis of particular attributes. One view that the gifted are not "recognized" and properly developed suggests that what is special and particular about them is not valued. The reaction to this view appears to be the opposite opinion that the gifted are discriminated on the basis of what is special and particular about them.

What seems to unify these beliefs is the idea that the "attribute" of giftedness is experienced ambivalently by society because the attribute is either denied or treated as disabling (disabling in the sense that by isolating the gifted on the basis of the special attribute they become segregated and treated as if their "meaning" is exhausted by the attribute).

Since the disabling treatment of giftedness also results from an effort to develop the talent, we could say that the issue posed by these versions of popular opinion pertains to the question of whether or not giftedness is being properly developed, i.e., whether society orients strongly to the special and particular talent of its youth.

If this concern has implications for our conceptions of childhood, it also plays off the deeper issue of the ways in which society orients to the special and particular attribute within its midst. These conceptions of giftedness then function as signs of the collective representation of the relationship of the particular to the universal in social life.<sup>1</sup>

An expert says:

A problem of continuing concern is the extent to which we are properly utilizing the nation's intellectual resources. (Wolfe, 1976, p. 263)

From the point of view of policy it appears to be difficult for a community to arouse itself to act with reference to its children so as to be decisive about intervening in their development; families rather than communities are expected to be so self-interested because the children are their "property." The community's response to its young seems to be "naturally" languid and *laissez-faire* in the sense that there is no "natural" interest in moving children to adulthood which the idea of development and cultivation of talent appears to suggest. Innately the community seems to resist the idea of development.

## Children as the Means of Production

On the basis of this picture, it is thought that in order to motivate the community to orient to development as its problem, policy has to show the consequentiality of the problem for the community's survival. The expert reasons that development must be made necessary for communal goals in order for the cultivation of the gifted to be justified since instrumental justification is the only one that works. In this way the community might become self-interested in its children.

That the productive community must develop its natural resources makes children into natural resources; this opinion results in the paradoxical conclusion that helping children (to develop their capacity) requires treating them instrumentally, i.e., we must think that we are helping ourselves rather than them. The rule then could be—orient to children and to their development under the auspices of our natural self-interest. This is an exemplary instance of a Hobbesian approach to the problem.

And now we can begin to understand the problem of the gifted child in a more interesting way for *we* would pose as an alternative opinion the suggestion that the disabling treatment of giftedness is reflected in this very policy-oriented collective interest in treating their particularity instrumentally. The truly disabling treatment we would say can only conceive of the special and particular instrumentally: we now need to examine the implications of this view for gifted children.

The natural resource view of the development of talent recognizes the major problem to lie in the recognition of abilities, the acquisition of information as to the distribution and location of individuals with ability, the potential for testing them effectively, etc. The natural resource view of giftedness sees a connection between the "full development" of individual ability and "the greatness of a nation" and so it equates the search for talented youth with "the pursuit of excellence" (Gardiner, 1958). It is certainly an exhilarating moment in our reflection upon our intellectual tradition when we come upon a recognition of the communal interest in excellence. That interest is institutionalized in the Greek conception of *Paideia* and in the notion of *Bildung* as self-formation.<sup>2</sup>

## Who Are the Prodigal?

How does the "talent search" and the contemporary version of the "pursuit of excellence" fit into the tradition of *Paideia*? How does the conception of *Paideia* relate to the recognition and development of "abilities?" Without belabouring the story we might note that the "abilities" of the young appeared first to Plato as the propensity to be hospitable to beauty (to order), to avoid ugliness (disorder) and to demonstrate as an appetite for discourse. Youth of ability were not merely "keen witted" i.e., highly intelligent,<sup>3</sup> but were dedicated to conversation and show an interest in the *ti-estin*, the *what is it?* Our modern sense of "abilities" would be a ruthless gloss of this aptitude.

Thus, youth of ability for Plato were those who showed an erotic inclination for discourse which was reflected in their playful and yet respectful

approach to the “strange” Socrates’ teachings, those whose interest in order was also reflected in a good-humoured approach to the incessant questioning of Socrates. *Paideia* then reveals that it is not exceptional competence that is recognized in the notion of “abilities” because competence must develop in accord with the integration of spirit and reason and such development can only refer to the way in which *experience* leads the way in such an integration. Subsequently we will compare this view of experience with the modern version of development.

For the present, note only that *Paideia* recognized the “abilities” of good instincts rather than of “exceptional talent” because talent severed from instinct is only mechanism and provides no opportunity for welcoming the effects of experience upon the soul. Talent is precocious in the sense that its development is not guided by reason but by nature and cannot be expected to be proportionate to the rational expectation of the growth of reason.

At this point we can ask—what interlocutor to the technical treatment of the prodigy can we envision? This question requires discussion of the technical treatment. We have suggested that it is irrelevant whether the interest lies in maximizing the “development” of the gifted or in treating him as “queer” or handicapped, but what is technical in the treatment is the focus on capacities rather than the person. The capacities as such reference the “what” of the person and need to be integrated with his self, his “who.”<sup>4</sup> There is no necessary relationship between the development of capacities and the development of the self.

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321

Even when the “natural resources” view of giftedness takes up the prodigy’s cause as does much of professional psychology, the interest in the child is still technical because it treats the development of capacities as primarily under the influence of some version of the acquisition of skill as a satisfying and complete end towards which he is headed.

If a picture of developing capacities requires a formulation of the child which accounts for his self-arousal and for his interest in his own development *per se*, then this interest tends to be conceived as a response to his own undeveloped capacities or to deprivations of ability. Insofar as a developmental conception anticipates a state of acquired capacities as an end, the value of acquisition in-itself is stipulated and undeveloped.

This is to say that when the interest in the child is concerned to develop his capacities there must be a way of conceiving the relationship between capacities and the self since precocious capacities *per se* remain unintegrated (indeed “phenomenal”) unless organized by self-reflection.

### The Incomplete Education

A view of the evolution of prodigality as a whole should always be ironic towards capacity since unregulated capacities are not governed by any end, purpose or value: developed capacities have no use value for the person unless he acquires side-by-side with these capacities a way of orienting to them that puts them in their place.

Now, the point of view needed to organize our capacities does not develop in the same way as the capacities themselves. Unlike the capacities,

the viewpoint is not developed as an acquisition. This "acquisition" picture of the development of talent cannot account for self-formation because self-formation actually makes development meaningful: it is presupposed in the acquisition of capacities. Self formation itself is not a matter of acquisition since it requires teaching and learning, the resistance of alterity, and the inspiration of an interest in self-arousal in order to put into question one's own mastery.

Indeed, self-formation in the sense of *Paideia* means putting one's mastery into question, it means developing an ironic stance towards the very development that is celebrated by "natural resources" conceptions. The technical treatment of giftedness jumps on the band wagon of capacities and acquisition, it finds the development of skills (whether numerate or literate) awesome and it does everything possible to maximize this movement. As a subject for education such a child cannot develop the ironic self resistance, he cannot develop the good-humouredness necessary for continuously placing ability within the whole because he cannot treat himself as anything but abilities.

The technical treatment lacks any conception of an *aporia*—the revolution within the soul through which the child comes to enjoy questioning his sense(s) of mastery as a way of grasping and understanding his self. If self-formation and the *aporia* go hand-in-hand, the developmental view of capacities treats them as a matter of industry and practice, of having, naming and cultivating skills until they become stable and dependable resources.

Self formation requires the introduction of alterity into the life of the child in the form of the teacher who resists and challenges the child's sense of mastery by inviting him to relate to this sense discursively and so, to surpass unreflective practice through the actions of a thoughtful relationship. In contrast, acquisition of capacities can be done in the household, conducted by familiar parents who teach the child skills. All is comfortable here since the only resistance envisioned is the possibility of not properly using time and resources to facilitate the child's development; teachers are merely technical consultants and parents administer lovingly but rigorously the child's timetable. The obstacles to development are lethargy, waste and spoilage—those metaphors of inefficiency—which, if mastered, can permit the child to literally "take off."

A conception of self-formation as *Paideia*, rather than as acquisition, reorients to the role of the family. In the deepest sense, the family does not educate the child but lays the ground for education as the strange experience reflected in his contact with the teacher as an embodiment of alterity. If the teacher introduces the hard question—the need and value of self-reflection—it is the family which prepares the child for this experience by establishing in him good instincts, i.e., a hospitality to order which the question aspires to recollect.

### The Birth of Passion

Another way of describing these different orientations to prodigality, reflected in the technical and *Paideia* pictures of giftedness, is through the

image of the place of passion in the education of the prodigy. *Paideia* supplies passion through the *aporia* which arouses the need to form oneself through the development of an approach to the quiddity, the *ti-estin*, the "what-is-it" question.<sup>5</sup> Passion is reflected in the desire for "complete clarity" with respect to that which is used and mastered. In this sense, passion requires the very resistance which the technical approach to giftedness cannot provide: the music master does not resist the musical prodigy, even in their struggle, because the training provided by the "lesson" differs from the discipline of Socratic conversation which teaches the child to ask—what is it?

If the prodigy comes to acquire the "discipline" of "complex rule structures" as suggested, such an acquisition depends upon instruction, repetition and practice, it depends upon a certain industry and regularity which we think of as training, i.e., as independent of extensive experience in the real world. The prodigy shows an ability to learn these "rules" and "to operate with them at a high level of achievement" (Winn, 1979, p. 17).

There is a relation here which needs to be explored between the absence of passion in the technical approach to giftedness and its insularity from experience. In what sense does *Paideia* provide experience and, through this, arouse passion?

We might suggest that the picture of development as the acquisition of skill fortifies the child against any influence which emanates from those who lack skill. His environment is oriented to immunize him from the influences exercised by those who are without power, i.e., without relevance for his acquisition of ability. He only accepts the influences of those who orient to his acquisition as primary, those who can treat acquisition metonymically, as if that is all he is. Despite the "stage mother" and the stern violin master who cajole and push him onward and upward, his world is still closed to real resistance and influence because it is closed to any discursive relationship to the limits of ability and skill; it is closed to the type of discourse that could challenge his very attachment to acquisition through irony or disregard.

Passion can only appear with the child's attempt to come to terms with the resistances occasioned by those who touch him deeply by making his very attachment to his own precocity problematic. In this sense it is one's peers who are capable of challenging him deeply by refusing to exempt him from the demands of interaction and in so doing, who force him to develop particular solutions to universalistic requirements. Experience suggests a metaphor for our need to react to the challenge offered by the *aporia* of life to the insularity of capacity and precocity, the continuous challenge to ability to use what it acquires in particular and for an end that is lively, contemporary and particular.

But now, if we are at the point of appreciating what is left out in technical approaches to giftedness, is not the conception of *Paideia* as it stands also technical unless we formulate it as orienting to help the child comprehend the social character of giftedness? That is, *Paideia* treats giftedness as requiring a morally oriented approach to self-formation, as the cultivation of irony towards capacity and acquisition and an appreciation of the

difference between giftedness and real excellence. Certainly *Paideia* stands for all this and more, and yet this stance could apply to any youth and to any situation of education. In order for *Paideia* to offer an oriented approach to giftedness *per se* it must develop itself in relation to the prodigy as the particular content of its practices of education. This is to say that *Paideia* remains abstract until it shows how it comprehends the meaning of giftedness as a particular subject for education.

### The Prodigy as a Relative Phenomenon

Prodigies are talented children whose excellence in one area such as mathematics, music or science surpasses what is expected of children. The exceptional character of these children is related to their advanced development within one area, and so a prodigy is remarkable because he is a child, for example, of eight years old who performs like a fifteen year old. A prodigy, however, refers to more than a talented youth because it points to the child whose talent is often conceived as phenomenal or spectacular. As a common attribute, talent refers to a competence or an ease in the development of a skill, whereas the idea of a prodigious or phenomenal talent refers to one who is gifted and whose life is identified with its talent. A prodigious talent would seem sufficient to care for all the prodigy's needs: he is full of his talent in the sense that there is nothing more which could be needed by him than the development of his talent.

The prodigious talent refers to a natural interest and absorption in those skills which are made possible by the difference in natural endowments. Thus, for example, the prodigy is more than a child who is musically talented; rather he is a child whose talent for music absorbs or consumes him to the point of excluding other interests, and he is encouraged by others to be so. In the case of the prodigy, society expects a child who is determined or shaped by his talent, and thus whose endowment of talent is so liberal and beneficent as to care for all his needs. While this is what society expects when it hears of a prodigy, there is still the question of how the exceptional child becomes the prodigy or why a life comes to be equated with its talent. The state of absorption and inward preoccupation associated with the prodigy can be encouraged and induced by a particular upbringing, and the treatment of talent as a phenomenon could produce the learned response or orientation of the prodigy.

A child prodigy is marked not so much by his skill as by the precocity of that skill. (Winn, 1979, p. 17)

The prodigality of the talent is a function of its precocity in the sense that it is the child's ability to perform "at or near the level of an adult particularly in a given field" that is phenomenal. What is phenomenal, then, is not the skill itself, *but the fact that it is exercised by a child*.

The phenomenon defies nature by appearing only and exclusively as a product of nature, i.e., as one whose talent is exercised without the benefit of art and training that normally intervenes between childhood and adulthood in the form of normal preparation.

## The Societal Exaltation of the Prodigy

Thomas Mann's short story, "The Infant Prodigy," depicts the past practice of placing prodigies within tours which exhibited them. In his portrayal of the child prodigy, Mann imagines that the following complicity occurs between the audience and the child:

He looks as though he were nine years old, but he is only eight as yet and is announced as only seven. People do not know themselves whether they really believe this. Perhaps they know better and nevertheless believe it, as they are so often wont to do. A bit of falsehood, they think, belongs to beauty. What, they think, would become of recreation and edification after the day's work if they did not come with a bit of goodwill, and let two and two make five? And they are quite right, with that collective mind of theirs! (1928, pp. 102-103)

The audience is willing to accept the falsehood in order that the child could satisfy what they need him to be. The age of the infant prodigy enhances his talent in that his piano recital is even more impressive since he is so young. Here beauty is afforded the privilege of using what is common, age, as a resource for enhancing or promoting itself.

One who treats the child prodigy as naturally gifted rather than as needing to develop his talent is the princess in Mann's story. She greets the prodigal musician with the presumptuous comment, "It must all come so easily to you. I bet you don't have to work at all!" a comment which causes the child to inwardly fume. The princess is insensitive to the child as one with needs, and as a spokesman for the collective mind she suggests that the child prodigy is enjoyed for the freedom which he provides to the audience. The child is imagined as one whose talent absorbs and preoccupies him, and which insulates him from the diversity of reasons for which people need one another. The audience then is free to enjoy him as one who needs nothing from them, and yet who is there to be what any of the audience need the child to be.

While the child fumes at the insensitivity of the remark, this is not because others misperceive him; rather his inner anger can be conceived as a feature of the disdain which the child has for those who could never understand him. The child views the audience in ways such as this:

"*Le Hibou*" is my strong card," he thinks, for he has learned this term from the impressario. "Then comes the *Fantaisie*," which is really much better, especially the place in C sharp. But you have gone mad about this *hibou*, you public, although it is the first thing and the stupidest which I have ever made." And he bows graciously. (Mann, 1928, p. 108)

The child recognizes that the public lacks discrimination or taste in its appreciation of his music, but he accepts this by bowing graciously. It would seem that he accepts the audience's lack of discrimination as a feature of their difference from his: thus he would not be the phenomenon that he is, if the audience were not the collective mind that was irremediably ignorant of his excellence. While the audience does not appreciate his skill in any one piece, it does appreciate its own ignorance as a consequence of the unfathomable and inaccessible nature of the child's difference. Thus the audience's ignorance of the child's musical accomplishment is a consequence of their understanding that they cannot know him. The collective

mind is parochial in that it shares the common view of the prodigy as the phenomenon or as one whose natural endowment separates him from others.

The prodigy is collectively enjoyed by those in the audience, although each member may express a particular reason for finding the prodigy remarkable. All views of the child share the belief that he is a natural, or complete and without needs. Two beliefs which are held about the child contribute to his being seen as a phenomenon: (1) that he has an unlimited interest in his talent, and (2) that he would never have the capacity to resist an invitation to perform. In the audience's view the prodigy needs the recognition that comes from performing because the performance provides the opportunity for him to demonstrate the independence of his talent. The prodigy performs then as a way of affirming that his desire and excellence are the result of his giftedness.

The prodigy's assumed need for recognition confirms for the collective its own indispensability for giftedness: the self-consciousness attributed to the prodigy is the very condition of his phenomenal appearance, for the phenomenon needs to be looked at and his collectivity needs to look. Each requires the other and together produce the complementary sense of narcissism and nurturance which result in the situation. That the prodigy needs to display and develop and the community to gaze and lead join in the social construction of the phenomenon as an extraordinary communal resource.

Why would a society cultivate or court the phenomenal? A society could cultivate excellence as what is phenomenal, in order to sacrifice it, and by sacrificing it show that the society is limited by a respect for the merely human or the common. The phenomenal refers to a society's treatment of excellence or what is best about itself, and by conceiving of excellence as the phenomenal a society isolates and excludes it from itself. Excellence refers to the relation between what is best within a collective and the remainder of its parts. When one seeks to be excellent, one seeks to be the best that a member of the collective could be, and in this way excellence is a relative measure of achievement. The phenomenon, on the other hand, is that whose distinction is a feature of its relation to what is foreign or divine rather than the collective, and whose relation to the foreign or divine is grounds for excluding it from the collective. The phenomenon is a means for man to recognize the presence of what is foreign, and by conceiving of talent as the excellence that is natural or the gift of God to exclude excellence as the phenomenal. One author writes about the experience of being exceptional:

Like the negatively stigmatized person who is likely to be ashamed of her/his inferiority, the superior person may feel similarly awkward about her/his extraordinariness. Even the phrase "to be gifted" suggests that the person involved should not be held morally responsible for her/his "sins." This reminds us, then, of the many references in *Stigma* to deformed persons who feel that their stigmas are "punishments from God." (Posner, p. 142)

Phenomena include those who are more than human, prodigies, and those who are less than human, freaks. Excellence and deformity provide occasions for a society to use what is common about itself as a standard for evaluating others, and to exclude the rare or the unusual as those who transgress the merely human or common.



The treatment of excellence or deformity as phenomena is a way for a collective to reconstitute itself through an enactment of its unity by excluding those who appear different. When natural difference is cultivated as uniqueness or a phenomenon then a primitive piety is exercised. By sacrificing or excluding what is unlike the common, by treating it as being more than human, men show the willingness to live within the limitations by which they define themselves. Such piety is primitive because it shows a distrust of the differences or diversity contained within the collective itself.

The preceding quotation referred to stigmatizing, and this can now be formulated as the requirement that the talented child live through the role of being a phenomenon. One rule governing this role is that the child treat what he has been given as sufficient to care for all his needs. For example, it has been suggested in the work on stigma that resentment is created when a woman who is beautiful also wants to develop her intelligence. The constraint upon the exceptionally beautiful woman is that she protect the uniqueness of her endowment by showing that it is all that she could desire, all that she could be. Thus the society is willing to sacrifice what the individual would need in order to develop because exceptional individuals are identified with the natural or divine. Whereas the common individual relates some information about himself through what he needs, the extraordinary individual is required to define himself through the absence of his needs. When the identity of a person is equated with the part of himself which appears most immutable because it is given, then the possibility of identifying himself through the relation which he forms to his endowment or fate is sacrificed.

327

### **The Waning of Rarity**

Literature concerning the prodigy focuses upon his fear that he will not be able to live up to his claim. There is often the fear that what is extraordinary about the child will fade into the ordinary. Thus, while a child of six years old is phenomenal because he plays the piano like a fifteen year old, this same child at fifteen years old may only play at the level of a seventeen year old. If the child identifies himself with the claim to be phenomenal, then the tension which he accepts as a part of his life is the need to continually demonstrate the extraordinary character of his gift. The fear that a prodigious talent may show itself to be the product of an accelerated growth or rapid development which will even itself out in the course of a life, now becomes intelligible as a fear given that the prodigy is one who makes the claim to be a phenomenon. The one who is conceived as a phenomenon is required to believe that by needing something more than what he has been given, then he will betray his natural endowment. If stigma refers to the unfavorable opinion which is attached to one's difference, then the constraint upon the prodigy is that he never detaches himself from that role for which he is stigmatized.

The assumption to this particular form of piety is that the difference which God or nature makes cannot be influenced by man. Thus the view of excellence as a phenomenon is opposed to the view of excellence as the work of authorizing the differences between men. The society, which con-

verts excellence into something which is to be viewed and displayed for its phenomenal character, is afraid of the power demonstrated by those who orient to excellence. One fear of excellence is that it treads upon what is more than the merely human because it concerns itself with the different fates which men can achieve in the collective.

The prodigy imitates society's conception of him as a phenomenon in his self-conception. The phenomenal nature of the prodigy's talent is that it is something which is visible or directly observable without the appearance of him as having chosen or developed it. For the prodigy, fate is quite prominent and in some cases sealed, before the need for character has been realized or established. To treat the prodigy as a phenomenon is to define the child by his possession of some remarkable talent, power or ability; and given this perception of the child, his responsibility is to always be "on." The child must be continually oriented to maintaining the appearance of himself as one with a remarkable talent. The phenomenal character of the prodigy is established by the continual reachievement of his difference in interaction. Being phenomenal, rare, or unique requires the work of orienting to others in such a way that one is continually oriented to the management and maintenance of one's difference.

One way of demonstrating his difference is through the demand which the prodigy places upon others. The prodigy needs others to serve as *resources* in the demonstration of his talent. The call for others to serve as a resource presupposes the fixed and formed character of talent, at the same time that it recognizes talent as making demands upon the environment. Talented youths make the demand upon others for recognition and stimulation. Thus, in the way that the prodigy recognizes his need for others he testifies to the established character of his talent as his fate.

### Talent's Need for Alterity

Consider the following examples of complaints made by talented youths:

I love to talk and I need to talk. When the appropriate companion is not present and efforts to converse with the person waiting for the bus are futile and de-energizing, I feel like running away. (*On being gifted*, 1978, pp. 10-11)

We're wasted! Wasted like common cookies. Well, speaking on behalf of the chocolate cookie-shelves everywhere: "We are not," I repeat, "Not ordinary, common cookies!" Is there a soul in the world who can appreciate our worth? Will no one accept us? Are we destined to go stale and be wasted for all time? Only the chocolate cookie, God knows! (*On being gifted*, 1978, p. 17)

These gifted children show knowledge of their giftedness through the demand that they make upon the world for recognition. Much of the talk of the gifted youths (in the study sponsored by the American Association for Gifted Children) centers upon their frustration with the education they receive in public and private institutions, as well as their pain at being rejected by their peers for having appeared dissatisfied and critical of the system. They resent being criticized by their peers for the special needs which gifted children show for more than the present educational system provides. Thus, while the gifted child feels wasted like a "common cookie" if she cannot show her difference in interaction, nevertheless she does

manifest her difference through the complaint about the deficiency or lack of resources in her environment. The two examples of complaints suggest one way which the talented child has for being "on": through the complaint the child offers a version of what should constitute the relation between self and others, as well as faulting others for their inadequacies. The impulse of the gifted youths is to turn others into resources for their own display. Thus, although the child who complained about being treated as a "common cookie" appears dependent upon another's recognition, the complaint itself gives voice to the difference for which the child believes that she should be recognized. Recognition is not needed as a feature of coming to identify the self, but rather recognition is demanded as an appreciation of the difference represented by one who is rare or remarkable. Resources are employed and not engaged, and to conceive of others as resources is to need them at the same time that one is closed to the difference which their interaction could make.

Thus far we have suggested that the prodigy's complaint that she is undeveloped could mean that she is unstimulated or unrewarded for her difference. It is necessary, however, to imagine that the prodigy does suffer from being undeveloped when acting as if she were a phenomenon. The naturalness or givenness of the prodigy's talent deprives her of the sense of struggle and accomplishment that would accompany the development of skills in others. It is conceivable that the child's gift would not be intrinsically interesting to her because of its naturalness or givenness. The child's frustration could be that the uniqueness of her gift demonstrates little about her because she has talent without having involved herself in the achievement of it. There is the potential for the child to reject that talent as what defines her, and to refuse to treat the natural or conditional parts of herself as establishing her fate. This refusal could be related to the temptation among prodigies to waste their talents. The prodigy can exemplify a disinterest in her gift by wasting or disregarding it. Thus the child who complains because she is unrecognized as a common cookie, could more significantly complain that she is unrecognized when treated as a phenomenon because her character is equated with her natural gift or what is given.

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329

It is possible to imagine the upbringing that would seek to shelter the child from the view of herself as a phenomenon. Our response to the recognition that a society cultivates the talented as the phenomenal is to nurture the talented apart from the common or collective view of them. When the talented are oriented to as a phenomenon, then their development is limited by their need to perform or to continually enact their difference for others, and as such the child's gift can also appear as a curse. The alternate response to the recognition that society can act indifferently toward the prodigy is to nurture the prodigy by sheltering her from the expectations which others have of talent.

This could be called a *naive* view of talent, and it attempts to create a natural environment in which talent or giftedness can develop. In this view, talent develops best in an environment which does not attempt to interpret or utilize talent. Opposed to the desire that talent maintains itself as a phenomenon through performance is the view that talent needs an en-

vironment that is free of artifice and illusion in order to continue the fate which is already charted by nature. In the naive view talent can be supported by an environment that does not interfere or distract it, and which leaves the child free to rest upon the experience of her talent.

The question which guides the naive upbringing is, how can nature best be nurtured? A text which illustrates the commitment to nurturing natural endowment is the film, *Shows Promise, Should Go Far*. In the film we encounter a family centered upon caring for the promising talents of its four children. The film draws our attention to the conditions in which the children live, and it shows these conditions to be created by the mother who strongly believes that these conditions are necessary to the development of talent: (1) the isolation of the home from outside influences, (2) the use of the house and the mother as material to be employed in the development of the children's interests, and (3) the sheltering of the children from evaluative and competitive situations.

Talent is portrayed by the film as the absorption of each child in one practice such as mathematics, music or painting. The mother protects the right of each child to be absorbed in their play and she shows respect for each child's interests by refraining from interfering or restraining their activities. It becomes apparent that the mother must restrain her interests and structure her activities in order to create the environment which gives unlimited scope to the child. Their development requires that she shelter them from the view of herself as one who could interfere with their pursuit of their interests.

In the naive view as exemplified by such mothering, the only nonexploitative relation is one in which each person names or develops herself. Rousseau raised this question in his concern with the formation of community: how can one consent to another and at the same time preserve one's free will? Specifically, the mother wants to prevent the subordination of the talented one to the will of the majority. The alternative which the naive view puts forward to the problem, of the rule of one by the many, is that all men can be united by the willingness to consent to themselves only. A community in which each person is involved in consenting to oneself is believed to be moderated because all people are occupied by the need to rule themselves.

The isolation recommended in the naive view is now understood as the self-absorption of each in the development of oneself. The mother in the film invites each child to be in charge of oneself, and she treats each as knowing best how to name or identify him or herself. Each child is most qualified to speak about her needs and wants. All of the children are expected to be engaged in the same activity, and thus the naive actor solves the problem of the difference between the talented and the multitude by imagining all as made the same by the practice of self-development.

The mother in the film conceives of talent as involving both heredity and nurturance in the proper environment. If heredity refers to that which naturally belongs to the self, then the proper environment is one which gives the child to the development of his natural self. From the mother's point of view, an undesirable fate would be for the talented youth to feel

dependent upon another's recognition of her talent. She requires that each child be engaged or absorbed by her interest prior to encountering a teacher in the same area. Each child is incubated for the period in which the recognition and initial pursuit of her talent must be fostered.

Central to the naive view is the belief that it has solved the problem of authority without having exercised authority itself. The mother's account of the family's life is that she never scolds or punishes the children, nor does she impose her will upon them; rather she encourages them to assume authority for themselves. Yet we observe that she is authoritative about the theory of difference to which each one must consent; each must act to fulfill her natural endowment. Thus while the mother acts to protect the view of talent as phenomenal, she nevertheless subscribes to the belief that the differences which are rare are phenomenal. She acts to invite the community to seek what is common through the shared, but individual practice of self-definition.

One interesting question which the mother is asked is whether she ever felt the need to discipline the children. She responds that when tensions occur she blames herself for losing control and not the children. Her obligation to the children is conceptualized as her need to remain in control: she must not let her frustrations or difficulties enter into the situation. Thus, losing control is always a possibility which she acts against, and she seeks to repress the ever-present character of this possibility. One set of problems which cannot be introduced into the relation are those which concern the struggle to gain control of oneself. While the mother recommends self-governance or self-development as what is most natural, she must nevertheless be portrayed as one for whom achieving self-control is a struggle.

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331

The mother portrayed in the film is painfully simple: she lacks all artifice or artfulness for showing the difficulties or concerns attendant to governance. Her commitment to preserving the naturalness of self-development leaves her indirect or covert about her own struggle to maintain control of herself. She is naive about her own struggle to provide nurturance to the children, because she cannot imagine the relevance of her own struggle as a mother to their upbringing. The naive view of upbringing lacks all means for portraying the tension between nurturance and governance.

### **The Singular and the Many**

Common to both conceptions developed thus far of the prodigy and her upbringing is the problematic character of the relation between talent and the multitude. In the treatment of talent as a phenomenon, the multitude rules talent. Talent is impoverished because it has no resources for resisting what the multitude or collective will make of it. The skills which may otherwise be involved in the talented display of the self such as the use of artifice, artfulness or illusion are subordinated by the view of the prodigy as a phenomenon to the need to maintain the appearance of his difference. On the other hand, the naive view of the prodigy formulates the relation between talent and the multitude as each person's need to control the inner multitude. Each person is to govern the inner diversity by repressing the multitudinous responses in favour of a singular interest. The mother in the film is an example of one who represses those reactions in herself which

do not serve her interest in the creation of a nurturant environment. The presence of what is multitudinous in herself is repressed because it is perceived as threatening the development of interest.

If we ask what representations of exceptionality connect all cases, we might be tempted to answer by enumerating attitudes such as contempt or indifference or practices such as segregation or isolation.

Yet the thrust of our work has been to understand the collective representation of prodigality as essentially technical, and so, we have noted how particularity is most endangered by the technical treatment.

The exception appears to deviate from the rule in a way which often leads us to focus on deviation *per se* as what is interesting in the case. The deviation of the exception from the rule still preserves the comparison as the limit of our interest. This is why the phenomenon is always "fascinating."

For example, the prodigy's departure from the normal expectations we have for children tempts us to ask how we can integrate her exceptionality and the rule, her particularity and the norm.

The character of her deviation resides in the fact that it is normal to understand ability as contingent upon the experience of development. What is phenomenal is ability uninfluenced by experience, that is, capacity that has no history.

If what humanizes prodigality is experience, this only means that giftedness has to be made to suffer an oriented history and development. It has to be made to struggle with its own self-realization.

Because prodigality is never tempted by real failure, it never needs to take a real risk. By its very nature, it is never exercised by the *struggle* to be competent since competence like social background for the upper class is always assured. Although prodigality struggles to fulfill its potential, that struggle never threatens to make the particularity of the self problematic.

The real struggle with failure occurs socially when we are confronted by our equals about the relation between who and what we are, in the mundane life which continuously makes our competence as persons, as selves, a question of concern. Experience describes the ways in which we apply our resources to the particulars of such challenges.

In this sense, the peers of the prodigy have no adult perspective on her precocity. Because her childishness is given to the peer, her prodigality can only be one of those curious and particular flaws or characteristics that children regularly ascribe to one another as grounds of differentiation. The prodigy is protected from the humiliation that only peers can dish out, that insinuating intimate denigration between those who have not established respect for one another's resonances. Children, then, require the prodigy to be *in* the world, to show her particularity in concrete and wordly ways and to suffer the need for such display that we think of as experience.

The lesson for the prodigy to grasp as a feature of her self-formation is the lesson of the social meaning of prodigality itself. Insofar as the prodigy

achieves an integrated grasp of her self, she achieves a sense of how prodigality itself is oriented to and used by the community to enact its representations of the particular, exceptional and phenomenal. The prodigy attains a sense of her self when she begins to understand her meaning as a social being, the ways in which her uses by the collective simultaneously reveal the interdependence of both she and the collective.

In this grasp, the prodigy acquires a sense of her constructedness, her typicality to and for the collective in a way that promises in the best of circumstances to free her from being determined by the collective. In grasping how prodigality is oriented she achieves a sense of being used and acted upon socially, a sense of how what she is, is as much a sign of the ways of social ascription as of her true and incorrigible nature.

In particular, the prodigy can understand prodigality as the fate of being used, the fate of the purely social being that satisfies the collective's appetite towards tautology, the fate of being pure malleability, pure materiality, the fate of being whatever the social treatment determines her to be. Society which values the prodigy because of her capacities also segregates her by virtue of its gaze because of these very same capacities.

If it is the fascination of society that makes her what she is, this recognition is, for her, at once liberating and oppressive: while free from the sense of her limitation as an incorrigible limitation which her prodigality suggests about her nature, in achieving this realization that she is a product of society's ways, of its fascination with the phenomenal, she returns to grasp her nature as the fate of being determined by the look. In this movement she recognizes victimage as her true fate, but as a fate that says more about the collective than the categorizations she has dissolved with her self-consciousness.

## Notes

1. The paradigmatic example of an approach to this problem is J. P. Sartre, *Anti-Semite and Jew* (New York: Schocken Books, 1942).
2. See Blum and McHugh in this volume ("Upbringing . . .").
3. See Plato's *Republic* on how corruptible the keen-witted are because their very intelligence makes them vulnerable indiscriminantly to good and bad influence.
4. See H. Arendt's *The Life of the Mind*, Chapter 1, for this distinction (New York: Harcourt Bruce Jovanovich, 1971).
5. See the article by Blum and McHugh in this volume.

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