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# NO! Against Adult Supremacy — Vol. 10

Toby Rollo, Brian Davis, Arthur Silber

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## **Why is the Child Crying? Slavery, Settler Colonialism, and the Ontological Misfortune of Childhood (Excerpt) *Toby Rollo***

Conceptions of early human life differ across cultures. Childhood, like infancy is in part a social construct comprised by a set of ideas and imaginaries which organize how we think and act in relation to young human beings. What we commonly think of as childhood is a distinctly European social category. For early western thinkers, the absence of language in the young suggested that they were more animal than human. In the western philosophical idiom, fully-human Man is a rational animal precisely because he has been forced to transcend his “childhood animality” through discipline, education, and violence. Although rooted in ancient views of humanity, the view of children as animals is still prevalent today, as we see in philosopher Georges Bataille’s quip: “What are children if not animals becoming human?”. In classical thought, the figure of the child was considered the bridge or missing link between reason and instinct, human and animal, heaven and earth, spirit and body, order and chaos. The distinctive convergence of life (bios) with reason and language (logos) was defined over and against the mere life of the child. Human improvement is attained through the violent inculcation of logos. The violence that is re-

quired to usher us out of childhood is a moral imperative so any interference with the civilizing of children constitutes a moral tragedy. To obstruct the telos of humanity is to suffer the chaos of cognitive disability, criminality or madness. Madness, as Foucault once observed, “is childhood”. Indeed, it is necessary for dominant cultures to assert the irrationality and criminality of childhood in order to position the adult as sane and lawful. The denigrating construction of youth as childhood exists in order to confirm the agency, freedom, and humanity of the adult. To be located in childhood is to lack agency, and therefore to be fixed as a fungible object for use by those with agency, adults, in accordance with adult epistemologies. I refer to this antipathy toward children and childhood as misopedy. The term is a partial cognate of more familiar terms such as misogyny (antipathy towards women and femininity) and misanthropy (antipathy toward human beings and sociality).

This childhood/human binary has been the primary model for positioning Europeans over and against non-Europeans. The relationship between misopedy and the oppression of non-Europeans is not a contingent analogy, but rather, a structuring principle at work in almost all western attempts to define itself over and against an Other. Feminist scholar Anne McClintock describes the relationship in terms of the projection of an image:

*Because the subordination of woman to man and child to adult were deemed natural facts, other forms of social hierarchy could be depicted in familiar terms to guarantee social difference as a category of nature ... Projecting the family image onto national and imperial progress enabled what was often murderously violent change to be legitimized as the progressive unfolding of natural decree. Imperial intervention could thus be figured as a linear, non-revolutionary progression that naturally contained hierarchy within unity: paternal fathers ruling benignly over immature children.*

We should note, however, that adult power over children is not just a rhetorical trope whereby the “image” of the bestial child is

*maturing adult will seek to express his repressed anger on external targets, since he has never been allowed to experience and express it in ways that would not be destructive. By such means, the cycle of violence is continued into another generation (using "violence" in the broadest sense). One of the additional consequences is that the adult, who has never developed an authentic self, can easily transfer his idealization of his parents to a new authority figure. As Miller says:*

*"This perfect adaptation to society's norms—in other words, to what is called 'healthy normality'—carries with it the danger that such a person can be used for practically any purpose. It is not a loss of autonomy that occurs here, because this autonomy never existed, but a switching of values, which in themselves are of no importance anyway for the person in question as long as his whole value system is dominated by the principle of obedience. He has never gone beyond the stage of idealizing his parents with their demands for unquestioning obedience; this idealization can easily be transferred to a Fuhrer or to an ideology."*

used only to "depict" the natural subjugation of animalian others. Rather, the child/human binary is the model or organizing principle upon which these modes of subjugation are structured. There is a homologous relationship between the domination of children and most other modern systems of domination: they share a common root and structure in the veneration of speech and reason. To understand the relation of misopedia to empire, colonialism and slavery, it is important to understand how the childhood/human binary emerged. Beginning in the classical period of Greek and Roman civilization, and probably before, children were used as labourers and slaves whose productivity was central to the formation of a leisure class could then cultivate cultural institutions related to religion, art, philosophy, politics and science. Ancient thinkers (the main beneficiaries of such labour) associated human toil with necessity and the absence of autonomy, a degraded condition for which the child stood as the perennial archetype. Vulnerability and physical dependency were lamented as indicative of some defect of character or constitution. Children were positioned as the natural embodiment of the defect. In the writing from antiquity, then, we encounter deep resentment for the miserable helplessness of the newborn and the dependence of young children. Only through violence and discipline could the bestial child emerge from the world of labour and play that is common to all animals into the world of language and reason (logos) achieved only by human beings (and epitomized in the philosopher).

Before the age of reason, children were understood as non-persons. Aristotle argued that slaves, women, and children are naturally excluded from political life on the grounds that they possessed deficient forms of logos. Most young boys and girls lived in conditions of servitude, slavery, or abandonment. Servitude is a natural condition, in Aristotle's account, for those who cannot organize their own lives. But although there was debate even among classical thinkers over the validity of slavery, as well as over the equality of the sexes (and even of animals) the natural servitude

and subordination of children was self-evident and never debated. At best, children were the living tools of adults. At worst, they were animals. In either case, the bodies of children were the property of adults.

Contemporary thinkers tend to project Romantic vision of childhood reverence back into the classical period. Philosopher Giorgio Agamben has asserted that the child's life of play is not a kind of bare life created by the imposition of sovereignty, but a self-contained form of life: "the child is a paradigm of a life that is absolutely inseparable from its form, an absolute form-of-life [forma-divita] without remainder." He concludes that "the child is never bare life [nuda vita], that it is never possible to isolate in a child something like bare life or biological life." While this may be accurate with respect to the phenomenological register (i.e., with respect to the way young human beings engage with and experience the world), at least for very young children, it is not an accurate political ontology. European conceptions of sovereignty have been direct and explicit expressions of the relegation of children to the status of Other. Even during the Romantic period, when poets and philosophers associated childhood with innocence and bucolic nostalgia, the animality of children was the object of sentimentalization. The lesson here is that the experience of oppression does not always or even necessarily reflect the motivations behind oppression. The phenomenology of subjugation is sometimes an untrustworthy window into the etiology of domination.

*you will finally end up with the kind of thinking, and the kind of psychology, that lies behind the journal entry from World War II (written by a German soldier) that I quoted in the previous part of this essay:*

*"On a roundabout way to have lunch I witnessed the public shooting of twenty-eight Poles on the edge of a playing field. Thousands line the streets and the river. A ghastly pile of corpses, all in all horrifying and ugly and yet a sight that leaves me altogether cold. The men who were shot had ambushed two soldiers and a German civilian and killed them. An exemplary modern folk-drama." 1/27/44*

*If you never allowed your authentic self to develop (or your parents never allowed you to develop one), if you denied and continue to deny the reality of your own pain, then you will deny the pain of others, even as the corpses pile up — and you will be prepared to believe anything.*

*And the horrors continue, beyond all human reckoning — and without end.*

In *When the Demons Come*, I also offered a brief summary of my own of Miller's central thesis:

*By demanding obedience above all from a child (whether by physical punishment, by psychological means, or through some combination of both), parents forbid the child from fostering an authentic sense of self. Because children are completely dependent on their parents, they dare not question their parents' goodness, or their "good intentions." As a result, when children are punished, even if they are punished for no reason or for a reason that makes no sense, they blame themselves and believe that the fault lies within them. In this way, the idealization of the authority figure is allowed to continue. In addition, the child cannot allow himself to experience fully his own pain, because that, too, might lead to questioning of his parents.*

*In this manner, the child is prevented from developing a genuine, authentic sense of self. As he grows older, this deadening of his soul desensitizes the child to the pain of others. Eventually, the*

only speak on His behalf; and country. When one's nation becomes such an authority figure, there are subsidiary ones as well: the nation's leaders, and the nation's military.

Many of today's hawks exhibit the kind of denial to which I refer in an extreme form: because they will not acknowledge any of this, they must insist that the U.S. military could never commit such atrocities. It must all be a vicious lie. As I explain in [When the Demons Come], this was the ultimate root of the hatred heaped on John Kerry: he dared to speak the truth about what had happened in Vietnam. For the deniers, this is the one crime for which no forgiveness is possible. As I wrote about this kind of denier (Rich Lowry and Andrew Sullivan were the particular writers to whom I was responding, but the same is true of many millions of additional people):

*With no effort at all, you could multiply examples such as these a thousandfold, every single day. In this manner, defenders of our current foreign policy wipe out of existence all the facts, all the costs, all the deaths, and anything else that might bring into question what is an absolute of their faith: the United States is right, what we have done and are doing in Iraq is right, our military is right, we are inherently unable to make mistakes, and the authorities must not be questioned.*

*These are the victims described by Miller — now grown into adulthood, continuing their denial, with additional authority figures added to the ones they first had. Besides the original parent, they now revere our government and our military and, beyond a certain point, nothing they do is to be challenged. ... to do so would bring into question these individuals' entire false sense of self, it would undermine their worldview completely, and it represents a threat that cannot be allowed to come too close. As always, what is dispensable in all this are facts, untold national wealth, reputation and prestige, and above all, the lives of human beings.*

*As I have said before, it is in this manner that horrors are unleashed upon the world. And if this mentality is carried far enough,*

## **Treat Children Like Adults *Brian Davis***

Our son started talking early and one of his first tricks was to parrot what we said and how we said it. I know that it sounds cute — and it was in the beginning — but mostly it was maddening. We quickly realized that traditional parenting is really, really condescending. Don't believe me? Try this experiment with your significant other:

Give seemingly arbitrary orders without any context or reasoning ("Don't touch that.")

Ignore feedback ("Do you want to go to the park? No? Well, we're going to the park anyway.")

Ask rhetorical questions in a passive-aggressive fashion ("Do big boys cry?")

Respond to frustration with more orders ("Stop pouting.")

Deny autonomy at every opportunity ("Let me do that for you. You'll hurt yourself.")

Impose arbitrary punishments ("Keep that up, and I'm taking away your car keys.") Be serious about it, just as if you were talking to a child. If, after a week of this treatment, you and your significant other haven't had at least one bitter argument, then you are either extremely lucky or already mired in a dysfunctional relationship.

So, how do you parent a child without treating them like a child? Here are some tricks that have worked for us:

*Explain Yourself*

Kids ask “Why?” so much because they genuinely want to learn. At some point, they stop asking, and it’s generally because we stop giving them real answers.

When a child questions your instructions, it’s a great opportunity to teach. When you explain the reasons and context behind a rule, you’re giving the child the tools to build their own moral framework, to fill in the blanks between the rules they know and the ones they don’t. This is fundamental to learning. Offering an explanation is also a great opportunity for your own reflection. If you don’t have a good reason for a rule (“Stop making faces.”), it’s probably a crappy rule and you’re probably taking yourself too seriously.

#### *Ask Them Questions*

Play this game: See how long of a conversation you can have with your child by only asking questions. At first you’ll be surprised at how much they talk. Then you’ll be surprised at how beautifully complex their minds actually are. And then you’ll be surprised at how rewarding it is to really get to know your own kid.

As for the child, they will love the fact that you care enough to ask about their day, about their feelings, about their preferences — about all the trivial little things that loom large in a child’s mind. Asking questions is the single strongest signal you can send that you’re listening, that you love them, and that you care what they think.

#### *Give Them Options*

A lot of a child’s frustration stems from having no choice in anything. A lot of your frustration stems from having to make lots of tiny, trivial decisions every day that drain your mental batteries. Delegate some of those decisions to your child and you can solve both problems at once. Your child gets to feel like an important, contributing member of the family because they got to pick out which beans to eat tonight. You get to make one less decision. Win-win.

This, more than any other trick, nips conflict in the bud. The child owns the decision now. They have no injustice to protest. Our son eats all his vegetables because he picks out which ones to buy.

*edge their pain fully and allow ourselves to realize what it means, it will necessarily call up our own wounds. But this remains intolerable and forbidden. In extreme cases, we must dehumanize other human beings: they become “the other,” the less-than-human. By using such devices, we make inflicting untold agonies on another person possible: if they are not even human, it doesn’t matter if we torture them. This is always how we create hell on earth.*

I said I was not referring only to the obvious cruelties inflicted on children by physical violence. Just as important, and often of much greater significance, are the psychological agonies to which parents subject their children. How often do we hear parents say to a child who will not follow an order: “Why are you making me so unhappy? You don’t want to make your mother unhappy and sad, do you, darling? Now just do what I say.” We should recognize this for what it is: emotional blackmail. The unstated threat — but the threat that is deeply felt by the child, even if he is not able to understand it — is that the parent’s love will be withdrawn unless the child obeys. Since the child knows that his life depends on that love, the threat is a terrifying one. Such blows are delivered countless times every day, by millions of parents around the world.

This knowledge is inaccessible to the majority of adults. We are taught to obey, and we learn to idealize our parents. We tell ourselves they did the best they could, or they couldn’t help it. In one sense, that is true: they raise their children as they were raised. They learned obedience very well, and they do to their own children what was done to them. But most of us cannot leave this truth at this point: to maintain the veneration of our parents, we must insist that they in fact were right — that they did it “for our own good.” That is where the great danger lies.

When the idealization of the authority figure spreads once we become adults, it can encompass additional authority figures. There are two primary such figures: God — who may have been there from the beginning, if the child is raised in a very religious household where God is the ultimate authority, and the parents

vival, so most parents believe that physical violence is sometimes morally “required” if their children are to be taught to be “civilized.”

Let us try to be as brave as Alice Miller: what we mean by “civilized” when we speak in this way, is that children must be taught to obey. If the principle of obedience is instilled in children from earliest infancy, and if parents further teach their children that physical violence is the means of commanding obedience, why do we wonder that some adults will torture those who have been rendered helpless and delivered into their control? They are merely reenacting what their parents taught them.

But we refuse to see this. We will not acknowledge what has been done to us. Miller continues in her work, because she understands better than anyone that these issues must be understood if the horrors are to be stopped. But she has met with fierce resistance every step of the way. In a similar way, although on an immensely more modest scale, I have found that many readers who agree with me on many issues — and many readers who may have followed this series so far, nodding their heads in confirmation at every point in my argument — will stop here. They will not acknowledge these particular truths, because they are too threatening.

This is because there is a necessary corollary to the obedience we are taught: the idealization of the authority figures in our lives. As children, we dare not question what our parents do: we depend on them for life itself. To comprehend fully what is being done to us would be unbearable, and it might literally kill us. So we must believe that, whatever our parents do, they do it “for our own good.” To believe otherwise is the forbidden thought. So we must deny our own pain when we are young; such denial is necessary if we are to survive at that stage in our lives.

*But if we maintain the denial when we become adults, it spreads throughout our lives. When such modes of thought are established in our psychologies, they cannot be isolated or contained. We deny our own pain — so we must deny the pain of others. If we acknowl-*

### *Give Them Space*

Speaking as an American, we tend to be too controlling of our kids, denying them the right to have their own initiative and to make their own mistakes. A child has to fall a lot before they learn to walk. And they have to trip a lot before they learn to run. By giving them the space to trip and fall — to experiment and to fail — you’re helping them learn faster.

Now, that doesn’t mean you should just let your kid wander into traffic in order to learn the importance of looking both ways before crossing, but we parents tend to confuse inconvenience for danger. A good rule of thumb is to ask yourself this: “If my child screws this up, will it cost more than \$20 to fix, hurt more than a scraped knee, or take longer than an hour to clean up?” (Adjust according to your financial/emotional/time budget.)

### *Practice Defensive Parenting*

Remove sources of conflict before conflict arises and both parent and child will be much happier. In our case, that meant moving valuables up high, getting rid of lots of sharp stuff, and plastering the bottom 3 feet of our walls with butcher paper. Our son gets to draw on the walls without, you know, ruining our walls.

We also got duplicates of things we couldn’t replace or remove. He has his own books, his own pens, his own wallet. That way he doesn’t go around “borrowing” ours all the time.

### *Ask For Help*

Kids want to help. By doing everything for them, we infantilize them and lull them into a state of dependency. It’s great, as a parent, to feel needed, but it’s also exhausting.

Free yourself. Ask for help washing dishes. Ask for help cracking eggs. Ask for help moving the furniture.

As they get older, ask for help with things that are just at or above their developmental level. It challenges them and it gives them a powerful sense of belonging. Remember the first time your parents let you park the car? Remember how exhilarating that felt? That’s how a 3-year-old feels when you ask them to help you sweep

the floor. Give them that gift as often as you can. You'll be surprised how much they'll want to help. In the end, treating a kid like a person prevents a parent from needing "discipline" at all.

Punishment, deprivation, praise, criticism, distraction, and a lot of the other things people have recommended don't actually do much to teach your child good behavior. More often than not, they teach children to be retributive, praise-seeking, or distracted.

Ultimately, parenting is not about control. Kids aren't irrational beasts out to deprive you of patience and silence. They're little people in need of understanding and a helping hand. And when they get what they need they're usually pretty spectacular.

It takes practice and time to change your habits, but after a couple of months you'll be amazed at how self-policing your kid is. Good luck.

## **On Torture: The Truth That Lies Within (Excerpt) *Arthur Silber***

*Children who become too aware of things are punished for it and internalize the coercion to such an extent that as adults they give up the search for awareness. But because some people cannot renounce this search in spite of coercion, there is justifiable hope that regardless of the ever-increasing application of technology to the field of psychological knowledge, Kafka's vision of the penal colony with its efficient scientifically-minded persecutors and their passive victims is valid only for certain areas of our life and perhaps not forever. For the human soul is virtually indestructible, and its ability to rise from the ashes remains as long as the body draws breath. — Alice Miller, For Your Own Good*

I have read extensively in my life, and Alice Miller is the most profoundly courageous writer in the world today to my knowledge. She writes unflinchingly and with a gaze that never turns away from what it perceives, no matter how horrifying it may be. Miller describes the untold cruelties that are inflicted on the most innocent and defenseless of victims — infants and very young children. Almost all of us accept these cruelties to one degree or another. I am not speaking only of the obvious cruelties, of corporal punishment and similar barbarities — although we should never forget that the great majority of parents believe that spanking is sometimes necessary. I will begin to trace the connections here at the outset: just as Charles Krauthammer maintains that we are "morally compelled" to utilize torture in rare circumstances in the name of our own sur-