Spoiled Rich Kids

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In a 1989 article in the medical journal *Pediatrics*, Bruce McIntosh introduces the term "spoiled child syndrome," with the explicit aim of repurposing an insult into a piece of technical medical terminology. He says that a "failure to teach the growing child age-appropriate limits" produces a child who is "self-centered and immature, unable to delay gratification or to tolerate not having his or her way." Such a child sees all her wants as needs, and reacts to unmet needs by way of a display of outrage (the temper tantrum). McIntosh notes that hardships such as divorce, family strife and mental disorders (on the part of either child or parent) make such behavior more likely; subsequent research has shown, by way of both parental self-reports and clinical observation of emotional and behavioral problems, that children with cancer tend disproportionately to meet McIntosh's criteria.

Thirty years on, it is fair to say that McIntosh's project to reform popular usage was a failure: we are accustomed to seeing the words "spoiled" and "child" accompanied not by "cancer" or "mentally ill" or "divorce" but rather by "rich." Whereas McIntosh's paper covers infants and toddlers, our disinclination to apply the label to such young children—they have time to recover!—suggests that we are looking to blame rather than diagnose. Our minds gravitate towards the teen who crashes her parents' sports car and is awarded another one; towards the dissipated life of the trust fund kid; towards parents who bribe officials to secure their children unmerited college acceptance. We use "spoiled" not as a medical term but as a slur expressing contempt at someone ruined by privilege; our go-to cases are those in which a feeling of special entitlement can be traced to extreme wealth.

It seems, therefore, that it falls to the ethicist, rather than the pediatrician, to theorize spoilage.

In our imagination, the opposite of being spoiled—rich, entitled and overindulged—is being poor, oppressed and overworked. The philosopher Bertrand Russell puzzled over the fact that we seem to see such people, the downtrodden, as especially good—he called this the "Superior Virtue of the Oppressed":

> "If it were indeed the case that bad nourishment, little education, lack of air and sunshine, unhealthy housing conditions, and overwork produce better people than are produced by good nourishment, open air, adequate education and housing, and a reasonable amount of leisure, the whole case for economic reconstruction would collapse, and we could rejoice that such a large percentage of the population enjoys the conditions that make for virtue. But obvious as this argument is, many Socialist and Communist intellectuals consider it *de rigueur* to pretend to find the proletariat more amiable than other people, while professing a desire to abolish the conditions which, according to them, alone produce good human beings."

Russell's description exhibits his usual brilliance and panache, but his essay falls short when it comes time to solve the puzzle. He suggests, somewhat offhand, that

ascribing virtue to the oppressed could be a means of justifying continued oppression. But in that case those most exercised about economic injustice would in fact be its strongest proponents, and, whatever else one wants to say about socialist and communist intellectuals, that charge rings false. Furthermore, Russell's analysis leaves unexplained why the continuation of oppression would be so attractive to the many, many people, not all of them socialist and communist intellectuals, inclined to valorize the poor and vilify the rich.

Is it just a given that there is a human impulse to try to oppress those below oneself and to experience the very existence of those above oneself as oppressive? Are human beings basically cruel, amoral and avaricious animals? I think we should resist the explanatory shortcut of misanthropy and cynicism, lest we become as spiteful and petty as the humans we so describe. Iris Murdoch said, "Man is the creature who makes pictures of himself and then comes to resemble the picture."

My alternative proposal is not a picture but a formula: I call it "the normative equation." I'll introduce it by way of a thought experiment. Suppose that you have lived in an apartment building for many years, and it has always taken you about five minutes to find parking in the attached lot. If one day the lot is all parked up and it takes twenty minutes to find a spot, you are likely to get annoyed. Custom produces normative expectations: just as years of parental indulgence have taught the spoiled child that her needs ought to be satisfied immediately, years of parking experience have taught you that your need for a spot "ought" to be satisfied after five minutes.

Now let's add a few of your neighbors into this thought-experiment: **R**(ich man) has a plum reserved spot right outside his apartment; **P**(oor man) cannot park in the lot, and this means a lengthy, daily search for street parking. If **R** is incensed that someone has briefly paused in his spot, that will strike you as a "spoiled" reaction, whereas you have empathy for—and might even feel a bit guilty in relation to—**P**'s parking plight. Your reactions to **R** and **P** can be explained by the fact that you have set the "price" of finding a parking spot at five minutes. You use this normative equation to conclude that anyone who expects to wait less than five minutes wrongfully expects to underpay; whereas a longer wait should be construed as wrongful, forcible subjection to overpayment.

If **R** gets his comeuppance and loses his spot, that brings you pleasure; if **P** receives that very spot, it brings you even greater pleasure. Neither of these events directly benefits you, but they seem to vindicate your normative equation: If **R** is being punished for underpayment, and **P** rewarded for overpayment, then *the price really is five minutes.*

If you doubt this analysis, consider why the uneven distribution between you, **R** and **P** bugs you enough to call for rectification. Randomization is, after all, one way of achieving a fair distribution. You might say, "resources such as parking spots should be distributed for reasons," but what kinds of "reasons" are you thinking of? I haven't told you enough to suggest that any other distribution might be more efficient. Your point is not pragmatic, it's moral. Your hackles are raised by the injustice of...what? The fact that parking spots should in some way be earned. That is the normative equation.

We are committed to the idea that there should be some price or other, and that that price be a set, fixed, real fact about the way the world is organized. The spoiled demand for unearned satisfaction stands as a threat to that commitment. When it's a child of divorce, or one with cancer, we calculate their suffering into the equation as payment; that tempers our outrage. By contrast, when the Spoiled Rich Kid attends college merely in order to party, her wastefulness of the educational opportunity strikes us a direct affront to the normative equation. Resources, opportunities or potentialities are placeholders for the future goods they stand to earn us; spoilage renders one blind to such normative promissory notes.

Maturity means gradually accepting a larger and larger gap between desire and satisfaction; taking on more and more of the work required to bridge that gap; learning to see opportunities and resources for what they are. When parents succeed in "teaching the child age-appropriate limits," this is often a matter of *not just giving them what they want but making them earn it.* Your child acquires the concept of "earn" when you teach them the normative equation. It is not surprising, then, that by the time they are adults, well-brought up people care deeply about this equation.

The pressure to bring down the rich and raise up the poor comes neither from the selfishness of envy nor from the selflessness of true egalitarianism, but rather from an instinct to protect the status of the normative equation. The normative order they have inscribed into the world is more precious to most people than any narrowly selfish pursuit of self-interest. It is a sign of being a grownup that one wants not happiness but *earned* happiness; that one has not only biological but also normative needs; that one situates the satisfaction of one's desire in a world-order; that one rejects a world-disorder as unlivable.

Our world-order is fragile, because the status of the normative equation is constantly called into question—and not only when inegalitarian distributions of wealth rub our noses in exceptions. The deeper source of fragility emerges when we stop looking around us and look ahead of us. The work we do to earn our happiness will, if it succeeds, improve the lot of man in just the way Russell describes: better education, more air and sunshine, healthier housing conditions, a reasonable amount of leisure, etc. We work to change the normative equation to allow our children to work for their happiness under more favorable terms.

As far back as Hesiod, such changes in the normative equation have made younger generations appear coddled to older ones. You improve the equation for others by holding it fixed for yourself, so you cannot help but assess them by the wrong standard. If you've earned your happiness, it appears to you that the new "spoiled" crop of youngsters can't possibly be earning theirs. Your philanthropic legacy necessarily outstrips your understanding of your fellow man, and so there is an obscurity at the heart of progress.

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