

Sony first - music?

Everyday Morality III: Vicious Circles of Deviance

1. Lighting the Chalice for Talcott Parsons (1902-1979), the pre-eminent sociological theorist of his generation. He usually tried to appear as a value free scientist, but much of his work can be seen as moral philosophy.

2. Joys and Sorrows

3. A Story for Children
(Children leave for RE classes)

4. Reading from Talcott Parsons. He was notorious for his abstract and difficult style, but I find much of his work a pleasure to read. In the following excerpt the two characters in the dyad are labelled "ego" and "alter," and it works better than something more concrete, like Dick and Jane, or something more abstract, like A and B, and there is the hint that the characters are I and you, or you and I.

Shel Silverstein
5. Song: "In My Merry Oldsmobile"

6. I asked you to come today prepared to tell about your experiences in being taught how to drive a car, or teaching others. My sociological interest in this goes back almost 40 years. Soon after I married Lois I taught her how to drive; it was the most stressful episode of our marriage to date, and among the most stressful ever.

Let me call on Doleta first, since I know she can keep it short and has both negative and positive stories.

5. Ambivalent Sentiments and Vicious Circles of Deviation

Driving instruction is a situation in which participants are likely to experience ambivalence. The student, the child, wife, or younger sibling, is "in the driver's seat," more than metaphorically in a position of power. And the teacher, the parent, husband, or older sibling, is not.

The goal of the activity is to make someone who has been dependent more independent, when it is likely that both teacher and student have a sentimental investment in the latter's dependency.

The situation is one in which the teacher can claim a moral right to express alarm, to expressing concern that the actions of the student are exposing both of them, and the teacher's care, to danger.

Hence vicious circles are likely. The student makes an error, and the teacher expresses criticism. The student becomes increasingly anxious and, because of that, increasingly likely to make errors. When additional errors occur, the teacher becomes increasingly critical and aggressive. Then the student becomes more anxious, and so forth.

Among people I know, the attempted instruction often fails. If the student does learn how to drive, it is after he or she goes to a professional instructor. Professionals are more likely to be successful ---- and, I think, not because of their technical skill, but because they are less ambivalent in the situation.

I think what happens in driving instruction is likely to occur in other situations where a person tries to teach another member of his family a complex skill. For example, I think most music teachers don't go much beyond the very basics with their own children in teaching them music, and even school teachers don't go about systematically teaching their children to read. I know that some Prairie people have been quite successful in teaching their children school subjects; I have some ideas about how they do it, and perhaps on some other occasion they can tell us how they do it. But I think there is a basic role conflict between being a parent and being a teacher, centering around dependency and independency, and success means getting around that.

Driving instruction and other teaching in the family are situations that often induce ambivalent feelings in participants. But I would argue that the ambivalence is more than situational, that it is inevitably present in intense interpersonal sentiments --- I would argue that **all intense interpersonal sentiments are ambivalent**, having positive and negative components. It is perfectly normal for elements of love and hate to coexist in a person's sentimental relations with others.

I think this is perfectly obvious in the relations infants and children have with other members of their families. One doesn't have to agree with Sigmund Freud's theories to recognize that he was correct on this point. Sibling rivalry is very common and often very obvious. Usually the elder sibling comes to love the new rival, but some hostility is likely to remain. One doesn't need to accept the specifically sexual aspects of Freud's ideas about the Oedipus complex to recognize that children can feel very hostile to parents while simultaneously loving them. Parents can be, and have to be, very frustrating to their children. But it works the other way around as well. While children can be delightful, they are also the cause of lots and lots of labor and lots of frustration. This too is expressed in the Oedipus myth, which starts off with Laius trying to kill his son.

And ambivalence is also normally present in intense erotic love relationships. Love means commitment, and commitment can mean a loss of freedom; it has opportunity costs, and there are costs in submitting to the power of another, there are risks entailed in these kinds of commitments.

6. The ambivalence involved with erotic love is often expressed in drama and poetry. It is expressed in the sonnets of William Shakespeare. I think those are among the finest sets of poems in the English language. (Like many of the finest forms of art, they are likely to be neglected on the grounds that we are all too familiar with them. But how many of you have read any of Shakespeare's sonnets in the past 5 years? 10 years?)

So today I asked Barbara to read three of them for us. (Numbers 35, 94, and 147 --- xxxv, xciv, cxlvii.) Note the expressions of ambivalence.

7. Given this ambivalence, vicious circles of deviance are a common occurrence in everyday life. Thus, in the supermarket one can see it with mothers and infants. The infant is tired and frustrated, perhaps because he isn't given the sweets he wants, and starts whimpering. This offends the mother, partly because it is embarrassing to have an infant make a scene in public. So she may tell the infant to keep quiet, something like "If you don't stop whimpering, I'll give

you something to really cry about." This makes the infant even more anxious and tearful.

Since deviant behavior can take different forms, there can be different types of vicious circles. The mother-infant case is one of aggression and overdependency, the infant's overdependency stimulating the mother's aggressiveness and vice versa. Another kind of vicious circle involves aggression in both parties. Another form of deviance is withdrawal, so one can find vicious circles of aggression and withdrawal, or of overdependency and withdrawal.

8. However, most of us learn to cope with these potential vicious circles, to nip them in the bud before they go too far. (Talcott Parsons learned about this when he studied psychoanalysis around 1940. Psychoanalysts are likely to be quite self-conscious about dealing with ambivalence in their relations with patients. Parsons observed that ordinary people could behave in similar ways.) To avoid vicious circles:

First, make sure that your social support of the other is very clear. Even if your infant acts disgracefully, or your teenager threatens to wreck the car, you are not going to pull out of the relationship. Expressions of support reduce the anxiety that can drive vicious circles.

Second, be permissive, within limits. Recognize that the other is under strain and don't insist that the other strictly conform to ordinary rules. Sometimes permissiveness takes institutionalized forms: if you successfully claim to be sick, you can be exempted from your ordinary chores. Being a child gives you the right to be foolish on occasion. And there are some kinds of tension release ceremonies, like Hallowe'en or office Christmas parties.

Third, refuse to reciprocate the deviation of the other party. Given ambivalence, people sometimes seek an excuse to become aggressive or overdependent. Don't give them the excuse.

Fourth, use rewards and punishments to get the other to be reasonable without being unduly threatening.

9. We also have problems in dealing with unwanted ambivalence. Sometimes this is when we find ourselves partly loving someone we should be hostile to, like Shakespeare and the dark lady of the sonnets. More commonly we have the unwanted feelings of hostility to people we should love, parents, children, sibling, spouses.

We can deny the existence of the unwanted feelings, repress them. It is common to see people idealizing their parents, failing to see obvious faults in them; cognitive distortions are very common in interpersonal perceptions. The repressed material finds ways of getting expressed, however, in the various ways Freud identified, slips of the tongues, dreams, and of course the kind of over-reaction to the other's errors that give rise to vicious circles. errors that give rise to vicious circles.

There are ways of becoming aware of these unwanted sentiments in a non-threatening fashion. Humor is one way: children like Shel Silverstein's poems because he does make it possible to deal consciously with anxiety provoking things like sibling rivalry.

Children's stories of a more serious sort can accomplish the same. Those wicked stepmothers in the stories of the Brothers Grimm make it possible to deal with the real mother who seems to be wicked. Drama can have the same functions for adults, and has from Aeschylus Oedipus Rex, to Shakespeare, to Tennessee Williams.

10. And what about religion in this respect? Religions have often fed on guilt. I don't think this is the most important source of the religious impulse, but it is clearly present. Think, for example, of the central myth of Christianity --- the killing of the father god figure, to be followed by some kind of atonement. *

My own feeling is that religion is too costly a way of dealing with interpersonal guilt --- it ends up creating more guilt than it resolves, and it does so in a way that leads to a loss of human freedom. We Unitarian-Universalists can recognize the good elements of many religions without being taken in by them. So most of us really like hymns like Amazing Grace, and we do not just because of the music, the wonderful harmonies. The words are meaningful to us too. But, I suggest, they are meaningful in much the same way as the poetry of Shel Silverstein.

* And eating him! Christians all over the world are doing that this morning