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Caring for the Child's Soul in the Late Modern Maelstrom

Zechariah Mickel
GCAS College Dublin/Wipf and Stock Publishers
mickelzechariah@gmail.com

Abstract: *This article employs the tools of phenomenological description to provide an account of the parent-child relation as it appears in the late modern context. Drawing especially from the work of the philosophers Jean-Luc Marion and Emmanuel Levinas, I aim to describe both (1) what we might call the child's soul and (2) the parent's responsibility for the child's soul as it appears within the constraints and violences of human finitude. The soul here is figured as the (partial) visibility of some invisible excess which speaks in the child's face, and which issues for the parent a call to attention and responsibility. From there, I move into a consideration of the call of the child's soul as it manifests in the late modern world, paying special attention to some of the key barriers the parent experiences in this sociohistorical milieu as he tries to respond to his child's call. I consider here the phenomenological critique of modernity in the work of Michel Henry before trying to complement his critique with my own. Important for me is the manner in which speed and consumption come to dominate the human person's life in the late modern world, and how these together create a maelstrom in which the parent's attentional and ascetical capacities are greatly diminished, thereby muting in some sense the call of the child's soul. I argue, therefore, that the responsible parent today must cultivate within himself and within the home environment a way of living otherwise than the way of the maelstrom, in short, a manner of existence which bears those now-strange fruits of patient contemplation and self-restraint so as to let the child's call resound and to equip the parent for a fuller responsiveness.*

Keywords: *Parenthood; Childhood; Soul; Modernity; Responsibility; Phenomenology*

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1. Facing the Child's Soul

We begin with the question of the child's soul, and what this idea of soul might mean in the post-religious and now post-secular context we find ourselves in. It might strike some as rather odd to even speak of such a thing as the soul today. What I mean here by soul is not necessarily in keeping with the kind of traditional doctrines of soul one finds in, say, Platonism or Christianity. That is not to diminish the legitimacy of such traditional notions of the soul in any way, only to say that this way of thinking the soul is not what I undertake here. What I aim to do here instead is to think the child's soul according to the existential heft of her life as a human person. The term serves here less a religious function and more an experiential function common perhaps to all human persons. This is the idea of the child's soul as the parent's experience of the finality of the child's life, the fundamental importance of this child, the weight of glory which her eyes speak to me as parent[1]. It is something akin to what Emmanuel Levinas means by "the face" and Jean-Luc Marion "the icon". The maneuver at hand, thus, is to *face the child's soul*, as it were, that is, to think the child's soul according to the phenomena which emerge for the parent as he gazes upon his child's face.

The next question we must ask, then, is what this might mean today, to *face* the child's soul. What gives us any right, after all, to speak of a "soul" in a world which no longer seems to believe in such things? And yet even the most atheistic reduction cannot erase the sublimity we sometimes experience as we look into the endless recesses of another's eyes. Some excess in the child's face, when we "have eyes to see", reaches us and affects us. Facing the child's soul, then, may mean something like attending to the child with a certain contemplative posture. This task requires a patient attention and an openness to the excess that may unfold for us as we gaze upon the child's face. Inversely, facing the child's soul would also entail thinking the child's soul precisely *through* her face. In other words, that the child's face *speaks* her soul to me in some way. The face here provides an access point to some infinite we encounter most poignantly when the face comes to us as an experience of the sublime, in whatever measure. (It may be only the slightest hint of sublimity, or it may totally consume us). As Levinas would say, the face serves in this way as a point of dilation opening onto some infinite.

Marion's rich concept of the "saturated phenomenon" proves most helpful in our consideration of the child's face. Indeed, the face, or what he sometimes calls the "icon", is one of Marion's five saturated

[1] I borrow the terms *finality* and *importance* from Henry Bugbee and *the weight of glory* from C. S. Lewis. See Henry Bugbee, *The Inward Morning: A Philosophical Exploration in Journal Form* (Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Press, 1999), and Clive Staples Lewis, *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses* (New York: HarperOne, 2001).

phenomena, all of which he outlines within the pages of his *In Excess* (and elsewhere, we should note). The notion of the saturated phenomenon is one that, to my knowledge, Marion himself developed as a way to describe that which eludes the conceptual. These are the phenomena in which, "to the contrary of poor and common phenomena, intuition gives (itself) in exceeding what the concept (signification, intentionality, aim, and so on) can foresee of it and show"[2]. We might think of these saturated phenomena as being particularly rich in meaning, indeed as opening up a superabundance of meanings that can never be closed down or upon which the lid can never be shut. Marion will at times also speak of these saturated phenomena as "paradoxes". By this he simply means that they "do not give themselves in a univocal display, available and mastered, according to a doxa"[3], but rather that they give themselves in a surplus of meanings which we interpret, however inadequately, via an "endless hermeneutic". As we will see later, the child's face opens up just such an endless hermeneutic.

The child's face may in fact appear to us more readily as such a saturated phenomenon than any adult's face would. Some mysterious quality in the child's face always renders her soul unguardedly, without any layer of guile blocking its manifestation. The child cannot help but bare her soul in her eyes. Even when the child is shy, her eyes somehow speak to us unguardedly. She seems somehow unable to turn off, so to speak, this glimmer of transparency which issues from her eyes. Her face is always uncovered, coming forth as an exposure of her soul which she at no time chose to expose. This quality of the child's face, its guileless exposedness, bears a special capacity for affecting the onlooker, the one who sees the child's face. The adult is more prone to feel affected, reached somehow, by the face of a child than that of another adult. My wife and I have sometimes commented to each other how, before having children, so few people would say hello to us or stop to converse with us when we walked through the park near our house. But now that we have a child, it is remarkable to watch how many people will smile at our daughter, wave and say hello to her, stop to tell her how beautiful she is, etc. Something about the child's face draws us in in a special way. There is some excess here that speaks to us and moves us. It calls most of all for our attention.

There is, in fact, something of a sacramental character, or an iconicity, to the child's face. The child's face reveals some invisible mystery, bringing this invisible mystery into visibility, to the extent that it can. Marion will often speak in the pages of *In Excess* of the visible both concealing and revealing an invisibility, or what Marion is wont to call, using his native French tongue, "*l'invu*" (the unseen). The

[2] Jean-Luc Marion, *In Excess: Studies of Saturated Phenomena*, trans. Robyn Horner and Vincent Berraud (New York: Fordham University Press, 2004), 112.
[3] Ibid., 112.

invisible here takes on the stature, we might say, of the visible, precisely in order to give itself as visible. In Marion's words: "The invisible only breaks forth into day *constrained to finitude* – crowned with an invisible by default, *l'invu*"[4]. The saturated phenomenon of the child's face hides to some extent the invisible, its great excess, even as its visible manifestation paradoxically gestures towards just this invisible beyond concept, this insurmountable and uncapturable excess. This is why we choose to speak of the child's face as revealing a *mystery*, for what it reveals is beyond the capacities of our comprehension. This mystery, this excess, overflows all conceptual containment. Thus, it reveals in the mode of the icon, which is perhaps just to say that the child's face bears a truly religious significance, that it gestures towards an image of humanity beyond all concepts.

The face for Marion (and Levinas) shows itself always as a gesture towards excess, towards the eternal. The face therefore opens up what Marion calls an "endless hermeneutic" which follows from the infinity of meanings flowing from said face. In the words of Marion, "It [the icon] must be allowed, then, to overflow with many meanings, an infinity of meanings, each equally legitimate and rigorous, without managing either to unify them or to organize them"[5]. The visible face of the child, then, both conceals and reveals an invisible always overflowing endlessly with meaning, an overflow which can never be scooped up and contained, bottled back up, or managed. And yet the paradox here is that the child's face also at the same time gives an infinity of meanings even precisely *within its finitude*. The changes wrought by the events it undergoes make the child's face always different, always new, never the same twice. Here opens what we might call the infinity of the face's finitude, which arrives parallel to the infinity qua infinity the face conceals (and reveals). The child's face gives itself anew with each moment, each look, showing the surplus of its finitude.

It is clear, then, that the icon of the child's face bears a richness far beyond what any concept could contain. This very richness is indeed what makes the other's face both unobjectifiable and unmasterable for Marion. "I cannot have vision of these [saturated] phenomena", he writes, "because I cannot constitute them starting from a univocal meaning, and even less produce them as objects"[6]. Simply put, I cannot make the child's face into an object. It is perhaps possible to think the child's face as object, to schematize it as such, but to do so is to enact a kind of violence upon the thing itself, the face which gives itself, and which gives itself all the more as I bracket its objectification all the more. To make the icon into an object, or even to think it as a "univocal display" is to already think it, as we

[4] Ibid., 105, emphasis mine.
[5] Ibid., 112.
[6] Ibid., 113.

quoted earlier, as "available and mastered, according to a *doxa*"[7]. But the child's face gives far beyond objectivity, gives in some way even infinity, gives what I can never master, what I can never schematize or rationalize. In fact, as Levinas constantly reminds us, it is actually the other's face itself which is my master in the scenario of the face-to-face. I do not determine the child's face, but rather the child's face determines me.

It remains unclear, though, what exactly this unmasterable excess is. If we are not careful, we run the risk here of a great philosophical imprecision and perhaps of a too-romantic description of the child's face. John Milbank, for instance, has critiqued Marion's work for always lapsing into a rather "blank sublimity"[8] under the banner of the "saturated phenomenon". We may have even given the impression in this article of waxing poetic about the iconicity of the child's face without first exercising the philosophical rigor necessary for truly thinking this face. We should also ask, though: does the vagueness of this sublimity make it any less real? Does its indeterminate nature mean that it bears no existential veracity? It is, after all, the overwhelming potency of the child's look, her eyes, which makes the child's face so hard to pin down under any univocal or metaphysical precision.

And yet this face of the child calls for evermore description. It is indeed an endless hermeneutic. Most simply, we can describe the child's face as both concealing and revealing a *mystery*, and we can furthermore say that this mystery is best described as the child's *soul*. What my daughter's face shows is the mystery of her soul, an incomprehensible mystery which nonetheless always speaks to me and always sounds a new word, or better, sings a new note. From her face bursts forth the unending song of her soul. Something here gives off some scent of the divine, some thoroughgoing goodness which can never be effaced nor lost. This mystery flows forth from the child's face in the form of nothing less than the visibility of an unsurpassable invisible, the incarnation of her soul in the impenetrable depths of her pupils. This phenomenon of the invisible made visible (in some small part) eludes the objectivity of definition, which would only be a useless effort to contain the uncontainable depths of that complex creature called the human person. The force of this phenomenon breaks through and thus breaks down any consideration of the child on the level of objecthood, along with any description of the child conducted at a purely material or biological level. Scientific objectivity, quite simply, cannot touch this

[7] Ibid., 112.
[8] Milbank used this phrase in reference to Marion during an interview I conducted with him for Wipf and Stock Publishers' *The Theology Mill* podcast. See "Luminaries / John Milbank / Metaphysics and Radical(ized) Orthodoxy", *The Theology Mill*, October 31, 2023, https://wipfandstock.com/blog/2023/10/31/luminaries-john-milbank-metaphysics-and-radicalized-orthodoxy/.

phenomenon of which we speak. It lacks more than anything the spiritual resources to do so, the kind of vision which the child's soul calls for.

At this point, though, we must not fall into the trap of simply chalking the child's soul up to a mystery and leaving it at that. Phenomenology gifts us with the task of describing such sublimities, if only in an exploratory manner and always with a view towards respecting the ultimate unknowability of such a mystery as the soul. We must ask, then, what we mean to say when we use a phrase like "the child's soul". What are we trying to describe when we use this word *soul*, particularly when we use it in relation to the child and the deepest reaches of her interiority?

In response to such a question, there are three important facets I would wish to draw out here. The first and second are (1) the soul as the largeness of a singular human spirit, its immeasurable excess, and (2) the soul's unwavering dynamism. We could even be so bold as to liken the child's soul to a massive underwater cave. There are depths there which one cannot easily access and which prove impossible to map with any precision. We might imagine the child's soul as this kind of cave which is only dimly lit, a phenomenon that is darker as it is deeper. Its cracks and crevices, its topographical details, ever changing with the ocean's persistent movement, do not make for ready mapping; indeed, one may discover some of these details are more or less impossible to find. And whatever pieces the parent finds in this cavernous soul, he must leave intact. These pieces, after all, do not belong to him; they are not something he can break off and take with him. There is a mineness about the constitution of the child's soul which stipulates that it can only ever belong to the child herself. This not only in an ethical sense, but in the sense of the impossibility of the parent ever reaching the other side of the child's soul so as to take up residence there where only the child herself can truly reside, a place over which she is sovereign and within which the parent is constitutionally unable, as a finite and singular human being, to make a home. What we have in the soul, then, is a site of inaccessible depths with unclaimable (and sometimes unreachable) wonders.

This image of the deep underwater cave speaks to both the *enormity* and the *dynamism* of the child's soul. This cave simply penetrates too deep beneath the waters and is too large in scope for, say, a scuba diver, to explore and log all its makeup. Moreover, the diver will discover with each new dive that, though he or she is still seeing the same cave, it has a new look about it. The ocean's unending movement has changed the face of the cave since the last dive, and will continue to perpetually alter the way the cave appears to the onlooker. And apart from all change, the onlooker will only ever be able to view this cavernous terrain from one angle at a time. Roughly speaking, we can think of the soul of the

child as something like this, a phenomenon which arrives for the parent in certain moments of peak sensitivity as something powerful and hyper-real and thus as an overfullness which he welcomes with whatever stores of love he can muster. But due to the enormity of the child's soul, no number of the parent's gazes can ever come close to covering the full breadth and depth of this plenitudinous and dynamic terrain.

The third element we should consider here is the parent's sense of the child soul as something in constant endangerment. This phenomenon that is the child's soul, though displaying glimpses of its enormity and always shifty in its appearance, seems to appear most clearly to the parent when it shows its position within human *precarity*, that it always exists within the human situation of risk of danger and death. In its moments of greatest thrownness into finitudinal fragility, its preciousness is somehow made more real for the parent. It is an excess beyond all epistemic capture, and yet the parent only ever knows this excess as something given over to human and thus finitudinal conditions, in some way passive with respect to the violences of time and event. This soul of the child shows itself most brilliantly when it is in harm's way – which it always is, but at certain times much more obviously than at others. What is perhaps most heartbreaking for the parent about the situation of the child's soul, though, is that the parent can never adequately secure it nor make it safe. It is in fact an impossible task to protect the child's soul from all harm, and for the parent to undertake such a task would only cause the child's soul a different kind of harm anyhow, that of disrespecting or defacing the child's freedom.

So we see, by way of introduction, that the child's soul, as I am thinking of it on these pages, is marked first by its *enormity*, its *dynamism*, and its *situatedness within human precarity*. This now gives us a first pass at analyzing the phenomenon of the child's soul, some at least tentative holds to grab onto as we explore deep and mysterious underwaters. What follows will, I hope, continue to unfurl this phenomenon which I have already begun to describe, though of course never sufficiently, in the face of a soul which is at bottom bottomless, an impenetrable mystery. (But to linger and to describe is an act of love! – or at least a loving attempt to love all the way down to the bone, a perhaps impossible task but a good and necessary one.)

This also brings us to a first start at describing the nature of the *call* that the child's soul speaks, the demands it makes on the parent. These demands consist first of all in the cultivation of a kind of vision, a manner of seeing, or better, to borrow again from Marion, a manner of "envisaging" the face of the child. Vision here is first and foremost a mode of attention, what we might think of as a kind of contemplative mode of attention before the mystery of the child's soul. It is the parent's manner of

approaching the child in all her mystery in a mode of respect and wonder. Here again Marion's descriptive efforts are most helpful:

> [I]ts phenomenality [that is, the face's] is accomplished when it is made heard (understood), when the weight of its glory weighs upon me, when it inspires respect. *To respect* – to attract sight and attention (-*spectare*), of course – but because I feel myself called and held at a distance by the weight of an invisible look, by its silent appeal. *To respect* is also understood as the counter-concept of *to look at*[9].

So, the first facet of the child's call is the injunction to attend, and to attend with respect and wonder. It is this call to attention which comprises a constitutive feature of parental responsibility, and it is a call to attend without end, to follow the child with my attention in her passage through time. My responsibility here meets her finitude, the many contingencies which will make up her life, so many of which I have little to no control over. Her soul's call to me is that I never leave her, no matter what events or conditions may come, that I never turn my back nor leave her all alone to face the sheer force of the events which will in some measure determine her life.

2. The Child's Finitude

The parent's "facing of the child's soul", of course, can only be of a soul as appearing within the confines of finitude. If the invisible is made visible, it can only do so according to the world in which the visible manifests itself, that is, according to a world which relentlessly inflicts change upon all that is visible. As citizen in this world of the visible, the child is endlessly subject to change, placed in some respect at the mercy of the event's great force. Here I am following Claude Romano's excellent exposition of the event in his *Event and World*, in which he speaks of the event as something which happens *to* me and before which I am largely passive. In a way, the event re-worlds me by unsettling and reconfiguring my options, or my possibilities, within the world. It inflicts a violence of sorts in my life, "completely upending my essential possibilities articulated among themselves in a world and so upsetting my own adventure"[10]. This *evential violence* which is a constitutive feature of time thus fundamentally alters my experience of myself in the world, and my experience of the future that lies before me. I am forced in this way to "advene", as Romano puts it, to this reconfiguration, to accept

[9] Marion, *In Excess*, 119, emphases original.
[10] Claude Romano, *Event and World*, trans. Shane Mackinlay (New York: Fordham University Press, 2009), 29.

and adapt to this new reality the event unfurls. I absorb the event's blunt force, and it irreparably changes me and my world. Now I am the "advenant"[11], the one who comes to terms with the wake the event leaves behind in my world. In short, the event recasts everything, sparing none. The event thereby reveals the radical contingency which marks my relationship with time.

Childhood is in a special way the era of the event's greatest impact. The child's guileless exposedness, of which we spoke already, leaves her particularly vulnerable to the event's blunt force, for good and for ill. She stands completely unarmored in the direct path of the event, having no resources at her disposal to soften its impact. There is consequently a unique plasticity to the child, who absorbs the event with little to no buffer. Not only is the child particularly vulnerable to the event's power; she is also more likely than the adult to be made new by the event, to have her world and her very sense of self recast in the event's wake. This is in part why the events of childhood can be so determinative for the rest of life. The child is in the process of world-construction, discerning her relation to the world, developing an "attachment style", as the psychotherapists say. The events which make up a childhood produce the child's world and give it meaning. These events are the foundation for the world the child will live within and build upon into her adulthood. The child learns from the event and adapts herself to it, *advenes* to it, reconsidering the fundamental questions which determine her sense of self and her (childlike) relation to the world: is the world safe or dangerous, are others trustworthy or untrustworthy, am I a good or a bad person, etc.?

The parent can likewise have a sensitive relationship to the events which appear in his child's life, most especially to those we might call *events of suffering* or even *traumatic events*. Here the parent is tasked first with triage and then, if the traumatic impact is severe enough, with aftercare. Even the smaller traumas of everyday life – falling over and scratching a knee, missing mom and dad at bedtime, experiencing digestive pains, etc. – can upend the young child for a moment or a day or a string of days. For the parent these smaller traumas can rend the heart, too, particularly as they seem to pile up on each other in frequent occurrences over time. It is hard to watch a young child suffer, especially one's own. And of course there are the larger traumas which every responsible parent most fears will visit his child: a serious illness, abuse at the hands of some other, or simply the pileup of smaller related traumas which together accrue a great evential force (as in the case of chronic bouts with bullying at school, for instance). Equally torturous for the parent is the fear that one's own neuroses will accumulate in such a way as to unintentionally deliver a decisive evential blow to the child and

[11] Ibid., 29.

configure her world accordingly. Regardless of the details, however, the parent is inescapably confronted with the reality of suffering and trauma in his child's life, so much of which he cannot prevent from occurring, much as he might like to substitute himself and stand in for his child in those moments.

Why do events like these affect us as adults with such force when a child is involved, though? What is it about the child that renders me as a parent so affectable? To answer this question, we must turn again to our consideration of the child's face, this time with Levinas rather than Marion, however. For his part, Levinas often speaks of the face in quite vivid images of existential vulnerability and neediness. He writes, for instance: "The disclosing of a face is nudity, non-form, abandon of the self, ageing, dying, *more naked than nudity*"[12]. To envisage the other's face is for Levinas to witness its givenness to suffering and death, to face unfiltered the piercing reality of the other's vulnerability before the evential violences of time. The other's eyes speak, as it were, this vulnerability in a special way, and so Levinas will also talk of "the total nudity of his [the other's] *defenceless eyes*… the nudity of the absolute openness [to suffering and death]"[13]. And as I argued earlier, the child is especially exposed to such violences of time. The answer to our question, then, is that the child renders me as her parent uniquely affectable first and foremost because of her great vulnerability. This vulnerability, I would argue, is the reason why crimes against children particularly upset us and provoke a certain protective spirit within us. It is also why the parent may fear to turn away from his child and leave her alone, whether at home or in a public space.

Indeed, this refusal to turn away is for Levinas the very foundation of responsibility for the other. As I explicated in the first section above, the other's face, which speaks her soul, issues a call for attention of a certain kind, attention in a contemplative key, in a posture of wonder and respect. This call takes on a new urgency when the other's face shows its essential finitude (as it always necessarily does, the invisible showing itself in the visibility of finitude). The finitude I meet in the other's face doubles my responsorial task; I am called not only to attention, but to responsibility as well. This responsibility takes on the form first of *staying with* the other, of refusing to turn my back on the other or to get away. It is "an appeal one cannot elude", an assignation from which one "cannot slip away", a call "which cannot be declined"[14]. Responsibility for the other is therefore "an obedience [to the other's call] where

[12] Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being, or, Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1998), 88, emphasis mine.
[13] Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 199, emphasis mine.
[14] Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 53.

there is no desertion"[15]. Thus the parent is often inclined to say to his child the words "I will never leave you". As a parent, I must attend *and* I must respond, and I respond first of all by *continuing* to attend, by attending without end. The parent in this way finds himself unable, certainly unwilling, to turn away from his child in all her existential vulnerability. He wishes rather to stay with her as she makes her adventure, her passage through the events that will fundamentally shape her and her relation to the world.

As my child's face shows to me her vulnerability and as I take up the parental responsibility of staying with her, this twofold task of attention and responsibility becomes identificatory for me as parent. In some sense, the vulnerability of the child's face chooses the parent, who thus becomes "*the chosen or required one*"[16], the one assigned the task of responsibility for this child's existential need. The assignation of responsibility, and the taking up of such responsibility, accomplishes within the parent a new vocation and identity, as he becomes no longer simply an "I-for-itself" but an "I-for-the-other". Levinas says as much: "The for-oneself of identity is now no longer for itself. The identity of the same in the ego comes to it despite itself from the outside, as an election or an inspiration, in the form of the uniqueness of someone assigned. The subject is for another; its own being turns into for another"[17]. *Affected* by the child's subjection to the evential violence of time and *staying with* the child in a posture of attention and responsibility, I as parent become someone new. I am no longer first and foremost the man who enjoys such and such things, but rather the man who has learned – or at least, who is currently learning – how to starve my appetites for enjoyment in order to care for another whose overwhelming need overtakes and greatly diminishes these self-referential appetites. In response to the call of the child's face, with all its neediness, the parent arrives with a "Here I am!" and thereby discovers in this response a new "I", the "I-for-the-other".

Responsibility is thus opposed in some way to the complacency of the self's enjoyment, for Levinas. Enjoyment marks in Levinas's thought our fundamental relationship to the world, what we live from and for. We are always following on the heels of some moment of enjoyment and seeking the next one. "We live from 'good soup'", he says, "air, light, spectacles, work, ideas, sleep, etc… objects of enjoyment, presenting themselves to 'taste', already adorned, embellished"[18]. Important to note here is that the self enjoys in a state of *independence*, and that what it enjoys exists for it on the level of an *object*. In layman's terms, this simply means that enjoyment consists of a self-oriented pleasure

[15] Ibid., 52.
[16] Ibid., 56.
[17] Ibid., 52.
[18] Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 110.

experienced in relationship to things which are pleasing to the self. Such enjoyment need not be thought of as morally bankrupt in itself, even for the parent; all we are saying here is that the child's face interrupts and relativizes the parent's prior baseline mode of enjoyment. The parent no longer operates primarily in the mode of being which is enjoyment, which the child's call has muffled and made secondary, but now lives first of all in a new mode of being as affected by the child's face and which we can properly call responsibility. Parental responsibility thus institutes a new and different relationship with enjoyment which includes most of all a greater measure of *asceticism*, a diminishment of enjoyment's urgency and importance for me, the parent.

The diminishment we speak of here is first passively received before any commitment on the parent's part but then also subsequently chosen and enacted with great commitment by the responsible parent. My child's call drowns out the noise of my own desires. Her vulnerability imposes a *quieting* of the appetitive demands which voice within myself for my own enjoyment. Enjoyment thus undergoes a quieting within me, a diminishment, or a marginalization. The child's face is the light which reveals my own enjoyment to have been rather unimportant all along, and especially now, when the only proper response to the light of the child's face is a breaking off from enjoyment in order to devote my full attention to this face which calls for my response. As parent, I now see that the task of responsibility requires an undivided attention, an attention which is not scattered nor spread thin by the endless flickering of desire here and there and everywhere. My newfound vocation thus prompts me to take up a more ascetical relationship to my own appetites. "To give", then, "to-be-for-another, despite oneself, but in interrupting the for-oneself, is to take the bread out of one's own mouth, to nourish the hunger of another with one's own fasting", "giving the very bread I eat"[19]. Of course, the parent can choose to eat his own bread. He can go on with his own enjoyment. But he can no longer do so without the pangs of his conscience's cries; to remain complacent in his own enjoyment is now and forevermore to be deaf to his child's call, even to *reject* his child's call.

3. Late Modernity's Muting of the Child's Call

At this point we must also ask what influence the sociohistorical environment has on the manner in which the child's soul appears to us today, and on how the parent conceives of the response most

[19] Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 56, 72.

proper to the call of the child's soul. In short, we must ask what these phenomena mean in modernity, most especially in our own milieu of late modernity. First, though, I would like to consider one particularly incisive phenomenological critique of modernity, that of Michel Henry, who speaks especially to the role of scientific objectivity in modernity's disintegration. From there, we will move into a more existential consideration of modernity, exploring the psychic conditions the parent and child live within in the context of the late modern world and the ways these conditions shape the parent and child in important and oftentimes destructive ways. We will consider here in particular some of the barriers to parental responsibility which have arisen in the context of late modernity. In doing so, it will become apparent how certain features of late modern life coalesce to *mute the call of the child's soul* by stripping the parent of the *attentional* and *ascetical* capacities which are required for the task of parental responsibility.

There are of course more than a handful of interesting and important phenomenological critiques of modernity, but one that floats to the surface as especially incisive is that of Michel Henry, too little known in Anglophone scholarship to date. For his part, Henry will often label the horizons of modernity as those of the *world*, following the New Testament usage of the word but always with an eye towards the particularly modern iteration of a kind of enclosure within the confines of the atheistic reduction most moderns live under, perhaps even those practicing some religion or other. Higher than this world, though, which Henry never tires of associating with the scientific worldview, is another horizon which Henry devotes most of his career to delineating: the horizon of *life*. This other horizon is divine in nature and thus marks a theological maneuver of sorts, one in keeping with the descriptions of "Life" in the Prologue to the apostle John's Gospel. "Life" here refers both to *L*ife (Christ as principle and force of creation) and to *l*ife (the many incarnations of Christ's creation, particularly human persons). For Henry, then, there is always a kind of dialectical tension, even opposition, between these horizons, or what we might call forces, of world on the one hand and life on the other. Therefore, he is always situating his critique of the world enclosure in contrastive juxtaposition to an exploration of the life force which creates, sustains, and pulses through everything and everyone.

What Henry means by *life*, however, is in no way straightforward. As is so typical of the continental philosophy of which Henry is a part, he never sets down in print a precise definition of the term. Always he is gesturing towards its meaning from a different angle, dancing around this thing he calls life, using words to try to evoke that which we cannot comprehend nor command. He often uses other terms in concert with his explorations of life, words like *Arch-intelligibility*, *auto-affection*,

transcendental affectivity, and *flesh*. Leaving aside for now a detailed exposition of these terms, we must note the primary importance of what Henry sometimes calls *Absolute Life*. For Henry, the human person can only find life first within one's own internal landscape, a life of the self which exists "in, by, and from" Absolute Life (that is, Christ)[20]. This human life within divine Life is far more certain for Henry than the world, but is distinct from it by its invisibility[21]. Life does not show up for us in visibility, but is rather a feeling of oneself in the experience of oneself, an auto-affection. Within the flesh – much as Merleau-Ponty conceptualized it – within the self's feeling of itself, one finds the capacity for receiving Life, for recognizing the ground of its own life in the Life of God, "vivified by God"[22]. Though far from describing the exact same phenomenon, we can tentatively note a rough similarity between what Henry means by *life* and what I have meant here by *soul*. The key distinction would be that Henry's *life* speaks to an experience of oneself, whereas my use of *soul* means to describe one's experience of the other. Both, however, are sensitive to the affective experience of human interiority, and to the presence of God as the ground and force of such an affective encounter with human interiority.

Coming back to Henry, though, we should ask how this experience of life, as he takes up the term, is distinct from the experience of the world. To this question, Henry's critique of modernity is most important. Henry sees modernity as enveloping us within a world which not only closes down the possibility of life's reception, but which also actually *defaces* or *profanes* this very life. "With respect to life", he writes, "it [modernity] is an issue of profanation"[23]. Modernity thus marks an era in which society has both *stepped on – trampled* would be a better word, perhaps – and *sidelined* life itself. Life is no longer treasured nor important, not even a bygone illusion because it is not even recognized as that which may have once existed as a psychic reality or psychic option. We are no longer even aware that this is or was a spiritually legitimate option for anyone; any religiosity must of course have been merely empty gesture, a repressive form of coping with the great epistemic uncertainty we all face, a way of managing or controlling one's own suffering and mortality, perhaps. "If life is [thus] diminished and obscured", says Henry, "if it is no longer the organizing principle of a society and of each one's life within it, the principle of each of its activities, then the time of nihilism has come"[24]. This is the heart of Henry's critique of modernity, that it has lost life by slowly suffocating life's voice, and that it has

[20] Michel Henry, *Incarnation*: *A Philosophy of Flesh*, trans. Karl Hefty (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2015), 85.
[21] Ibid., 92.
[22] Henry here quotes Irenaeus. Ibid., 133.
[23] Ibid., 219.
[24] Ibid., 219.

done this – wittingly or not – under the regime of scientific certainty, under the thumb of science's drive for objectivity.

Central to Henry's criticism of the modern view of things is what he sees as its idolization of objectivity as a mode of knowledge. He writes, for instance: "*[I]t is a general presupposition of modern knowledge that comes into play*, which takes objectivity as the site of reality, and the knowledge of this reality as the one and only mode of actual knowledge"[25]. Two important features of modernity are at work in this statement of Henry's. First, the modern attachment to pure objectivity, to objectivity as the sole "site of reality", closes down any other sites of reality which may exist outside the confines of objecthood. What room is there, then, for any consideration of Marion's "saturated phenomena", those phenomena which seem to paradoxically cloak some invisible excess within their visibility – phenomena like the event, the work of art, the flesh, *the child's face*? Second, there is an existentially felt fallout to the reign of objectivity – namely, again, the nihilistic profanation of life. The human person now sees itself and other persons according to objecthood, as merely objects. But even within this milieu of objectivity, humanity cannot erase its drive for the infinite, and so it will try to produce new conditions for some experience of excess within the walls of its atheistic world. Thus follows all manner of self-abasement: "violence, indignity, infamy, ignominy… , prostitution"[26].

We can say with some certainty, then, that the reign of objectivity in the modern world comes to bear on the parent-child relationship in ways far too numerous to enumerate here. One particularly salient example, however, is the issue of abortion, surely an act of violence and a destruction of life, we can all admit, whether we fall on the pro-choice or the pro-life side of the aisle[27]. The much-knotted and difficult discussions around when the fetus could be considered a human being, and when, if ever, it is okay to kill this life-form, to "abort" this life springing into being, all seem to miss the very violence of such rhetoric in regards to the unborn child. (Yes, there are exceptions, of course, and yes, sometimes violence is required.) It is remarkable, however, to witness the manner in which some pro-choice politicians, activists, and yes, even (especially?) scientists deploy the language of scientific objectivity in order to allow the parent to shirk responsibility for this life growing inside the womb. Scientific objectivity, it seems, would render the very most vulnerable among us – the unborn – face-less, soul-less, even life-less, a mere "clump of cells". The responsible parent, however, has no thought for

[25] Ibid., 222.
[26] Ibid., 194.
[27] Another example which deserves patient exploration is how scientific objectivity plays out in the medicalization of childhood, particularly with an eye towards the proliferation of behavioral and psychological diagnoses and of their increasingly pharmaceutical treatment.

measuring the bounds of his responsibility for the life of his child, for his care for her through all the vulnerabilities she faces and will face. There is no beginning nor end to the child's call nor to my response as parent, precisely because the call and the response speak the voice of some sublime immemorial and unhoped-for, as Jean-Louis Chrétien would put it, some infinity which knows no measures.

It is clear, then, that Henry performs an important and nuanced criticism of the modern age, in his own way. Certainly, too, the issue of objectification comes to bear on the parent-child relationship in significant ways, one of which we have explored above. Still, I think it would be much more accurate to conceive of modernity's toxins as a complex matrix with objectivity as but one important ingredient among the many at work in said matrix. Perhaps more existentially immediate to the task of parental responsibility is a consideration of the distinctly modern shaping of human desire and its relationship to the human person's experience of his own (and others') limitations and mortality. On these fronts, we find modernity, particularly *late* modernity, presenting ways of life which are perhaps just as toxic as objective reductionism. Indeed, we find forces here which are deadening to the vitality that otherwise brilliantly shines forth in the relationship between parent and child, forces that block the parent's receptivity to the overfullness that is the child's soul.

To Henry's incisive critiques of modernity, I will add my own, then[28]. Not at all as a corrective to Henry's account but as a way of beginning to round out our understanding of modernity's effects on our most intimate relationships. I will argue here what I have already alluded to (here and there) above: that late modernity is characterized by, first, a *neurotic relationship with time*, and second, a *disordered appetition*, or what I will call an *appetitional overload*. Both of these, in my view, operate in a mode of burnout[29], as Byung-Chul Han has labeled it, or a frenzied state of activity and acquisition that perpetuates and intensifies a baseline anxiety verging on panic. This is life in the shitstorm[30], to borrow another of Han's terms, life in the chaotic maelstrom of an unrestrained activity and appetite. It knows no self-discipline, no genuine sacrifice for the other except that which is forced on us and to which we reluctantly accommodate. The maelstrom's incessant noise sounds, then, in both the external world and in the interior world. Or rather, it is an external noisiness to which we become so accustomed that it takes up residence interiorly. Perhaps in some sense our acclimation to such an external cacophony requires, or at least begs for, an interior which absorbs and recapitulates the maelstrom in and for

[28] Though I am surely not the first to voice these particular concerns, and the others who have voiced them before me have likely done so more forcefully than I could.
[29] See Byung-Chul Han, *The Burnout Society*, trans. Erik Butler (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2015).
[30] See Byung-Chul Han, *In the Swarm: Digital Prospects*, trans. Erik Butler (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2017).

oneself. This noise, though, as we will see, drowns out the much gentler sound of the child's call, the sound of her soul, and militates against the parent's cultivation of the kind of patient attention and readiness for sacrifice which the child's soul calls for.

If we want to adopt Levinas's pejorative use of the term "enjoyment", then we could say that two of the primary manifestations of enjoyment in the modern world are those of *speed* and *consumption*. These speak to the above-mentioned neurotic relationship with time and appetitional overload, respectively. The dominance of speed and consumption in our lives overloads our time and attention to such an extent that we in some sense bathe in a continuous stream of enjoyment, moving without break from one enjoyment to the next, enslaved to the constancy of the accelerative and appetitive thrill. In many cases, there was never a point at which we chose to live in such a way; rather, it in some measure *happened to us*, or better, we adapted without even realizing we were doing so. Again, the external maelstrom interiorized itself within each of us, often slowly, bit by bit, until we found ourselves needing it, craving more of the shitstorm. We thus find ourselves living in an environment in which our enculturation develops in us habits which are conducive for enjoyment but injurious for our abilities to attend and to respond with continued attention (to stay with). We are habituated, in other words, to speed and consumption, having lost in some measure the capacity to live otherwise, even though we can remember that we once did indeed live otherwise, before the maelstrom spread within our person like some kind of sickness and came over time to transform us into creatures with an altogether different mode of being in the world. In this mode of being, *speed* measures both the maximal volume of activity which the modern person undertakes as well as the maximal pace at which the modern person performs said activity. Productivity and efficiency are the key indicators of success here. And for its part, *consumption* is likewise a measure of success in a special way for modern persons, but in this case it is a matter of the acquisition and possession of goods, whether material or immaterial. Quantity and quality of goods figure here as marks of status to both oneself and to others.

This sickness of the self, wrought by the interiorization of the shitstorm, never seems to reign entirely uncontended, however. The good dies hard, it would seem. In short, we can still hear the call of the other's soul even in the cacophonous maelstrom of enjoyment in which we live. The manifestation of ethical intersubjectivity still speaks to us in such a way, with a certain potency, that it often succeeds even in today's unfavorable conditions at interrupting the flow of enjoyment. Indeed, the call to intersubjective attention and responsibility appears to be one of the few remaining forces which can contend with the maelstrom's sheer power. Still, as parents in the late modern world, we experience the

call of the child's soul and our immersion in the maelstrom as cross-pressured, borrowing Charles Taylor's term here. The parent hears the call not as a clear voice in the quiet, but as calling out at variable decibels from among all the din of late modern life. It is not a call out in the open, so to speak, but a call piercing through a dense fog. The sociocultural conditions of late modernity work together to mute the child's call, and so the parent – in a special way today – finds he must perform a kenotic movement, emptying himself of late modernity's many temptations to speed and consumption, in order to attend and respond to his child faithfully. He has to find some way to quiet the noise, to cultivate enough quiet within himself to hear the call of the child's soul. But in our day he is working against considerable odds in this effort, which requires what we might think of as a certain spiritual maturity and thus a mode of being in the world which is distinct from modernity's vain insatiability, even if this spiritual maturity is always necessarily and inevitably intermingled with the maelstrom that is the milieu in which the parent lives and which has in some measure inscribed itself in his very person.

We have elaborated in some detail on the place of attention and asceticism in the task of parental responsibility. What I want to say now is that late modernity's maelstrom negates these, and more specifically, that *speed wears down our attentional capacities*, on the one hand, and that *(hyper)consumption erodes our ascetical abilities*, on the other. First, let us consider the issue of speed, as it relates to the attention required for the parental vocation. It is no secret that we live in an age that idolizes speed. We are immersed in an era that wants everything as quick as humanly possible, whether in the form of food, a book ordered online, or an email reply. Moreover, in America especially, and particularly for those wishing to be upwardly mobile, our "work lives" are defined by an always insatiable need for greater speed, for increased efficiency and productivity. (Note, for instance, that artificial intelligence seems to be taking off most forcefully in the workplace, where it is marketed as a tool for quicker and easier results, thus freeing up more time for, well, more work.)

For all its benefits – and there are many, to be sure! – the undeniable problem with speed is that it bars the necessary space and silence for reflection. It fills our lives with noise, to come back to our earlier metaphor. By barring the kind of stillness conducive to a certain attention that is placid in quality, speed breaks down the existential depth and the contemplative presence which help so much to hear the call of the child's face, the call of her soul. As a parent, too much speed in my life spreads my attentional energies thin, so while I might be doing all the things a responsible parent is supposed to do – going to my child's sporting events, teaching her how to calm herself down when she is emotionally elevated, tucking her back into bed when she wakes up from a nightmare, etc. – it may be the case that I am

performing these tasks with only the most feeble and bare minimum of attention required. In short, I can do all the right things as a parent without ever really noticing my child's soul which speaks to me in her eyes, or without ever appreciating this child's face with that utmost wonder and respect it deserves. Speed has this way, it turns out, of sapping our attentional strength such that we live in large part on a kind of attentional autopilot, so to speak, always on to the next item.

Consumption as a mode of being then further undercuts the kinds of capabilities the child's soul calls for. More to the point, the hyper-consumption to which we are all accustomed in the late modern West has a deteriorating effect on the parent's ascetical capacities. In fact, consumption invades and thus further corrupts our already-depleted attention. It does so by slowly seducing us into a now-customary *consumptive mode of attention*. This form of attention is entirely alien to that more patient and contemplative type of which we have spoken so much in these pages. It is a greedy and consuming attention, a fixation always on the next fix, as it were. It leaves us always on the hunt for some novelty to enjoy, some news item or Twitter trend, a development in our favorite sports league or a new episode of our favorite show on Netflix, an exciting career opportunity or our next tropical vacation. In this mode of being, this manner of existence in the maelstrom, we find ourselves living always for the next titillation. Indeed, we find ourselves in need of that next auto-erotic fix, addicted to our enjoyment, turned in on ourselves and bathing in our own desire. Levinas is most incisive in his consideration of this kind of enjoyment:

> Here lies the permanent truth of hedonist moralities: to not seek behind the satisfaction of need, an order relative to which alone satisfaction would acquire a value; to take satisfaction, which is the very meaning of pleasure, as a term… In enjoyment, I am absolutely for myself. Egoist without reference to the Other. Not against the Other, not 'as for me…' – but entirely deaf to the Other, outside of all communication and all refusal to communicate – without ears, like a hungry stomach[31].

This, indeed, is precisely what I mean when I talk about *the consumptive mode of attention*. Existing in its whirlpool, the parent knows not how to break free from his appetitive overload. His incapacity to hem in all the noise of his desires, to cultivate appetitive quiet in his interior life, spreads his attention thin all the more, again leaving him with only the feeblest of attention to offer his child. He learns to be responsive to his child's need in a rather inattentive sort of way, without stilling himself for the fuller task of kneeling down and noticing the child's soul, and then responding to it with the proper wonder

[31] Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 134.

and respect which can only come from a close proximity to the sacredness of her face, from taking the care to envisage the surplus in her eyes.

For Levinas it would seem that enjoyment has a necessarily negative moral status. But we should ask: does the experience of enjoyment qua enjoyment always, in every case, feature this deafness to the other's call, or should we speak rather of this deafness as a perversion of a more original enjoyment that is morally positive, or at least neutral? What should we make, for instance, of the experience of enjoying another, or even of enjoying the task of sacrifice for the other, enjoying the vocation of responsibility? The responsible parent knows well the enjoyment that can well up from an act of patient attention with his child, or of meeting his child's need, which may sometimes meet the parent as an experience of sublime communion with his child. Enjoyment in itself does not seem to be the problem, then, but rather an overindulgent enjoyment that is wholly self-absorbed and self-interested. It is this kind of enjoyment, a perversion we could say, that endangers the parent-child relationship, or at the very least seriously stunts the parent's hearing of the child's call and his readiness for response. What parents today most lack is the spiritual skillset of attention and asceticism which would equip them to be better able to *relativize* their own enjoyment so as to be more available and responsible for their children. Speed and consumption, however, late modernity's capital forms of enjoyment, tend to spoil the parent's (good and original) appetitive nature as geared towards enjoyment on another level, that is, as enjoyment *of the other* and of life *for the other*.

In the end, it might be better to speak of this enjoyment-on-another-level not as *enjoyment*, which rightly has all the Levinasian connotations of self-absorption and self-interest, but instead as a manifestation of *joy*. This joy is that spiritual and sacrificial enjoyment beyond enjoyment, or enjoyment beyond self-enjoyment, and is borne of a vocation for attention and responsibility. The life founded on these is in large measure one which has a joyous moodal hue. In this mode of being, the parent delights in his child, in the environment of the home, and in all the small (and sometimes big) ways he gets to provide care for his child. Pope Francis's *Amoris Laetitia* is particularly illuminating on this point:

> 'Through their union in love, the couple experiences the beauty of fatherhood and motherhood, and shares plans, trials, expectations and concerns; they learn care for one another and mutual forgiveness. In this love, they celebrate their happy moments and support each other in the difficult passages of their life together.… The beauty of this mutual, gratuitous gift, the joy which comes from a life that is born and the loving care of all family members – from toddlers

> to seniors – are just a few of the fruits which make the response to the vocation of the family unique and irreplaceable,' both for the Church and for society as a whole[32].

We see here an image of family life which is saturated with the kind of joy that can only come from an immersion in the many textures of familial responsibility, sharing "plans, trials, expectations and concerns", learning "care for one another and mutual forgiveness". This is no late modern's individualistic dream we are talking about here. In fact, to put the matter bluntly, we see that late modernity, with all its cult of objectivity and technicization and all its worship of speed and consumption, has slowly and steadily worked to exterminate precisely this kind of life together, this manner of living for the other. It is no mystery why we notice so many young people in my generation repulsed by the idea of settling down with a spouse and starting a family. There is too much work involved in this way of life, too much inconvenience, too much sacrifice of my own self-enjoyment, too much compromise on all my dreams and aspirations for myself.

And yet we have to ask: what spiritual maturity and what fullness of joy are lost in such an aversion to a life of responsibility for others? The answer, it seems, is precisely the capacity for patient and sustained attention and for thoroughgoing responsibility for others, not to mention the opportunity for a life with and for others which is saturated with a joy beyond self-enjoyment. As a culture, therefore, our call today is to cultivate within ourselves and within our homes a way of living otherwise than the way of the maelstrom, a manner of existence which bears those now-strange fruits of patient contemplation and self-restraint. Only thus can we recover a fuller experience of what it means to give oneself to and for the child and to find in this self-gift a communion with the child which far surpasses any of the enjoyments of modernity's maelstrom. What we need, in short, is a fresh expression of what one might call a prayerful life, or a prayerful mode of living. If, as a society, we want to attend to the souls of children as they deserve, we need to open ourselves again to the experience of astonishment, to remember what it is like to live unshielded, available for all the moments when wonder begs to strike. It is a prayerful patience down on one's knees, a contemplation which alone quiets all the internal and external noise enough for us to see the saturation beyond saturation which is the child and her soul, pure gift.

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[32] Pope Francis, *Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation Amoris Laetitia* (Vatican City, LEV, 2016), §88, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20160319_amoris-laetitia.html. Francis here is quoting *Relatio Finalis*, the "final report" of the synod of bishops in 2015 on "the vocation and mission of the family in the church and in the modern world", which can be located online at https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/synod/documents/rc_synod_doc_20151026_relazione-finale-xiv-assemblea_en.html.

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