

## THE EXAMINED LIFE

him half. She has learned to say—and to feel—that, for hating her parent, she has “no cause, no cause.”

Being grown-up is a way of no longer being a child, hence a way of relating to one's parents, not just by acting as their parent but by stopping needing or expecting them to act as yours; and this includes stopping expecting the world to be a symbolic parent, too. The task of trying now to get something from the world that symbolically represents our parents' adequate love is an impossible one. What is possible is to find a *substitute* for that love, something else that performs some of the same or analogous functions for us now as adults. The difference between a substitute for something, and that which must be it symbolically, is intricate and complex. Yet growing up and reaching maturity depends upon mastering that difference and turning, however wistfully, toward a substitute fit for an adult. You may then discover how very loving your parents had been, after all.

Bequeathing something to others is an expression of caring about them, and it intensifies those bonds. It also marks, and perhaps sometimes creates, an extended identity. The receivers—children, grandchildren, friends, or whoever—need not have earned what they receive. Although to some extent they may have earned the continuing affection of the bequeather, it is the donor who has earned the right to mark and serve her relational bonds by bequeathal.

Yet bequests that are received sometimes then are passed on for generations to persons unknown to the original earner and donor, producing continuing inequalities of wealth and position. Their receiving is no expression or outgrowth of *her* intimate bonds. If it seems appropriate for her to pass on what she has earned to those she cherishes and chooses, we are far less certain it is appropriate when these others do the same. The resulting inequalities seem unfair.

One possible solution would be to restructure an institution of inheritance so that taxes will subtract from the possessions people can bequeath the value of what they themselves have received through bequests. People then could leave to others only the amount they themselves have added to (the amount of) their own inheritance. Someone could bequeath to anyone she chose—mate, children, grandchildren, friends, etc. (We might add the further limitation

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that these all be existing people—or gestating ones—to whom there already can be actual ties and relations.) However, those who receive will not similarly be allowed to pass *that* on, although they will be able to pass on to whomever they choose what they themselves have earned and added. An inheritance could not cascade down the generations.

The simple subtraction rule does not perfectly disentangle what the next generation has managed itself to contribute—inheriting wealth may make it easier to amass more—but it is a serviceable rule of thumb.\* To allow a person to make many bequests, yet limit these to one passing which cannot then be repeated or iterated, respects the importance and reality of bonds of caring, affection, and identification, without limiting these to one generation—grandchildren may be given to directly—but does not get extended to include the husk of continued inheritance without the personal substance.

One may ask, if the concern is for the reality and value of personal bonds, why shouldn't an inheritor be allowed to pass that inheritance on too, without first having his estate diminished by what he had inherited? After all, a person who has inherited certainly may have bonds to his own children, friends, and mate as strong as those had by the person who bequeathed the wealth to him. However, many philosophers—Hegel, for one—have commented on the ways in which property earned or created is an expression of the self and a component of it, so that one's identity or personality can become imbued or extended in such a creation. When the original creator or earner passes something on, a considerable portion of his self participates in and constitutes this act, far more so than when a non-earner passes on something he has received but not created. If property is a bundle of rights to something (to consume, alter, transfer, spend, and bequeath it) then in bequest not all of these rights

\* To determine what amount is first to be subtracted in tax, the monetary value of what one had received in inheritance would be calculated in contemporaneous dollars, corrected for inflation or deflation but not including actual or imputed interest earned. Placing an inheritance in a position to earn interest does count, I think, as an earning that may be passed on, after the amount of the original bequest is subtracted from the total. Harder questions are these: Would certain sorts or amounts of gifts be included also? How would the proposal avoid providing an incentive for squandering to those whose wealth near the end of their lives is not far above the amount taxes would subtract?

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get transferred, and in particular the right to bequeath that item does not—this adheres to the original earner or creator.

In order to bar an exceedingly wealthy individual from enriching his complete lineal descent, we can add as a further specification to the institution of inheritance that a designated individual recipient must already exist. This further restriction might be objectionable even when the first is not. Consider the following objection, suggested to me by David Nozick. Mightn't a dying childless man donate sperm to a sperm bank and legitimately want to leave an inheritance to whatever future child or children of his might result? And if we permit this case, wouldn't we want to allow a person who leaves money directly to existing grandchildren also to make provision to leave it to whatever grandchildren will be born only years after he dies? Is there some principled way to allow these yet to block the extended concerns creators of wealth might have for the continuing wealth and power of their family through many generations? (I do not think this last evidences any actual relational tie of a weight that need be catered to.) Perhaps the following weaker restriction will suffice: A person may not bequeath to two unborn persons who are in different generations of descent from some last already existing node of a family tree. The first condition continues to hold, of course: Subtracted from the estate someone is able to bequeath will be the amount that person has inherited himself.

Notice that the power to bequeath may also bring a power to dominate, through the threat, explicit or implicit, *not* to bequeath if the potential receivers do not behave to one's satisfaction. We might conjecture that it is this power and continuing control that many wealthy people care about, rather than the ability to enhance and express the bonds of personal relations, and that their compliant children or associates would have been better off without any institution of inheritance at all.

Wealthy people devote their time to amassing money and spending it; they are able to pass this money on to their children. How may the rest of us leave what we have been concerned with? I have spent time thinking about things, reading, talking to people and listening to them, learning some subjects, traveling, looking. I too would like to leave to my children what I have amassed—some knowledge and understanding. It is pleasing to imagine a pill that would encapsulate

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a person's knowledge and could be given to his children. But then wouldn't the wealthy manage to purchase this too for their own? Perhaps bearers of scientific knowledge and research skills could develop a procedure to transmit adult knowledge that depended upon the recipient's neurons genetically overlapping the donor's; only those sharing half the donor's genes could be at the receiving end. (Unfortunately, this would not serve adoptive children.) Children would not thereby become clones of their parents—they would absorb and utilize and build upon this knowledge in their own ways, just as they do with books. How a society might be transformed over generations if this were possible is a theme for science fiction.

*This scheme is undesirable, of course. With the truly worthwhile things we all start roughly evenly—I have written elsewhere that we all are immigrants to the world of thought. It would be oppressive if inequalities of understanding and knowledge were to pile up over generations. And given the ways in which some knowledge builds and depends upon other, it does not make any sense to contemplate a system analogous to the one we suggested for material wealth, whereby someone would pass on whatever knowledge he himself had gained, first subtracting that passed on to him. In any case, with truly worthwhile things such as knowledge and understanding—and curiosity and energy, kindness, love, and enthusiasm—we do not want to hoard these for ourselves or our own children only. What we can transmit directly, though, is a prizing of what is worthwhile, and an example.*