

THE BOXER

Why is it that we are so inevitably drawn to re-create that which we most fear?

To understand that, let us look at the parable of a boxer named Simon.

As a child, Simon is subjected to physical abuse. He is slapped, pushed, punched and beaten.

Since he is a child, he is helpless to resist these attacks. How, then, can he survive them?

Well, since clearly he cannot master his environment, or those who are abusing him, that leaves only one choice for poor Simon.

Simon must master *himself*.

He cannot master his attackers – or their attacks – he can only master his *reaction* to their attacks.

He has no control over the external world – he can only have control over his *internal world*.

All children take pleasure in exercising increasing levels of control over their environment. If control over their *external* environment is impossible, however, they have no choice but to start exercising increasing control over their *internal* environment: their thoughts and feelings.

This is all quite logical, and something that we would all wish for, as the best way to survive an impossible situation.

If we cannot get rid of the *source* of our pain, what we most desire is to get rid of the pain *itself*.

THE RELIEF OF SELF-CONTROL

Thus Simon grows up gaining a sense of efficacy and power *by controlling his own pain, fear and hatred*.

The pleasure that most children get out of mastering external tasks such as tying their shoelaces, catching a ball and learning to skate, Simon gets out of “rising above” and controlling his terrifying emotions.

Can we blame Simon for this? If anaesthetic is readily available, would we want to scream through an appendectomy without it?

When Simon is young, his self-control remains relatively stable. As he gets older, though, his parents slowly begin to reduce the amount of physical abuse they inflict on him. This is particularly true during and after puberty, when he is becoming old enough to tell others about the abuse, and also because his increasing size makes it less and less possible to dominate him physically.

How does Simon *feel* about these decreasing physical attacks?

Two words: *terrified* and *disoriented*.

Simon’s entire sense of power and efficacy – his very *identity* even – has been defined by his ability to master and control his own emotions in the face of terrifying abuse.

In other words, in the absence of abuse, he has no sense of control, efficacy or power.

In addition to being taught all the *wrong* things, Simon has also been taught almost none of the *right* things. He does not know how to negotiate, he does not know how to express his emotions, he has not been taught empathy, he has not been taught sensitivity, he has not been taught win-win interactions – the words that are missing from Simon’s social vocabulary could fill a shelf of dictionaries.

Thus, in the absence of violence, not only does Simon feel powerless – since his sense of “power” arose primarily as the result of his ability to *survive* violence – but he is also increasingly thrust into a world of *voluntarism*, where sophisticated skills of self-expression and negotiation are required for success.

As he enters into his teenage years, for the first time since he was very young Simon feels excruciatingly powerless – and *vulnerable*.

Since *vulnerability* was the original state he was in before he began to repress and control his emotional responses to those around him, he unconsciously feels that he is in enormous danger. (This arises from the

reality that he *was* in enormous danger when he was a child, but he is only now feeling it for the first time.)

The reason that he disowned his emotions in the first place was because he felt fear and hatred in the face of physical attacks. It was the reality of his vulnerability that provoked the self-defence of dissociation and “self-mastery.”

Thus for Simon, vulnerability is always followed by excruciating and self-annihilating attacks.

Having spent years mastering his responses to these attacks, he has not learned how to deal with vulnerability in a positive and self-expressed manner.

As he becomes an adult, however, Simon no longer needs to defend himself against attacks – thus undermining his sense of control – and he also moves faster and faster into a world of voluntary interactions for which he is utterly unprepared.

Simon also unconsciously knows that learning the skills necessary to flourish in this voluntary world – if that is even possible for him anymore – will take years of excruciating labour.

FLEEING THE FUTURE FOR THE PAST...

Simon has access to a drug that can instantly make all of his anxiety go away. This drug can restore his sense of control, eliminate his bottomless terror of voluntary interactions, and place him right back in familiar territory where he feels efficacious, powerful and in control.

That drug, of course, is violence.

Simon finds that when he leaves the world of voluntary interactions and re-enters the world of violence and abuse, his anxiety vanishes. His sense of efficacy and control returns, and he feels mastery over his own world again.

Like an army that does not want to be disbanded, in the absence of external enemies, Simon must create them.

After realizing the relative joy and serenity that he feels after getting involved in physical fights, Simon goes down to his local gym and puts on some boxing gloves.

He finds that he is very good in the ring, because where other people feel fear and caution, he, due to his years of self-mastery, feels power and control. When he is in the ring he does not feel anxious, he does not feel afraid – he does not even feel angry – he simply feels the satisfaction of being in a situation that he can control.

The endorphins released in Simon's system by violence quickly become addictive.

True addiction requires both a highly positive reaction from taking a drug and a highly negative reaction from abstaining from it. For Simon, boxing not only restores his sense of control, but it also eliminates the crippling anxiety he feels in the absence of violence.

Sadly, familiarity breeds content...

This is the psychological story of a boxer, of course, but it can equally apply to criminals, soldiers, policemen, and others drawn to dangerous situations.

Simon was utterly terrified of violence when he was a child, so how can we understand his pursuit of boxing as a career when he becomes an adult?

When we become addicted to controlling our fears, we can no longer live without either control or fear.

Simon became addicted to controlling his responses to abuse – *thus he can no longer function in the absence of abuse.*

Addiction also worsens when every step down the road of repetition makes it that much harder to turn around.

This applies to Simon in many, many terrible ways.

Every time he uses the defences he developed in his childhood, he reinforces the value of violence in his adult life. Every time he avoids the anxiety of voluntary and positive interactions through the use of violence, he takes yet another step away from learning how to negotiate in a positive manner with kind and worthwhile people.

In other words, every time he “uses” the drug of violence, he makes the next “use” of violence that much more likely – and resisting the drug that much harder.

In this way, we can truly understand how a man can be drawn to endlessly repeat that which terrified him the most as a child.

In hopefully less extreme ways, Simon’s story can also help us understand why we are so drawn to repeat that which we fear the most.

Were you rejected as a child? Beware your desire for rejection.

Were you verbally abused as a child? Watch out for verbally abusive people: they will inject you with addictive endorphins.

Were you sexually abused as a child? Watch out for predators: they will tempt you with the self-medication of surviving them.

THE SADIST

The above analogy can help us understand how someone can end up spending his whole life attempting to “master” violence.

However, at least Simon is getting into the ring with an equal. How can we understand a parent who ends up abusing his or her child?

A basic fact of human nature is that it is impossible for anyone to do anything that involves a moral choice without moral justification. George Bush could not invade Iraq without claiming that it was an act of “self-defence,” or “just punishment.” When parents talk about screaming at or hitting their children, they always justify their actions by claiming that, “We have tried everything else and gotten nowhere.” Or, they claim that their exasperated responses are generated by the misbehaviour of their children: “He just doesn’t listen; he doesn’t show us the proper respect,” etc.

It is impossible to imagine a parent standing in front of a mirror and saying: “I am abusing my innocent child.” Any parent capable of making such a statement would have recoiled in horror the first time that he yelled at or struck his child, and sought the necessary help.

Continued abuse requires continual *moral justifications*. In fact, the very worst aspects of the abuse that a child receives are not so much the physical fear and pain, but rather the *moral corruption* of the lies that are told to justify the abuse.

For a child, being beaten is terrible, but being repeatedly told that the beating is a *just response to his "bad" actions* is worse.

So – how could this possibly come about?

CHILD ABUSE

For the sake of this example, let us assume that the parent was abused in her own childhood, as is so often the case.

We will take the example of a mother named Wendy, who ends up verbally abusing her daughter Sally.

Wendy was verbally abused when she was a child. She was told that she was bad, disrespectful, disobedient, ungrateful, selfish and so on.

From Wendy's childhood perspective, her own mother loomed like a titan in her little world. One of the amazing things about the differences in perspective between parent and child is that the parent screams and hits because the parent feels helpless. However, to the child, the parent seems virtually omnipotent.

We can assume that the Christian God destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah because He felt helpless to reform its inhabitants. However, from the standpoint of the city-dwellers burning alive in a sea of flames, God's complaint that He felt helpless would be utterly incomprehensible. If God is all-powerful, as He claims, how can he claim frustrated helplessness as his motivation? If an all-powerful deity cannot reform individuals, how can those individuals, with infinitely *less* power, be expected to reform themselves?

If parents knew how large they loomed in their child's world, they would use a far, far lighter touch in their discipline. When you are around somebody whose hearing is preternaturally sensitive, you only need to whisper; yelling is both unnecessary and abusive.

When Wendy was a child, her mother's verbal abuse was utterly overwhelming. The stress of having someone five times your size, who

has complete and utter power over you, yelling at you, putting you down, denigrating you, or abusing you in some other manner causes a fundamental short-circuit in a child's neurological system. It is the equivalent of taking a man terrified of heights and constantly dangling him out the open door of an airplane. He may "acclimatize" himself to the repetitively awful stimulation, but only through extreme dissociation from his environment, which comes at a terrible personal cost. Victims of repetitive torture undergo the same "out of body" experience wherein they cease to feel, and in many ways cease to live, at least emotionally.

When a child is abused, she experiences her life as a series of fundamentally impossible situations. The capacity to abuse arises out of a lack of bonding, a lack of empathy, an absence of sensitivity towards the feelings of the child.

A child's only security is her *bond* with her parent. Abuse is a deliberate severing of that bond – a "strangling with the umbilical." Abusing a child requires that you eliminate your capacity to empathize with her. If a child perceives that she cannot rely on her bond with her mother – which is to say that her mother's capacity to empathize with her comes and goes at best – then the child feels fundamentally insecure, because positive and empathetic treatment cannot be relied on.

When you are under the total power of someone who can treat you badly whenever she feels like it, you are placed into an impossible situation because that person will inevitably command you to show "respect" and "love" towards her.

If your abusive mother detects that you fear her, for instance, she will generally react with aggression. If at a dinner party your mother raises her hand and you cower in fear and beg her not to hit you, she will get very angry.

Thus you must pretend on the outside the opposite of what you feel on the inside. You must show "love" and/or "respect" despite feeling fear and hatred.

Thus, when Wendy's mother verbally abused her, Wendy could not react with fear or hatred, because that would only increase her mother's attacks. ("I'll give you something to cry about!")

Thus Wendy had to disown and repress her own authentic emotional responses and mimic their exact opposite. All her fear and pain had to be "magically" transformed into "love" and "respect."

This form of the “Stockholm Syndrome” has disastrous effects on a child’s long-term emotional development and integrity. Instead of learning how to interact in a rational manner with reality, the child ends up forced into a situation of eternal hyper-vigilance wherein she constantly scans the behaviour of those around her, endlessly alert for any signs of an impending attack.

If you are driving a car and suddenly notice a number of wasps in the car with you, it will become very hard to concentrate on the road. In addition, imagine that you had to keep driving under increasingly difficult conditions, while the number of buzzing wasps in your car kept multiplying – all the while knowing that you were allergic to wasp venom – this is the endless livid terror of all too many childhoods.

This kind of terrible “split focus” (“I must keep driving / I must not get stung”) empties out the spontaneity and richness of the child’s inner life. Just as we cannot daydream while being pushed out of a plane, we cannot develop an internal discourse with ourselves if we are in a constant state of hyper-vigilance with regards to our surroundings.

If a child in an abusive environment stops scanning for danger, the pain of being attacked is then combined with the shock of surprise, and the inevitable self-flagellation for lowering one’s guard. Daydreaming, or self-conversation, thus becomes a form of “self abuse,” insofar as it increases the risk and agony of being attacked – it becomes as dangerous as a tightrope-walker losing his concentration and risking falling to his death.

This terrible equation – “relaxation = danger” – keeps the child in a constant state of high alert, of hyper-vigilance, and effectively prevents her from ever coming to a true understanding of her situation.

In a nation, a state of war creates the panic, haste and hysteria that prevents people from effectively questioning their government. Just so does hyper-vigilance in childhood prevent children from rationally evaluating their parents’ behaviour.

Thus, with all this in place, when Wendy becomes an adult and gives birth to Sally, an awful series of events is set into motion.

THE CHILD UNAFRAID ...

To understand how parental cruelty comes into being, the first and most important fact to remember is that *children enter this world in an un-abused state*. They are not afraid, they are not hyper-vigilant, they are not twisted, they have not become enemies to themselves or others – they are curious, perceptive, engaged and benevolent.

Remember – as a child, Wendy learned that relaxation was danger. Thus when Sally is born, Sally is fundamentally *relaxed* in a way that Wendy has no conscious memory of.

Since for Wendy relaxation is followed by attack, Sally's relaxation creates great anxiety for her mother, because she associates it with an impending attack. In the same way, if Sally were crawling towards a set of steep stairs, Wendy would feel great anxiety and a compulsion to snatch Sally away from the impending danger – very aggressively if need be.

For Wendy, then, when Sally in all innocence engages in actions that in Wendy's world would have triggered a terrible attack, it reawakens all of the repressed pain, fear and hatred in Wendy's heart. When this occurs again and again, Wendy genuinely feels that Sally is *creating* or *causing* terrible attacks of pain, fear and hatred in her.

Now, the last time that someone else created pain and fear in Wendy, it was her own mother attacking her when she was a child. For Wendy, then, any sudden eruption of pain and fear is associated with a direct attack. Thus for Wendy, Sally's innocent anxiety-provoking behaviour is *the direct emotional equivalent of her parents' abusive attacks*.

Furthermore, the only way that Wendy could create any sense of security and control as a child was to brutally repress her own emotional responses. In other words, "that which causes anxiety must be brutally repressed" is the law of her emotional land.

Now, when Wendy was a child she could not brutally repress her own parents, because that created further attacks – thus she had to brutally repress her *own* anxieties.

The difference with her own child, however, is that she now has the power to repress Sally, which she did not have with her own parents when *she* was a child.

It is in this way that she makes the transformation from victim to abuser.

Since she experiences Sally's actions as attacks upon herself, Wendy feels justified in controlling Sally's behaviour so that these attacks do not occur.

If our child continually kicks us in the shins, we consider it good parenting to prevent this child from acting in such an abusive manner. We must do whatever it takes, we say to ourselves, to prevent our child from hurting others. *What will happen*, we think, *if we allow our child to act in such a horrible manner?* A life of brutality, loneliness and rejection seems inevitable, and we could scarcely call ourselves good parents if we allowed *that* to happen.

Many parents start off with relatively calm and patient lectures, but the absolute of "*thou shalt not*" remains determinedly hovering, in the not-too-distant background.

"It upsets Mommy when you act like that," we may say gently – however, like the initially polite letters from the IRS, a not too subtle threat is always visible between the lines. We talk about "politeness," "niceness" and "consideration for the feelings of others," and so on, but what we are really saying is: "It makes me angry when you make me anxious, so you'd better stop!"

Children, due to their amazingly perceptive natures, find it hard to take these lectures seriously, because they sense the contradiction and narcissism at the root of such speeches. Thus they generally tend to continue to do what comes naturally to them, despite the anxiety that their actions cause other people.

Since the children remain in an un-brutalized state, they do not themselves directly feel the anxiety that their actions provoke in their brutalized parents. In the same way, if I do not have a migraine, playing loud music will bring me pleasure. If I do have a migraine, obviously it will not.

Since children continue to do what comes naturally to them, and since their actions continue to provoke anxiety, pain and rage in their parents, their parents feel a growing sense of helplessness and frustration and an increasing loss of control over their own emotions.

The basic lesson that Wendy learned in her own terrible childhood was that when someone does something that makes you feel bad, the solution is to stop the other person from doing that thing.

Thus, when Sally's actions provoke awful feelings in Wendy, Wendy's inevitable reaction is to prevent Sally from performing those actions, so that Wendy does not have to feel those terrible emotions.

To be a "good" daughter, Sally must stop doing whatever causes Wendy anxiety.

If Sally continues to act in a way that causes her mother anxiety, Wendy will be inevitably driven to the "conclusion" that Sally *wants* to cause her pain – or, at best, is utterly indifferent to the pain that her actions cause.

In this way, Wendy can frame a perception of her daughter that includes the pejoratives "cruel" and "selfish."

Now, the battle lines are truly becoming drawn.

If we say to our child: "Stop doing 'X,' because it makes me feel bad," surely the solution is simply for the child to stop doing 'X,' right?

Sadly, no.

THE ESCALATION...

The true nature of Sally's "offense" towards Wendy is that Sally is *unafraid*.

Remember that in Wendy's childhood, being unafraid always invited attack – or made the inevitable attack even worse. Thus Sally's state of calm or self-possession creates an overwhelming sense of "impending doom" for Wendy.

When Wendy was a child, spontaneous self-expression invited attack. Now that she is a mother, when Sally sits and sings to herself, this causes increasing anxiety in Wendy, and at some point she will express disapproval to Sally.

At this point, perhaps Sally stops singing. However, five minutes later, Sally states that she wants to go for a walk.

In Wendy's world, expressing an open desire always invited attack – thus when Sally says that she wants to go for a walk, Wendy also feels anxiety, and once more snaps at Sally.

As we can imagine, this process can go on and on virtually *ad infinitum*.

There is no end to the escalation of “little rules” that end up snaking around Sally, like an infinity of tiny spider webs that eventually leave her bound and immobile.

However, even if Sally were to obey every single one of her mother's “rules,” she would *still* not be safe.

As Sally becomes more and more inhibited and more and more fearful, Wendy begins to feel guiltier and guiltier. Sadly, Wendy also interprets this as some sort of “manipulative aggression” on Sally's part and so is inevitably drawn to accuse Sally of “playing the victim” *in order to make Wendy feel bad*.

In this way, there is no possibility whatsoever that Sally can ever satisfy her mother.

If Sally acts in a natural, independent manner, she provokes an attack. If she acts in an unnatural, obedient manner, she provokes an attack. Since she can neither be spontaneous nor obedient, neither act nor refrain from acting, there is nothing that she can do to avoid being attacked or criticized in some manner.

THE EVIL AT THE CORE...

The central problem is that Wendy is *attempting to manage her own anxiety by controlling Sally*.

However, since Sally is *not* the actual source of Wendy's anxiety, controlling Sally's behaviour will only temporarily alleviate Wendy's anxiety – while making it worse deep down, since she is acting unjustly and blaming Sally for her own feelings.

CONTROLLING THE BED

To understand this madness more fully, imagine that you are bedridden in a hospital and I am standing by the controls of the bed.

“Can you raise the head of my bed so that I can eat?” you ask.

I push a button, but nothing happens. I push another button and your head goes down.

“No, no!” you cry. “Up, I want my head to come up!”

I push another button, and both your legs and head start to rise, causing you pain.

“Ow! Not that way, just my *head!*”

As you can well imagine, this process will generate an extraordinary amount of frustration and tension in both of us. You would be panicking and yelling at me, and I would be frantically stabbing at the buttons trying to control or reverse whatever motion was giving you such discomfort.

Now imagine further that at some point, we discover that I am actually pressing the controls of a bed in another room, and the reason that your bed is moving “randomly” is that you are in fact sitting on the controls for your own bed, and your shifting around is what is causing the uncomfortable movements.

Clearly, the first thing that you would do is apologize to me for blaming me for your discomfort, and for railing against my “incompetence.”

This is the typical experience of someone who finally understands that using other people to manage his anxiety only makes his anxiety worse, causing him to further attempt to control and manipulate others, when the whole time he is “sitting on the controls” that only *he* can reach.

WHY IS THIS SO IMPORTANT?

The reason that we are spending all this time focusing on how abusive tendencies come about is because it is essential to understand the genesis of the mythologies that separate us from

each other.

When we look at the interaction between Wendy and Sally, we can understand that Wendy's bad behaviour *predated her justifications for that bad behaviour*.

Due to her rejection of her own history, Wendy ended up attacking her daughter.

This shameful action produced a great stress in Wendy, because she wants to be – and believes herself to be – a good, fair and just person.

However, continually snapping at a child, or verbally abusing her in some other manner scarcely sits well with a benevolent and virtuous self-image.

SELF-MYTHOLOGY

When we perform actions that we cannot justify to ourselves, we have one of two choices. We can either recognize that we have a significant moral flaw and go through the painful work of starting to correct it, or we can say that our actions resulted from a significant moral flaw in someone *else*, and go through the far *less* painful work of starting to “correct” the *other* person's flaws.

In other words, if I am angry at you, and I cannot believe that I am unjustly or abusively angry at you – which would be the case if you did nothing to provoke my anger – then I must convince myself that my anger is a *just* response to injustice or abuse from *you*.

As mentioned earlier, this shifting of moral blame is called *projection*, which is a wonderful word on many levels – not only does it connote the shining of an image onto a blank surface, but it also invokes a “movie” metaphor, which includes the artistic fiction that it so often actually represents.

THE CROSSROADS

When Wendy stands over her child, her voice hoarse and her hands shaking, looking down into Sally's bewildered and frightened eyes, it is a moment of truth for her very soul.

If Wendy recognizes that she has just attacked a helpless and dependent child – which can never be justified in any terms – then she can begin to take the necessary and humbling steps of learning how to control her temper and hopefully, over time, win back the trust of her child.

However, the majority of parents feel the terror and vulnerability within their own hearts when looking into the horrified eyes of their children – and then take the terrible step of inventing a fiction wherein the *children* are the perpetrators – and they, the parents, are the *victims*.

Remember, in the religious approach we are always taught to create sinners to blame for our mistakes – and the more immoral our errors, the worse the sinner must be.

“Look what you made me do!” is the brutal and vengeful cry that erupts from the tortured souls of the parents.

*“Only a bad child would turn me into **this!**”*

RELIGION AND MYTHOLOGY

Why is it that we are so invariably drawn to making up self-justifying stories, rather than accepting the truth about our own capacity for doing harm?

Child abuse is just one of the many, many destructive fallouts that result from our addiction to the superstitions of religion.

Religion completely externalizes the moral – and immoral – decisions of mankind. “Virtue” is obedience to the whimsical dictates of a self-contradictory deity, while “vice” is surrender to the whimsical temptations of a self-contradictory devil.

“The devil made me do it,” (often supplemented with “I was weak!”) is a constant cry among the religious – while these cultists often believe that they have the choice to reject temptation, the devil is very strong, and human flesh is invariably weak.

Furthermore, children are not only born un-abused, they are also born fundamentally anti-religious. (If you doubt this, try taking away a four-year-old’s Halloween candy and saying he will get 100 times more candy after he is dead!)

Children are empirical, secular, rational and fundamentally scientific. In fact, the progression of competence in a child's mind directly follows the scientific method. For instance, in the first few years a child develops the recognition of causality, by tracking an object with his eyes or turning his head at a sound, followed by "object permanence," such as recognizing that a ball placed under a blanket still exists, which then develops into basic problem solving with these objects. As the child continues to develop, these basic problem solving skills are refined by more formal use of logic in every aspect of life: identity, language, values, etc.

Just as it takes an enormous amount of statist propaganda to turn a child into a dogmatic Soviet Marxist, it takes an endless amount of *religious* propaganda to turn a child into a dazed "worshiper" of imaginary ghosts.

Children are not even naturally agnostic. To test this proposition, simply give a child an empty box as a birthday present and tell him that there *may* be an iPod in it, but there's just no way to know for sure, so he cannot really tell you that there is *no* iPod in there!

See if he thanks you for this "gift" or not.

Thus, the subjugation of children in terms of religion is based on the subjugation of children to *stories* – exploitive, abusive, ghastly, disorienting and manipulative *stories*.

In reality, of course, it is impossible for a child to obey the Bible or the Koran or the Torah, because they are simply dead books with no capacity to reward or punish.

No, the subjugation of children is fundamentally the enslavement of children to storytellers – their obedience to the whims of others, presented as absolute moral and metaphysical *facts*.

Enslavement to the idea that the stories of others are absolute facts is a crushing blow to a child's capacity to process objective reality – and, to the great benefit of those in authority, to criticize or question the errors of those who "teach" them.

Thus, since children are trained to automatically obey "stories," when an abusive parent aggressively tells a new "story," which is that the aggression of the parent was directly caused by the actions of the child, the child can only nod numbly and blame himself.