ERASMUS

Edition 5

think deeper.

MAY 2024

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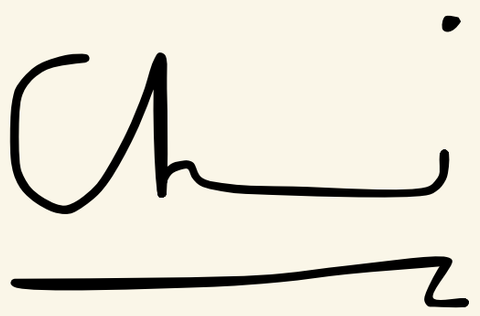
Welcome to this little space where ideas abode and abound.

Welcome to a reading experience devoid of topic, time and word constraints - just as our writers are devoid of topic, time and word constraints.

Welcome to *Erasmus*.

I hope you enjoy your stay with us,
and I hope the ideas in these essays will stay with you.



Chenrui Zhang

Cher lecteur...

May seems to have been a month of reformation and revolution-- that is, at least, what seems to unite these essays. I am honoured to have been able to be this month's editor and extend my thanks to Chenrui for having given me this opportunity, as well as for having founded *Erasmus*, an uncannily titled journal whilst on my year abroad! I would also like to thank all of the writers: it was a genuine pleasure editing your essays, so thank you for allowing me to suggest edits on your initial drafts so that they can have become the final versions in this edition.

Rosie Shepherd's essay, *A Theory of Meaning*, edited by Will Robinson, last edition's editor, opens this month's edition. Of the essays that I edited, we have Elias Turing's thoughtful analysis of what we can learnt from Edmund Burke when approaching institutional reformation with humility. We then have Thomas Fennell's fascinating exploration of the history of the coffeehouse in England which will most certainly have you appreciate your next visit to this quotidian place. Andrei Lambert's essay *On Memory* makes for a reflective penultimate essay calling for a reformation of the mind, wisely advising how we *ought* to reform the ways in which we think about memory in this day and age. Offering us some incredibly striking images, Elaine Cheng's beautifully written piece in the form of a letter to her mother makes up the last essay edited by me. This edition close with Chenrui's thought-provoking interview in conversation with Will Shackleton on theatre.

So, dear reader, without further ado, I can only hope that you enjoy your voyage into the essays ahead.

Jolina Bradley
our constructive deconstructivist
& May editor

A Theory of Meaning

A Theory of Meaning

No attempt at a theory of meaning has come as close to faultlessness as that of Paul Grice's. Grice, in his article *Meaning* (1957), proposed a theory focused on reducing sentence-meaning down to facts about a speaker's intentions with his ingenious two-step process.

Prior to delving into Grice's theory, it's important to be clear on his goal in order for our analysis of its correctness to be relevant. He aims to account for sentence-meaning in terms of intention, which strikes me as a charming goal; when I speak to others, my thought process is fuelled by intention, whether it be consciously or not. The path Grice takes towards his goal unfolds in two steps.

The first step reduces speaker-meaning to intention, and then the second reduces sentence-meaning to speaker-meaning. After completing both steps, we will successfully have an account of sentence-meaning in terms of intention according to Grice (p. 381). This can be better understood in the form of finding A to B, and B to C, to achieve A to C. My focus will be on the first step, Grice's account of speaker-meaning in terms of intention.

Grice's account of speaker meaning

Admirably, Grice adjusted his account of speaker-meaning

multiple times until he was satisfied. In *Meaning* (1957), Grice discussed his theory in syntax, but I will summarize it with a series of clauses. His first suggestion can be best summarised by the clause (C1) '*By uttering u, S intends to induce the belief that p in their audience A*', where *u* is a 'neutral word to apply to any candidate for meaning' (Grice, 1957, p. 380). However, he promptly dismisses this as insufficient (p. 381); my own *Flower Case* illustrates why.

Consider, I (*S*) am sat with my girlfriend (*A*) and exclaim, 'I do love flowers' (*u*), in order to induce the belief in her that I want to be brought flowers (*that p*). I would certainly never be as bold to tell my girlfriend I want to be brought flowers; I wish for her to recognise this intention herself. My wish for my girlfriend to recognise my intention is not covered by C1. Hence, Grice suggests we must add more to accurately account for speaker-meaning (p. 382). Our second clause (C2) '*S intends A to recognise the intention in C1.*' accounts for my wish that my girlfriend recognises I want to be brought flowers rather than telling her.

Grice describes this account of speaker-meaning to be still 'not good enough' (Grice, 1957, p. 382). He wishes to develop his theory in order to cover 'the difference between (…) "getting someone to think" and "telling"' (ibid.). Let's alter the *Flower Case* slightly by forming two contrasting scenarios to make this difference apparent. In the first scenario, my mum tells my girlfriend how I love flowers. In the second, my mum shows my girlfriend my collection of pressed flowers from over the years.

Within both scenarios, my mum (*S*) wishes for my girlfriend (*A*) to be induced with the belief that I want to be brought flowers (*that p*) through recognising the intention behind her action (*u*). Grice reflects that there is a difference in how

complex the recognition of intentions is between these two scenarios. In the former, my mum is acting more explicitly by verbally telling my girlfriend how much I love flowers. This still requires my girlfriend to recognise my mum's intention, however the latter requires much greater processing to achieve this recognition.

My mum sharing my pressed flower collection still intends to induce the belief that I wish to be brought flowers, but it is more complex because my girlfriend must recognise my love for flowers through reflecting on the evidence, rather than being explicitly told. With C1 and C2 alone, we are yet to have an account that allows for more complex intentions such as this. To solve this, Grice wishes to adjust his theory further once again with C3 '*S intends A to form the belief that p, at least in part, because A recognises the intention in C.1'*.

Now, in the second scenario where the intention is more complex to recognise, it is covered that my girlfriend will recognise my mum's intention, at least in part, from her showing my pressed flower collection. Whilst Grice went on to develop his theory further than as elucidated here, I will restrict my personal review of his account of speaker meaning to *Meaning* (1957) alone.

In summary, Grice's account of speaker-meaning can be laid out as follows:

C1) *'By uttering u, S intends to induce the belief that p in their audience A'* and

C2) *'S intends A to recognise the intention in C1.'* and

C3) *'S intends A to form the belief that p, at least in part, because A recognises the intention in C.1'*

By analysing an utterance with this account, Grice claims we can accurately represent speaker-meaning. Grice's awareness of this more complex aspect of communication within his account of speaker-meaning is incredibly attractive. In the twenty first century, ambiguity is core to the younger generation's humour and communication, requiring you to think significantly more than in some conversations previously discussed.

For example, a recent trend on the popular social media platform, TikTok, involved a clip from Zoolander (2001) featuring two of the characters staring intensely at one another and expressing distaste in passing, captioned with a hypothetical comparison in which the creator relates to the situation. Such as 'Me when I was supposed to sleep 4 hours ago:' and 'the sun:' staring at each other in passing.

When the context and complex intentions are recognized, the TikTok is easily understood; but if they are not recognized, then it will be perceived as absurdity. The creator (*S*) is intending for us (*A*) to recognise from the TikTok (*u*) that they regret staying up too late (*that p*), at least in part, because we recognise the intended distaste from the creator that the sun is rising. Grice was ahead of his time with accounting for such complex scenarios of speaker-meaning.

Objections versus Grice

There are two main types of objections that have been raised against Grice's account of speaker meaning. The first is that Grice's account is too weak; there are cases where all clauses are met, yet an account of speaker-meaning has still not been achieved. Ironically, the second claims that the account is too strong; there are cases where an account of speaker-meaning is apparent, but not all of the clauses are required.

The first objection type comes from Strawson, *Intention and Convention in Speech Acts* (1964), who believed Grice's account was complex, but 'not quite complex enough for his purpose' (p. 446). Another variation of the *Flower Case* demonstrates Strawson's counter. Contrasting other renditions: I want my girlfriend to want to buy me flowers, rather than buying them because I want her to, she should buy them because she wants to.

Imagine I am in town with my girlfriend, and we bump into her friend, Z. I tell her that I'll look around the market whilst they catch up. I wonder over to the flower stall directly behind Z and admirer the flowers on show, pretending I don't realise my girlfriend is watching me. I (*S*) intend for my girlfriend (*A*) to be induced with the belief that she should want to buy me flowers (*that p*) and I intend for this to be recognised by my admiring of the stall (*u*). Because my girlfriend doesn't know that I know she's watching me, I intend for her to want to buy me flowers herself rather than only doing so because in her presence I utter, in some way, that I want to be brought them.

Strawson thinks that with Grice's account as it is, he wrongly has to say that I intended for my girlfriend to believe I want to be brought flowers, rather than her wanting to buy them for me! There is a difference here between my intention inciting her to do it for me, and inciting a wish to do it herself. Evidently, Strawson is correct that Grice's account is too weak because this extra intention is not recognised. We need more clauses, but where? C1 is met because I intend for my girlfriend to be induced with the belief that she wants to buy me flowers. C2 is met because I wish her to recognise the intention in C1.

Strawson suggests that before we reach C3, we need to add

another clause. I will coin this clause C2*, which states that '*S intends A to recognise the intention in C2*'. Now, my girlfriend will recognise that I want her to want to buy me flowers, and that is why I am admiring flowers with her distant observation.

Strawson's adaptation to Grice's theory allows for occurrences of communication that are even more complex than previously accounted for. The additional layers of intention can go deeper, such as C** and C***, to allow for any possible instances. It could be argued that there is a risk of absurdity if we continue with further intentions and could eventually deteriorate the credibility of the theory.

However, situations with a number of intentions that spark such absurdities are very rare, and even if something was uttered with such complexity, then this theory would be able to cover it. I believe Strawson could not have come to this level of accuracy when accounting for speaker-meaning if Grice's theory had not already existed for him to supplement. Hence, although Grice's account is attractive, it is not perfect, and I believe that minor supplements from Strawson do improve it.

The second objection type claiming the account is too strong is discussed by Ziff, On *H.P. Grice's Account of Meaning* (1967). He analyses a situation where a man speaks in a soliloquy (p. 3-4). In this occurrence, there is no audience to induce a belief onto, and therefore, none of our clauses have been met.

However, it is likely that the man would claim he *has* spoken with meaning, even if his utterance did not intend to inflict effect on an audience. This objection does not render Grice's theory incorrect in instances where there is an audience, but

it does raise a possibility that Grice hasn't accounted for *all* occurrences of speaker-meaning.

I certainly disagree with Ziff's objection. Ziff too swiftly dismisses the possibility that the man is his own audience, and I must insist that this is a mistake.

Ziff shows distaste towards the concept that when anyone speaks to themselves, and we consider them to be their own audience, they may be intending to produce an effect in themselves. I disregard this distaste and instead believe that when someone speaks aloud, there is an intention to inflict an effect on themselves, elsewise they would've merely thought internally.

Consider, I am driving to my first day of a new job and I am nervous. I have been thinking to myself all morning about the day ahead, but on the drive there I decide to speak to myself aloud. When I (*S*) say, 'today will be fine' (*u*) I intend to reassure myself (*A*) that the day ahead will go better than I think (*that p*). Even in situations where I am not intending to make myself believe something, speaking allowed to myself still creates a different effect than simply thinking inside my head. Thus, I must dismiss this objection.

Grice's theory excellently allows for various adaptations. Just as *u* does not need to be speech, as seen when discussing the *Flower Case*, the *A* does not need to be another person.

Conclusion

Grice's account of speaker-meaning as found in *Meaning* (1957) is concise, coherent, and accurate when applied to instances such as my *Flower Case*. Strawson's (1964)

adaptation supplements Grice's account perfectly so that it covers all possibilities of communication. Thanks to this adaptation, no degree of speaker-meaning is too complex to understand if we focus on recognising each individual layer of intention.

The critique from Ziff (1967) is understandable; if there is no physical audience apparent, then how can Grice's account be relevant? Every aspect of his theory involves an audience. However, I insist that this is not intuitive when you assess how speech in the soliloquy format feels to the speaker. Instances of communication can be diverse, and it can be said that Ziff's focus on non-transactional expression, where there is no external receiver, can be analysed with Grice's account if we have an open mind to what consists of an audience.

It is clear from my analysis that Grice's account of speaker-meaning is most definitely correct and can shed light on how communication works universally. Even the most absurd occurrences, such as evident on Tiktok and other social media platforms, can be accounted for thanks to Grice; he has truly opened a door for genuine meaning to be understood.

Rosie Shepherd
our ambivalent platonist

Revolutionary caution advised

Edmund Burke, the 18th-century philosopher and statesman, is often hailed as the father of modern conservatism. His seminal work, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, written in 1790, serves as both a scathing critique of the French Revolution and a timeless commentary on the perils of radical change. While his prose can be as dense as an overstuffed Victorian sofa, Burke's reflections offer valuable lessons on the importance of prudence, tradition, and the dangers of unchecked enthusiasm. Let's delve into Burke's arguments with a light touch, for even the weightiest of political treatises can benefit from a sprinkle of humour.

Burke begins his essay with a clear stance: the French Revolution, with its lofty ideals of liberty, equality, and fraternity, is, in his view, a disaster waiting to happen. He paints a vivid picture of a society in chaos, where reason is overthrown by passion and the venerable institutions of the past are dismantled with reckless abandon. Burke, ever the champion of measured reform, compares the French revolutionaries to a herd of wild cattle rampaging through a china shop, smashing centuries-old heirlooms in their fervour to create a new order.

One of Burke's central arguments is the importance of tradition and gradual change. He extols the virtues of the British political system, with its slow, deliberate reforms and respect for established customs. According to Burke, societies are like ancient trees, their roots deep and intertwined with the soil of history. Uprooting these trees in the name of progress, he warns, will lead to nothing but barren land and chaos. It's as if Burke is advising us to prune our societal garden with care, lest we end up with a desolate wasteland instead of a flourishing landscape.

Burke's skepticism towards radical change is grounded in his belief that humans are fallible creatures, prone to error and hubris. He argues that the revolutionary leaders in France, in their zeal to remake society, have overestimated their own wisdom and underestimated the complexities of human nature. For Burke, the idea of a perfect society is as elusive as the proverbial pot of gold at the end of the rainbow. Instead of chasing utopian dreams, he advocates for a cautious approach, building on the tried and tested foundations of the past.

A particularly striking aspect of Burke's essay is his prescient warning about the potential for tyranny in the wake of revolution. He fears that the destruction of the old order will pave the way for despotism, as power-hungry individuals seize the opportunity to impose their will on a disoriented populace. Burke's prediction proved eerily accurate with the rise of Napoleon Bonaparte, who crowned himself Emperor of the French, thus replacing one form of absolute rule with another. It's a bit like replacing a broken umbrella with one that has a few more holes – the end result is the same: you still get wet.

So, what lessons can we glean from Burke's reflections in our modern world? First and foremost, his emphasis on prudence and gradual reform remains relevant. In an age of rapid technological advancements and social upheaval, Burke's call for careful consideration and respect for tradition serves as a reminder that progress should not come at the expense of stability. The allure of radical change can be tempting, but history teaches us that revolutions often lead to unforeseen consequences.

Burke also underscores the importance of humility in political discourse. His critique of the revolutionaries' arrogance and overconfidence is a timeless caution against the dangers of ideological zealotry. In a world increasingly polarized by extreme views, Burke's advocacy for moderation and dialogue offers a path towards more constructive and inclusive politics.

Finally, Burke's reflections highlight the value of preserving institutions that have stood the test of time. While not immune to reform, these institutions provide continuity and a sense of identity, anchoring societies amidst the turbulence of change. In essence, Burke teaches us that while change is inevitable, it should be approached with respect for the past and an awareness of our own limitations.

Elias Turing
our experiment

The True Tales of the Coffeehouse

Take a sip, sit back. Relax.

You're in a coffee shop. Maybe in Oxford, maybe not. What are you drinking? A latte, flat white, espresso, perhaps not even coffee at all? Are you studying, socialising, staring out the window? Whatever the image in your mind, it would have hardly been difficult to conjure up. The modern coffeehouse is ubiquitous, the dense scattering along Oxford's High Street confirmation alone. Yet such a sight is decidedly modern, with today's Italian-style industry leaders first appearing in Britain in the nineties. Recent, but removed enough such that, for those of us under the age of thirty, this ubiquity is all that we have ever known.

But coffee has been at the centre of more conversation and conflict than you might think. After its introduction to England, initially in Oxford in 1650, with London shortly following, the coffeehouse soon became an unlikely innovator in discourse, altering both the scope and form of public interaction. Whilst consuming stale coffee with notes of soot, people *talked*; and who was now speaking was important. In charging only a penny entrance fee, access to coffeehouses stretched far beyond the wealthy and aristocratic. By today's standards, this isn't accessible at all: large segments of the population remained unable to afford this excess, and the presence of women was minimal at most. Yet what was new at the time was a greater degree of openness, married with a generally social and amicable environment.

Within coffeehouses, it was not only who was doing the talking that changed, but the subject of conversation too. Possibly due to the relative lack of alcohol available, coffeehouse conversation diverged greatly from tavern and alehouse conversation. The coffeehouse quickly became central to the dissemination and discussion of current events: one could pay just a penny to enter; sit with a coffee; ask and debate the latest news – for hours. Today, any attempt to spark a lasting debate with those seated near you would certainly raise some eyebrows. By the 17th century, such an activity had become commonplace and ensured that the English coffeehouse was responsible for opening new avenues by which information and ideas could be exchanged. Combine this with the relative heterogeneity of individuals, it's not difficult to conceive of the original English coffeehouse's social power. Indeed, in just twenty-five years, coffeehouses had firmly nestled into English society, a similar time period to when Starbucks and Caffè Nero first arrived and have since established themselves in the UK.

However, the social aspect of the coffeehouse wasn't the only factor at play. Economically, coffeehouses were an important source of fiscal revenue, as coffee excise taxes were agreed upon during the Restoration. Some accounts put the revenues generated from the goods sold by coffeehouses as comprising four percent of all excise revenues in the country at its peak.

But on a broader level, the economic environment in late 17th century England was changing. This was defined by the political landscape of the time: the Glorious Revolution of 1688 was crucial in diverting primary decision-making authority away from the crown, and into the House of Commons. Even in the years prior, there was a growing influence shifting to individuals removed from the centralised state. In turn, the arbitrary exertions of power of rulers grew increasingly subject to constraints. This made England a hotbed for industrial innovation in the years to follow; for fear of creative destruction, leaders were unable to prevent the seminal 18th century activities and inventions of the first Industrial Revolution.

Some of these activities were at the heart of the coffeehouses themselves – this included their role in English financial markets. Stockbrokers, barred from the Royal Exchange due to their apparent rudeness, instead worked in other establishments. One such establishment was Johnathan's Coffee-House, an institution which became known for the commercial transactions that took place within, and, in the late 17th century, began to list commodity prices and exchange rates on its walls. This practice continued until 1778, and Johnathan's has since transformed into the London Stock Exchange which can be seen today on the same site. For stockbrokers, the coffeehouse became a haven that underpinned the economy's potential to evolve.

Despite the coffeehouse enjoying significant social and economic influence in England, not everyone was happy: to the English rulers of this period, the coffeehouse had some explaining to do. But before asking any questions, King Charles II took more decisive action: on the 29th of December in 1675, he issued a proclamation forbidding the selling of coffee after January the 10th the following year. Naturally, the people of England were not too pleased about Charles's ruling. One account described London "in a mutinous condition" over the prospect of a ban, while others questioned whether such a move would end the meetings and discourse that coffeehouses had established.

Before delving further into the consequences of Charles' actions, let us consider the implications of the institutional landscape of the time: what shaped the possible actions that disgruntled coffee-drinkers could take? And what was Charles' response? At this point, even prior to the Glorious Revolution of 1688, English political institutions already contained some mechanisms to restrain the whims of rulers. Still, one cannot bestow all of the praise upon English institutions. Here, the coffeehouse deserves some credit as the centre for debate and catalyst for news circulation. Eager to maintain a grip on the throne following the Restoration, Charles II would have seen such places as frightening. And in some ways, he had reason to worry – the freedom of conversation in coffeehouses meant that political discussion was commonplace, and diverse political ideas would thus have found a new medium to disseminate. The king held significant political power and the ability to determine economic institutions; but his fear alone – of coffeehouses, no less – shows us how his power faced real limitations and credible threats.

Although coffeehouses were by no means political structures themselves, their power and efficiency to incite change cannot be underestimated. Almost immediately after news of the proclamation spread, a large number of coffeehouse owners banded together to submit a petition to the king urging for leniency. In response, Charles met with his council to reconsider. A particular consideration concerned whether the king had the power to legitimately revoke the licences of coffeehouse owners in the first place. As Charles's advisers failed to agree amongst themselves on this matter, the king himself hesitated. Shortly after, Charles and his council rescinded the proclamation – just two days prior to its officialization, the coffeehouse had won and was here to stay.

And that's just in England! So the next time you visit a coffee shop – which, let's be honest, will be rather soon – consider what's changed; how the ubiquitous coffee shop is the result of both a modern revolution and the institutional evolution of the intervening centuries. If you're feeling so bold, you could even try storming in and asking for the latest news. In any case, get yourself something to drink. Smell the coffee; see the light (almost certainly more today than then) shining in; listen to the soft background music.

Take a sip, sit back. Relax. Think about the coffeehouse, so steeped in history. At the very least, I hope it's comforting to infuse a purpose into coffee shops beyond a mere void into which four pounds vanish.

Thomas Fennell

our coffee connoisseur

On Memory

False modesty is a fair-faced demon which has dampened and barred too many of our interactions and endeavours. We shy from singing, speaking, and even rising early in the morning because of it. Ignorance can be justified with virtue by claiming never to have had a good memory for this or that subject. Indeed, there is no sphere of human life more affected by this little demon than the use of memory. A particular subject on which every sensible person seems to be totally and happily hopeless is names. We cannot remember people's names. The relish and pleasure with which we tell each other of this crass inability is no less universal. There is always the illusion that I, in particular, suffer from this relational amnesia more than others, as if it something special, when in reality it is hugely common.

However, remembering names is not the only practice in which our memories are found wanting. It is now impressive to be able to remember phone numbers, historical dates, directions, grocery lists, book quotations. Rarely does anyone commit something to memory outside of a work or study context, no doubt because we think we can rely on the services of technology instead. Smartphones are even so considerate as to remind you of your mother's birthday. The result is that the average person has one disproportionately atrophied muscle: he may have a sharp mind, probably a strong will, even good biceps thanks to the gym; but a singularly undeveloped memory.

Clearly the problem is much broader than false modesty, nor is technology entirely at fault. Not having enough time for reading or memorization is besides the point: that is like claiming you don't have time to yawn. The memory muscle can in fact be exercised almost any time, without needing to dedicate a block of time to it, as we regimented moderns like to do. Walking, washing, eating and commuting all provide luxurious opportunities for engaging the memory, provided we dare to part with the phone or the radio for a few moments. Daily situations like these feel designed for the act of reflection, being routine circumstances that require little mental exertion. And it is indeed an "act" of reflection because it must be done with intention. Languishing passively over an earlier event is not reflection; it is closer to reminiscing. To reflect is to digest, consolidate, and refine; to think deeply about a conversation, ponder a dense book chapter, repeat a phrase from last week's film. If there is a human partner with whom to conduct this exercise of reflection, so much the better; conversation solidifies reflection. With such practices made habitual, one might find many precious capacities coming to light, such as offering people the very pleasant surprise of remembering a detail they had shared some time ago.

In many of us there is probably, amidst all this, an underlying assumption that memory is just another feature of the human psyche. It is a neat little capacity which can impress others with facts and poems, but ultimately only a muscle which is now becoming obsolete, just as our leg muscles shrank once humans relied on farming more than hunting. As emancipated, developed human beings, we can regard the memory as an extinct organ to be admired aesthetically rather than used actively.

Nevertheless, a deep-seated appreciation for both the mystery and the usefulness of memory resides in all people, past and present. For some ancient and medieval philosophers, memory was an irreducible faculty of the human person, on par with intellect and will, or even flatly synonymous with mind. One author who seriously grappled with the issue was the north-African rhetor-turned-bishop, Augustine of Hippo (b. 354). 'I come to the vast palaces and fields of the memory', he announces in his Confessions. For Augustine, memory was the 'stomach of the mind'—perhaps he was in the midst of his Advent fasting. Memory meant for him 'a vast and infinite profundity', and he can only conclude that 'amazement grips me'. No small feat, to be so riveted by the recesses of one's mind, which most of us would either find dull or slightly unsettling. This was a man uniquely qualified for the task; he knew scores of Cicero and Virgil, no small share of Aristotle, and had a monumental command of the Bible which powered his improvised hour-long sermons—no doubt we are glad Augustine did not own a smartphone.

Nor has the memory lost its power to fascinate. This is particularly true of those ancient creatures dwelling in the more secret parts of the mind, entities we amusingly deem "forgotten" and "recalled". We are confronted with the reality that it is much harder to keep something away from the memory—like unseeing an arresting image—than it is for the memory to keep something hidden from us. 'We are, to be sure, a miracle every way', wrote Jane Austen in Mansfield Park, 'but our powers of recollecting and forgetting do seem peculiarly past finding out'. You need only the right stimulus—a particular smell, an arrangement of events—and a whole abandoned universe comes crashing through the awareness, wholly unaware of the ruckus it will cause in the process.

We also prize the life-giving uses of memory. People so often speak of making and cherishing memories, and it seems that the afterlife of an experience is more valuable than the experience itself. Remembering our joys is a joy itself, even if tinged with desire. By 'plucking the fruit of memory', to use Joseph Conrad's phrase, we stretch ourselves on the bed of time. And that is why it is all the more odd that we neglect memory, in the singular sense, to such a cruel extent. To add to the irony, the very devices which we use to preserve memories are also involved in the general dilapidation of the faculty of memory. In one swift stroke, the sly rectangles in our hands capture our highest experiences with the fine brush strokes of a Giotto, only to then beget the amnesia of a Professor Calculus from *The Adventures of Tintin*.

This strange ambivalence between memory-hunting and retentive inability beckons for a renewal of the reflective habit. The only way that memories can be cherished, whilst also living fully in the present, is when frequent reflection forges contact with the experiences of yesterday. "Reflect" in the psychological sense is not that different from the sense used in optics. Reflection is the business of light. In other words, there is no enlightenment without reflection. The more we reflect, remember, and draw the chords of the past with us, like a shoelace being tightened snug, the more we will be one with ourselves and those around us. Some things we do best to forget, but on the whole the present is best suited to meet the future when it is on good terms with the past.

As real as fair-faced demons may be, true modesty is also real and needful of its rightful place in the dynamic of life. We are limited, and the fragility of memory has the last word. But

the only way to know these limits is to exercise the capacities which determine them. If honest effort merely confirms the conclusions supplied by false modesty, this time at least the humility will be authentic, and not some imagined threshold arbitrarily imposed. Humility is no enemy to effort. As Chesterton put it, the humble person has a stirrup on his boot pushing him forwards, whereas the skeptic has a nail in his boot preventing him from walking at all. In the context of memory, this nail in the boot is a surrender to circumstances, a life of gliding from one thing to the next, of opening and closing one tiny drawer at a time. To reflect, on the other hand, is to swing the doors of the wardrobe wide open.

Andrei Lambert
our petit philosophe

Memory of Rice and Shattered Glass: A Letter to My Mother

Dear Māma,

I refuse to describe you as a Tiger Mother. I refuse because it is a stereotype, a dehumanizing epithet, a gendered, racializing myth. And I know these words mean nothing to you. I doubt translating them into Mandarin would help. Instead, I want to tell you how I understand and love you, in my own way.

Growing up sunken in the backseat of your Toyota Camry, I listened as you told me the story of Láng Lǎng:
Did you know Láng Lǎng's father forced him to practice piano for ten hours a day since he was three?
Yes Māma.
I wasn't even that harsh on you, you'd laugh. *Now, maybe if I was, you'd be the next Lang Lang. When his piano teacher told him he wasn't talented enough, his dad told him to jump off the balcony. Sure, he hated his father at the time, but he's so grateful to him now. He knows he wouldn't be who he is if his dad didn't push him as a child.*

Elaine, I'd rather you hate me now, and thank me later. I don't want you to ask me when you are older, "why didn't you push me more?"

Push. verb. “to exert force on (someone or something), typically with one's hand, in order to move them away from oneself or the origin of the force.”

You made sure to push me, even if it pushed me away from you. You pushed me to develop all the talents that you suspected that I could have—that was how you loved me. You wished Grandpa let you take piano lessons as a girl, so you saved up for months to buy me a piano. You wanted to dance, so you put me in ballet. You were disappointed when I didn’t turn out to be a piano prodigy or have talent in ballet.

Māma, I kept finding bits and pieces of us on the back covers of memoirs. On the back cover of Journey of *A Thousand Miles: My Story*, Lang Lang wrote—

“Number One” was a phrase my father—and, for that matter, my mother—repeated time and time again. It was a phrase spoken by my parents’ friends and by their friends’ children. Whenever adults discussed the great Chinese painters and sculptors from the ancient dynasties, there was always a single artist named as Number One. There was the Number One leader of a manufacturing plant, the Number One worker, the Number One scientist, the Number One car mechanic. In the culture of my childhood, being best was everything. It was the goal that drove us, the motivation that gave life meaning. And if, by chance or fate or the blessings of the generous universe, you were a child in whom talent was evident, Number One became your mantra. It became mine. I never begged my parents to take off the pressure. I accepted it; I even enjoyed it.

He was describing himself when he wrote, “if, by chance. you were a child in whom talent was evident." But you had looked at me, ten years old—your poor talentless daughter—distressed. You wanted to teach me how to survive in a cutthroat, capitalistic society. So you decided to shape me into “Number One.” You always told me that because I had no talent, I must work harder than anyone else, be pushed harder than all the other kids around me, in order to survive.

“笨鸟先飞”，you said. “Dumb birds need to fly first.” And I had accepted this as truth—that I was dumb, that I was untalented, and you knew best. I never believed in praise that didn’t come from you. My teachers called me bright, but that was just flattery, since you thought I was slow. Other adults found me intelligent and talented, but I didn’t believe them, because you told me I had no natural talents. After all, you kept saying, 我都是为你好, “I’m doing this for your own good”. After all, the voices around me were saying, “别人对你再好都是假的，家里人对你才是真心的，亲人永远不会害你。 No matter how good other They would never do anything to hurt you.”

“打是疼，骂是爱。*Beating is affection, yelling is love.”*

- Chinese proverb, unknown origin.

*“*慈母多败儿。*Kind mothers spoil their children.”*

- Chinese proverb, unknown origin.

Last month, you called me from Shanghai. “Elaine,” your voice was choked in tears, “I know this is far too late, but for what it’s worth, I’m sorry. I’m sorry for everything I had done when you were young. I know you won’t forgive me,

but believe me, if I could have a magic hourglass, I would turn back time. I wouldn't have gotten married. I wouldn't have had kids."

By then, all I wanted to say was "I love you, too." I grew up wanting to hear those five words from you: I love you; I'm sorry. I thought those words would cure all the problems between us, but they were just a start. But now, I know that our experiences as a Chinese-American immigrant family were not idiosyncratic. Our conflicts were not of our own construction, not entirely. We lived in systems. Systems that taught us to intermix love and abuse. To see abuse as the highest form of love. To not be able to know love without abuse. When I was younger I always wished I could turn forward the hourglass and grow up faster. That way, I could be more eloquent and articulate my feelings. I understand now that children suffer a hermeneutical injustice—they have emotions, feelings, no less than adults, but not the emotional or literal vocabulary to express it.

Now, I am twenty-one, about to cross the line from being seen by society as a child to being seen as a to-be parent. So I'm writing to you from the middle of the hourglass.

Chinese-American diaspora literature is filled with conflicts between mothers and daughters, fathers and sons, and every permutation in between. I saw the dialectic of you and me in all and none of them—*The Joy Luck Club, Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother, A Journey of A Thousand Miles, Chinese Cinderella: The Secret Story of an Unwanted Daughter, Interior Chinatown*— and those were the only ones I could bear to read, because they reminded me too painfully of us. Visceral descriptions of love and hatred, physical and verbal abuse, yet deep love between parents and children and Chinese culture recur endlessly until cliché.

But even as I was reading these books, I felt like they were not written for me—no. These books were written in English, for a Western audience. Twice, throughout high school, I had gone into an interview with my resumé in hand. And my Caucasian interviewers, with one glance, would take down their glasses and chuckle: "well, you must have had quite the tiger mom." I had felt an unexplainable feeling. Now, I understand that it was rage at my interviewer's condescension—to look at my achievements and chalk it up to parental pressure—stripping me of my agency and individuality. It says, *you are just another one of those machine-produced academic machines imported from China, now invasive in America without natural predators*. It carries the assumption that I am submissive, hardworking, and therefore uncreative, lacking strong opinions and out-of-the-box thinking. In some ways, I feel like American culture has an obsession with the mythos of the Chinese "Tiger Mom" and "Wolf Dad" as a causal explanation for the academic success of Asian-American students in the US. This myth fuels the model-minority stereotype, and enough ink has been spilled on that.

Māma, I hear you're now giving parenting seminars in China. Your first-generation immigrant daughter with no apparent talent got into Yale—you want to teach other parents how to replicate your parenting success. But to what standard is that definition of "excellence" to be measured? And at what cost?

You defined success as making a lot of money and being respected. We were first-generation immigrants living out of a garage because we couldn't afford rent—of course I understood why this would be your idea of success. By suppressing your feelings and becoming a productivity machine, you laid the groundwork for my education. I am beyond grateful for this.

However, I soon learned that shutting down feelings and glorifying productivity was a survival mechanism, not a sustainable framework for life. Because when I tried to sustain this framework, my body responded. Rather, my mind set off an alarm, and my body shut down in self-preservation. You were so shocked by my long-delayed depression diagnosis, and I was too. But now I understand, it is not a pathology to have psychological imbalance from regularly suppressing emotions and working myself to the bone—it is its natural effect. I was so scared to tell you that I had depression, because I was scared that you'd tell me I had failed you.

We hid my depression like a dark family secret. Because there was no room for failure stories in the cultural narrative dominated by Lang Lang, Amy Chua success stories. The children who didn't succeed just didn't work hard enough, because their parents failed to push them hard enough. Failure to achieve this sky-high standard of excellence is attributed to the individual daughter and the individual mother. If I failed, then you failed to raise me. So people will not hear about my depression. This secretiveness is isolating, but I'm used to this. After all, they always say:

"家丑不可外扬: A family's dirty laundry must not be aired in the presence of outsiders"

- Chinese proverb, unknown origin.

"家家有本难念的经: Every family has a closet full of skeletons."

- Chinese proverb, unknown origin

But then I read bell hooks. On page eighteen of *All About Love*, she wrote:

In our [American] culture the private family dwelling is the one institutionalized sphere of power that can easily be autocratic and fascistic. As absolute rulers, parents can usually decide without any intervention what's best for their children… irrespective of class or race, other adults rarely intervene to question or challenge what their peers are doing with 'their' children.

Māma, who am I, without you? When you tell me that I'm lazy, untalented, dumb—that your "pushing" was what allowed me to have any success at all in this cutthroat American society, For a long time, I found it hard to think believe that I could have come to where I am today, to be the writer, the thinker that I am, if you hadn't pushed me until my breaking point. For a long time, I thought my self-worth and my abilities were tied to how you raised me. And when you're mad at me, the accusation that pierces me deepest, is "Elaine, do you know how much money I've spent on you? How much I've sacrificed to give you every opportunity I didn't have? You're the most ungrateful child in the world." When I was young, I could only cry and deny—*I am not ungrateful, Māma. I am so grateful for you, but can I have a choice in what I do?* You say no, you say I am spoiled. And then I would acquiesce.

Now, I know that what made me submit to you was guilt and shame. Existing, for me, was to be in neverending debt—I can't even get a job as a minor—how could I repay you for all the money you've spent on me? Therefore, there seemed to be no choice but to acquiesce. Try as I could to feel grateful, I succeeded only in feeling more and more indebted, more and more owned by you. It is difficult to love the person who claims to own you.

Just now, I thought of a metaphor—of rice and shattered glass. Each spoonful of rice hurts me, but I'm still hungry. You raised me and hurt me in equal parts—I later learned that it was because that's how grandma raised you, too. You grew up on a diet of rice mixed with shattered glass, and it taught you that love is inextricably intertwined with abuse. So when you fed it to me, it felt as natural as could be.

I got used to the glass scratching down my throat. I grew up on that rice, and eventually, the pain numbed. I accepted that your care came with conditions—straight As and an Ivy League acceptance letter. To rationalize this, I convinced myself that no one else ate rice without shattered glass. Therefore anyone who doesn't hit me, doesn't hurt me, doesn't actually care enough about me. I wonder why children from families where conflict and violence are the norm enter into abusive relationships. Because we are so used to the taste of rice with shattered glass, that when we are fed a spoonful of pure white rice, we are confused and distrust it. Where are the strings attached?

I want to break this cycle of lovelessness, and the myth of the "Tiger Parent" that glorifies lovelessness in the family as toughness and a recipe for success. I believe that only when we love each other for who we are, only then, can we grow to achieve our full humanity. Māma, did you know that Lang Lang had a son? He's not planning to push his two-year-old son into music, he said.

In the perennial present of memory, I remember our biggest fight. You said "I'm so sorry, Elaine. I did everything right in raising you, except for one thing. I didn't make you go through enough hardship (挫折) in your childhood. Your childhood was too smooth, and now you're fragile. Society will break you." You always speak of this evil society filled with evil people, and how my idealism and openness to love will be crushed. But is it possible that you are raising me to

uphold the evilness in this society by teaching me to distrust everyone who isn't family? Are we creating the very societies we are afraid of?

Māma, I want to write children's books. You didn't have enough money left over to put me into daycare, so you left me after school in public libraries, and I loved it. But the children's section had only sunny stories. Aren't we underestimating children, by not writing children's books about anger, domestic violence, guilt, and shame? I don't think it's ever too early to expose how ugly the world truly is to us, because I saw its ugliness anyway, just without necessary language and knowledge to understand it. To be a child is to live through hermeneutical injustice. Children's books should give us the literature, theory, and words to protect ourselves and transform ourselves out of the cycles and systems we are born into.

In fact, we should overthrow the tyrannical structure of the family. The *don't say don't tell* culture around parenting makes us feel like Rapunzel trapped in our individual towers. We should encourage children to speak about how they are treated in the home without fear of their parents being taken to jail, or Child Protective Services being called—and having an alternative intervention system that is culturally empathetic to parents who themselves have had difficult childhoods. At the current state in America and most other countries, the foster care system is presented as the only alternative to staying in an abusive household, and it is a terrible one.

Māma, it's not too late for us to pull others back from growing up on a diet of rice and shattered glass. I've always wondered why parenting books were almost exclusively

written by adults. When I visited home last summer, I looked through your bookshelves and found your stash of parenting books. Half of them still had plastic covers intact, all of them were in Mandarin. Some of them were daughter-specific, others were explicitly marked towards raising "successful children." Very rarely, did these books mention "how to be loving," or "how to raise emotionally healthy children," as if knowing how to show love was a given once you became a parent.

Māma, I want to write a parenting book with you, one with empathy, deconstructing the myth of the "Tiger Parent" with an eye towards cultural change, so that we can build a more loving society.

I love you.

Your daughter,
Elaine Cheng
our Revolutionary Smurf

What's in a play?

In conversation with Will Shackleton

Peter Brook once posited that a play is simply 'a man who walks across an empty space whilst someone is watching him'. It's a minimalist's dream, but for Will Shackleton, 2nd year English student and aspiring actor at Oxford, the essence of a play delves deeper into the realms of human experience and theatrical tradition. In our conversation, we explored the sinews and tendons of what makes a play, the realities of acting, and the gritty charm of the theatre's underbelly.

We began with tragedy. Will's preferred definition of the genre was a hauntingly simple one: 'Tragedy is about questioning through pain.' His reverence for Shakespeare is palpable, particularly for *King Lear* and *Measure for Measure*. These plays, rife with moral quandaries and existential despair, resonate deeply with his belief that a play must confront the audience with challenging questions, often without easy answers.

Shackleton offers a refreshing take on Hamlet, a role of often mired in brooding introspection. "Hamlet should be fun and young," he asserts. "Someone fresh out of drama school." This perspective turns the traditional portrayal on its head, emphasizing the character's youthful exuberance and the sheer joy of performance. Yet, Shackleton is pragmatic about

the actor's craft. "Actors need someone trustworthy to tell them when they really can’t play a role. An eighty-year-old Lear shouldn’t be doing Hamlet."

"Theatre is a very muscular activity," Shackleton notes, highlighting the physicality and endurance required. Unlike the often fragmented nature of film acting, theatre demands a continuous, dynamic presence. "Some film actors really can’t act," he adds, suggesting that the stage separates certain wheat from certain chaff. In theatre, the body is an instrument finely tuned through relentless practice.

Moreover, Shackleton challenges the romantic notion of actors as chameleons who can morph into any character. "There are roles we can’t play," he admits. Authenticity and believability hinge on an actor’s alignment with the role's demands, a lesson often learned the hard way.

Shackleton marvels at the ingenuity of composite set designs. "One set that has all the props ready for actors to pull out whenever needed" exemplifies the cleverness inherent in stagecraft. Yet, he stresses, "nothing is real." The magic of theatre lies in its illusions, not in verisimilitude. "You should not imagine a traumatic event to force yourself to cry. You just have to train the muscles," he advises, underscoring the actor's craft over raw emotional dredging.

Fame has always been double-edged, but takes on a specific significance in the world of theatre: "Bigshot actors’ reputations can work against them when audiences only see the actor and not the character." Conversely, no-name actors have the advantage of full audience immersion into their characters. This anonymity allows for a purer form of storytelling where the narrative instead of the celebrity takes centre stage.

Despite the profundity of his insights, Shackleton finds joy in the simpler aspects of theatre. "I can’t fully get into my character until I put on his shoes," he laughs. The first steps onto the set, the camaraderie in the dressing room, even the ritual of carrying a toothbrush to combat the grime of the theatre world—all these moments contribute to the actor's journey. Yet, he doesn’t shy away from the "grotty and dirty" realities of the theatre's underbelly. This honest acknowledgment serves as a reminder that the grandeur of performance often emerges from the humblest of settings.

At its core, drama is "two people in a space with conflict," Shackleton says. Resolution, he insists, is optional. Conflict, however, is essential. This tension, the need to figure it out (or not), drives the narrative forward and keeps the audience riveted.

In the end, what makes a play a play? It's a mosaic of elements—tragedy and comedy, illusion and reality, conflict and fleeting moments of resolution. Through the lens of Will Shackleton, we see that a play is not merely a script performed, but a living, breathing conversation between actors and audience, a questioning through the medium of theatre itself. As our conversation wound down, it became clear that Shackleton's insights are not just about the mechanics of acting or the structure of a play, but about the very human need to question, to feel, and to connect. And perhaps, that is the true essence of a play.

Chenrui Zhang
our thinking buddy

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