

N. /  
March 15, 1986 (letter 12)

Dear Colleague:

In my last letter I talked about small children falling off radiators, car hoods, tree limbs, etc., to be caught by their anxious parents. Children cannot resist the vertical. They want to go up--they want to fly. One reader (JM--English) has given my story a mythological dimension by pointing out that Icaruses have a way of getting their wings singed as they fly too close to the sun and it is the job of the Daedaluses to see to it that the bold young adventurers survive their fall.

In my last letter I also discussed Schadenfreude. A reader (DC--Philosophy) points out that Lucretius has given a good account of this somewhat unworthy sensation in De Rerum Natura, book II.I. "When on the great sea the winds are tossing the waters, it is sweet to watch from the land the great struggles of some other--not because it gives pleasure and delight that anyone is distressed, but because it is a joy to discover from what misfortunes you yourself are free."

Now, this contribution from a philosophical colleague has made me think how sad it is that philosophy is, by now, so firmly divorced from psychology. Philosophical discussions on morals and ethics proceed as though there is no such thing as Schadenfreude, mitleid, and mitfreude as well as numerous other human passions. Moral philosophers seem to think that we are all disembodied liberals concerned almost solely with large abstract questions of social justice and with resolving intricate moral dilemmas that sound much like intellectual puzzles. A possible exception is Richard Wollheim's The Thread of Life (Harvard University Press, 1984). But this book has its origin as the William James lectures. So some psychology has to be admitted. Even in this book, it seems to me that the psychological angle is very narrow.

In my last letter I used the word "emergency" (emergency room of a city hospital). I assume that emergency comes out of emergence--something that emerges. But why would something that emerges (a gentle image to my mind) cause an emergency? Are we so insecure that we cannot have anything new--anything that emerges--without dialing the emergency number for help?

This letter doesn't offer anything new. I am responding to my readers and I am delighted to have a few. Yet, how strange it is to write when my readers are also my neighbors. We should be talking to each other over sherry in some centrally located faculty lounge, not passing notes to each other in tattered brown envelopes. But, as Bob might say, we live in the modern world and must make do with a cool medium. In the human warmth of the faculty lounge, we may in fact find ourselves talking about promotion and tenure rather than about Icarus and Lucretius. So there is some gain: there always is if we think hard enough.

Best wishes,

*N. /*