

ANTHROPOLOGY OF THRESHOLDS

Volume II

PARENTHOOD

An Essay on the Anthropology of Generation and Transmission

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Chapter I — The Event of Parenthood

1. An Event Like No Other

One becomes a parent, it is commonly said, as one becomes a homeowner or as one comes of age: through the acquisition of a status, entry into a function, the opening of a series of rights and duties that civil law enumerates with precision. This description is not false. It is merely insufficient, and it conceals what is properly overwhelming in the experience it claims to describe. For becoming a parent is not merely taking on a function: it is discovering, often with astonishment, that one is henceforth responsible for a freedom that is not one's own, and that will never entirely become so.

No other human experience places the subject in this exact position. One can be responsible for a project, a venture, a promise: in all these cases, one remains responsible for what one has oneself undertaken. The parent, however, is responsible for a being whose becoming they did not decide, and whom they can never entirely shape without betraying.

2. An Unthought Symmetrical to That of Birth

The first volume of this collection noted that birth remains an unthought of contemporary anthropology, reduced to a medical fact or a date on a civil register. Parenthood meets a comparable fate, in a different form: it is readily reduced to a social function — educating, protecting, transmitting an inheritance — or to a personal fulfilment of the adult, as though becoming a parent consisted above all in accomplishing oneself. Both reductions, one functionalist, the other psychologising, miss what is anthropologically at stake in this event: a discovery of self that passes through neither of the two.

3. Reformulating the Question

The question itself must therefore be shifted, as the first volume did for birth. To ask what a parent is, or how to educate a child, invites technical or normative answers, useful but failing to reach the anthropological root of the phenomenon. To ask instead what it means to engender a free being, or what the human being discovers about themselves when they become a parent, opens a space in which responsibility, renunciation, and separation — the very matter of this volume — can finally be heard.

4. The Guiding Hypothesis

Birth had revealed that the human being does not belong to themselves: they receive their existence before being able to become its author. Parenthood reveals the other side of this same truth. The one who was first received becomes, in turn, the one through whom another is welcomed — and discovers then that this transmission demands of them a very particular discipline, since they must care for what they can never possess.

Parenthood consists in caring for a freedom that is not one's own.

5. Four Paradoxes

This hypothesis unfolds into four paradoxes, which the following chapters will each take up in turn. The first is that the child depends entirely on the parent without thereby belonging to them: no dependence, however total, constitutes a title of ownership. The second is that transmission is never one-directional: the parent forms the child, but also learns from them, and discovers themselves transformed by a relation they believed they were only giving. The third is that authority limits the child's freedom for the sole purpose of one day making it fully possible: a successful authority is one that eventually becomes unnecessary. The fourth, finally, is that parental love, through its very success, prepares the separation it dreads: one truly loves a child only by working, year after year, toward being able to detach from them.

6. The Other Side of Being Born

This volume thus does not begin from nothing. It directly continues what the first volume of this collection established, by reversing its perspective. *Being Born* showed the human being on the side of reception: a being given to itself, given by another, given into a world, vulnerable, inscribed within a filiation it had not chosen. Parenthood shows this same human being having become, in turn, the agency that gives, welcomes, transmits, and must consent

to withdraw. The two volumes thus form a diptych: neither can be fully understood without holding both together.

But this diptych reveals, in completing itself, something Being Born alone could not yet show. In Being Born, anteriority was discovered as vertical: one was preceded, a single point, and the analysis stopped where the subject's own life began. Becoming a parent reveals a still broader structure: the adult discovers that they occupy a place within a chain of generations of which they are neither the first nor the last link. They have received; they must transmit; they are neither the origin nor the end of what runs through them. Parenthood thus reveals to the adult that they are not an origin, but a relay.

It is this notion of generation — not in the biological sense, but in the anthropological sense of a chain in which each receives in order to transmit — that gives deep unity to the chapters that follow. Engendering, transmitting, authorising, renouncing, separating, letting go: these are the six successive figures of one and the same structure, the one already announced by this volume's subtitle.

7. The Course of This Volume

The chapters that follow will each take up one thread of this inquiry. Chapter II will dwell, with Levinas, on what it means to engender a being who is at once oneself and radically other than oneself. Chapter III will examine, with Arendt and Ricœur, what it means to transmit a world to someone who did not ask for it. Chapter IV will explore, with Korczak, how authority can serve growth without ever substituting itself for it. Chapter V will dwell, with Winnicott, on the apprenticeship of renunciation that parenthood imposes on the adult. Chapter VI will follow, with Dolto, the necessity of separation. Chapter VII, finally, will confront this anthropology with the contemporary metamorphoses of parenthood, with Gauchet: the wanted child, reflexive parenting, educational negotiation, the digital challenge.

One thing alone must be understood from now on, and the rest of the volume will do no more than unfold it: to become a parent is to become responsible for a beginning one has no right to finish oneself.

To be a parent is to accompany a beginning to the point where it can continue without you.

Chapter II — Engendering a Free Being

1. A Relation Without Equivalent

No other human relation resembles exactly the one uniting a parent to their child. It is not a friendship, since it begins with no mutual choice. It is not a possession, since the child is at no point a good one might dispose of. Nor is it mere biological causality, since what results from it is not one effect among others, but a being capable, in turn, of saying I. Emmanuel Levinas devoted decisive pages of *Totality and Infinity* to this relation, under the name of fecundity, in an attempt to think what neither production nor possession suffices to describe.

2. Fecundity: Transcending Without Departing From Oneself

For Levinas, fecundity designates the singular way in which a subject prolongs itself into a future that is nevertheless not the mere continuation of itself. The child is not a fragment of the father detached from him like an object one shapes and then abandons to its fate. The child is a transcendence: the parent exists, through the child, beyond what their own life could ever accomplish alone, without thereby losing or dissolving themselves in this continuation. One might say that fecundity is the only way for a finite being to exist in several times at once without ceasing to be itself in each of them.

In fecundity, the parent discovers that the future belongs to them no more than the child does. The child carries a time that no one can foresee, or inhabit in their place: to engender is to accept that a part of the future already leaves our power. The birth of a child is thus one of the moments in which the adult most clearly discovers that they are not the centre of history.

3. The Child as Self and Not-Self

It is here that Levinas formulates the most difficult and most decisive intuition for our purposes. The child, he writes in substance, is not merely mine: the child is myself, made stranger to myself. This formula must not be read as a contradiction, but as the most exact description of what parents confusedly discover from the very first days: one recognises oneself in this being, one prolongs oneself in it, and yet it already entirely escapes what one is. It is myself without being identical to me; it is other without being foreign.

My child is myself become an other that I myself could never be.

4. What Fecundity Is Not: Neither Power Nor Work

To clarify what fecundity affirms, one must also say what it refuses. It is not a power, for power is exercised over what remains subject to the one who exercises it, whereas the child, by definition, is called to no longer be so. Nor is it a work, in the sense in which an artist produces a poem or an object: the work remains the property of its maker, who can keep it, sell it, destroy it; the child, however, remains no one's property, and the only gesture truly fitting toward them is to let them become what their parents could never decide in their place.

Parenthood begins where engendering renounces appropriation.

5. What Levinas Gives Our First Paradox

Chapter I posited, as the first paradox of this volume, that the child depends entirely on the parent without thereby belonging to them. Levinas allows us to understand why this paradox is not a mere tension to be eased, but the very structure of fecundity properly understood. If the child were merely dependent, without also being radically other, they would remain a prolongation of the parent, one possession among others. And if they were radically other with no dependence at all, there would be no relation of filiation between them, but only two strangers. It is the exact union of these two traits — depending without belonging — that defines what it means to engender a free being. Perhaps the whole difficulty of parenthood is concentrated in this balance. Too much insistence on dependence, and the child becomes a possession. Too much insistence on otherness, and filiation dissolves. Parental love consists in holding together what one is constantly tempted to separate.

6. Toward Transmission

A question remains, however, that the notion of fecundity alone does not yet resolve. To engender a being at once mine and other than myself is one thing; but this being will still need to receive, in order one day to exercise their freedom, an already-constituted world, a language, a history, a memory they did not choose any more than their own birth. The next chapter will address this dimension: no longer what the parent engenders, but what they transmit, and what it means to transmit a world to someone who did not ask for it.

Chapter III — The Transmission of a World

1. *Transmitting a World to One Who Did Not Ask for It*

The first volume of this collection showed, with Arendt, that to be born is to enter a world already built, already spoken, already handed down. But this world is never offered of itself: someone must transmit it, and that someone is, most often, the parent. Parenthood thus reveals to the adult a responsibility for which nothing had prepared them: they become the obligatory passage between a world that existed before them and a being who asked for nothing in order to enter it.

2. *Arendt: The Educator's Double Responsibility*

Hannah Arendt showed, in her reflections on the crisis in education, that whoever introduces a newcomer into the world bears a double responsibility, exercised in two opposite directions. On the one hand, they must protect the child from the world: not exposing them too soon, too brutally, to a reality whose harshness could crush them before they have had time to form themselves. On the other hand — and this is the less expected movement — they must also protect the world from the child: this common world, made of institutions, knowledge, and accumulated works, is fragile, and the radical novelty each child introduces could, if not patiently introduced in turn into what already exists, sweep this world away rather than continue it.

This double responsibility explains a tension every parent knows without always being able to name it: protecting the child too much from the world prevents them from truly entering it; letting the world impose itself on them without mediation risks breaking them before they are ready. To transmit a world is to hold these two requirements together.

3. *Ricœur: Becoming the First Narrator*

The sixth chapter of *Being Born* showed, with Paul Ricœur, that the born being first receives a story before being able to tell it themselves: they are the character of a narrative others make for them, before being able to become its narrator. Parenthood reverses this structure and reveals its other side: the parent is the one who, first, tells. They tell the child where they come from, who awaited them, what their birth changed for their family. This inaugural narration is never neutral: it inscribes the child within a family history, but also, more broadly, within a collective memory that exceeds them, and which Ricœur invites us to

transmit with particular care, since a poorly transmitted memory can as easily wound as found.

The parent then discovers that they never transmit a world they made alone. They transmit what they themselves received from others before them: a language, customs, narratives, works. All authentic transmission is thus preceded by an even older reception — what Ricœur calls a debt, not a burden that would crush the one who bears it, but a fecundity that passes through them without belonging to them.

Before becoming the narrator of their own life, the child is first the character of a story their parents begin for them.

4. A Second Paradox: A Transmission That Is Never One-Directional

It would, however, be misleading to describe transmission as a movement simply going from the adult to the child, as one might pour an already-formed content into a still-empty vessel. The child who receives a language, a history, a memory, always receives them in their own way, questions them, sometimes distorts them, and it is precisely this singular reception that compels the parent to revisit what they thought they knew well. A child's question can shake a certainty the adult had never taken the trouble to examine. An unexpected way of understanding a family story can reveal, to the one telling it, a meaning they had never themselves seen in it.

Transmission, thus understood, is therefore not a transfer completed once and for all on the side of the one who gives. It is a relation, in which the one who transmits finds themselves transformed by the way the other receives what they offer. The parent who believed they were only giving discovers that they have also received.

A successful transmission is not one that reproduces, but one that makes a renewal possible.

5. Toward Authority

Transmitting a world presupposes, however, that one can, at certain moments, impose it rather than merely propose it: a child cannot always negotiate bedtime, the necessity of school, or the limits that protect them from what they cannot yet gauge. This necessity introduces a question this chapter has not yet addressed, and which the next can no longer avoid: on what does the legitimacy of this authority rest, if it is neither a power nor a

possession, but a service rendered to a freedom that can only be fulfilled by gradually doing without it?

Chapter IV — Authority as a Service to Growth

1. A Badly Posed Problem

Contemporary debates on parental authority most often lock themselves into a sterile alternative: more authority, to restore a firmness said to have been lost, or less authority, to respect a freedom said to be threatened. This alternative poses the question badly, because it treats it as a matter of quantity, as though it were a matter of correctly dosing a substance. The Polish paediatrician and educator Janusz Korczak, who devoted his life and ultimately his death to children entrusted to his care, allows us to pose the question differently: not how much authority should be exercised, but in service of what this authority is exercised.

2. The Child's Present Dignity

Korczak fought all his life against a conviction so widespread that it usually goes unnoticed: the idea that the child is still only an incomplete adult, whose true dignity will only arrive at maturity. Against this conviction, he affirms that the child already possesses, today, an entire dignity, a right to respect that is not measured in advance against what they will become. The child is not a human being held in reserve. They are, in the present, someone — capable of judgment, of secrecy, of grief, of an inner life the adult has no title to despise in the name of their own experience.

The child is not an adult-in-waiting; the child is already someone.

3. The Children's Court: An Authority That Transmits Its Own Function

This principle, in Korczak, never remains a mere declaration. In the orphanages he directed, he instituted a children's court, where disputes between residents were not settled by him, but by the children themselves, according to a code he had designed to help them, whose spirit was less to punish than to understand. The adult did not disappear from this institution: he remained its guarantor. But his own function, judging, was progressively transferred to those very persons it concerned. This is, in a concrete institution, the most exact image one could give of the third paradox announced in Chapter I: a successful authority is not one that maintains itself indefinitely, but one that patiently organises the conditions of its own transmission to those it governed. Authority thus finds its truth neither

in the obedience it obtains nor in the duration of its maintenance, but in the capacity it gives others to one day exercise responsible judgment themselves.

4. What Authority Refuses: Condescension

Korczak also allows us to name what legitimate authority must refuse, and what is too often confused with kindness itself: condescension, that manner of addressing the child as a being whose point of view does not yet truly count. To guide a child, for Korczak, never meant deciding in their place what was good for them without ever consulting them; it meant taking seriously what they perceive, feel, and think, while assuming, when necessary, the limits their inexperience makes necessary. The authority that serves growth is not the one that speaks loudest, but the one that listens enough to know where and how it must still intervene.

5. The Paradox Resolved: Limiting in Order to Make Possible

One then understands why the third paradox of this volume is not a mere logical curiosity. Parental authority really does limit the child's freedom: it sets schedules, imposes rules, refuses requests. But it does so only in service of a still-greater freedom, still formless, which could never unfold without the markers this limitation first provides. An authority that limited nothing would serve no growth; an authority that did not aim, from the outset, to render itself superfluous would no longer be a service, but a domination.

6. Toward Renunciation

Korczak never separated this thought from his existence. His entire work testifies to this conviction that authority is legitimate only in service of those in its charge. When the children of his orphanage were deported to Treblinka in 1942, he refused the opportunities offered to escape their fate alone, and chose to accompany them to the end. This gesture does not found his thought; it merely manifests, in the most tragic circumstances, its ultimate coherence. A question remains, however, that authority, however well exercised, cannot resolve alone: how does the adult learn, concretely, day after day, to renounce the central place they first occupied? It is to this question that the next chapter, with Winnicott, must now respond.

Chapter V — The Apprenticeship of Renunciation

1. An Almost Total Adaptation

The English paediatrician and psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott observed, with rare attentiveness, what is at stake in the very first period of an infant's life: a period in which the mother, or any other adult fulfilling that role, adapts almost entirely to the child's needs, to the point that the child can live in the illusion that their needs themselves create their own satisfaction. This near-total adaptation is neither an excess nor an indulgence: it is, for a precisely limited time, exactly what the child requires in order to begin to exist psychically without being overwhelmed by a world they cannot yet face alone.

2. The Good-Enough Mother: Why Perfection Would Be Harmful

Winnicott names this figure the good-enough mother, and the choice of this adjective is deliberate: not the perfect mother, but the one whose adaptation, sufficient at first, must then progressively diminish, as the child becomes capable of tolerating the gap between their desire and what the world actually grants them. A mother who remained perfectly adapted indefinitely would do the child no service: she would keep them within an illusion of omnipotence that reality will, sooner or later, shatter all the more violently for having been needlessly prolonged. The parent's progressive renunciation is therefore not a failure of love; at a certain age, it is love's most exact form.

The good-enough parent is not the one who never fails; it is the one who fails at the right moment and to the right degree.

The parent's progressive withdrawal introduces the child to a decisive discovery: the world is not the extension of their desire. This disillusionment could be destructive if it occurred abruptly; it becomes, on the contrary, structuring when it is accompanied and gradual. It is in this way, and no other, that the capacity to distinguish one's own desire from what the world actually grants is born — the elementary condition of all future freedom.

3. Programmed Renunciation

This withdrawal owes nothing, however, to improvisation or neglect. Winnicott insists that it is a process as demanding, if not more so, than the initial adaptation: one must sense, almost day by day, how far the child can now tolerate frustration, neither depriving them prematurely of support they would still need, nor maintaining it beyond the point where it

would begin to stifle them. The parent must thus learn a skill no authority has ever taught them before: renouncing with discernment, rather than out of weariness or principle.

4. The Transitional Object: What the Child Invents to Fill the Gap

What makes this analysis so fruitful is that Winnicott never reduces the child to a passive being faced with this progressive withdrawal. He observed that children themselves invent, at a precise moment in their development, transitional objects — a piece of cloth, a worn toy, a comfort blanket — which are neither entirely the child themselves nor entirely a neutral external object, but a personal creation that helps to bear the progressive absence of absolute parental presence. The child therefore does not merely wait for the parent to renounce; they actively participate, through their own ingenuity, in filling the space this renunciation leaves open.

5. What This Costs the Parent

It would be incomplete to present this renunciation as a mere educational technique, neutral and costless for the one who must exercise it. Winnicott never minimised the difficulty, for the adult, of withdrawing from a position in which they had felt, for a time, almost indispensable to the psychic survival of another being. This withdrawal resembles, for the parent, a true loss, even when desired and necessary. The apprenticeship of renunciation thus concerns not only the child, who must learn to tolerate absence; it concerns equally the parent, who must learn to tolerate no longer being, gradually, the one without whom nothing was possible.

All authentic parenthood thus contains a discreet form of mourning. Not the mourning of a lost child, but that of a necessity fading away. Each stage of growth removes from the parent a place they previously occupied, and it is precisely this removal that attests that this growth has succeeded.

Renunciation is the concrete form by which the parent learns that the child does not belong to them.

6. Toward Separation

This progressive renunciation, however well conducted, does not remove the deadline toward which it moves: one day, the child will have to not only tolerate the parent's momentary absence, but truly separate from them in order to become fully themselves. The

next chapter, with Françoise Dolto, will address this necessary separation, and what it means, for a child as for their parents, to finally become a distinct subject.

Chapter VI — Necessary Separation

1. More Than a Distance

Separation is often reduced to a matter of distance: the growing child moves away physically, leaves to study, departs the family home. This dimension exists, but it does not exhaust what the French paediatrician and psychoanalyst Françoise Dolto sought to think under this same word. For her, separation does not first designate a spatial distancing, but the advent of the child as a distinct subject, capable of recognising themselves as other than their parents even while continuing to live alongside them. One can be separated while remaining in the same house; one can remain fused at a thousand miles' distance.

2. The Child as Subject From the Outset

Dolto maintained, against much of the common sense of her time, that the child is a person from birth, capable of perceiving and integrating the truth of a situation well before being able to put it into words. This conviction led her to a singular practice: speaking truthfully to very young children, including about the most difficult realities — an illness, a bereavement, an adoption, a parental separation — rather than protecting them through silence or through reassuring but inaccurate explanations.

3. True Speech as the Condition of a Successful Separation

This practice rests on a precise thesis, which constitutes Dolto's most decisive contribution to this chapter: it is not separation itself that wounds the child, but the silence or the lie that surrounds it. A named separation, even a painful one, can be integrated and lived through; a separation that is silenced or disguised does not disappear for all that — it shifts, and continues to act in a form the child can neither understand nor work through, for lack of words to think it.

It is not separation that wounds the child; it is the silence placed around it.

4. Symboligenic Castrations: Repeated Separations

Dolto does not describe a single separation, occurring once and for all in adolescence or upon leaving the family home. She observes a series of structuring separations, spread throughout

childhood, which she names, in her own vocabulary, "symboligenic castrations": weaning, which separates the child from the maternal body as the sole source of satisfaction; the entry into language, which separates the child from immediately satisfied desire; entry into school, which separates them from the exclusivity of the home; puberty, which separates them from their status as a child. Each of these stages removes from the child a prior form of fusion, in order to open for them a space of symbolisation and autonomy they did not previously possess. None of them is optional; all of them, when well conducted, are structuring rather than destructive.

5. The Fourth Paradox Fulfilled

One then fully understands what the first chapter announced as the fourth paradox of this volume: parental love, through its very success, prepares the separation it seemed to dread. An attachment that never prepared any separation would not be love, but a form of capture. And a separation that did not proceed from a sufficiently secure attachment would not produce a free subject, but an unhealed wound. It is authentic attachment, and it alone, that makes possible a separation that does not abandon, but liberates.

6. Toward Contemporary Metamorphoses

This structure — engendering an other being, transmitting a world to them, guiding them through an authority that intends to be provisional, progressively renouncing one's own indispensability, finally separating from them so that they may become fully themselves — is not an abstract schema that today's parents could apply without resistance. It runs through, and sometimes runs up against, contemporary transformations of parenthood that the final chapter of this volume must now examine.

Chapter VII — The Contemporary Metamorphoses of Parenthood

1. A Structure Tested Rather Than Abolished

As with birth in the first volume of this collection, two symmetrical temptations must be resisted when facing the contemporary transformations of parenthood: the one that laments a supposedly simpler parental authority of the past, and the one that celebrates the child's total liberation from any inherited framework. The six preceding chapters allow us to ask, of each contemporary phenomenon, the same question: does it modify the concrete forms of

engendering, transmission, authority, renunciation, and separation, or does it alter their very structure?

2. The Wanted Child: From Gift to Project?

Today's child is, more often than in the past, chosen, planned, sometimes preceded by years of waiting or medical procedures. One might think that this growing share of decision shifts the child from the register of gift, described in Chapter II with Levinas, to that of project — an object of expectation whose concrete reality ought to correspond to what was expected of it. The risk is real, and it would be dishonest to deny it: a child too heavily invested as a project may suffer from never exactly matching what was hoped for them. But this risk changes nothing in the structure Chapter II established. However wanted, awaited, and planned a child may be, they remain, as soon as they exist, both mine and not-myself at once; the desire that preceded their conception takes nothing away from their own otherness — it only delays, sometimes dangerously, its full recognition.

3. Reflexive Parenting: Managing or Educating?

A contemporary trend pushes parents to monitor, measure, and optimise their children's development with unprecedented attentiveness, sustained by an abundance of advice, tools, and indicators. This reflexive parenting starts from a laudable intention, but it risks replacing education with management, and indefinitely prolonging what Chapter V, with Winnicott, described as a necessarily provisional adaptation. A permanent vigilance, one that never renounces anything, would prevent precisely the structuring disillusionment without which no autonomy can be built.

4. Educational Negotiation: Authority Without Legitimacy?

In the same movement, parental authority is today often viewed with suspicion, as a trace of authoritarianism to be overcome rather than a legitimate service. The parent then becomes a facilitator or companion, reluctant to impose anything that has not first been negotiated. Chapter IV, with Korczak, allows us to answer this suspicion without simply dismissing it: Korczak himself refused condescension, but he never renounced exercising real authority — only patiently transferring it rather than abandoning it outright. A permanent negotiation, leaving room for no undiscussed limit, does not prepare a free child; it deprives them of the very tribunal — which an adult must first institute before being able to transmit it — without which their own capacity for judgment never finds occasion to form.

5. The Digital Challenge: Transmitting a World One No Longer Masters

A situation unprecedented in human history deserves to be named for itself: today's parents are often less competent than their own children in mastering the digital tools that make up a growing part of the common world. Chapter III described, with Arendt, the double responsibility of the one who transmits: protecting the child from the world, and protecting the world from the child. This double responsibility becomes singularly more difficult to exercise when the adult no longer has, in one of the most important parts of this world, the head start it presupposed. The parent must then learn to transmit vigilance and discernment rather than a technical competence they do not always possess themselves — which in no way exempts them from responsibility, but profoundly changes its means.

6. Gauchet: The Deinstitutionalisation of the Family

Marcel Gauchet allows us to connect these four phenomena to a broader movement, already encountered in the seventh chapter of *Being Born* with respect to filiation: the weakening of the symbolic frameworks that once almost automatically stabilised parental authority and the forms of transmission. Where a shared custom, a religious authority, or a largely uncontested social order once supported the parent without their needing to constantly justify it, today's parent must continuously construct, state, and reaffirm what these frameworks once offered effortlessly. This deinstitutionalisation — or, more neutrally, this individualisation of the parental function — is a real transformation, of which the four preceding phenomena are only particular manifestations.

7. What Remains

What these transformations change are the social, technical, and symbolic conditions under which parenthood is exercised. What they do not change is the very structure this volume has patiently uncovered: a child who remains other whatever desire preceded them; a transmission that remains necessary whatever tool carries it; an authority that is justified only by its own transmission; a renunciation that no vigilance can indefinitely postpone; a separation that only truth, never silence, allows one to pass through unharmed. The forms change; the task remains identical: caring for a freedom that is not one's own.

General Conclusion — Caring for a Freedom That Is Not One's Own

This volume's journey was guided by a question simple in appearance: what does the human being discover when they become a parent? The most common answers invoke love, responsibility, or transmission. None is false. But none alone suffices to account for what constitutes the anthropological singularity of parenthood.

For becoming a parent does not consist merely in loving more, nor even in assuming more responsibilities. It consists in entering a relation whose structure has no equivalent: caring for a freedom that is not one's own and never will be.

Throughout these pages, this structure has revealed itself through several complementary figures. With Levinas, we saw that the child is at once mine and other than myself, close to the point that no other relation can be compared to it, and yet irreducibly distinct. With Arendt and Ricoeur, we understood that to transmit does not mean reproducing identically what one has received, but introducing a newcomer into a world that precedes them, while accepting that this world will be transformed by their arrival. With Korczak, we discovered that just authority does not seek to maintain itself, but to make possible the capacity for judgment of those it guides. With Winnicott, that true love requires a progressive renunciation of one's own centrality. With Dolto, finally, that attachment is only fully accomplished by making separation possible.

Beneath the diversity of these approaches, one same logic appeared. Everything that constitutes authentic parenthood seems oriented toward a paradoxical goal: progressively rendering useless what was at first indispensable.

The infant cannot survive without those who care for it. The child cannot grow without those who transmit a world to them. The adolescent cannot become themselves without those who agree to no longer occupy the whole space. But the success of these functions is measured precisely by their capacity to fade away. The parent feeds so that the child may one day feed themselves; speaks so that the child may take up speech; decides so that the child may judge; protects so that the child may face the world; and finally accompanies so that the child may leave.

There is a remarkable singularity here. In many human activities, success consists in increasing one's influence, extending one's work, or prolonging one's power. Parenthood

obeys the reverse logic. The more it succeeds, the less it possesses. The more it accomplishes its task, the more it consents to what it helped bring into being slipping from its grasp.

The more parenthood succeeds, the less it possesses.

This is why parenthood reveals something more general about the human condition itself. The first volume of this collection showed that no one gives themselves their own existence. Each receives their being from a history, a world, and others who precede them. This second volume unveils its complementary side: what we have received is never given to us to be kept, but to be passed on. The human being thus appears as a being situated between an anteriority they did not choose and a posterity they will never entirely master.

Parenthood is one of the experiences in which this condition manifests itself most clearly. It teaches whoever lives it that they are neither the absolute origin of what they transmit, nor the ultimate master of what they engender. It invites them to occupy an intermediate place, at once modest and decisive: that of a ferryman.

Contemporary transformations have profoundly altered the forms of this experience. Reproductive technologies, the individualisation of family trajectories, the redefinition of parental roles, the expansion of the digital world have changed the conditions under which parents exercise their task today. But none of these transformations has removed what constitutes its anthropological core. Everywhere the same requirement remains: welcoming a being who does not belong to us, transmitting to them what we ourselves received, then consenting to their making of it something other than what we had imagined.

Parenthood is thus not merely one episode of human life among others. It is a school of letting go. It teaches that the most accomplished love is not the one that holds on, but the one that sets free; that the most faithful transmission is not the one that reproduces, but the one that allows for the unexpected; and that the highest responsibility is not to shape another in one's own image, but to watch over their growth long enough that they may one day walk without us.

Caring for a freedom that is not one's own: this was the hypothesis of this book. At the end of the journey, it appears less as a definition of parenthood than as the description of a task never entirely complete. For no parent ever finishes learning what it means to accompany a

freedom they do not possess. And it is perhaps in this endless apprenticeship that the quiet greatness of the parental condition resides.

A poem accompanies this threshold in *Le Pédoncule des seuils*, the companion collection of poems that accompanies this series.

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