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FERAL CHILDREN AND AUTISTIC CHILDREN¹

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ABSTRACT

Belief in the truth of the occasional reports of children having been reared by wolves and behaving like animals may in part be accounted for by a narcissistic unwillingness to acknowledge the human nature of the so-called feral children. However, Ogburn has successfully proved that in a recent instance there is no sound evidence of animal foster-parents. Moreover, the behavior of the children strongly resembled that of severe cases of infantile autism with seemingly animal-like traits and habits being treated at the Orthogenic School of the University of Chicago. These are for the most part children of intelligent, educated parents, reared in middle-class homes, and there is no question of intervention by non-humans. As far as the etiology of such behavior is established, it seems to lie in extreme emotional deprivation, which may be equated with the traumatic experiences of wolf children reported from India.

In science, more than in other fields of human endeavor, the correction of a widely held error often contributes more to the solution of a thorny problem than some new discovery or theory. Often, too, erroneous ideas can prevent the valid knowledge we already have from making its influence fully felt. This is amply demonstrated by Professor Ogburn's "The Wolf Boy of Agra." For years, on the basis of much experience with severely autistic children, I have been convinced that most of the so-called feral children were actually children suffering from the severest form of infantile autism, while some of them were feeble-minded, as was possibly the Wild Boy of Aveyron.²

Children suffering from early infantile autism typically are unable to relate themselves in the ordinary way to people and situations from the beginning of life. Extreme aloneness shuts out anything that comes to them from the outside. Some acquire the ability to speak, while others remain mute. But language is not used to convey meaning to others. The over-all behavior is governed by an anxiously obsessive desire to maintain sameness. The term "feral child," in contrast, is not a definite diagnostic category but vaguely denotes very wild children and those supposedly reared by animals.

¹ The study of autistic children which forms an essential part of this paper was made possible by a grant of the Ford Foundation supporting research on childhood schizophrenia.

² J. M. C. Itard, *The Wild Boy of Aveyron* (New York: Century Co., 1932).

From historical accounts of most of the feral children, diagnosis cannot be established. But, the more detailed the accounts, the more definitely do they seem to signalize autistic children. Fortunately, in the case of the two famous wolf girls of Midnapore,³ Amala and Kamala, a fairly accurate description of the behavior of the older girl and of the steps in her partial recovery has been published. This story closely parallels our experiences with autistic children at the Sonia Shankman Orthogenic School—a laboratory school of the University of Chicago devoted to the education and treatment of severely disturbed children. These children have never lived in the company of wolves and were reared by none but human beings. The similarities were so great and so unmistakable that no other conclusion seemed possible but that the two wolf girls also had suffered from severe infantile autism, accountable without a history of being reared by animals. Yet I could not doubt the veracity of the Reverend Singh's description of this kind of behavior and development, so familiar to all of us. In fact, I was probably more ready than most to believe in the accuracy of his account, and therefore I fell into the error of also giving credence to his report of how he found them.

But, as I read Ogburn's story, suddenly the blinders fell from my eyes. Now it became all too clear: Singh's account of his

³ J. A. L. Singh and R. M. Zingg, *Wolf Children and Feral Man* (New York: Harper & Bros., 1940), and A. Gesell, *Wolf Child and Human Child* (New York: Harper & Bros., 1940).

close association with the girls could be, and, I believe, was, entirely correct; his *interpretation* of the origin of their behavior—their having been reared by wolves—was false. He was carried away by his imagination about that one single event which makes or breaks his interpretation, namely, the way in which the children were found. He flushed three grown wolves out of the hollow of a “white-ant mound as high as a two-storied building” and found “two cubs and the other two hideous beings there in one corner, all four clutching together.”⁴

Hindsight is always easy. I can now also see the parallel between Singh’s story of finding the girls and the wild fantasies we spun about the pasts of our autistic children when we first met them—speculation originating in our efforts to find emotionally acceptable explanations for this nearly inexplicable and wholly unacceptable behavior.

Later we came to recognize that this speculation originated mainly in two different psychological needs: first, in our narcissistic unwillingness to admit that these animal-like creatures could have had pasts at all similar to ours (the same narcissism which revolted against the theory of evolution) and, second, in our need to understand and to explain (the more unusual, the less acceptable a phenomenon, the greater our narcissistic need of an explanation). Perhaps, too, the more revolting the behavior, the less we wish to devote much thought to it, explaining it by an emotional reaction or in such simple form as to require no further thought.⁵

Throughout the story of Amala and Kamala, the strangeness of the children’s behavior and that Singh had proved truthful in his account of it were taken as evi-

⁴ Asked “How often do wolves den in deserted ant mounds?” Singh replied that “this was the only white-ant mound known to be lived in by the wolves” (Singh and Zingg, *op. cit.*, chap. i).

⁵ For a few years during World War II the Nationalist Socialists of Germany, since they behaved so inhumanly, were viewed as subhuman, and theories that all Nazis were insane found ready acceptance and were defended by psychiatrists.

dence that he must also have told the truth in all else: in his story of the way he found them and in his interpretations of how their correctly observed behavior was due to, and could only be explained by, their having lived with wolves. The mechanism at work here seems to be that the rational mind, which at first rejected the story of Kamala’s behavior, turned out to be an unreliable instrument. Therefore its critical voice was silenced, as far as these stories were concerned, and henceforth everything was believed as told.

This is not surprising to us. Many times when we have described the behavior of some of our extremely autistic children—how they urinated and defecated without so much as knowing it as they walked or ran about; how they could not bear clothes but would run about naked; how they did not talk but could only scream and howl; how they ate only raw food; how they would bite us so often and so severely as to require frequent medical treatments—even persons quite familiar with disturbed children would react with polite or not so polite disbelief. But later, when they met these children, their doubts changed to complete belief, so that they would have been willing to believe almost anything told them about the children or their pasts.

Thanks to Ogburn’s investigation, we now know that Parasram was not found in the company of wolves. We have, therefore, good reason to doubt that Amala and Kamala were found living with wolves. But, just as it was true that Parasram was found wild, there seems no reason to doubt that Amala and Kamala were found living wild in the forest.

But how did these children survive all alone in the wilderness? How did they get lost in the first place? I believe from our experience with autistic children that the wild children could not have survived for very long by themselves, even allowing for the clemency of the Indian weather. Neither their haggard look nor the absence of clothing nor the “hideous ball of matted hair”⁶

⁶ Singh and Zingg, *op. cit.*, p. 18.

prove that they had been lost for long: some of our autistic children keep their wild looks for months. They can and do tear off all their clothes in minutes. Even after years with us the well-groomed hair of one of our autistic girls could, within hours, turn into a "hideous ball of matted hair," glued into a mass by saliva, remnants of food, dirt, and what-not. One of our autistic girls kept her face well hidden for months behind a curtain of hair.

Ogburn speculated that the Indian children might be lost, feeble-minded, or the abandoned offspring of prostitutes—these offer as accurate explanations as any other. My guess would be that they were simply emotionally, and perhaps also physically, abandoned. In the report on the two children of Midnapore we are told by Bishop H. Pakenham-Walsh: "The very primitive people who inhabit the parts where these children were found, who are not Bengalis, do fairly frequently expose baby children."⁷ If these people are ready to expose normal babies, is it so far-fetched to believe that they may also expose older children who act like babies (as autistic children do) or children who seem extremely abnormal to them? Also, how old are "baby children"? How old are the children before people normally stop exposing them? All these questions remain unanswered in the account of Amala and Kamala.⁸

Our own experience suggests the explanation that the girls in question were probably utterly unacceptable to their parents for one reason or another. This is characteristic of all autistic children, no matter of what age; the parents manage to disengage themselves from them by placing them in an institution (as is the usual case in the United States today), or by setting them out to fend for themselves in the wilderness, or, the most

likely explanation, by not pursuing when they run away.

Our experience with the parents of autistic children, many of whom are well educated, good, middle-class people, leaves little doubt that in their deepest emotions they wished to be rid of them and for very good reasons. They could not afford to become conscious of such wishes or to act upon them, because of the demands of conscience, the behavior expected of parents in the United States, and the near-impossibility of a child's getting permanently lost in our cities. But there is hardly one such parent, living in twentieth-century America and conscientiously on the watch, whose autistic child has not managed to get lost several times after the age of about three or four.

It is reasonable, therefore, to assume that it must be quite easy for such children to get separated from their parents under more primitive conditions of life. If one can draw any conclusions from our experiences with some of the parents of autistic children, it is reasonable to assume that their efforts to find their lost children have been more than lax. So much for how feral children may get lost.

But what promotes the belief that there are feral children in general or wolf children in particular? First, such children are not dumb but do not talk; and speech, almost more than anything, separates humans from animals. Animals cannot talk; hence these children must have something in common with animals. Second, all normal children, even if feeble-minded, need humans to take care of them and will reach out to them; but these children shun human company. Third, some of these children are ferocious in their attacks on others, using claws and teeth, like animals. Beyond that, I can offer only speculation. Thus, for example, if the people of the region where the two girls of Midnapore were found believed in the transmigration of souls and were confronted with the behavior of the girls, is it not possible that they thought of them as having been wolves in a previous incarnation or of now representing an incarnation that was part

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. xxvi.

⁸ While Pakenham-Walsh, who knew the area, spoke only of "baby children," R. R. Gates, in his introductory remarks to the report on the wolf girls, mentions that in the jungle areas of India "female children are still occasionally exposed" (*ibid.*, p. xiii).

wolf, part human? Such beliefs were unacceptable to the Reverend Singh, but perhaps they were part of his ingrained thinking before he became a student of Bishop's College in Calcutta.

I have already suggested the role that human narcissism may have played in making credible the stories of feral children. As long as we could believe that insane persons were possessed by ghosts or devils, their "wildness" was less of a shock to our self-image as human beings. But the origins of the sub-human, animal-like behavior of these children are, in our enlightened age, no longer sought in the world of spirits. In this day of reason, we think, of course, of childhood environment as the source of their behavior. But on first encounter with their wildness, and, thereafter, when their total withdrawal, their "contrariness," their violence, or other types of inhuman, animal-like behavior have overpowered us and made it harder for us to deal rationally with their onslaught, then, and despite all our knowledge, we too are thrown back for moments to feel that they are possessed—that they are "animals." To quote a typical response after a rather mild example of such behavior shown by Anna, one of our wild children: "As I watched her continual application of saliva to all parts of her body, her biting and chewing of her toes, I thought to myself, 'She is an animal, destructively washing herself.'" So the easiest solution to the problem of their behavior is to believe it the result of an animal upbringing.

There are other and more specific reasons to suggest comparing these children with animals. During one year a single staff member had to have medical help more than a dozen times for bites she suffered from Anna, and the children regularly bare their teeth when annoyed or angry. Different, and again reminiscent of animals, is their prowling around at night, in marked contrast to their quiet withdrawal into a corner during the day. One of these girls could finally be reached and brought to accept human closeness only when her favorite counselor roamed through the building with her for

many hours during the night. And only then would she accept food from us. Then there is their great preference for raw food, particularly raw vegetables. Some will go to almost any length to get raw onions and lettuce and similar food, and go into violent temper tantrums if they do not get them immediately. Others lick salt for hours, but only from their own hands. Others, again, build themselves dens in dark corners or closets, sleep nowhere else, and prefer spending all day and all night there. Some build caves out of blankets, mattresses, or other suitable objects. They do not permit us to touch either them or their abodes, and at least two of them would eat only if they could first carry their food into their self-created caves or dens, where they would then eat without using utensils.

Some of these children, on seeing animals, respond as though they had found a dear, long-lost friend. One girl, for example, became extremely excited on seeing a dog; she showed a strong desire to run toward it and cried or howled like an animal, particularly like a wolf. She fell on all fours, jumped like a dog with her head down, and made biting gestures. Now, had we believed in the feral origin of this girl—whose total life-history, incidentally, is well known to us—we would probably have been convinced that, on seeing that wolflike creature, she was filled with memories of her happy times among wolves and was reverting to what she had learned from them.

And yet, despite such similarities between the behavior of some of our autistic children and that of the wild children described in the literature, could it not be that this is all due to chance—that the similarities are only superficial and that closer inspection would reveal important differences? To decide whether Amala and Kamala were autistic children, we have to ask whether they showed all characteristics typical of the disturbance. Does what was viewed as the characteristic behavior of these two girls resemble the characteristic behavior of our autistic children and of infantile autism, as reported in the literature?

Singh, in describing the children's behavior, states as most typical of the two wolf girls, first, what he calls their aloofness and, second, their shyness or fright.

The presence of others in the room prevented them from doing anything, even moving the head from one direction to the other, or moving about a little, changing sides, or turning about. Even a look towards them was objectionable. They wanted to be all by themselves, and they shunned human society altogether. If we approached them, they made faces and sometimes showed their teeth, as if unwilling to permit our touch or company. This was noticed at all times, even at night. . . . For nearly three months . . . there was a complete disassociation and dislike, not only for us, but for their abode among us, for movement and play—in short for everything human. [*Sic.*]⁹

A child psychoanalyst described as what he considered most characteristic of one of our ten-year-old autistic girls: "Her most pervasive behavior trait is her overwhelming panic reaction to the slightest interference from the outside, often occurring without visible external motivation."

This is behavior typical for all autistic children. But how do the authors explain it? According to them, withdrawal from the surrounding world was related to the following:

After their rescue and subsequent capture they were looking for the cubs and the wolves. It was noticeable that they wanted their company and association, but finding that they could not get them here, they refused to mix with the children or with anybody.

They could not find their mates in the jungle; they could not prowl about with the wolves; they missed their cozy den, and could not get to feed on meat or milk. Consequently, the thought of their old environment preyed heavily on their mind, and their thought was to regain their former habitation and company. This fact made them meditative and morose.¹⁰

But how could it have been "noticeable that they wanted" the company of wolves, or how could it have been deduced that "the

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 15–17.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 15 and 17.

thought of their old environment preyed heavily on their mind" and that "they missed their cosy den"? Formerly autistic children whom we have succeeded in rehabilitating to the point where they could tell us about their autistic past have had only the dimmest notion of the vague fantasies which occupied their minds in a state of total withdrawal. We can say with certainty that those who were mute for long periods and were later able to reflect upon it recalled only having been in vague states of terror, interrupted by equally vague fantasies of a bliss without content which, in the literature, has been discussed as oral reunion fantasies. But the latter gives a much too specific content to what are either vague and basically empty states of withdrawal from content and relations to environment or intervals of relative comfort and discomfort.

Singh's descriptions—trustworthy as they are—are so flavored by his convictions about the girls' feral past that I would like, before comparing them with our own experience and with the literature, to quote the only other eyewitness account of Kamala's behavior because it is more concise and less adumbrated by speculations. We owe an excellent description of Kamala's behavior when she was estimated to be fourteen years old (some six years after she had been found) to Bishop Pakenham-Walsh. He was, apparently, if not also the most intelligent, certainly the most highly educated person who saw her. He reports:

When I saw Kamala, she could speak, quite clearly and distinctly, about thirty words; when told to say what a certain object was, she would name it, but she never used her words in a spontaneous way. She would never, for instance, ask for anything she wanted by naming it, but would quietly wait till Mrs. Singh asked her, one by one, whether it was so and so she wanted, and when the right thing was named she would nod. She had a very sweet smile when spoken to, but immediately afterwards her face resumed an appearance of unintelligence; and if she were left alone, she would retire to the darkest corner, crouch down, and remain with her face to the wall absolutely list-

less and with a perfectly blank expression on her face. She had an affection for Mrs. Singh, and was most amenable to her directions during the time I saw her. She was not interested in anything, nor afraid of anything, and cared nothing for the other children, nor for their games. She walked upright, but could not run.

I saw her again two years later, (when her age would have been about sixteen) and except that she had learned a good many more words, I did not notice any mental change.¹¹

During the past years we have cared for at least nineteen children at the Orthogenic School whose diagnosis was definitely infantile autism. We have lived with each for at least one year, and with most of them for several. If an intelligent and interested layman such as Pakenham-Walsh had observed most of them during their first year with us (and a few even during their second or third year) for a period of time comparable to that he spent with Kamala, his description might have been exactly like that he gave of this wolf girl. At present, we have twelve such children, ten of whom, for a year or two, showed the same behavior, though most have since advanced much further intellectually. Three who have been with us for less than two years are now at the stage of behavior described by Pakenham-Walsh as seen in Kamala at about fourteen; a fourth has not yet reached it, since he has not yet said a single word. He has been with us for about a year.

Interestingly enough, two of the children began to say their first words after about a year with us, which closely resembles what was reported of Kamala—that she said her first words after thirteen months, when she began to “prattle like a baby.”¹² From our experience, as well as from Pakenham-Walsh’s description, I doubt that she prattled like a baby, for that is the result of a voluntary reaching-out and an enjoyment first of vocalization and later on of verbalization. These autistic children, even after they have acquired the ability to say a few words—or perhaps, I should say, have overcome their

reluctance enough to venture a few words—prefer not to use them but to let us do the talking for them, as was noted in Kamala after six years. The soft, hesitating, often echolalia-like saying of preferably only short single words which characterizes their speech is very different from what develops out of the usual happy prattling of babies. It is also in stark contrast to their wild, ear-piercing screaming, which makes their barely audible and unclear (or overclear) strained enunciation of single words appear, by contrast, to be even more minimally invested with the positive wish to talk than might otherwise seem true.

Kamala’s behavior, as described, is also typical of the behavior of children suffering from infantile autism as reported in the literature. In their classical descriptions of this disease, Kanner and Mahler¹³ state the most characteristic feature of infantile autism to be a profound withdrawal from contact with people, an obsessive desire for the preservation of sameness that none but the child himself may disrupt on rare occasions, and this while retaining an intelligent and pensive physiognomy. Equally characteristic is either mutism or the kind of language apparently not intended as communication. The children are unable to relate themselves to people and situations from the beginning of life, are referred to as self-sufficient, act as though people are not there, and give the impression of silent wisdom.

Kanner’s first case, Donald, at the age of five displayed “an abstraction of mind which made him perfectly oblivious to everything about him. He appears to be always thinking and thinking, and to get his attention almost

¹¹ L. Kanner, “Autistic Disturbances of Affective Contact,” *Nervous Child*, II (1942–43), 217–50; “Early Infantile Autism,” *Journal of Pediatrics*, XXV (1944), 211–17; *Child Psychiatry* (Springfield, Ill.: Charles C Thomas, 1948), pp. 716–29; and “Early Infantile Autism,” *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, XIX (1949), 416–26; M. Mahler, “On Child Psychosis and Schizophrenia,” *Psychoanalytic Study of the Child*, VII (1952), 286–303; and M. Mahler and G. Gosliner, “On Symbiotic Child Psychosis,” *Psychoanalytic Study of the Child*, X (1955), 195–211.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. xxvi.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 121.

requires one to break down a mental barrier between his inner consciousness and the outside world."¹⁴ This sounds like Kamala's crouching in a corner for hours, as if meditating on some great problem, so indifferent to all that was going on that her attention could not be drawn to anything.¹⁵

Of Kanner's "Case 9" we are told that "the most impressive thing is his detachment and his inaccessibility. He walks as if he is in a shadow, lives in a world of his own where he cannot be reached. No sense of relationship to persons. He went through a period of quoting another person; never offers anything himself. His entire conversation is a replica of whatever has been said to him."¹⁶ The similarity to the wolf girls' aloofness and shyness is striking, and this boy's never talking spontaneously approximates the Pakenham-Walsh description of Kamala.

And yet, perhaps, some of the specifics of Kamala's behavior (Amala was so much younger, and died so early, that very little of Singh's account deals specifically with her) are so different from the behavior of autistic children as to justify Singh's belief in its feral etiology. To find out whether this is so, I have tried to make a content analysis of the wolf children's behavior. Now, among Singh's descriptions, only one item stands out as very strange, and it is the one repeatedly referred to as explicable only by feral experience. It is also the only one for which we have no parallel among our autistic children. This is Amala's and Kamala's inability to walk erect when they were first found. While several of our autistic children have preferred to crawl on all fours for some time, and others for a long time would walk only bent over, none was actually unable to walk erect when we first met them.

Nevertheless, some facts in Singh's account of the children's lives might suffice to

¹⁴ Kanner, "Autistic Disturbances . . .," *op. cit.*, p. 218.

¹⁵ Singh and Zingg, *op. cit.*, p. 15.

¹⁶ Kanner, "Autistic Disturbances . . .," *op. cit.*, p. 236.

explain this phenomenon. On their capture the girls were immediately placed in "a barricade made of long poles, not permitting the inmates to come out. The area of the barricade was eight feet by eight feet." Singh left them there in that narrow confine and returned five days later to find them deserted by their keepers and left without food or drink. "The situation [was] very grave, . . . the children lying in their own mess, panting for breath through hunger, thirst and fright. . . . The feeding was a problem. They would not receive anything into their mouths." Finally, he got them to suck some tea from a wick, like babies. Before the girls had time to recover, a journey of seventy-five miles was undertaken, lasting for seven days, during which they were transported in a jolting bullock cart. There they spent another seven or eight days in narrow confinement. When they arrived at Midnapore, "they were so weak and emaciated that they could not move about."

If this had happened to some of our autistic children, we would assume that complete and prolonged deprivation of food, drink, and a chance to move about are sufficient to explain total regression to infantilism, such as not walking and being able only to suck. Most of the descriptions we have of the Indian girls' way of walking refer to the time after their arrival at Midnapore. In an entry dated twenty days after (i.e., November 24, 1920), Singh mentions "extensive corns on the knee and on the palm of the hand near the wrist which had developed from walking on all fours." The sores healed, but, he adds, only "on the nineteenth of December we found them able to move about a little, crawling on feet and hands."¹⁷

Thus no moving-about was actually observed in Amala and Kamala after their capture, and probably none took place from the day of their capture until some sixty-two days later when they began to crawl like normal infants: a type of behavior which can be fully explained by the deep regression they had experienced in all other ways.

¹⁷ Singh and Zingg, *op. cit.*, pp. 8-12.

The belief that their walking on all fours was due to their living with the wolves is pure conjecture.¹⁸ I believe that it is much more reasonable to assume that their walking on all fours was part of a regression to the crawling stage such as we see frequently in some of our autistic children.

A characteristic of the children attributed to the feral past is that their eyes were wide open at night, like those of a cat or a dog. We are also told that they could see better by night than by day, though no objective tests support the assertion. This unusual acuity of vision is reported as of December 20, the day after they first began to crawl, when they were barely emerging from their deepest immobility and debility.¹⁹ How Singh could be sure that they could see better at night than during the day, at a time when they could hardly move or do anything else, is beyond me.

Another capacity linked with their feral past is their ability to smell meat or anything else from a great distance, like animals. Hardly anyone who has worked with psychotic children and has reported on them in any detail has failed to remark on their strange hypersensitivity to sensations of smell and touch in stark contrast to prolonged periods of unresponsiveness to those of sight. Hearing often takes a middle position, being sometimes blocked out and at other times or in other cases increased. In general, the senses of closeness (touch and smell) and distance (hearing and seeing) are invested in psychotic children inversely to what is usual in normal persons. Elsewhere I have reported on the extremely acute sensitivity to smell of schizophrenic children, who could smell what we could not.²⁰

Kamala's ability to find her way about in the darkness is reported as unusual and

¹⁸ R. R. Gates, in a footnote to the description of the children's crawling, mentions that A. Hrdlicka in his book *Children Who Run on All Fours*, published in 1931, collected 387 such cases, mostly of white children of civilized parents. This suggests that crawling is neither unique nor necessarily due to feral rearing (cf. Singh and Zingg, *op. cit.*, p. 13).

¹⁹ Singh and Zingg, *op. cit.*, p. 22.

likewise due to her feral experiences. But this is not unusual for many of our autistic children, who, in general, rely very little on sight for getting about.

Amala and Kamala are reported to have eaten and drunk "like dogs from the plate, lowering their mouths down to the plate," to which statement a footnote is attached, saying: "Their methods of eating were conditioned reflexes learned from the wolves."²⁰ Joe (whose history is given below) has never to our knowledge eaten any other way and still eats only thus, after more than a year with us. Other autistic children eat only by shoveling food into their mouths with a paw-like motion, while again others feed only from their own skins.²²

We are told that "the perception of cold or heat was unknown to them," to which, in a footnote, is added that this was "another conditioned reflex from their experience with wolves."²³ But some of our autistic children have sometimes tried to run out into the street stark naked even in Chicago's winter weather, when the temperature is quite different from that of Midnapore. We always caught them quickly, yet they seemed totally insensitive to such experiences and never had so much as a cold in consequence. Schizophrenic children often behave as though they were totally insensitive to heat and cold, as did Amala and Kamala, whose attitude to temperature is therefore hardly unique and proves nothing about a feral past.²⁴

²⁰ *Truants from Life* (Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1955), p. 222. For example, one of our autistic, non-speaking girls at one period kept her eyes shut tight for days. This in no way impaired her ability to find her way about, even when we tentatively put some obstacles in her normal course in the hope of inducing her to open her eyes. This she did not do but sensed exactly the place where the obstruction was put and circumnavigated it.

²¹ Singh and Zingg, *op. cit.*, p. 27.

²² For this and similar strange eating behavior see my "Childhood Schizophrenia as a Reaction to Extreme Situations," *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, XXVI (1956), 515.

²³ Singh and Zingg, *op. cit.*, p. 31.

²⁴ Cf. my *Love Is Not Enough* (Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1950), p. 300.

Sensitivity to pain in psychotic children is, in the same way, unlike that of normal children and has to do with the nature of the disturbance and not with a feral past.²⁵

This leaves only one inhuman characteristic in my catalogue—their inability to laugh. This, too, is quite characteristic for most, if not all, autistic children. As far as my recollection goes, our autistic children have never laughed until such time as we believed they had definitely moved from infantile autism toward severe neurosis, a much more benign degree of emotional disturbance.

Actually, the catalogue of animal-like behavior is slight. Comparing it with what animal psychologists, such as Lorenz, can tell us about the wide variety of an animal's behavior, not to mention the incredible variety of human behavior, it appears that even our most autistic children show only a few characteristics that lend themselves to comparisons with animals. But the few characteristics or types of behavior are so shocking to us that they assume importance and proportion entirely out of line with their actual frequency or significance in the child's total life. If we were to catalogue the behavior of even wildly acting-out autistic children, two things would stand out: first, that most of the time they do nothing and avoid any contact with the world (cf. the aloofness of the wolf children) and, second, that, if they cease to be aloof for short periods, even then they do very few things in comparison with normal children of their age. When they occasionally engage in animal-like behavior, we tend to be so overimpressed by it that we lose sight of the rest.

What was the actual nature of the children's past? If feral experiences do not explain their behavior, what experiences do? I can say nothing about the past of the two

²⁵ Mahler describes how one of her psychotic patients deliberately scorched her own lips with a cigarette lighter and showed no reaction, and she goes on to say that this child's sensitivity seemed grossly below normal and to explain this as an "indication of the lack or deficiency of peripheral cathexis in autistic child patients" (Mahler, "On Child Psychosis and Schizophrenia," *op. cit.*, p. 291).

wolf girls, but perhaps the past of our autistic children may suggest what their actual, as opposed to their imagined, past may have been. I would like to stress here that, while we continue to study these children intensively, as of the moment we reserve judgment about what *causes* infantile autism. By now we are pretty sure of the important role of certain contributing factors, but whether they are causative or only contributory only further work will tell.

It should be stressed again that only a small minority of known autistic children are "wild." For example, only a few of Kanner's cases showed some of the traits which characterized Kamala and possibly also Amala; most of his cases were much more like Parasram. We have worked with both those similar to Parasram and those more like Kamala; both groups have all the essential features in common, with the one exception of the animal-like wildness of the latter.

What causes this difference in behavior? For a time we thought it might originate in the difference in home backgrounds. All Kanner's cases are children of highly intelligent parents, and that is also true of a majority of our nineteen autistic children. Some of our wildest children had unusual experiences in infancy, as will be seen from the life-history of Anna. Her parents would hardly be described as highly intellectual. Two other very wild autistic children come from highly intellectual homes. On the other hand, at least five of our quieter autistic children who are very like those described by Kanner come from non-intellectual homes, and four more from lower-middle-class backgrounds, the parents having had little, or at best modest, education.

On the quiet autistic children, more similar to Parasram, ample material is available, particularly in the case studies published by Kanner. I shall give the life-history of Anna, a wild child with animal-like traits, of whom I have already spoken:

Anna came to us at the age of about ten. For years, before she entered the Orthogenic School, her uncontrollable wild behavior had made life unbearable for her family. Her broth-

er, six years younger than she, had been in constant danger of his life and had to be protected at all times from her violence. Neighbors had had to call the police because Anna was so dangerous to their children. Several efforts at placing her in treatment institutions failed. In a very well-known institution for disturbed children she lasted barely half a day; in those few hours she managed to throw the institution into such a turmoil, and did so much damage, that she could not be kept. Even in a psychiatric hospital she could remain only a month because it, too, was not equipped to handle such a wild child. There she had to be in a maximum-security room, that is, a room without any furniture, where she spent her days naked because she tore off all clothes that were put on her. Most of the time she crouched in a corner in total withdrawal; from this she emerged for short periods of wild screaming, running, jumping, and pounding on walls and door. Since this made it impossible to keep her in the children's ward, the hospital had to place her in the adult maximum-security quarters, an arrangement too unsuitable to be continued.

Anna's life began in a dugout under a farmer's house in Poland, where her Jewish parents were hiding from the Germans, who were trying to exterminate all Jews. Her parents were ill mated. The mother, who found the father utterly unattractive, had rejected him for years while he courted her hopelessly. Both felt that they were of unlike temperaments and background. By the time World War II broke out, the father had given up hope of winning the mother, but the German invasion of Poland soon changed the situation. He foresaw what would happen after Germany occupied Poland, and so he collected a large amount of wool and made arrangements with a gentile peasant friend to staple it in a dugout under his farmhouse, where he had set up a loom. When the Germans began to exterminate the Jews, Anna's father took permanent refuge in his small earthen cellar. But first he tried once more to persuade the woman he loved to join him. This proposal she again rejected without hesitation. She had no use for him, she said, and would rather be killed by the Germans than live with him. Soon things grew much worse; most of her family was killed. At that time the father, who could no longer leave his hiding place, again sent word to her through his gentile friend, asking her to join him. By then she had been left all alone and had no place in which to hide from the Germans. Very much

against her will she took refuge with the father in his hole under the ground; his peasant friend was willing to let them both hide there. But her condition for accepting was that they would have no sexual relations.

The father managed to support them, and in part also the peasant who hid them all during the German occupation, by weaving in his underground hole. The peasant sold the sweaters he wove, and on what he got for them (clothing being at a premium) he and the two in hiding were able to live. But the dugout was so small that there was not enough space for the parents to so much as stretch out at night unless the loom was taken down. Then they could bed themselves down for the night, the wool serving as bed and cover. So every night the loom was taken apart, and every morning it was reassembled. Several times the Germans searched the farmhouse but did not find the two in their cellar; its trap door was covered with stamped earth, like the rest of the farmhouse floor.

At least once (according to other stories they told us, it was *several* times) the Germans shot into the farmhouse. With the passing of time, life under such conditions became ever more difficult, the two being forced on each other without respite. Nevertheless, for over a year Anna's mother refused to live with her husband as man and wife. She rejected him because she felt him to be beneath her, culturally and socially, and repulsive physically. According to Anna's father, though incensed at the continued rejection, he respected her wishes and did not force himself upon her.

About what happened then, the parents' stories disagree. According to the father, they trembled for their lives every day, but he at least had his work to keep him going, while Anna's mother was beginning to lose all will to live. In desperation he decided that, if she had a child, it would restore her wish to live and maybe even make her accept him. So he convinced her to have a child, and she agreed to have sexual relations just for that purpose. Only because of these circumstances did she become pregnant.

According to the mother, the father pursued her sexually all along. After a year, no longer willing or able to stand the presence of a woman whom he loved so much and who rejected him, he threatened to kick her out of their refuge: she must either surrender or leave—which was tantamount to being killed by the Germans. Only under such duress did she finally give in.

When, in the spring of 1943, Anna, the child of this relation, was born, she did, it is true, occupy the mother and give her some interest in life, but it made existence even more difficult in their narrow confinement. When Anna tried to cry, as infants do, one of the parents had to hold a hand over her mouth, since any noise, particularly a baby's crying, would have given them all away. Also the peasant, who with reason feared for his life if it should be learned that he was hiding Jews, became more and more fearful and angry when the infant made any noise or otherwise complicated matters. So the parents and the farmer, each afraid of the Germans, did their best to see to it that the infant was totally quiet at all times and as little of a bother in all other respects.

As long as the mother could nurse her, Anna had at least enough food. But her milk gave out before Anna was a year and a half old. Then all she could feed her was raw vegetables or such like, since they could not cook. Not until 1945, when the Russian occupation replaced that of the Germans, did things improve, but by then Anna had become unmanageable. Nightly she would run, jump up and down, and scream, sometimes for hours, sometimes all night. She never fell asleep before two or three in the morning. When she was not screaming or being violent, she was doing nothing, "thinking, thinking, sitting by herself and thinking her own life."

Eventually, the parents managed to reach Germany and entered first one, then another, and finally a third DP camp. But, once in Germany and relative freedom, the mother began illicit relations. When her husband learned of it, new and violent fights broke out between the two. The mother wanted to leave him once and for all, but Anna stood in the way. The mother wanted to keep the child, but her lover did not want Anna. The mother was ready to give Anna up because she wanted to live with her lover but was unwilling to surrender Anna to the father. So she suggested that Anna should stay with her own mother. To this the father would not agree—he wished to emigrate to the United States, where he had relatives, and to take Anna there.

During the years in Germany the parents frequently contemplated divorce, but at the last moment the father could never consent to it, fearing that Anna would probably be given into the custody of the mother, who had no use either for Anna or for him. There were violent out-

bursts in front of Anna. As one of them put it: "We screamed and fought all the time over the child." The father's feelings about his wife can best be expressed by his lament: "I so often gave my life for her, and she only betrayed me."

Long before Anna came to this country, even before her brother was born, she was examined by an American physician in one of the German DP camps and immediately recognized as an autistic child who needed treatment in an institution. Since we are here concerned with the background of so-called feral children, and since Anna was recognizably both wild and autistic when about five or six years old, nothing more needs to be said here of her story.

We can say with conviction that it is simply due to chance that our two wildest girls were foreign-born and first saw the world in time of war. Thousands of children were born in DP camps and developed normally, and most of our autistic children were reared in what seemed like good middle-class homes. Even more than the deep inner rejection, total emotional isolation makes for autistic withdrawal, though, as said before, we reserve final judgment until we know more. In general, they seem potentially very bright and very sensitive children. Perhaps this is why they react so strongly to emotions in their parents which they somehow comprehend as a threat to their existence. To protect their lives, they stop existing as human beings, or so it would seem. Thus to give the story of one of our wild, autistic children from a middle-class family:

Joe was the native-born son of native-born, highly intelligent and ambitious parents, exactly what Kanner describes as typical of all autistic children. He was nine when we first met his parents. By then, what they recalled of their attitudes toward him as an infant were highly colored by feelings of guilt, but clearly this was a case of extreme neglect and isolation.

The earliest investigation of Joe's past took place when he was not yet three years old. Several more psychiatric studies preceded his coming to the Orthogenic School and our interview with the parents. From each emerged the same picture of Joe's early life. Both parents began psychotherapy a few years after Joe's

birth, and they gave us permission to confer with their therapists, who stated that they each gave us a truthful account of their early handling of Joe—accounts which also tallied with their personalities and with their past and present attitudes as these were made plain during treatment.

Joe was born within ten months of the parents' marriage, a time when both parents were overburdened and physically and emotionally exhausted. The father, a junior in medical school, held two jobs, one being night work, to support himself and his family. Understandably, he was always on edge. The task of taking care of a baby frightened both parents. As was typical of the father all his life, when in fright, he attacked. The mother's reaction to having a baby was one of fear and panic, which only increased the father's anger. What the father called his anger and fighting back at the baby are described by the mother as violent rages, which kept her in constant fear. Finally, as she said, after living "in fright and trembling," she suddenly turned and started a "counteroffensive"; her husband appeared simply as an enemy to be vanquished.

While the mother stated that she was "thrilled at the idea of having a child," the father reports that her attitude changed immediately after Joe's birth. She became depressed and developed great fear, if not panic, at nursing him. Indeed, she became afraid of everything about Joe, particularly about whether he would get enough to eat. At the same time she was worried by sore nipples and confused about how often she should feed him.

Joe was obviously not a happy baby. He rocked a great deal, scratched his face severely, and cried a lot. He was colicky, and by the end of his first month of life both parents were "fed up with him." They accepted a pediatrician's advice to leave him strictly alone, particularly when he cried. The mother, who had previously felt that Joe's demands on her were monstrous in their excess, was glad to follow this advice rigidly. After a few weeks his prolonged daily crying spells stopped, but he was still left alone most of the time. His mother related, for example, that, when Joe was about six months old, "we again had a violent quarrel one day. We screamed and physically fought each other for half an hour, or longer. Before the fight started, I had just put Joe on the potty, and it all took place within his hearing. He just sat

there on the potty without moving or any reaction."

When he was not yet a year and a half old, the mother went to the hospital to avoid a miscarriage, and, since the father was a physician, it seemed simplest to place Joe in the pediatric ward. This precipitated a regressive episode in which he resumed persistent thumb-sucking and rocking and ceased to speak the few words he had already learned. Some weeks later the mother aborted and had to be hospitalized for a time; yet, despite the bad effect they knew it had on Joe, they put him again in the pediatric ward for the sake of convenience. By then both parents had lost interest in him. The father withdrew entirely into his work, the mother became engrossed in a new pregnancy, and Joe spent most of his time alone, either in the yard or at a nearby beach. He had nobody to play with; he did not move about; he spent all his waking day simply clinging to one toy or another, such as a ball.

The parents first became aware of the seriousness of his difficulties when he was two and a half, at which time the birth of a brother intensified his symptoms: twirling, rocking, thumb-sucking, and lack of speech. When they tried sending him to a nursery school, his total withdrawal became even more apparent. Treatment was attempted but failed.

The parents wished to believe his difficulties were organic, but complete physical examinations at three outstanding medical centers revealed no supporting evidence: each time the conclusion was that his difficulties were emotional in origin. The findings agreed on Joe's extreme intellectual retardation and the severity of his emotional disturbance, as evidenced by his total withdrawal and self-preoccupation, his inability to relate himself emotionally to others or to make any meaningful contacts at all, despite attempts at physical contact made by others. He was and remained withdrawn in his own autistic world, and there was no tangible evidence of fantasy content to his solitary infantile play or to his primitive hand and mouth activity. The low affect responses and the emptiness of his emotional and intellectual life indicated a primary psychotic disorder in which at no time was there any but the earliest and most primitive ego development.

The diagnostic impression was, once, of psychosis of childhood; twice, of infantile autism. Treatment away from home was recommended, and Joe, not yet four, was placed in an institu-

tion where he remained without much change until he was about nine and entered the Orthogenic School. By then he had never made any articulate sounds, though he understood simple commands. He tore his food with his hands, licked the plate like a dog, attacked others in all ways, including clawing and biting—in short, behaved like a “feral” child.

To sum up: Study of the so-called feral children, and comparison of them with known and well-observed wild autistic children, suggests strongly that their behavior is due in large part, if not entirely, to extreme emotional isolation combined with experiences which they interpreted as threat-

ening them with utter destruction. It seems to be the result of some persons’—usually their parents’—inhumanity and not the result, as was assumed, of animals’—particularly, wolves’—humanity. To put it differently, feral children seem to be produced not when wolves behave like mothers but when mothers behave like non-humans. The conclusion tentatively forced on us is that, while there are no feral children, there are some very rare examples of feral mothers, of human beings who become feral to one of their children.

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