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DECENT AND INDECENT: Our Personal and Political Behavior. By Benjamin Spock, M.D. 210 pages. McCall Publishing Co. 1970. \$5.95.

MORALITY WITHOUT AUTHORITY?

by Amitai Etzioni

The main virtue of this book is that it *touches*—and I choose the word carefully—on a cardinal question we all face: Where are we headed as a nation? By removing many curbs on sexual expression, and by undermining respect for established norms and authority, are we eroding the foundation of society? Are we on the verge of a collective breakdown? Are we working ourselves into a self-indulgent anarchy?

Or, are we simply undergoing a moderate and limited adjustment as our society moves from a period in which considerable limitation of individuality has been necessary (to build up our industrial machinery) to one in which social order will be *relatively* more relaxed? Are we now able to allow ourselves a greater degree of variety and freedom, including self-indulgence, without radically altering our affluent way of life? Is the presence of hippies and of student unrest a temporary excess of this adaptive transition?

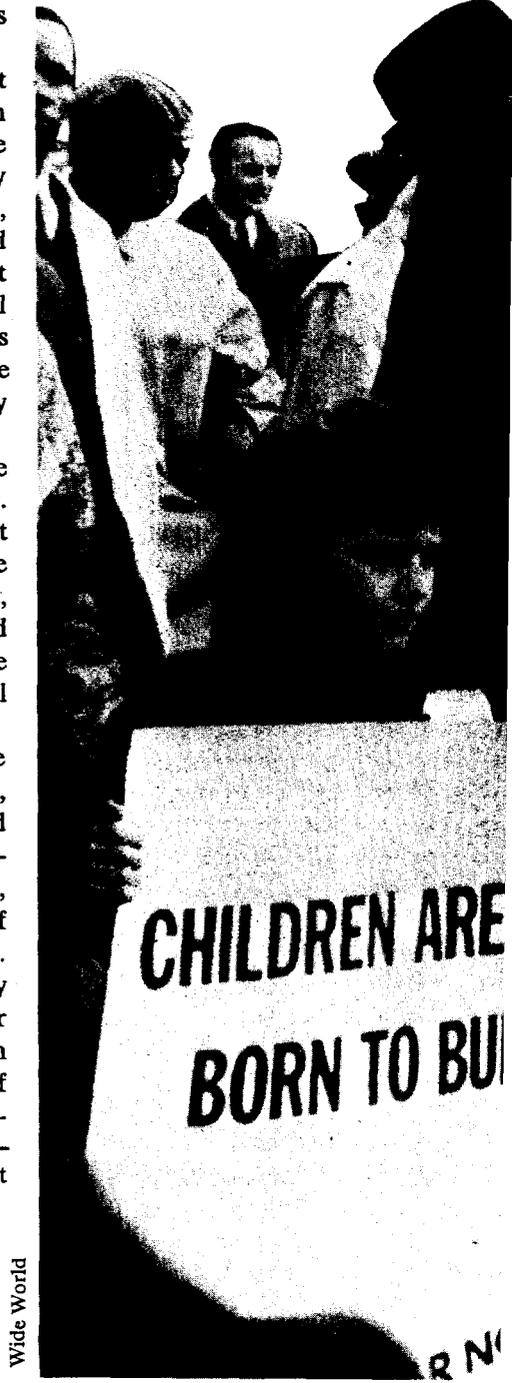
Or, are we on the verge of finding wholly new patterns of personal conduct and societal composition, a community in which all authority emerges from a continual group discussion and the only order is perpetual change? Are we about to learn to combine the fruits of affluence with personal spontaneity and community-mindedness and so, conquering the neuroses of modernity, become rich noble savages? Is the authoritarian backlash that we see around us the last great gasp of those nineteenth-century segments of society that resist adaptation to the new world? Once their resistance is overcome, will we live liberated ever after? To put it more succinctly, are we losing the basis of our civil order, replacing one that is obsolete with a new order, or are we merely *talking* crisis while we actually modify the existing civic order in only a limited way?

Answers to these questions are dependent only in part on the evidence available, which at best is confusing and open to a variety of interpretations. Largely, one's view of the moral order of society and the role of education at home are determined by how one sees the relationship between human nature and society. If one views man as being ultimately good in his spontaneous, uncivilized nature, society becomes a jail, an inhibitor of natural urges, and the prime source of the neuroses of our time; authority then enters on the side of repression. It follows from this that the more we dismantle societal curbs, the healthier society will be.

On the other hand, if one views society as composed of not much more than the sum total of its members' individual urges and behavioral drives, which, unchecked, can pull society apart, then the presence of an imposed authority becomes a prerequisite of our very human existence. Other positions have, of course, been developed, ranging from a stand for order and, hence, authority as the product of a rational consensus, to the premise that if we just restore the primacy of our animal instincts we will not hurt each other.

The trouble with Benjamin Spock's new book, which is made up of loosely connected short chapters, is not that he chooses the wrong position but rather that he seems unaware of the need to take one at all. He sits comfortably on all sides of all fences as he comments at random on many specific issues of educational and public policy. It is not surprising that the baby doctor, lack-

AMITAI ETZIONI, Ph.D., is Chairman of the Department of Sociology at Columbia University and author of *The Active Society* (Free Press).



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ing a consistent point of view, would have us both more restrained and yet freer. For he fails to formulate a guiding principle as to when, where, and why we should behave with restraint or freedom, as if our *individual* freedom were the ultimate one.

If this of Spock's books is remembered, it will be for the breadth of issues he covers and for the tension between New England establishmentarianism and the antiwar rebellion he depicts. That Spock is not simply the dogmatic advocate of permissiveness he has been styled as being by the popular press is clear even to the careful reader of the first (1946) edition of his *Baby and Child Care* book. Over the years, and especially recently, this bible for diapering parents has grown less progressive and more concerned with teaching the child what his social responsibilities are. At the same time, Spock's rebellion against the war-making society has gained international attention. Now, in his most recent book, the reader encounters the full measure of Spock's internal conflicts.

Dr. Spock is not simply the dogmatic advocate of permissiveness he has been styled as being by the popular press. While rebelling against the war-making society, he has grown less progressive in his advice about children, more concerned with teaching the child what his social responsibilities are. Now, in his most recent book, the reader encounters the full measure of Spock's internal conflicts.

In a few hundred sparsely populated pages, Spock subscribes to a wild melange of conservative, liberal, and leftist views. Thus, the Spock who is so outspoken about the war and establishment repression is also surprisingly upset about pornography, which he sees as fostering the "abrupt and aggressive breaking down of inhibitions," a grave risk to a society like America's, especially since "an unprecedented loss of belief in man's worthiness" has occurred already. He suggests setting "levels of tolerance or taboo" that would apply to all aspects of mass media. While admitting that his reasoning is "the same that all censors and prophets of doom have used," he sees censorship as a positive device for maintaining a nation's adherence to standards.

A similar conservative position is taken in respect to the role women are to play in society. Members of Women's Liberation may well drop Spock from their list of most favorite men when they read that mothers are to stay at home, take care of their children, and disregard the possibility of a career outside the home. Arguing that women are temperamentally different from men because of biological factors, Spock urges women to be noncompetitive and to stay in those occupations "uniquely suited to women": "*On the other hand I feel that since women have an inborn aptitude for—and naturally get gratification from—understanding and helping people and creating beauty, and since most of them are going to spend fifteen to twenty-five years of their lives primarily raising their children, it would be fairer to them if they were brought up at home and educated at school and college in such a spirit that they would enjoy, feel proud of, and be fascinated by child rearing rather than frustrated by it.*"

Spock conservatively argues *against* philosophies of education that rely on positive symbolic rewards and oppose physical sanctions. But when he speaks about the calamities technology has wreaked on society, SDS may well consider him for membership after all.



The resulting effect is bewildering because the various positions he takes—none of which is elaborated on—are parts of different *Gestalts*; each of these positions has a different philosophical and normative underpinning that keeps colliding with the others throughout the book. Spock seems quite unaware that he speaks from both sides of the street at once, say, for acceptance of sex as a natural drive and for suppression of some of its more trivial manifestations.

The positions taken are far from novel, and they are advanced in a tedious manner: Page after page is riddled with platitudes, clichés, global pronouncements. Here are two fair examples: *“Man can be the most affectionate and altruistic of creatures, yet he’s potentially more vicious than any other. He is the only one who can be persuaded to hate millions of his own kind whom he has never seen and to kill as many as he can lay his hands on in the name of his tribe or his God.”* Or, *“If America turned its energy to saving the world, the Communist nations would have to follow suit to compete with us, just as they did in developing the bomb.”*

Beyond all this, a *Leitmotiv* runs through the book that reappears, sometimes in a traditional, sometimes in a contemporary, mode: a search for the foundation of moral and public education and the resulting social order. Are we a sick society? What are the sources of our moral weakness? And, more specifically, how can we educate ourselves to be more “decent?” Thus, in this book, Spock accepts the role he has been popularly assigned and deals with the aspects of society he is widely reported to have significantly affected. In fairness to Spock, however, I should indicate that the number of copies his baby-care book has sold (above the 25 million-mark) is no proof of his impact; actually, it is most likely the other way around—the fact that the upper middle classes after World War II were inclined to untighten their educational strings (followed by a rapid rise in wealth and higher education) made his book into a best seller. (The other reason is that the book is written in a way that reassures parents of a surprisingly wide range of views.)

Spock is not only unaware of the basic choices; he also “fudges” on the specific issue with which he chooses to deal: sexual permissiveness and moral education. He is at one and the same time against modernity (as revealed in his tirades against science and technology) and for a permissive upbringing, especially in sexual matters. It is widely believed that a fairly repressive (“uptight”) upbringing is necessary for the functioning of our productive machinery, which makes possible our affluent way of life, the security of our nation, and our high standard of health. The more spontaneous, sexually permissive child-rearing patterns are said to lead to a society that is more relaxed and less efficient (one may speak here about some tendencies toward the Latinization of North America).

I am far from certain that such a linkage does indeed exist, that our psychic energies are either squandered in sexual games or mobilized for industrial and scientific enterprises. Possibly, some reductions in the restrictiveness under which many children are reared may be needed to prepare the younger generation for the world they will live in, one in which work will be increasingly of the professional, creative type that requires a greater capacity to follow one’s own leads. That is, new combinations of spontaneity and productivity may well have to evolve. Similarly, it seems that in our public life we will have to find new ways to allow for more citizen participation without destruction of the societal fabric.





These needs are far easier to point at than to provide for. However, auxiliary questions, more limited in scope but directly relevant to the central issues, can be more readily answered. What we need are more empirical studies of these questions. What we require are studies of child-rearing practices and their effects on the child's capacity to relate to authority, to various kinds of authorities.

One example will have to suffice here. "Permissiveness" as a concept is useful—to a point. To say that a society or a child-rearing pattern is becoming more permissive is to indicate a general decline in rigidity of the pattern of expectations (we ask less) or in the enforcement of the norms (we set standards but do not mind too much if they are ignored frequently). On the level of personality development, permissiveness is also associated with an effort to minimize externally imposed control and thus to rely more on self-regulation; on the societal level, permissiveness describes the elimination of arbitrary commands and the introduction instead of "rational" authority, which explains itself.

However, very little is known about what happens when parents try to follow a "permissive" course in educating their children. If our parents, or their parents, were all authoritarians, how could they shift to a different educational philosophy? *Can* authoritarian parents educate children permissively, or can children who were reared in an authoritarian home free themselves and subsequently succeed in pursuing a consistently permissive policy with their offspring? Or, do they alternate between bouts of permissiveness and authoritarianism? Also, are their permissive phases riddled with guilt over an inconsistent application of sanctions and provision of liberties? Is inconsistent permissiveness, or permissiveness laced with a strong sense of guilt, the cause of children's incapacity to accept authority, or is it a matter of the *limits* of permissiveness?

Permissiveness can be understood as allowing a child to learn to regulate himself within some basic framework, the rationality for which comes largely from within but the boundaries of which are imposed (e.g., you can do what you wish—as long as you stay in the house). This kind of "*contextuated*" permissiveness may have quite different effects from the sort that desperately attempts to eliminate constraints and to award the child as much freedom as possible. Seen more sociologically, the question is of *relative* limits. Are the contexts used by highly permissive families in bringing up their children too free for them to be able later to deal successfully with institutions (such as schools or jobs) which allow far less freedom?

This raises, then, the question of the extent to which institutions can adapt. It seems to be quite evident that most could be restructured to be *much* less authoritarian, to expand extensively their contexts of permissiveness (e.g., discretion at work). But could they be as indulgent as the highly permissive family? Or do such families prepare their children only for a world of expressive communes, in which little must be achieved and no authority must be formed or followed, for a world in which one can always argue and/or leave and income is drawn from parents, from fellow hips begging or stealing, or from sporadic work? Some hippie families and student communes may function in this manner (although even they are very unstable), but can a broader societal base be formed after such models? Or, must we find a new, clearer balance between permissiveness and societal order if our affluent economy is to continue to lay the golden—some would say gilded—eggs? If civilized society is to sustain its civility? ●

