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A New Frontier in the Eighteenth Century: Karl Philipp Moritz and the Exploration of the Human Mind

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Abstract

The 18th century brought about a new and different interest in the workings of the human mind. Karl Philipp Moritz and others retrospectively examined their childhoods in order to recognize ailments of the soul or what we would call psychological disorders. Moritz believed that childhood holds the key to understanding the adult mind. In order to promote such introspection, Moritz published a psychological journal, ΓΝΩΘΙ ΣΑΥΤΟΝ oder Magazin zur Erfahrungsseelenkunde als ein Lesebuch für Gelehrte und Ungelehrte, from 1783 to 1793. He urged his readers to submit reports and anecdotes—essentially case studies—from their lives of unusual and out of the norm behavior. With its novel emphasis on the case study as a means of diagnosing mental illness, the Magazin is generally acknowledged as the forerunner of modern psychological journals and paved the way for later research. The mind became a new frontier which deserved attention and exploration.

Keyword: Ailment, psychology, childhood, 18th century, introspection, self-analysis, Erfahrungseelenkunde, Moritz

1. Introduction

Inspired by Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Emile*, German philanthropists and educators like Campe, Basedow, Pestalozzi, and others subscribed to a radical new idea for the late eighteenth century Germany: let children be children before they become adults. These men believed in a natural order that granted children a special, separate realm from adults. As a result, during the eighteenth century, the general perception of children and childhood changed dramatically. Now, children were no longer merely seen as small versions of adults, but they were afforded a special realm of their own. Philippe Aries refers to this change in attitude and perception as the “discovery of childhood,”¹ and Stephan Schindler has coined the term “invention of childhood.”² Freed from physical labor and from contributing to the welfare of the family, bourgeois children now grew up with much free time on their hands. However, children in the eighteenth century could by no means spend their days doing nothing. Indeed, the free space was quickly filled with education through literary texts written specifically for children. These moral and educational writings by John Locke, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Johann Bernhard Basedow, Carl Felix Weisse, Karl Philipp Moritz, Joachim Heinrich Campe, and others introduced and revolutionized education by providing instructions through fun activities in a formal setting. The objective was to instruct children in reading, writing, moral behavior, and all other topics worthy of education. Many authors of the time made an attempt to regulate and control the unoccupied hours children now had,³ and men from all walks of life started writing literature for children in an effort to occupy children through rigorous and soon mandatory education.

While others wrote literature for children and developed means of controlling them, Karl Philipp Moritz investigated childhood for another reason. Believing that much work needed to be done and that much good could be accomplished, Moritz launched a novel attempt to gain insight into the workings of the unseen entity of the human being, the soul or the human mind. The gateway to the mind or soul was childhood, in his opinion.

¹ Philippe Aries, *Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life*, trans. Robert

² Stephan K. Schindler, *Das Subjekt als Kind. Die Erfindung der Kindheit im Roman des 18. Jhd.* (Berlin: Schmidt, 1994).

³ Katharina Rutschky, ed., *Schwarze Pädagogik: Quellen zur Naturgeschichte der bürgerlichen Erziehung* (Berlin: Ullstein, 1997). XLVI

His contemporaries referred to the exploration of the human mind as *Seelenkunde*, (the study of the soul or mind) and since he based his examinations on observation and consequently gained experience, he coined the term *Erfahrungsseelenkunde*. (The study of the soul based on experience). To explore the workings of the mind, Moritz had the ingenious idea of putting together a magazine or journal which dealt with the study of the psyche. He especially wanted to investigate ailments of the soul, or what we would call psychological problems today. In 1783 he published the first issue of the journal *ΓΝΩΘΙ ΣΑΥΤΟΝ oder Magazin zur Erfahrungsseelenkunde* (a journal or magazine for the study of the mind, a reader for scholars and non-scholars). It became so popular that he continued to edit and publish issues in regular intervals for ten years from 1783 to 1793. It is generally acknowledged as the forerunner of modern psychological journals. Hans Joachim Schrimpf calls it “The first German journal of empirical-analytical psychology.”⁴ The magazine became popular reading material, in part because Moritz edited it and at that time he was already a noted author best known for his travelogue *Travels of a German through England*.

2. The Goal of the Magazin

The goal of the *Magazin* was to shed some light on the obscure workings of the human mind by compiling as many case studies as possible and making them accessible to the reading public. Moritz solicited contributions from interested readers who related their problems, wrote about their own or other people's lives, and described abnormalities and disorders. The entries were essays or case studies that conveyed and described the manifestations of mental afflictions in as much detail as possible. Readers wrote, for example, about unusual compulsive behavior, fears, mental illnesses, religious extremism, unusual sexual behavior, obsessions, and other inexplicable abnormal behavior which originated in the mind.

One of Moritz's concerns, and the one we will be discussing here, is how childhood – positive or negative – shapes and influences a person. He believes that a person's early years are crucial and the determining factor as to how this person will be and act as an adult. He expresses this sentiment when he writes: “The relationship of all ideas collected from childhood on forms the individual nature of the human soul” (*MzE* IV, 1,33). For this reason he encourages his readers to take a close look at their own childhood years and submit their experiences in essay form to the *Magazin*.

Moritz himself professes to have spent countless hours trying to recall memories from his first years of life because memory constitutes the connecting factor between the past and the present, between child and adult. Therefore, it is essential for every adult, Moritz believes, to discover the child within himself through recollection because the adult is shaped and determined by a succession of experiences and traumas.

Moritz believed that publishing these case studies would offer a great service to the reading public. The *Magazin* was not a merely theoretical undertaking. Hoping to promote self-observation in his readership, Moritz assumed the journal would become a common mirror in which the human race can observe itself. He thought that, just as a mirror gives a fairly accurate picture of a person or object, case studies would give a reflection of society and its problems. Such a mirror is necessary as a means of making his readers aware of ailments which originate in the mind or soul. He was convinced scores of people were afflicted with problems but many were not even aware of their ailments. By reading these case studies, the readers would then recognize that they are suffering from the same afflictions and consequently they could change or adjust their behavior.

3. Ailments of the Soul

In contrast to medieval beliefs, Moritz now saw ailments of the soul caused not by bodily fluids, or by supernatural forces, but by a self that is out of balance. To him, an ailment of the soul is an imbalance of all the forces of the soul (*MzE* I, 1, 33). It is quite an abstract concept but to help his readers, he gives several examples of ailments of the soul such as envy, greed, slothfulness, revengeful thoughts, and excessively horny thoughts. His readership caught on quickly and contributors to the *Magazin* wrote about issues we would call mental illnesses or psychological problems such as – and I use modern terminology – obsessive compulsive behavior, sex addiction, compulsive lying, and compulsive gambling etc.

⁴ See Hans Joachim Schrimpf, *Karl Philipp Moritz* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1980) 7.

It was Moritz's theory that a specific and very unique balance of the soul distinguishes every individual from others; consequently no general judgment can be made about what constitutes a healthy equilibrium and what is an ailment. Essentially, if a person is bothered by a problem or if it interferes with every-day life, if it robs a person of happiness or if it hinders interpersonal relationships then we are dealing with an ailment of the soul. A plain definition is never given but that did not stop people from submitting case studies.

Because every person is different and has a unique balance of the forces of the soul, remedies cannot be universally applied to just anyone, but must be custom-tailored to the needs of the individuals. Whereas Freud later believes that a trained analyst is needed and certain universal patterns apply, Moritz proposed a truly individual method of healing ailments of the soul. Two people sick with the same ailment might require two completely different cures.

4. *The Cure*

Identifying problems, seeing them reflected in the mirror of society, Moritz believed, was the first and most important step toward a cure. He was convinced a mere reading of a case study could help readers recognize similar problems in themselves. He envisioned the case study as a trigger for introspection. Let us consider, for example, the man who is obsessed with the theater. The subject in this case study has an unquenchable desire to attend the theater, and this obsession threatens to ruin his life.⁵ Moritz believed that by publishing this man's case history in the form of an essay or anecdote, the readers of his journal would be able to see parallels to their own lives. If some readers had similar problems and had been unaware of such a predicament, they now could identify with the person in the essay. After recognizing that they, too, are afflicted with such an ailment, they can take steps to correct the problem. After all, becoming aware of a problem or an ailment of the soul is the first and most important measure in overcoming it. Interestingly enough though, Moritz never explains the next step, what an individual has to do in order to "cure" himself. Obviously, he was convinced that recognition alone would initiate some kind of healing process; and since it has to be individual, custom made for every person, it is probably silly to discuss all possible cures. So the healing process is left to the reader who has to figure it out for himself.

Observation and an active self-healing process are possible for adults because Moritz's model – unlike Freud's – presupposes a mind that is not obscure and inaccessible, but transparent and comprehensible. Moritz believed behavior could be consciously changed once it was recognized as abnormal or excessive. Moritz's ultimate goal was the improvement of the entirety of the human race and he was certain that his project would contribute greatly to the common good. To accomplish such an ambitious project, Moritz advises all his readers to become trained observers, observers of the self and of others.

5. *The Process*

In order to find ailments of the soul during this process of self-observation and self-analysis, a searching for the roots of the afflictions is essential. Moritz believed many problems start in early childhood and manifest themselves later in life. To resolve the problem, the individual must research his childhood and try to recall as many childhood experiences as possible. The idea of recalling childhood memories is not a novel one; however it was innovative in Germany. A similar idea was proposed by the French Étienne Bonnot, abbé de Condillac in *La Logique/Logic*.⁶ Only then can one draw conclusions and chose a possible treatment.

He believes that a person's early years are crucial and the determining factor as to how this person will be and act as an adult. For this reason he encourages his readers to especially take a close look at their own childhood years and submit their experiences in essay form to the *Magazin*.

To illustrate this notion of how childhood shapes our adult lives, Moritz relates an anecdote of a man who, as a child, attended church services every night with his father. There, the images and impressions stirred his imagination. As he grew older he denied his religion and any pious feelings. Yet, every time he heard a choral accompanied by a mighty organ, he wept (*MzE* III, 2, 100). Though he was a rational thinking man without any belief in supernatural influences, he shed tears when he was exposed to religious music.

⁵ "Eine Geschichte eines unglücklichen Hanges zum Theater" (*MzE* VIII, 1, 1-5).

⁶ Étienne Bonnot, abbé de Condillac in *La Logique/Logic*, trans. R.S. Pine-Coffin (London: Penguin Books, 1961). See here Larry Wolff, "Then I Imagine a Child: The Idea of Childhood and the Philosophy of Memory in the Enlightenment," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 31.4 (1998) 377-401.

Since he consciously denied religion, the author surmises, it must have been the early feelings and images that echoed in his mind. This childhood impression can never be erased. Echoes of the past occasionally surface and manifest themselves in form of memories and often stir the emotions. "The first years of life are truly the most important ones writes one contributor" (*MzE* III, 2, 97).

6. *The Importance of Childhood*

Since in Moritz's model harmful childhood occurrences are enormously detrimental, he suggests a new pedagogy to avoid the possibility of causing future ailments of the child's soul. Only proper education can avert this pitfall. In order to support his point Moritz stated that "Children are born without a pre-determined disposition" (*MzE* II, 2, 97-8), as John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau had suggested earlier. The general consensus in the *Magazin* was that children are born without any preconceived notions or ideas and without inherited shortcomings. A child's unwillingness to submit to parental authority cannot be blamed on Adam and his transgression; this is, rather, the result of bad education or neglect. Parents and nannies carry great responsibility in the shaping and molding of little ones because children are not capable of determining what is virtuous or bad.

Moritz and other contributors to the *Magazin* were greatly influenced by Rousseau and adopted many of his ideas. We see many parallels between Rousseau's *Emile* (1762), for example, and the ideas proposed in the *Magazin*. Rousseau proposed to give a child the best possible start in life by forbidding any questionable art or literature. Moritz and his contributors also believed that a child must be guided toward everything that is edifying in order to help him learn and appreciate the precious and beautiful in life. Then, and only then, will he have an appropriate start in life, diminishing the possibility of problems later in life. A failure to shelter the child from the harmful aspects of life could result in extreme actions and behavior, such as religious fanaticism or other diverse obsessions. Most importantly, Moritz reiterated to the readers over and over to heed the words of all the contributors, recall their own past, search for possible ailments of the soul, and raise their children according to the admonishments published in the *Magazin*.

Since this pedagogy is new and could not have been practiced when the readers of the *Magazin* were children, it is inevitable that many of them suffer from one or more mental maladies. Early memories are of great importance since they constitute the connecting factor between the past and the present, thus joining the child with the adult. Every person has to discover the child within himself through recollection; it is, indeed, precisely the succession of childhood experiences and traumas that constitutes the self. Moritz suggested observing oneself impartially as if looking at a different, separate person. This would require splitting of the self and observing the psyche as if it were the mind of another. What seems difficult or almost impossible becomes feasible when investigating one's own childhood. Looking back at his childhood, the subject is investigating a younger entity of the self. Here a splitting of the self and somewhat impartial observation, as if observing another person, is possible. The dichotomy between child and adult makes the split of the self feasible.

Echoes of the past occasionally surface and manifest themselves in form of memories, illustrating that the person we are now was already shaped in the years of infancy. Moritz indicates that early childhood memories are the "ribbon" which connect the now with the past and this ribbon forms the *Ich*, who the person is (*MzE* I, 1, 66).

Since there is a bond or connecting "ribbon" between now and previous years, it is entirely possible to get glimpses of what shaped the self in the first place. Moritz envisioned that it simply requires some effort on the part of the subject in order to recollect episodes from his earlier years. This attempt of recollection is essential since the past is ever present in the actions and mental ailments of the subject.

One must wonder, however, where childhood ends and youth begins. When can a young man be called an adult? For the answers, we can turn to the article "Vorschlag" and to the *Magazin* where Moritz and others give clear definitions of the thresholds of the various stages of life. Here we learn that the moment of birth ushers in the stage of infancy. In the essay "Beobachtung jugendlicher Charaktere," the author contends that even newborns are extremely easily influenced and therefore warns to control the environment during childbirth (*MzE* III, 2, 98). An infant is a non-speaking subject until the age of three. The acquisition of language then catapults the infant into the stage of childhood at around the age of three years. Having outgrown the *Kindheit* stage at roughly the age of ten the boy then becomes a *Jüngling*--not a child anymore but not yet a man. Eventually the *Jüngling* becomes a man and the man concludes his life as a *Greis*.

For Moritz and others, children are not simply children or even a small version of adults but they pass through several stages of development, much as we believe today. Every stage is unique and plays an important part in the development of the person.

An interesting fact is the terminology the authors of these case studies use in describing these stages. Every term denoting a child is the male term, even if a female one exists. Continually the authors refer to male children, completely excluding girls. Hence we might conclude that childhood in the context of the *Magazin* and in the mind of its contributors is exclusively male.

Clearly, the female gender is never defined in any of the case studies. Surprisingly, however, neither is the male. Boys are simply defined by the masculine term boy and no gender inscription ever takes place. In fact, the entire *Magazin* refrains from any assignment of gender roles. While moral writings for children of the time clearly make the separation of gender roles an issue, the *Magazin* does no such thing. Nowhere are we instructed what a boy is or how a girl should act. Boys in the *Magazin* engage in fist fights yet they also cry and show a tender human side. The *Magazin* does not intend to persuade or force gender roles upon its readership, but it merely encourages self observation. And judging by the articles printed in the magazine, childhood is essentially androgynous. Childhood is universal, not stigmatized by gender division, and it becomes clear that childhood experiences shape a person, and not predetermined genetics. Any outside influence is much stronger than nature.

Though the observations are conducted mainly by men and on male subjects the *Magazin* does not suggest an exclusion of women, quite the opposite is true. Case studies submitted by women and about women were published for public discussion. Even though the language is male centered both sexes can benefit from the project of investigating one's childhood, as Moritz points out. The consequence is a celebration of diversity. And diversity is an important theme.

For instance, we read about a young man who has homoerotic feelings for a classmate, and the report objectively conveys such feelings. There is no moral judgment of right or wrong and the reader is never encouraged to make one. Since there actually is no gender distinction in the *Magazin*, relations between men seem perfectly acceptable. These case studies are very persuasive and allow the reader a glimpse of the subject's motivations and feelings. Readers who live outside the given moral norm can openly discuss their shortcomings with the world, knowing that the editors will not discriminate on moral grounds.

7. The Problem

The entire venture of the *Magazin* appears to have an innovative, therapeutic and liberating character. The description of childhood in the *Magazin* is in its inception not only therapeutic, but supposedly honest, sincere, and true. But not all is well and as rosy as the editors would have us believe. Anyone who submitted a case study was subjective to a certain extent. It is impossible to write about personal issues and be completely objective. As a consequence, childhood with all its pleasures and problems is unfortunately, often a deliberate fashioning by an adult mind. Since the studies are contributed by adult readers, often decades after these memories were impressed upon their minds, they are not only distorted by time and experience but now, at a riper age, the author is aware of any mistakes he made as a child. A retelling of one's childhood often is a correction of wrongs or an excessive and lopsided concentration on positive or negative experiences. Sigmund Freud calls this belatedness – the interpretation of past experiences with the knowledge we now have at a later age. Even the language of some case studies explicitly indicates a construction of childhood. In one important passage Moritz refers to the “ideas of childhood,” (*MzE* I, 1, 66) and a contributor suggests that one should design, create, or even map out the story of one's heart. The term "entwerfen" (*Vorschlag* 492) clearly implies a deliberate construction. Thus, what we regard as our childhood is but an idea, a construct created by an adult mind because the reality is much different – and cannot be accurately recalled. It is, in its essence, a product of a retrospective narrative or text.

Many contributors to the *Magazin* are aware of the difficulties of impartial and true reproduction of experiences that occurred decades earlier because our imagination supplements what is forgotten and therefore distorts true memory. A belated reinterpretation of childhood events is a common problem of the *Magazin*.

By deliberately refashioning and reconstructing their younger years, the contributors constructed a synthetic notion of childhood that is prevalent throughout the *Magazin* and the entire notion of childhood itself lacks a clear connection to reality. For example, childhood without gender simply does not exist.

Androgyny and the absence of gender in childhood accounts might suggest that the contributors are themselves unclear about their process of gendering during their formative years or that gender inscription and distinction is not essential for the process of self observation

Conspicuously absent in all case studies is the nurturing and life giving role of the mother. Childhood and the process of learning takes place in institutions like school, which is often taught by ruthless and sadistic teachers. In retrospect the contributors to the *Magazin* only remember their teachers but almost completely push their mothers out of the picture. Since the *Magazin* generally focuses on how negative influences shape a person we can assume that mothers shaped the children positively. Mothers, then, must also be responsible for gender assignment and gender distinction. With their absence there is no gender thus children in the *Magazin* are androgynous.

8. Conclusion

The notion of childhood in the *Magazin* is thus partially fictionalized and dramatized and conveyed in anecdotal character. However, Moritz has no problems with fictional elements or even fiction itself. He believes that one can analyze literary characters and still learn something about oneself. After all, the case studies, anecdotes, and stories about childhood experiences should act as a trigger for introspection and self-recognition. If a fictional character can accomplish that then the reader has won.

The purpose of the *Magazin* was to change and improve society. Through introspection and self-analysis, Moritz believed it was possible to bring about personal change and a betterment of society. He hoped that the case studies would encourage people to overcome their ailments of the soul and become stronger, better members of society. The goal of introspection is to recognize one's goodness and realize one's place in the universe, he explains.

Moritz saw the human mind a worthy subject of investigation and he believed that there was a deep-seated for ailments of the soul which could be found in childhood experiences, and he believed there was a cure for these ailments. Drawing attention to children, he paved the way for a discourse that continues into the twenty-first century. Moritz was instrumental in opening up a new frontier and many followed. Salomon Maimon and Heinrich Jung-Stilling both wrote books about their childhood experiences around the same and were praised by Moritz. A continued contemplation of childhood issues led Sigmund Freud to propose a different model of childhood about one hundred years later. Like Moritz, however, he relied on case studies to illustrate his theories.

Since in Moritz's model harmful childhood occurrences are enormously detrimental, he and others suggested a new pedagogy to avoid the possibility of causing future ailments of the child's soul. The solution: Only proper education can avert this pitfall. The general consensus in the *Magazin* was that children are born without any preconceived notions or ideas and without inherited shortcomings. A child's unwillingness to submit to parental authority for example, cannot be blamed on Adam and his transgression; it is, rather, the result of bad education or neglect. Parents and nannies therefore carry great responsibility in the shaping and molding of little ones because children are not capable of determining what is virtuous or bad.

Over and over Moritz reiterated to the readers to heed the words of all the contributors, recall their own past, search for possible ailments of the soul, and raise their children according to the admonishments published in the *Magazin*.

The question remains, however, if the sharing of mental ailments ever reached Moritz's objective of improving society. After all, Moritz's suggestion to observe oneself and others objectively, to examine one's childhood and identify possible problems, and to raise children sheltered from anything bad is quite an ambitious project. It is a very innovative approach to researching matters of the soul and mind with high goals for the *Magazin*.

Though Moritz's intentions were pure and honorable, his editor Pockels and readers and contributors soon "perverted" the entire undertaking. Slowly, editorial remarks crept in that judged behavior, moralized, and preached to the readership. Objectivity slowly disappeared and the *Magazin* was read by many for entertainment purposes only. It was not unusual for people to get together to read the latest issue to have a good laugh and to mock the subjects in the case studies. It deteriorated into trendy pop-culture reading and missed its intended goal. But we can still learn much about society and their problems at that time and the case studies are still very interesting and yes – entertaining today.

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