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**Getting That Meal Ticket**

*Roy Lisker*

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## Chapter I

### I come into the world

Although my memory is unexceptional, it is somewhat better than one ought to expect it to be. Some of my memory faculties are even remarkable. Given that all of my life people have paid me unneeded compliments, (one of the standard forms of self-congratulation), on several occasions my memory has even been qualified as prodigious. As I've matured I've quite lost the appetite for flattery, and it does not please me when people spout such nonsense about my endowments.

The French philosopher of science, Pierre Maurice Marie Duhem, (1861-1916) has gone on record <sup>1</sup> for having worried about such matters more than almost anyone else. He argues that two kinds of brain are distributed throughout the human race: the broad, weak brain and the strong, narrow brain. A blending of research, experience and prejudice had convinced him that most Englishmen have broad, weak brains. The French, so he claims, have strong, narrow brains - with the exception of Napoleon, whose intellectual cast is discussed at some length, on page 57.

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<sup>1</sup>The Aim and Structure of Physical Theory; Pierre Duhem; Atheneum 1962,pg. 55

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Distinguishing between these two types of brain is easily done: the attributes of the broad, weak brain may be likened to a strip of sticky fly-paper or a pot of book-binder's glue: facts come into its vicinity and stick to its surface. They may remain there forever, never integrating themselves into any larger synthesis, yet never quite succeeding in breaking loose. In this way, bit by bit a vast repository of miscellaneous dead knowledge is accumulated.

Over the course of a lifetime the surface of a broad, weak mind comes to resemble a public monument covered by an accumulation of decades of bird shit, with nothing at all in its interior. The image is fortuitous: if one strokes such a mind it emits the kind of sound one expects to hear from a hollow bronze statue. Furthermore the knowledge gathered by the broad weak mind has no more relevance to the world than does the speck of shit left behind to the bird that left it.

The strong, narrow mind, the logical mind, the analytic-synthetic mind, the intellectual mind one might say, is the polar counterpart to the broad, weak mind. It shuns facts in the way nature abhors a vacuum. Much as repentance may suddenly wash over the heart of a sinner, it rids itself periodically of the slime-mold of deposited data. Buzzing like a bee through the sunny groves of knowledge it dallies not over each mystifying attraction, each exotic petal and leaf; rather does it spontaneously quintessence the ethereal juices which will contribute to the rich honey of theory. And if, through accident, ignorance or neglect, it may somehow accumulate a paralyzing burden of factual dross, the burden is summarily dumped in one good crap.

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Although I admit the brilliance of Pierre Duhem's bifurcated brain hypothesis, he erred greatly in relating the two kinds of brain to inherent racial characteristics. In any case his opinions on French and English brains ( with a few sour reflections on the Germans) , have little bearing on me. I am an American. One need not be anxious that I intend to unfurl the Stars and Stripes: this statement is being made merely by way of evidence. Son a Scotch-Irish mother, (with a possible admixture of Native American ancestry) and a Russian-Jewish father, I was born in 1935 in the little coal-mining town of Freewash, Pennsylvania. Local legend would have one believe that Freewash got its name sometime before World War I, because it had the only public baths in the region and offered eleven baths for the price of ten. For the sake of those who take stock in such idiocy , my birth took place beneath the sign of Capricorn, on January 18th. In the astrology I've invented for my own use, my birth placed me under the protection of the radio galaxy Mersier 87: a most potent God.

Quite apart from my ethnic precursors, it can be categorically stated that I have a strong mind. In fact I have a very strong mind, which I'm well aware of, thank you, without the need to be continually reminded of it by everyone on every occasion ( more by my enemies, perhaps ,than by my friends.) The presence of a strong mind indicates, following Professor Duhem, the compensating handicap of narrowness. Consequently my memory cannot be very good.

Still, my memory is not too bad either, not bad at all. I can remember events in my life right down to my earliest moments; I even remember the experience of my birth! On the other hand there

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are also some surprisingly large gaps, such as not being able to recall anything that happened to me between the ages of 7 and 9.

In 1950 I astonished my mother by asking her if I'd been born prematurely. Questioning me closely she discovered that my recollections went back as far as my six months in the womb and my three months in the incubator. What made this revelation all the more astonishing was that my mother had never mentioned any of this to me; she has always exhibited a peculiar sense of shame about any feature of herself, whether in thought, body or conduct, that was not commonplace to the rock bottom level of utter banality. A premature birth would certainly have led her to regard herself as a freak of nature. This subject will reoccur several times throughout this narrative.

Given my mother's obsession with normalcy, it is remarkable that every one of her pregnancies has been accompanied with complications. Two years before I arrived she had a miscarriage. In 1942 she gave birth to twins , my siblings Albert and Aga . In 1950 the youngest child, Knut, was delivered by Cesarean section. Parenthetically Knut is an *imbecile genie* : at age seven he could multiply two one- hundred digit numbers in his head. He is otherwise completely unremarkable, even stupid.

Too much weight should not be attached to my ability to remember the principal sensations of my birth. Most of them were reconstructed many years later by examining my physical characteristics in a mirror. In contrast I have always had a clear direct recollection of my life inside that incubator! It was a German model; I did not, of course, know this at the time. In 1959 a shock of recognition hit me while leafing through a catalogue of hospital equipment from the 40's. Even the initial segment of its

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serial number stands out in my mind: ...M ...1.....5.....5..... The rest escapes me.

After I was taken out of the incubator my memories disappear for 6 months. I remember nothing in fact before the day when , at the age of 9 months, I began spontaneously talking in complete sentences. In all likelihood I just said things like "Goo-goo" , and "Ma-Ma", like most babies. Yet I clearly recall the circumstances in which I uttered my first complete sentence. As it happened, my father was trying to bait a mousetrap. He was having a hell of a time with it. Invariably with each new attempt he would set the trap first, *then* try to introduce the bit of cheese. At the last moment the trap would spring loose and grab his fingers. Unable to bear the catastrophe a minute longer I sat up in my crib and cried: "*Put the cheese in first!* "

It is from this incident , I truly believe, that one can date the implacable hatred my father bears towards me to this very day, a hatred scarcely mitigated by our mutual progress towards maturity. After he'd gotten over his initial astonishment, he did put the cheese in first, then set the trap; it all went off without a hitch. Henceforth, however distasteful the fact might be, Mom and Dad were forced to acknowledge that they had a prodigy on their hands.

In most other respects as well my early development was unconventional. I was unable to walk a single step until age 3. For some reason walking has always been more of a problem to me than speaking. Potty-training is something I'd rather not go into. Suffice it to say that the experience was hazardous and grotesque for everyone concerned. That it was accomplished at all must be deemed little short of miraculous.

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Learning to eat with knife, fork and spoon was made far more difficult than it should have been through my becoming so absorbed in the geometry and trigonometry of their shapes as to be incapable of associating them with any sort of utility. Somewhat similar difficulties arose with the tying of shoelaces: my fascination with Knot Theory dates from age 2.

Awareness of the fact of my own precocity, however, began at birth! Even in the incubator I knew I was special. Some people might find it incredible, but to this day I can recall staring into the vapid faces of the doctors and nurses hovering over me, unable as of yet to shout out the monstrous realization that thundered in my consciousness: *I'm better than you!* But how could a speechless infant have hoped to be able to communicate a concept beyond the comprehension of normal minds?

In the process of growing up I gradually learned to couch my innate arrogance under a thick layer of contrived humility; and by now in fact it does not appear to me that I am better than other people. But my breath fairly catches in my throat, with an admiration amounting to awe, every time I reflect upon how an infant scarce one month from the womb could have formulated so stupendous a conception, however infantile that conception might have been!

As I lay in a crib at home my reactions were much the same. Any time that Mom or Dad looked inside to see how I was getting along, the insolent thought screamed from my brain: *"Don't you realize I'm better than you are!"* Fixing them with eyes brimming with hostility, I inwardly raged: *"Can't you numbskulls see that I came into this world for a special purpose? That, unlike the rest of the human race, I have a reason for being here?!"*

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There has never been a time in my life when I did not have this sense of a unique mission. My earliest coherent thoughts are all connected with the impatience I felt at having to wait so long before this mission could be put into action. It must be admitted that, at the time, the precise character of this mission was hidden from me. It continues to be so. In order to maintain my faith in it over the decades I've been obliged to periodically re-interpret every phase of my existence, right from the months in the incubator down to my present residence in the Municipal Men's Shelter on New York's Lower East Side. All of the phases of my life should be understood as adventures in the direction of what I believed, at various times, to be that mission so strongly sensed from the moment of my premature birth. Against all the evidence I still believe in it. The sense of a unique mission hovers in my consciousness in much the same way that the echo of the Primal Creation hovers in the 3° Kelvin background radiation left over from the instant of the Big Bang.

At age one I believed that the divine purpose that had led to my being set down on the third planet from the sun, consisted in being as obnoxious to all and sundry in my immediate environment as it is possible for one brat to be. Note that I was offensive through conviction only, never by character. It is important that I state this, in as much as I am, at heart, a good-natured and kindly soul. Despite this, in this earliest stage of my existence I believed myself under an obligation to make people hate me. Time has changed me into the timid, innocuous person of today. Even as a helpless infant there was a distinct malevolence in the strategies employed to get attention. Until I was finally house-broken I found it possible to time the acts of

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excretion and elimination so as to cause the maximum amount of distress in the household. As a general rule these coincided with those moments when my great-aunt Alice, (deceased these five years, God rest her soul) picked me up to play with me, or while my mother was holding my rosy bare bottom in her naked palms. Looking back over my youthful intransigence, it is tempting to interpret my behavior as an instinctive rebellion against the standard methods of toilet training, particularly as practiced in Freewash at the time. Though perfectly capable of using all the standard facilities by age 1, I continued to make life odorous for my family until the age of 3.

One would imagine that an infant who is able to talk grammatical English at 9 months would not deign to resort to anything as low as bawling his lungs out to get what he wants. And so it was with me; the invention of a hundred insidious devices made crying quite unnecessary. It is doubtful that there are many households able to cope with being rudely awakened, at 2 AM night after night, by a shrill voice calling out with the lusty insistence of babies everywhere: "Help! Help! Come quickly! Hurry up! I'm dying, I'm dying!" One or both of my parents would come running into my bedroom, only to find that the urgency of my need amounted to little more than "I'm thirsty", " Change my diaper! ", or " I'm bored. Read to me!" My father soon got used to my tricks, but my mother always came rushing to my bedside.

Whereas most toddlers are constrained to whine "Gimme" when they want something , thus losing respect and the power to negotiate on equal terms, my standard tactic was to wait until there was somecompany present before saying " Give me (



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this or that thing) , if you don't want me to embarrass everybody telling what I know!"

The sudden inflammation of the Kantian Categories of the synthetic apriori, notably Extension and Cause and Effect, in the impressionable minds of infants , leads them, at a certain age , to question everything in sight. They do this by the insidious employment of the interrogative "Why?" to the point where it may literally drive their elders mad. Soon enough children come to understand that, although most things in the universe have no causal connections , yet, owing to severe limitations on the capacities of the human brain, they appear to have them. The demented repetition of "Why? " , so aggravating even in normal children, was refined by me into a veritable instrument of torture. Here is a typical exchange between my father and myself at that time. It shows why he had more than his share of reasons to hate me:

" Daddy: why am I me?"

" I also ask myself that question!"

" Why? Why do you also ask yourself that question?"

" Because then I would know how to deal with you."

" Why? Is it so important that you know how to deal with me?"

" Shut up and don't bother me."

" Why? Why shouldn't I bother you?"

" Because if you don't shut up, I'll spank you, that's why!"

" Why? What right do you have to spank me?" ( At age 2! I really was a bright baby!)

Another:

"Daddy: why do you look older than me?"

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" You should know that, you smart-ass! Because I was born before you were."

" Why? Why weren't you born after me?"

" I don't know. Ask your grandfather."

" Why? Maybe I should ask my grandmother?"

" All right: ask you grandmother. So what if she's dead? "

" Why?"

" Why? Why not?"

" Why why not?"

This one sticks in my mind as indicative of the little bastard I was:

"Daddy, why aren't you dead?"

" Why do you want me dead?"

"Why do you think my question means I want you dead?"

" Because it's obvious you don't like me."

" Why do you conclude from my asking you why you aren't dead already, that I don't like you ?"

" Okay: let me ask you a question: do you like me?"

" What's gotten over you that you have to ask a question like that?"

My poor father held his head in his hands for a moment before replying:

" Because in fact you don't like me."

" So? Then why do you ask me if I like you or not?"

" Because I, too, want to know why you don't like me?"

" Why?"

And so on, interminably. It should be clear by now that my father is Jewish. His name is Myron Cantor , and my name is Aleph Randal McNaughton-Cantor. My mother's maiden name is Jessica

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McNaughton. The middle name Randal was inserted because *Where Have You Been, Lord Randal My Son* is Mom's favorite ballad. Later on, when I was working for my Ph.D., the family would kid me by calling me:

" *Randal my son the doctor!*" , a cute way of tying together my mixed ancestry.

This "Why" business made the household a living hell for several years; even the recollection of them is painful. Once, during one of their frequent quarrels, Dad railed at Mom:

" You'll do what I say because I'm the boss around here!"

" Why?" I piped up, "What evidence do you have to support the claim that you are the boss around here?"

I live today only because my mother restrained my father from killing me. I should add that it was not always my fault that I got into trouble. My father is not known for benevolence, even towards amiable beings like my brothers and sister. I've never seen him drunk, and I've often wondered if his being so might reveal a gentler side to his nature. Now that I've reached my middle 30's I can answer the question he put to me at age 14 months: Why don't you like me?

- *Because you are an obnoxious, tyrannical, penny-pinching schmuck.*

- *Because you save used tooth-picks.*

- *Because you don't even know how to set a mouse-trap.*

- *Because you never change your socks .*

-*Because Mom throws you around like a sack of potatoes.*

- *Because you've got no self-respect.*

- *Because I hate you, that's all. I just hate you!*

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Having uttered this diatribe , let me just add that I don't in the least blame my father for hating me. I would have been a lousy son no matter what my parents were like . They should have left me in the incubator until

I reached 13. It's a mystery to me how anyone was able to stomach me; I should have had my head examined. At age two I set fire to the house. At age three I murdered Aloysius, our pet dog. Even today there are few regrets: that dog was a real pest. But the method of execution continues to send chills up and down my spine: I threw it into the washing machine during the rinse cycle. Time wrought its changes. Nothing of what I was then resembles me in any way. Rather than touch a hair on the head of some dumb creature I'd sooner chop off my right arm.

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