

## THE DECLINE OF DISCIPLINE

WHETHER we deplore it, or welcome it as a deliverance, it is a fact beyond controversy that parental authority has decreased in the last fifty years, and that this has been accompanied by a decline in family discipline. The battle is joined, but the issue is still in doubt, between those who see in this a breakdown of the family group pattern, and those who believe that the development of the psychologists' 'free' child is the forerunner of a new age of enlightenment, a new family relationship of pure love—although, apparently, the obligations in this new relationship are entirely material ones and entirely one-sided. It may not be inappropriate in a number of BLACKFRIARS devoted to the Family to glance briefly at some of the implications of this phenomenon.

When seen against its historical background the first thing to strike the observer is that this decline is not an isolated fact, but that it appears to be bound up with a general decline of the concept of authority, and a growing tendency to pragmatic thought. Sovereignty is no longer looked upon as delegated by God, but as residing in the group, whether this group is defined as an individual group, or an ideal group of humanity to which all subordinate groups owe allegiance, and with reference to which their separate authorities are limited. The parent has progressively, during the last half-century, come to doubt his 'right' to exercise discipline, has forgotten the real source of his authority, and has accepted more and more State interference. The rapid contemporary advance in Social Services, excellent in so many ways, has often undermined the parents' sense of responsibility, and narrowed the field of their authority, still further. Moreover, once the origin of that authority had become obscure, the mother, and to a lesser degree the father, became an easy prey to the popular versions of current psychology. Hag-ridden by the bogies of 'inhibitions' and 'complexes,' unsure of their obligations, Oedipus-haunted, censured, the twentieth century parents exercised discipline from a temperamental disposition rather than from any other motive, but more often laziness coupled with a deficient sense of responsibility resulted in excessive leniency.

Springing from this debasement of the concept of authority the connotations of many terms related with its exercise have acquired guilty implications. Thus the fact that discipline exists for the sake of those over whom it is exercised has been lost sight of, and

it has become associated with severity, which is the abuse of discipline. The fact that the bewhiskered tyrant of the Victorian home is a figure of fiction that finds its counterpart in legal and social history has undoubtedly contributed to this misuse of the term. Punishment, too, has acquired an ugly ring. It is often looked upon as a resort to force, a breaking of the will, and as such it is rightly suspect. The child's whole will is needed for all striving for the good and resistance to evil. But surely the whole principle of atonement is involved. All children, even very small children, exhibit moral consciousness, and when they think they have done wrong it is only by reparation that they can be liberated from a sense of guilt. When punishment is just and proportionate from the standpoint of the child, and not of the adult, it releases the child from strain and restores its innocence. Moreover, punishment rightly conceived is an expression of confidence, and it should always be so presented. If the child were of its nature incapable of better conduct, punishment would be pointless.

It is not surprising, perhaps, to find, on the other hand, a contemporaneous exaggeration of the concept of freedom. The very word has acquired a heady quality; its devotees, like Eastern dervishes, grow extravagant and in their ecstasy scatter the poppy of oblivion on its relative value. For freedom must always be conditioned by the nature of man and his environment. However great the desire of man, however untrammelled his actions, he is never 'free' to become a sheep in any sense except the analogous one. But as de Rougemont, in *Passion and Society*, has so skilfully diagnosed, 'the superstition of our time expresses itself in a mania for quaintly mistaking a merely necessary condition for a sufficient cause.' Nowhere is this superstition more manifest than in the present-day up-bringing of children.

Semasiology is a science still in its infancy, but it is a method, if a neglected and subsidiary one, of elucidating the history of the human spirit. It may well be that the changing implications in the terms authority, discipline, punishment, and freedom are clues to a current trend in the human spirit towards lawlessness. If this is so, one would expect it to express itself, in its early stages, in the family, which is the archetype of ordered society. Whether we are not in fact witnessing such an attack is a question it would be dangerous to ignore.

DIANA ALBEMARLE.