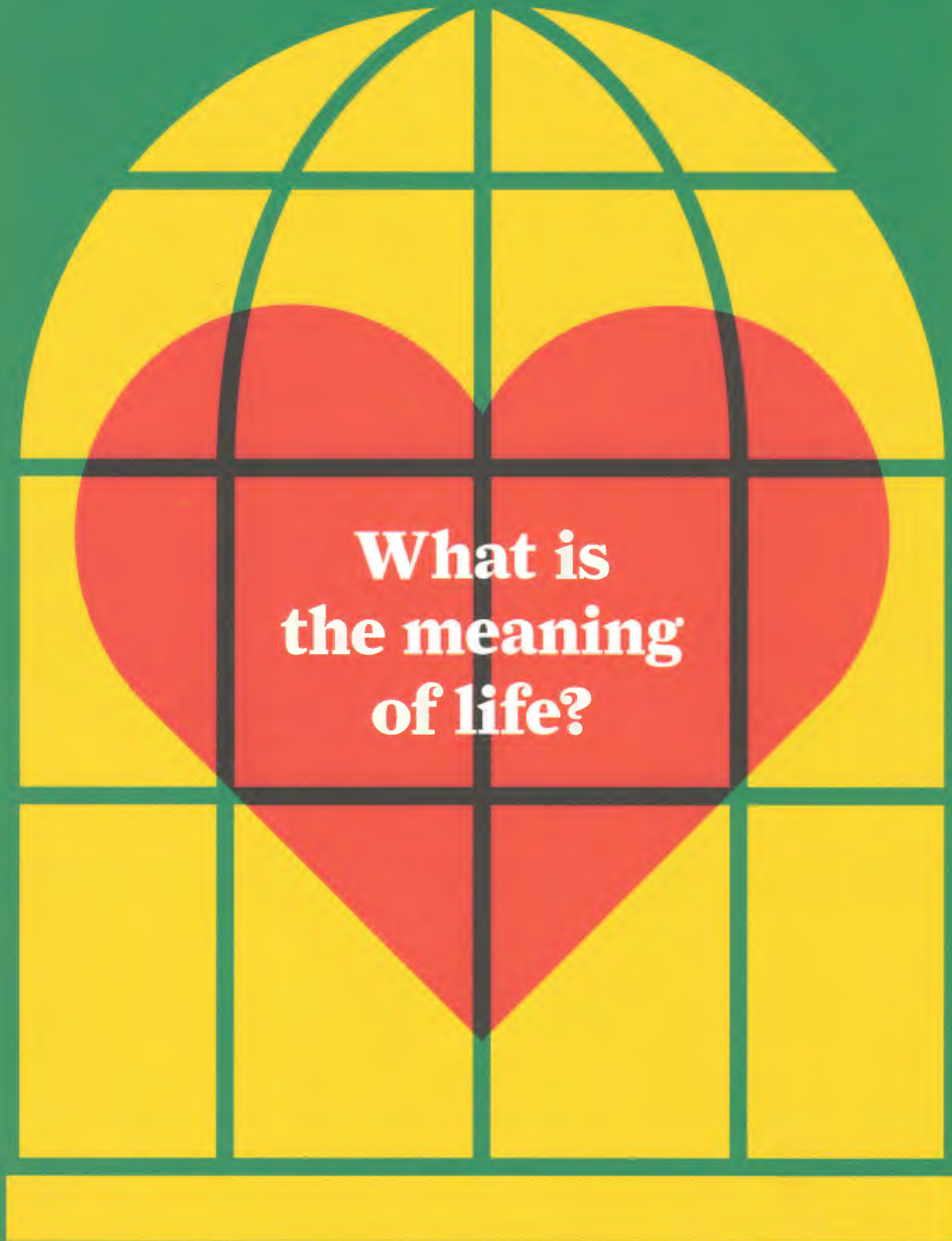


THE SIXTH EXTINCTION

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by Mariana Alessandri

# Giving birth to difference

Creating a human being means contending with life's disappointing byproduct: 'difference'. Our odds of success in our role as creator depend on our willingness to let our creatures differentiate, detach, grow, and become independent. For most of us, handling difference gracefully – what is sometimes called loving someone unconditionally – is learned. In my case, this meant that, after a decade of teaching, I would become a student again. My son and teacher is five years old, and it wasn't until kindergarten that he began to register as radically different from me, and, like a newborn again, as radically alive.

He knows that I don't approve of him eating the school lunchmeat, and my son's two concrete options every day are: eat it or don't eat it. Since he enjoys eating meat that he can't imagine grows anywhere but on some green pasture, abstaining from it

would cause him a degree of pain. Eating it, though, would lead him to two additional choices: tell me or don't tell me. During the first week of school he ate the lunchmeat and told me about it. As it turned out, he hadn't realised that hamburgers were little bits of ground-up cow. After we cleared that up, he agreed not to eat any more school lunches. This seemed to work for the second week, but by the third week of school he was eating it and lying about it. At baseball practice I saw him take something out of his pocket and eat it. When I confronted him about his secret stash, thinking he had swiped a cookie from the counter before leaving, he finally confessed that it was "hamburger with cheese". It had been there for hours. First, I was appalled that he ate the meat, then that he stored it in his pocket, and finally that he hid it from me.

After a few days of disorientation and disappointment at the fact that my son would lie to me about something that I value so highly, coupled with the guilt I felt over not having taught him better, I realised that this issue could stay with us for the rest of our lives as mother-and-son. What would happen when he began to order food for himself at restaurants?

What if he ordered the fajita plate – would I refuse to pay for it? Would he then retaliate and refuse to eat out with me? This fight had the potential to turn into a lifelong power struggle in which each occasion of his eating factory-farmed meat would result in a look of disappointment I wouldn't be able to hide from him. He might learn, as I did, that lying to parents can save you from that look.

During those early weeks, I began to entertain an opposite approach: maybe instead of bending him to my will, I would grow up. He had made it clear that I do not control him – regardless of his age and our disproportionate sizes. Nor am I responsible for his decisions or their consequences. By this stage, I concluded that in creating another person I'd given birth to difference. Painful difference. But I also realised there was more to learn from his wilfulness. Quickly and with no prior practice, I had to begin to love him, unconditionally, even when I thought he was making a mistake or hurting himself. I needed to stop pairing difference with disappointment, and stop offering disappointment a seat at the dinner table.

Every time I would begin to ask myself the series of questions that

began with “*Where did I go wrong?*”, this was my cue to invoke my spiritual master, the child-expert and theologian-philosopher, Mister Rogers. I recalled Rogers’ advice to “let go of the thought of the perfect child in order to love your child.” This was the best advice I’d ever heard. Rogers’ belief about loving the real child instead of his idealised version reminded me of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard, who, although unmarried and childless, had insight into the labour of difference. Kierkegaard held that true lovers love each other “despite and with” their faults instead of just despite them. Rogers and Kierkegaard would both urge me to love the child I see, the one right in front of me, the one whose belly is full of chicken nuggets. Also, incidentally, to love myself that way. The history of philosophy is full of lovers grappling with difference, and it offers us wisdom on how to avoid being eternally disappointed by the fact that you are not me. It also shows us, sometimes by way of negative example, how we might come to love difference itself.

Nineteen centuries before Kierkegaard, Plato wrote that Alcibi-

ades loved Socrates so much that he wanted to crack his head open to find the goodness inside. In the *Symposium*, Alcibiades compared Socrates to a statue of Silenus, in whose bust the craftsman would carefully place images of the gods. The difference between Socrates and Silenus, though, is that the statue was created to be opened, and Socrates wasn’t. Alcibi-

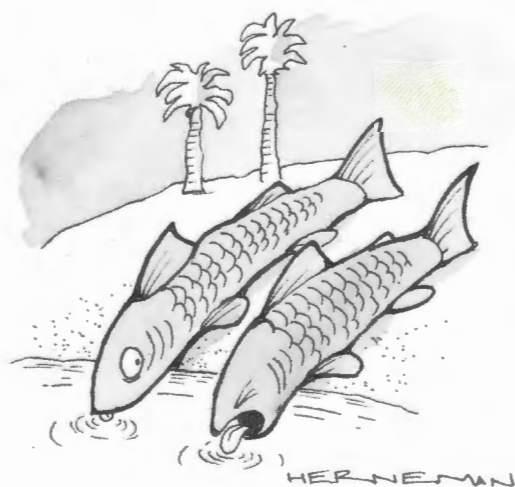
## What makes life tricky is: how to love someone without killing, consuming, or becoming them?

ades’ desire to eliminate the difference between them by opening him up would mean bleeding Socrates out. Socrates understood this, so he begged his friends to protect him from the man whose loving quest for identity would vivisect him. What makes life tricky is this: how to love someone without killing, consuming, or becoming them?

The Socrates-Alcibiades relationship suggests that love cannot eliminate difference and remain love. Quite

the opposite: love requires difference to love. Even though I had accepted my son’s decision to eat the school lunch because I couldn’t stop him, I hadn’t considered loving the decision, or loving the difference that made the decision possible. As it turned out, my creation was more like the human Socrates than the statue Silenus, and, as such, any non-murderous love needed to be predicated on his display of difference: his penchant for lunchmeat.

The 20<sup>th</sup> century philosopher of otherness, Immanuel Levinas, would tell me that my son will always escape me; he will always be unknowable. Instead of resenting the knife that cut the umbilical cord, Levinas would remind me that my son’s life, as well as my love for him, depended on it. In evoking difference, my son taught me not only that the garden of Eden is everywhere – that to be born a human being means to disobey, sometimes grievously – but also that life is difference incarnate, which is cause for celebration. Difference will still sometimes disappoint me as it did Alcibiades, but my meat-eating son trained me how to listen for, even in his poor decisions, the sound of his heartbeat. ▣



*‘Ugh! Not primordial soup again!’*

