

## 0.1 Chapter 4: self: Mood

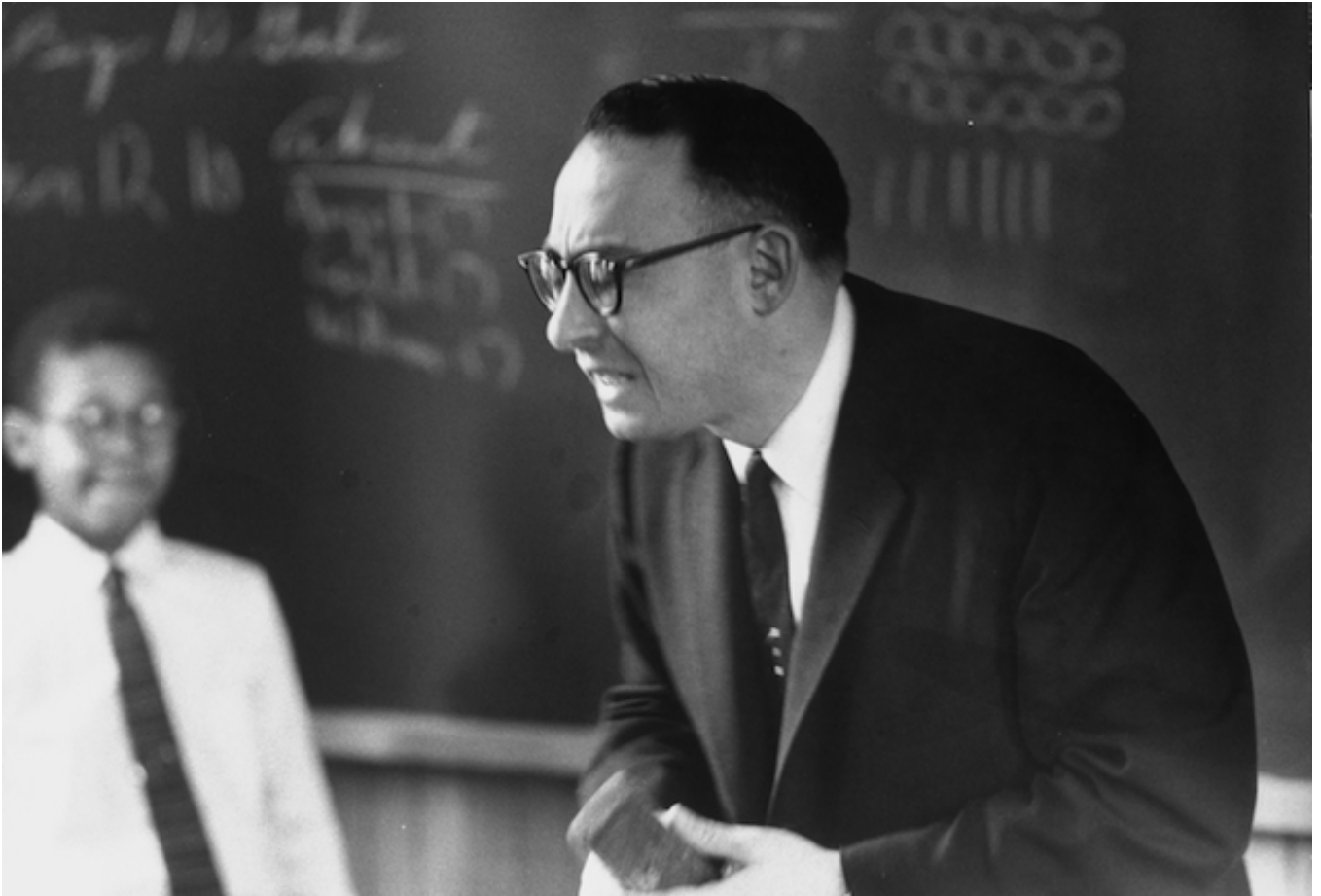
## 0.2 Mood

### 1 On Irritability

Irritability is the tendency to get upset for reasons that seem to other people to be pretty minor. Your partner asks you how work went and the way they ask makes you feel intensely agitated. Your partner is putting knives and forks on the table before dinner and you mention (not for the first time) that the fork should go on the left hand side, not the right. They then immediately let out a huge sigh and sweep the cutlery onto the floor and tell you that you can xxxx-ing do it yourself if you know better. It was the most minor of criticisms and technically quite correct. And now theyve exploded.

There is so much irritability around and it exacts a huge daily cost on our collective lives, so we deserve to get a lot more curious about it: what is really going on for the irritable person? Why, really, are they getting so agitated? And instead of blaming them for getting het up about little things, we should do them the honour of working out why, in fact, these things may not be so minor after all.

The journey begins by recognising the role of fear in irritability in couples. Behind most outbursts are cack-handed attempts to teach the other person something. There are things wed like to point out, flaws that we can discern, remarks we feel we really must make, but our awareness of how to proceed is panicked and hasty. We give cack-handed, mean speeches, which bear no faith in the legitimacy (even the nobility) of the act of imparting advice. And when our partners are on the receiving end of these irritable lessons, they of course swiftly grow defensive and brittle in the face of suggestions which seem more like mean-minded and senseless assaults on their very natures rather than caring, gentle attempts to address troublesome aspects of joint life.



The prerequisite of calm in a teacher is a degree of indifference as to the success or failure of the lesson. One naturally wants for things to go well, but if an obdurate pupil flunks trigonometry, it is at base their problem. Tempers can stay even because individual students do not have very much power over teachers lives. Fortunately, as not caring too much turns out to be a critical aspect of successful pedagogy.

Yet this isnt an option open to the fearful, irritable lover. They feel ineluctably led to deliver their lessons in a cataclysmic, frenzied manner (the door slams very loudly indeed) not because they are insane or vile (though one could easily draw these conclusions) so much as because they are terrified; terrified of spoiling what remains of their years on the planet in the company of someone who it appears cannot in any way understand a pivotal point about conversation, or cutlery, or the right time to order a taxi.

One knows intuitively, when teaching a child, that only the utmost care and patience will ever work: one must never shout, one has to use extraordinary tact, one has to make ten compliments for every one negative remark and one must leave oneself plenty of time...



All this wisdom we reliably forget in loves classroom, sadly because increasing the level of threat seldom hastens development. We do not grow more reasonable, more accepting of responsibility and more accurate about our weaknesses when our pride has been wounded, our integrity is threatened and our self-esteem has been violated.

The complaint against the irritable person is that they are getting worked up over nothing. But symbols offer a way of seeing how a detail can stand for something much bigger and more serious. The groceries placed on the wrong table are not upsetting at all in themselves. But symbolically they mean your partner doesnt care about domestic order; they muddle things up; they are messy. Or the question about ones day is experienced as a symbol of interrogation, a lack of privacy and a humiliation (because ones days rarely go well enough).

The solution is, ideally, to concentrate on what the bigger issue is. Entire philosophies of life stir and collide beneath the surface of apparently petty squabbles. Irritations are the outward indications of stifled debates between competing conceptions of existence. Its to the bigger themes we need to try to get.

In the course of discussions, one might even come face-to-face with that perennially surprising truth about relationships: that the other person is not an extension of oneself that has, mysteriously, gone off message. They are that most surprising of things, a different person, with a psyche all of their own, filled with a perplexing number of subtle, eccentric and unforeseen reasons for thinking as they do.

The decoding may take time, perhaps half an hour or more of concentrated exploration for something

that had until then seemed as if it would more rightfully deserve an instant.

We pay a heavy price for this neglect; every conflict that ends in sour stalemate is a blocked capillary within the heart of love. Emotions will find other ways to flow for now, but with the accumulation of unresolved disputes, pathways will fur and possibilities for trust and generosity narrow.



A last point. It may just be sleep or food: when a baby is irritable, we rarely feel the need to preach about self-control and a proper sense of proportion. Its not simply that we fear the infants intellect might not quite be up to it, but because we have a much better explanation of what is going on. We know that theyre acting this way and getting bothered by any little thing because they are tired, hungry, too hot or having some challenging digestive episode.

The fact is, though, that the same physiological causes get to us all our lives. When we are tired, we get upset more easily; when we feel very hungry, it takes less to bother us. But it is immensely difficult to transfer the lesson in generosity (and accuracy) that we gain around children and apply it to someone with a degree in business administration or a pilots license, or to whom we have been married for three-and-a-half years.

We should try to see irritability for what it actually is: a confused, inarticulate, often shameful attempt to get us to understand how much someone is suffering and how urgently they need our help. We should when we can manage it attempt to help them out.