

Aaron Schuster
**Primal Scream,
or Why Do
Babies Cry?: A
Theory of Trump**

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Many critics, journalists, and concerned citizens have compared Trump's temperament to that of a baby. Is he the nation's first toddler president, behaving in office like – to use Freud's phrase – "His Majesty the Baby"? In this essay I propose a more conceptual elaboration of Trump's childishness, starting with a general reflection on child psychology and baby crying, then examining one particularly interesting theory of the screaming tot, that of Immanuel Kant.

Terrible Forces

By the time it reaches the age of two years old, the average baby has cried four thousand times.¹ A colicky baby can scream for hours on end, driving the parents to the brink of lunacy and despair. For all the heartache and suffering caused by babies' crying, perhaps the worst offense is to the practice of philosophy. As Heloise of "Abelard and Heloise" fame complained: "Who can concentrate on thoughts of scripture or philosophy and be able to endure babies crying, nurses soothing them with lullabies, and all the noisy coming and going of men and women about the house?"² In this situation there is only one possible revenge for a philosopher: to turn the troublesome obstacle to philosophical contemplation into a theoretical object itself.

Why do babies cry? The English psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott analyzed baby crying in terms of four distinct motivations: satisfaction, pain, rage, and grief.³ The first is perhaps the least expected: Winnicott underlines how crying is a source of pleasure for the baby, since, like any motor activity, it exercises a vital function (this accords with Aristotle's view: "Those are wrong who in their Laws attempt to check the loud crying and screaming of children, for these contribute towards their growth, and, in a manner, exercise their bodies. Straining the voice has a strengthening effect similar to that produced by the retention of the breath in violent exertions"⁴). Next is the cry of pain, that noisy announcement of bodily discomfort and distress, often triggered by hunger; for the infant, hunger is experienced not so much as a positive desire for food but as a crisis in the body, a pain to be alleviated. The cry of rage designates the temper tantrum, the baby overcome by anger and wailing till it's blue in the face. However unmanageable the raging baby may be, Winnicott underlines the positive side of anger: at least anger implies some degree of faith in the other, as capable of responding to its cries and altering the infuriating situation. Through its screaming the baby manifests a desire for change. A baby without anger is one that has become disillusioned and without hope, reduced to vaguely moaning or banging its head on the wall;

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Donald Trump holds baby cousins Evelyn Kate Keane, aged six months, and Kellen Campbell, aged three months, following a speech he delivered at the University of Colorado, Colorado Springs on Friday, July 29, 2016. Photo: AP.

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eventually it stops crying altogether and lapses into silence. Finally, there is the cry of grief, which marks a significant advance in the baby's psychological development. Whereas rage is mostly a direct reaction to frustration, grief and sadness entail a more complex understanding of the self's relation to others, the whole drama of attachment and loss. Sad crying may also be seen as a minimally poetic gesture, and arguably provides one of the main wellsprings of music: it is an attempt at self-consolation, an unhappy song that the baby sings to itself in order to both give voice to its loss and keep itself company in the face of this loss.

a child's crying with understanding will know that psychic forces, terrible forces, sleep within it, different from anything commonly assumed. Profound rage & pain & lust for destruction."⁵ These obscure and terrible forces, "different from anything commonly assumed," were the object of a whole other line of psychoanalytic theorizing, starting with Freud's idea of the death drive and later taken up in Melanie Klein's psychoanalysis of children, with its emphasis on primitive anxieties and aggressions, attacks and counterattacks. Hanna Segal summed up Klein's surreal vision of the intrapsychic struggles of the baby as follows:

A hungry, raging infant, screaming and kicking, phantasies that he is actually attacking the breast, tearing and destroying it, and experiences his own screams which tear him and hurt him as the torn breast attacking him in his own inside. Therefore, not only does he experience a want, but his hunger pain and his own screams may be felt as a persecutory attack on his inside.⁶

Wittgenstein famously stated that "if a lion could speak, we couldn't understand him."⁷ But what about a baby? If babies could speak, would we understand them? Would they talk of devouring breasts and persecuting penises, like Melanie Klein? If the terrible forces lying inside the baby defy common understanding, creating a gulf between the worlds of the child and the adult, these forces are never completely vanquished by discipline and education but remain, in some sense, our own. Beneath the more obvious and explicit motives, what do we understand when an adult cries or wails or throws a tantrum? What if, for example, the president were to do so?

The Baby's Complaint

Here I wish to focus on one particular explanation of the baby's cry, contained in a few marginal comments by Immanuel Kant. Kant advanced an eccentric yet intriguing theory of the screaming baby, on the basis of his moral philosophy and his notion of the autonomy of the human will. For Kant, when a baby cries it is neither exercising its lungs, nor expressing bodily pain; nor is it simply angry, nor grieving a loss. Rather, it is making a judgment, a judgment concerning the (unfair) conditions of its existence. To Winnicott's list of tears should be added a fifth category: the cry of injustice. Kant writes: "The child who has just wrenched itself from the mother's womb seems to enter the world with loud cries, unlike all other animals, simply because it regards the inability to make use of its limbs as *constraint*, and thus it



A modified plate from Charles Darwin's book *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* (1872).

Does this taxonomy of tears fully capture what is at stake in the infant's wailing? What is missing in Winnicott's nuanced and seemingly exhaustive account is a sense for just how crazy baby crying can be, its extravagant and even diabolical dimension, which stretches to the breaking point more commonsensical psychological explanations. As Ludwig Wittgenstein once put it: "Anyone who listens to



A woman tries to get her baby kissed by presidential candidate Donald Trump at a January 2016 rally in Iowa. Photo: Scott Olson / Getty Images.

immediately announces its claim to freedom (a representation that no other animal has).”⁸ He continues:

The fact that his feeling of uncomfortableness is not due to bodily pain but to an obscure idea (or a representation analogous to it) of freedom and its hindrance, *injustice*, is disclosed a few months later after the birth by the *tears* which accompany his screaming; they indicate a kind of exasperation when he strives to approach certain objects or in general merely strives to change his position and feels himself hindered in it. – This impulse to have his own way and to take any obstacle to it as an affront is marked particularly by his tone, and manifests a maliciousness that the mother finds necessary to punish, but he usually replies with still louder shrieking. The same thing happens when the child falls through his own fault. The young of other animals play, those of the human being quarrel early with each other, and it is as if a certain concept of justice (which relates to external freedom) develops along with their animality, and is not something to be learned gradually.⁹

Kant conceives the scene of the crying child as a kind of trial. Thrust into the world, the newborn quickly discovers itself trapped inside an awkward and ill-equipped form. It lacks motor control, its limbs are flailing this way and that, it cannot even stand upright. The child is helpless. Yet, at the same time, it has an obscure intimation of a power inside it, a sense of its inner freedom. And this consciousness of freedom comes to the baby precisely through the resistance exerted against it: it is the feeling of hindrance that alerts the child to its free will; the child becomes aware of its liberty to the extent that it is thwarted. This is why the baby’s cry is not merely one of distress or irritation, but constitutes a veritable complaint: it is a denunciation of a situation that the baby deems to be unjust; its anger is a righteous anger. And because this complaint concerns not just this or that incident but the baby’s generally hapless condition, it is as if the baby’s judgment were a judgment against existence itself. If babies could speak, they might say, in a quasi-Greek way, “Not to be born like this!” Why consign free will to a useless blob of flesh? – such is the injustice of being born. The original experience of the body is that of an obstacle, a hindrance, a shackles, an “I can’t,” to turn around Husserl’s phenomenological description of embodiment as a primordial “I can” (this is perhaps the origin of

the ancient belief that the body is the prison of the soul). Indeed, one of the few things the infant effectively can do is scream: screaming is thus the very expression of freedom in the form of the denunciation of unfreedom. Now, Kant admits that the newborn does not yet have the cognitive capacities for making such a judgment, but argues that at around the age of three months the tears which come to accompany its crying bear witness to a dawning awareness of having been wronged. It is as if Kant had imagined the baby as a tiny, hapless adult, but, ironically, an adult that turns out to be far more childish than any child (or at least the child usually studied by psychology): the Kantian baby is an incredibly irascible and outraged creature filled with an explosive moral indignation. We might extend this idea further: would not adulthood then consist in a continual restaging of this trial and a reiteration of this complaint, an attempt to settle scores and prove that “I can” in light of this first traumatic raw deal?

Freud wrote about the infant’s condition of helplessness (*Hilflosigkeit*), which makes it totally dependent on parents and caretakers for its physical and emotional survival. Lacan drew on the child psychology of his day to describe the imaginary constitution of the ego in the mirror stage: the fragmentary and uncoordinated body of the infant achieves a degree of mastery over itself through its anticipated unity as reflected in the mirror gestalt. Deleuze modified this scheme with his distinction between partial objects and the body without organs: the body reacts to its fragmentation by creating a smooth, frictionless body, devoid of pesky and rebellious parts. Kant, while starting from the same basic idea about the helplessness of the infant, sketches out a different conflict. His baby is caught between the uselessness of its sensible body, on the one hand, and a precocious intuition of its supersensible vocation, on the other. Although unable to do much except kick and holler, it already has a vague consciousness of itself as a rational being free to set its own ends. And this is what gives its fussing a special intensity:

The cry of a newborn child is not the sound of distress but rather of indignation and furious anger; not because something hurts him, but because something annoys him: presumably because he wants to move and his inability to do so feels like a fetter through which his freedom is taken away from him.¹⁰

Of Winnicott’s categories, the Kantian baby’s cry is closest to rage, but it is a rage against an injustice, the feeling of being robbed or cheated. This is why the baby’s cry is a distinctly human

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phenomenon. For Kant, animals are not free and have no sense of justice, hence they play in an easy and carefree way whereas humans are self-assertive and “quarrelsome” practically from the start. Moreover, this freedom is not something that is “learned gradually,” it is not a cultural acquisition but part of the mind’s inherent architecture. It defines human nature. If culture consists in a refinement of nature, a development of the human being’s innate reason and moral sense (our capacity to do good for its own sake), there is also in human nature something that is recalcitrant to culture, and that stubbornly refuses the path of moral goodness. Contrary to the usual picture, this discontent is not the result of wild animal instincts (hunger, sex) resisting education and discipline, but is something peculiarly human: an even more wild and intractable passion for freedom. The baby’s tantrums reveal the dark side of human freedom. Kant does not hesitate to refer to the child’s “maliciousness” (*Bösartigkeit*, the same term he uses for radical evil in *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*) in order to designate the infantile will that only wants what it wants, that goes its own way and fiercely defends itself against any outside influence or interference. This marks another

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contrast with Winnicott’s account of rage. The Kantian baby does not want help and has no faith in the other; its pain cannot be consoled because it is not looking for consolation. In its fury the baby would rather destroy the other, if it were able.

Kant avec Trump

How can the foregoing help to illuminate the crisis currently unfolding in American politics? Trump is often accused of infantile behavior: he is narcissistic, thin-skinned, has no sense of decorum, is devoid of empathy, petty, cruel, does not read, does not listen, cannot resist trading insults or getting into “schoolyard” scraps, lacks impulse control; like a needy child he is easily influenced and manipulated by strong authority figures (Bannon, Putin). “Donald Trump’s childish tantrums threaten to derail his presidency before it has even begun,” “The leaks coming out of the Trump White House cast the president as a clueless child” are typical newspaper headlines; the *New York Times* ran a column titled “When the World Is Led by a Child.”¹¹ It is perhaps no accident that the Muslim Ban also turned out to be a Baby Ban; recall the five-year-old who was detained as a security risk, or the baby slated for critical surgery held up in Tehran. There is



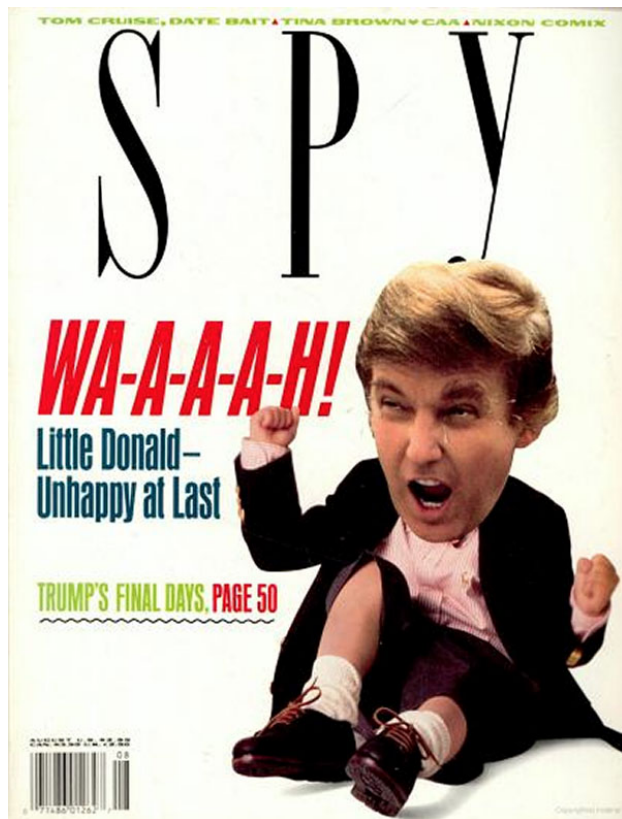
Meme of Trump posted on God's Facebook page. Author unknown.

something too close for comfort in the figure of the baby, something too proximate to Trump's own tetchy constitution. He's been photographed in a kiddie pose mock-driving a semi truck, which spurred the parodic book *The President and the Big Boy Truck*; he's received an animated cinematic portrait in *The Boss Baby*. In his ongoing spat with Trump, Arnold Schwarzenegger recently made a nice interpretation: "I think he's in love with me," said the former Governor, turning the president into the proverbial little boy too embarrassed to express his affection any other way than grabbing a girl's pigtails, or in this case, sending mean tweets. Here I would like to propose a more conceptual elaboration of Trump's childishness, taking seriously, on the one tiny hand, Wittgenstein's observation about the terrible forces at work in the infant, and on the other, Kant's portrait of an obnoxious "freedom baby" (where one can hear the ring of Freedom Fries or the Freedom Caucus or the Freedom Party).

Like the Kantian baby, raging against its own clumsy and immature body, Trump is enraged by whatever obstructs his freedom. And not only is he upset, he is also filled with a profound sense of moral indignation; all that opposes him is unfair, his pain is couched in the

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language of right. This reached its apogee in his recent declaration, too absurd for comment, that "no politician in history, and I say this with great surety, has been treated worse or more unfairly." In contrast to the baby, however, it is not Trump's physical body that is obstructing, or better, persecuting him, but the even more unwieldy and fragmentary body of the State: laws, courts, and the Constitution, first and foremost, but also other elected officials, military leaders, the intelligence community, agency heads, the FBI, climate scientists, budget experts, inside leakers, and so on, the whole federal bureaucracy, not forgetting his overriding obsession and *bête noire*, the news media (now branded with the Stalinist epithet "Enemies of the American People"). Taken together, these disparate elements make up Trump's ungainly political body. They figure as so many obstacles to the free reign of his executive will. They are the inept – or to use a Trumpian best word, "stupid" – body within which the president's will is unhappily stuck. For Trump, the democratic State is a *corps morcélé*, a body in bits and pieces, an unwieldy collection of organs without the unity and mastery he sees reflected in Steve Bannon's ideal alt-image (if Trump has lately distanced himself from Bannon, it is to jealously



Spy magazine, August 1990

assert his dominance against his model-cum-rival). With each media outburst, executive order, and Twitter rant, he expresses a deep contempt for this political body; his is a passion against institutions, up to and including that most fundamental of institutions, language itself.

To paraphrase Wittgenstein: if Trump could speak, would we understand him? Compared with George W. Bush's linguistic bumbblings, which sporadically hit on the truth – recall such classics as “Our enemies are innovative and resourceful, and so are we. They never stop thinking about new ways to harm our country and our people, and neither do we” or “They underestimated me” – Trump's speech manifests a bizarrely avant-garde poetical spirit. During the election campaign Trump stated, “I know words, I have the best words.” Though seemingly a boast about his oratorical skills, something darker was being intimated. Having the best words is not merely a matter of educational pedigree (“I went to an Ivy League institution”) or rhetorical prowess (which is immediately refuted by their enunciation – these are, quite simply, the worst words). They are rather bluster aimed against language, their aggressive circularity an attack on the fundamental principle regulating political discourse, or any discourse whatsoever: namely, that words matter. It is as if Trump were dreaming of a language unfettered by words, like a body unhampered by organs or a State without the rule of law or Capital without limits – a totally slippery symbolic space, evacuated of meaningful content and constraints. We now even have a proper name for this brave new symbolic space, supplied by a recent tweet which immediately went viral: “covfefe.” Trump's Twitter typo presents a reverse Freudianism: instead of a slip that one disavows since it points to an uncomfortable truth, it is a slip that one proudly avows in order to confirm one's absolute mastery over sense and nonsense, which flow exactly as one desires. It is ironic that in covfefe-speak, composed of best-words, one of the privileged terms is “stupid,” a slur used to delegitimize opponents not simply as wrong but as falling outside the universe of truth and falsehood and therefore unworthy of reasoned debate. One of the things confounding about Trump is that beyond the calculated lies and mendacity, which at least have the merit of paying lip service to the truth, there is the inertia of stupidity, covfefe immune to argument. According to a well-known philosophical slogan, “Language speaks.” This phrase condenses an entire reflection on language as that which by furnishing the very horizon of intelligibility and experience escapes the control of the individual ego. We use language, but never in a way we

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exactly choose; we have to bend to its rules and meanings, it forms us even as we use it. Here it is not “Language speaks” but “Language – listen to me! I am the word master.” This can only mean one thing: the degradation of language in general. Language, truth, symbolic reality should all become pliable material, to be reshaped according to the master's will. This pliability at the same time betrays a rigidity and a stale repetitiveness, as all speech is effectively reduced to a sole function: self-glorification. Words must serve Trump just like his name does. Hence the piecemeal construction, both risible and frightening, of a new post-truth reality, made up of unread decrees (Bannon), mangled speech and doubletalk (Spicer), and alternate facts (Conway). Ultimately, there can be only one best word, the “Trump” brand name itself.

Tzvetan Todorov described Kant's “strange interpretation of the first cry of the newborn child” in this way: “If the newborn child cries, it is not to demand what is necessary for life and existence; it is to protest against his dependency in regard to others. As a Kantian subject, man is born longing for liberty.”¹² Usually, the baby's cry is understood as a cry for help; it is a plea, a demand, a call, a primitive form of communication springing from the pressures and exigencies of life. Kant reverses this perspective. First, the baby's cry is not a call for help but a cry which reveals the helplessness of others. It puts under pressure the other who does not know how to respond to or deal with the child's maliciousness. Does one ignore the baby (Obama's “parenting strategy,” hoping it will settle down by itself) or fantasize about murdering it (see many exasperated leftists) or mourn one's defeat by it (Winnicott's self-consoling sad tears) or organize collectively against it (the promising signs of early mass protests)? Second, the cry has, at bottom, nothing to do with “what is necessary for life and existence” it is not fundamentally concerned with vital needs, but expresses the subject's abhorrence of dependency and its unconditional insistence on doing what it wants. This is why the baby's tantrums can be so vexing: while it may be provoked by the smallest incident or frustration, the baby's rage touches on the Absolute. (Here we hit on another of Trump's traits, that any setback or insult can trigger an explosion.) What is the Absolute for the baby? It is to be a fully autonomous being, dependent on nothing, and detached from all ties and constraints (“absolute” in the etymological sense means to unbind or cut links). To be rid of external obstacles and reliant on nobody for realizing one's will: a dream of total independence, which, as Kant understood, would mean “to live scattered in the wilderness,” in a “state of

continuous warfare” (this is a destructive fantasy, filled with rage and pain).¹³ Because the baby’s inept body is the source of its misery, mobility is central to this vision: it wishes to be unencumbered, liberated from restrictions, to move easily and freely, to flow.

This notion of the Absolute points us in an interesting direction. For it is not so much the childish characteristics of Trump that demand critical attention but the way that he incarnates a particular infantile fantasy. In our world there is one thing that corresponds with this fantasy of absolute freedom: money. This is exactly how Norman O. Brown, back in 1958, analyzed the psychological structure of capitalism, as appealing to and exploiting an infantile fantasy of autonomy and independence, itself stemming from the child’s biological helplessness and anxiety-ridden dependency on its parents for its care and life. Initially caught in a sheerly passive relation to the Other, the infant is exposed to the threats of loss, separation, and death. In order to escape from this unbearable situation, it constructs an inner fantasy world without loss or dependency, making itself the sovereign of its own universe – but at the cost of plunging it into guilt and debt, the crushing load of psychic work needed to maintain its illusion of control. Kant’s freedom baby, in protesting against its dependency, is the precursor to Freud’s psychoanalytic baby, fleeing from dependency and helplessness into neurosis. According to Brown, the infantile fantasy par excellence is the “*causa sui* project,” the dream of being a self-caused, self-generating, self-perpetuating being. In its most basic form, this fantasy, “originating in infancy but energizing all human history,” is “the wish to become the father of oneself.”¹⁴ (And if this fantasy is strongly connected to capitalism, it is because money presents the ultimate self-generating circuit, what Marx called the “self-valorization of capital.”) If there is one thing Trump insists on with tremendous pride, it is that he’s a self-made man, someone who succeeded due to his natural gift for the deal, and not at all because of his father’s wealth and connections. He is, in his own mind, *causa sui*, his own father, and beholden to no one. The flipside of this fantasized autonomy is the obsessive need for appreciation and self-aggrandizement: the incessant drive to make oneself praised through others. Trump thereby personifies the perfection of the neoliberal ideal of excellence, which ultimately signifies nothing other than itself: the vacuity of the best and the greatest. Indeed, if there is a certain greatness to Trump, it lies in the way he has exploited his infantile neurosis and magnified it to glorious proportions. Instead of being wrecked by neurosis, he has made it into a wrecking ball for

everyone else: a compulsively serviced tacky spectacle that has managed to plaster its brand across the globe. “The show is ‘Trump’ and it is sold-out performances everywhere. I’ve had fun doing it and will continue to have fun, and I think most people enjoy it.”¹⁵

If Trump is the infantile fantasy par excellence, then who is the adult? In today’s political constellation, the adult is the center left or center right political manager, articulate, morally sensitive, and eminently reasonable; a politician filled with resigned wisdom about the way things are – the necessity of austerity, of globalization, of inequality, of perpetual war as peace – but brimming with half-believed hope about the future. For this political class, Trump is indeed a vulgar and petulant child. But his momentary victory over them does not simply signify a regression or a turn to darker times. It rather reveals the ugly underside of the system that they themselves have long supported and served. Trump stands for the merger of private capital and state sovereignty, so that the State should ultimately become part of the Trump brand – American democracy is the new Trump Steaks, grilled to a crisp at Mar-a-Lago – and a worldwide platform for his ongoing reality show. Who doesn’t want to scream? Yet this is where we should part ways with the chorus of critics denouncing Trump’s childishness: the problem with the satiric portrait of a preschool POTUS is that it serves all too well to reassure existing elites that they, and only they, are the real adults. This kind of complacent satire is one of the things that hobbled Democrats during the election, and what Trump has proven himself remarkably immune to; a true political comedy, on the other hand, would cut across political divides and skewer the so-called enlightened centrists and right-thinking realists along with the nativists and vulgar populists. Put simply, what Baby Trump reveals is the lack of a viable idea of political maturity today, and the urgent need to reinvent adulthood for twenty-first century politics. There is a double lesson here: don’t underestimate Trump by calling him a baby, but also be wary of the self-satisfaction of those who would proudly consider themselves adults.

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Aaron Schuster is a philosopher and writer, based in Amsterdam. He was a visiting professor at the University of Chicago in 2016. He is the author of *The Trouble With Pleasure: Deleuze and Psychoanalysis* (MIT Press, 2016).

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