The Clap

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I am attempting to do impasse analysis, relying on a couple of gold nuggets supplied by Alan at our last conference:

...the truth of our perplexities.

Find the common problem.

Whereas it has rightly been argued the perplexities can be revealed in any usage, I have opted to start from something that is self-evidently perplexing:

We know the sound of two hands clapping but what is the sound of one hand clapping?

This is different from finding perplexity in everyday usage in that it is a question that is designed to be perplexing. In fact, what it is is a Zen koan.

I first came across it, well before I met Blum and McHugh. It was the epigram to a book I found extremely compelling when I was around 18, *Nine Stories* by J.D. Salinger.

If we try to approach this koan in the spirit of impasse analysis or, for that matter, Zen, it is important to rule out certain other ways of dealing with it. We must rule out a scientific answer, either just saying, in a self-satisfied way, that it has no sound or even simply trying to make a feeble sound with one hand.

Only a little better would be accepting that there is no sound but concluding that the fact that applause requires two hands is another way of saying that it takes two to tango. In other words, that one needs a partner to be happy. This is much too sentimental an interpretation.

I think Alan would say we are not yet accepting the truth of our perplexity.

Here is a better start: We could say, with Simon and Garfunkel, that, though there is silence when you clap with one hand, still you could consider the meaning of the silence. You could consider the sound of silence. The sound, in this sense, would be what the silence means and, of course, it is right that silence can be very meaningful.
Apart from the fact that a flaw in this interpretation is that it works equally well for no hands clapping, there was an event that made me feel that I grasped, for the first time what it means or what it could mean to clap with one hand.

I am afraid it is a bit of a long story but here goes.

Labour MPs had to attend a meeting with their leader, Jeremy Corbyn, just after he had done surprisingly, indeed, incredibly well in the recent election. The vast majority of these MPs had vehemently opposed Corbyn on principle and, in fact, had desperately tried to replace him before the election. But when he entered the room, they cheered him. Commentators almost universally accused them of hypocrisy.

Although I could understand what the commentators meant, I felt their criticism was a bit too easy. A quote from Blum and McHugh gave me a little help in beginning to understand what, intuitively, I was feeling:

We affirm that the life world leaves a space for an actor who can enjoy what he does, that his best times are not those when he could only be stimulated by obligation.

The Labour MPs who wish to be principled are facing a situation that does not look like one of their best times, precisely because it does seem that if they applaud, they are only being stimulated by obligation and yet, is there a place-room-to do anything else? If they simply don’t applaud, aren’t they guilty of not recognizing what is, after all, an achievement? In refraining, wouldn’t is be fair to call them simply churlish?

We are coming to see that applause is quite a blunt instrument in that it does not appear to offer an opportunity to do anything but either do what is expected-obligated-or not.

But what if the life world offers an actor some additional space that, on the face of it, is not there? What if we say that he or she can do something like only applaud with one hand?
Not exactly this as it is physically impossible but something that is like this. Something that has this meaning. So we come to appreciate that the life world can offer some additional room-some space-in the form-the practice-of being tepid.

Since it is true that one can applaud without being whole-hearted, we can notice that even such a blunt instrument as applause offers some room for an actor not to just do what is expected, here applaud or merely deviate, i.e. be the odd one out who fails to recognize Corbyn’s achievement.

Having gone through an (impasse?) analysis, now we can reflect on what the common problem could be. It is tempting to say it is the modes of approval and disapproval. Thus, I have already branched out from normal clapping to tepid applause and presumably we could move on to standing ovations, booing, Bronx cheers, whistling, and even the yahoos that I noticed millennials were partial to at a recent Patti Smith concert. However, such a range of usages strikes me as more a feature of ethnomethodology than impasse analysis. For a more germane common situation I would propose ones where it does not appear that there is room to be principled in the sense of fully enjoy what one is doing, situations where and when the life world does not appear to offer much room and so where and when most people just think they have to do what is expected. The common situation, then, would be one where there is a clear obligation to do something dishonest and where refusing looks impossible.

In such a situation, we say that, while it will not constitute the very best of times for the would-be principled actor, yet they should look for and possibly will find at least some room. Possibly that room will take the form, metaphorically speaking, of clapping with one hand, or, to use another, if more well worn metaphor, being half-hearted.

I am indebted to Alan’s recent book for its pointing to another such situation where characters are faced with a mere obligation and where, therefore, a principled actor would not be experiencing one of their best times. This is where King Lear tries to bribe his daughters into a love competition, the reward being the best share of his kingdom.
As it turns out, neither of Lear’s older children has any trouble praising their father to the skies but, then, Blum and McHugh never claim that all actors would be troubled by a situation in which it appeared that they could only be stimulated by an obligation. Such a problem only arises for principled actors.

The reaction of the youngest daughter, Cordelia, is very different from how her sisters respond. First, she tries to refuse to say anything. Then, when her father cuts off this option, what she comes out with is:

I love your majesty according to my bond; nor more nor less.

I think we can say that this is exactly the same solution as clapping with one hand. Cordelia, like some Labour MPs and unlike her sisters, manages to avoid being only stimulated by obligation by doing something half hearted. We see here again where the life world can offer at least some space for principled action, even when an obligation appears to offer the most obvious stimulus and so only compliance seems possible.

Because the Shakespeare case provides examples both of an actor who refuses to go along with what is expected of her and actors who suffer from no such compunctions, it offers an opportunity to explore possible fates of both types of speakers. While it is true that Cordelia incurs the immediate wrath of her father, over the long term things do not go well for her sisters. The lack of substance present in what they are saying eventually becomes obvious because they cannot avoid having to act in ways that are consistent with their professions of great love. Of course, they fail to do so.

But, even straight away, Cordelia is able to show that the sisters compliance only makes sense if, in the language of Blum and McHugh, they don’t listen to-self-reflect on-heed-what they are saying. As Cordelia points out:

Why have my sisters husbands if they say they love you all?

I want to close with a clarification. I have tried to show that even obligatory situations may not rule out a principled response though I have also insisted that the key in such situations is to be half-hearted.
In general, then, I am far from denying the central Blum and McHugh claim that, for a principled actor, his or her best situations are not ones where he or she is stimulated by obligation.

Now, the clarification. It might always be ambiguous to decide between an obligation and a desirable requirement. In terms of this interest here is a quote from Nietzsche:

The aphorism, in which I am the first master among the Germans, is a form of eternity; my ambition is to say in ten sentences what everyone else says in a book—what everyone else does not say in a book.

To only be allowed ten sentences could certainly look like an obligation but could it not turn out to be a desirable requirement? Could it be a circumstance that a principled actor could enjoy? Could it animate one rather than force one to be half-hearted?

Besides aphorisms, I would point to some titles and slogans. Surely there is nothing half hearted, which is to say joy animated the practices, of those whose circumstances gave them the room to invent both ‘workers of the world, unite’ and, Alan’s favourite ‘Up against the wall, motherfuckers.’

Even some severe constraints, in my example spatial ones, can, with sufficient imagination turn out to be desirable requirements rather than mere obligations.