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THE CRITICS: BOOKS

## Here's Why

*A sociologist offers an anatomy of explanations.*

by Malcolm Gladwell

1.

Little Timothy is playing with his older brother Geoffrey, when he comes running to his mother.

"Mommy, Mommy," he starts in. "I was playing with my truck, and then Geoffrey came and he said it was his turn to play with the truck even though it's my truck and then he pushed me."

"Timothy!" his mother says, silencing him. "Don't be a tattletale."

Timothy has heard that phrase—"Don't be a tattletale"—countless times, and it always stops him short. He has offered his mother an eyewitness account of a crime. His mother, furthermore, in no way disputes the truth of his story. Yet what does she do? She rejects it in favor of a simplistic social formula: Don't be a tattletale. It makes no sense. Timothy's mother would never use

such a formula to trump a story if she were talking to his father. On the contrary, his mother and father tattle to each other about Geoffrey all the time. And, if Timothy were to tattle on Geoffrey to his best friend, Bruce, Bruce wouldn't reject the story in favor of a formula, either. Narratives are the basis of Timothy's friendship with Bruce. They explain not just effects but causes. They matter—except in this instance, of a story told by Timothy to Mommy about Geoffrey, in which Mommy is suddenly indifferent to stories altogether. What is this don't-be-a-tattletale business about?

In "Why?" (Princeton; \$24.95), the Columbia University scholar Charles Tilly sets out to make sense of our reasons for giving reasons. In the tradition of the legendary sociologist Erving Goffman, Tilly seeks to decode the structure of everyday social interaction, and the result is a book that forces readers to reexamine

everything from the way they talk to their children to the way they argue about politics.

In Tilly's view, we rely on four general categories of reasons. The first is what he calls conventions—conventionally accepted explanations. Tilly would call "Don't be a " a convention. The second is stories, and what distinguishes a story ("I was playing with my truck, and then Geoffrey came in . . .") is a very specific account of cause and effect. Tilly cites the sociologist Francesca Polletta's interviews with people who were active in the civil-rights sit-ins of the nineteen-sixties. Polletta repeatedly heard stories that stressed the spontaneity of the protests, leaving out the role of civil-rights organizations, teachers, and churches. That's what stories do. As Tilly writes, they circumscribe time and space, limit the number of actors and actions, situate all causes "in the

consciousness of the actors," and elevate the personal over the institutional.

Then there are codes, which are high-level conventions, formulas that invoke sometimes recondite procedural rules and categories. If a loan officer turns you down for a mortgage, the reason he gives has to do with your inability to conform to a prescribed standard of creditworthiness. Finally, there are technical accounts: stories informed by specialized knowledge and authority. An academic history of civil-rights sit-ins wouldn't leave out the role of institutions, and it probably wouldn't focus on a few actors and actions; it would aim at giving patient and expert attention to every sort of nuance and detail.

Tilly argues that we make two common errors when it comes to understanding reasons. The first is to assume that some kinds of reasons are always better than others—that there is a hierarchy of reasons, with conventions (the least sophisticated) at the bottom and technical accounts at the top. That's wrong, Tilly says: each type of reason has its own role.

Tilly's second point flows from the first, and it's that the reasons people give

aren't a function of their character—that is, there aren't people who always favor technical accounts and people who always favor stories. Rather, reasons arise out of situations and roles. Imagine, he says, the following possible responses to one person's knocking some books off the desk of another:

1. Sorry, buddy. I'm just plain awkward.
2. I'm sorry. I didn't see your book.
3. Nuts! I did it again.
4. Why did you put that book there?
5. I told you to stack up your books neatly.

The lesson is not that the kind of person who uses reason No. 1 or No. 2 is polite and the kind of person who uses reason No. 4 or No. 5 is a jerk. The point is that any of us might use any of those five reasons depending on our relation to the person whose books we knocked over. Reason-giving, Tilly says, reflects, establishes, repairs, and negotiates relationships. The husband who uses a story to explain his unhappiness to his wife—"Ever since I got my new job, I feel like I've just been so busy that I haven't had time for us"—is attempting to salvage the relationship. But when he wants out of the marriage, he'll say, "It's not you—it's me." He switches to a convention. As his wife

realizes, it's not the content of what he has said that matters. It's his shift from the kind of reason-giving that signals commitment to the kind that signals disengagement. Marriages thrive on stories. They die on conventions.

Consider the orgy of reason-giving that followed Vice-President Dick Cheney's quail-hunting accident involving his friend Harry Whittington. Allies of the Vice-President insisted that the media were making way too much of it. "Accidents happen," they said, relying on a convention. Cheney, in a subsequent interview, looked penitently into the camera and said, "The image of him falling is something I'll never be able to get out of my mind. I fired, and there's Harry falling. And it was, I'd have to say, one of the worst days of my life." Cheney told a story. Some of Cheney's critics, meanwhile, focussed on whether he conformed to legal and ethical standards. Did he have a valid license? Was he too slow to notify the White House? They were interested in codes. Then came the response of hunting experts. They retold the narrative of Cheney's accident, using their specialized knowledge of hunting procedure. The Cheney party had three guns, and on a quail shoot,

some of them said, you should never have more than two. Why did Whittington retrieve the downed bird? A dog should have done that. Had Cheney's shotgun been aimed more than thirty degrees from the ground, as it should have been? And what were they doing in the bush at five-thirty in the afternoon, when the light isn't nearly good enough for safe hunting? The experts gave a technical account.

Here are four kinds of reasons, all relational in nature. If you like Cheney and are eager to relieve him of responsibility, you want the disengagement offered by a convention. For a beleaguered P.R. agent, the first line of defense in any burgeoning scandal is, inevitably, There is no story here. When, in Cheney's case, this failed, the Vice-President had to convey his concern and regret while not admitting that he had done anything procedurally wrong. Only a story can accomplish that. Anything else—to shrug and say that accidents happen, for instance—would have been perceived as unpardonably callous. Cheney's critics, for their part, wanted the finality and precision of a code: he acted improperly. And hunting experts wanted to display their authority and educate the public about

how to hunt safely, so they retold the story of Cheney's accident with the benefit of their specialized knowledge.

Effective reason-giving, then, involves matching the kind of reason we give to the particular role that we happen to be playing at the time a reason is necessary. The fact that Timothy's mother accepts tattling from his father but rejects it from Timothy is not evidence of capriciousness; it just means that a husband's relationship to his wife gives him access to a reason-giving category that a son's role does not. The lesson "Don't be a tattletale"—which may well be one of the hardest childhood lessons to learn—is that in the adult world it is sometimes more important to be appropriate than it is to be truthful.

## 2.

Two years ago, a young man named Anthony mugged a woman named Anne on a London street. Anthony was caught and convicted, and a few days before he was sentenced he sat down with Anne for a face-to-face meeting, as an exercise in what is known as "restorative justice." The meeting was videotaped by a criminal-justice research group, and to watch the video is to get an even deeper sense of the usefulness of Tilly's thinking.

"We're going to talk about what's happened," the policeman moderating the meeting begins. "Who's been affected, and how they've been affected, and see what we can do to make things better."

Anthony starts. He has a shaved head, a tattoo on his neck, and multiple piercings in his eyebrows and ears. Beside him is his partner, Christy, holding their baby boy. "What happened is I had a bad week. Been out of work for a couple of weeks. Had my kneecap broken. . . . I only had my dad in this country, who I don't get on with. We had no gas in our flat. Me and Christy were arguing all that morning. The baby had been screaming. We were hungry." His story comes out painfully and haltingly. "It was a bit too much. All my friends I was asking to loan me a couple of pounds. They just couldn't afford to give it to me. . . . I don't know what got into me. I just reached over and took your bag. And I'm really sorry for it. And if there is anything I can do to make up for it, I'm willing to do it. I know you probably don't want me anywhere near you."

Anne has been listening closely, her husband, Terry, next to her. Now she tells her side of the story. She

heard a sound like male laughter. She turned, and felt her purse being pulled away. She saw a man pulling up his hood. She ran after him, feeling like a "complete idiot." In the struggle over her bag, her arm was injured. She is a journalist and has since had difficulty typing. "The mugging was very small," she says. "But the effect is not going away as fast as I expected. . . . It makes life one notch less bearable."

It was Christy's turn. She got the call at home. She didn't know exactly what had happened. She took the baby and walked to the police station, angry and frightened. "We got ourselves in a situation where we were relying on the state, and we just can't live off the money," Christy says. "And that's not your problem." She starts to cry. "He's not a drug addict," she continues, looking at her husband. Anthony takes the baby from her and holds him. "If we go to court on Monday, and he does get three years for what he's done, or six years, that's his problem. He done it. And he's got to pay for what he's done. I wake up and hear him cry"—she looks at the baby—"and it kills me. I'm in a situation where I can't do anything to make this better. . . . I just want you to know. The first thing he said to me

when he walked in was 'I apologized.' And I said, 'That makes what difference?'"

Watching the conference is a strange experience, because it is utterly foreign to the criminal process of which it is ostensibly a part. There is none of the oppressive legalese of the courtroom. Nothing is "alleged"; there are no "perpetrators." The formal back-and-forth between questioner and answerer, the emotionally protective structure of courtroom procedure, is absent. Anne and Terry sit on comfortable chairs facing Christy and Anthony. They have a conversation, not a confrontation. They are telling stories, in Tilly's sense of that word: repairing their relationship by crafting a cause-and-effect account of what happened on the street.

### 3.

Why is such storytelling, in the wake of a crime, so important? Because, Tilly would argue, some social situations don't lend themselves to the easy reconciliation of reason and role. In Jonathan Franzen's novel "The Corrections," for example, one of the characters, Gary, is in the midst of a frosty conversation with his wife, Caroline. Gary had the sense, Franzen writes, "that Caroline was on the verge of accusing him of being

'depressed,' and he was afraid that if the idea that he was depressed gained currency, he would forfeit his right to his opinions. . . . Every word he spoke would become a symptom of disease; he would never again win an argument." Gary was afraid, in other words, that a technical account of his behavior—the explanation that he was clinically depressed—would trump his efforts to use the stories and conventions that permitted him to be human. But what was his wife to do? She wanted him to change.

When we say that two parties in a conflict are "talking past each other," this is what we mean: that both sides have a legitimate attachment to mutually exclusive reasons. Proponents of abortion often rely on a convention (choice) and a technical account (concerning the viability of a fetus in the first trimester). Opponents of abortion turn the fate of each individual fetus into a story: a life created and then abruptly terminated. Is it any surprise that the issue has proved to be so intractable? If you believe that stories are the most appropriate form of reasoning, then those who use conventions and technical accounts will seem morally indifferent—regardless of whether you agree with

them. And, if you believe that a problem is best adjudicated through conventions or technical accounts, it is hard not to look upon storytellers as sensationalistic and intellectually unserious. By Tilly's logic, abortion proponents who want to engage their critics will have to become better storytellers—and that, according to the relational principles of such reasoning, may require them to acknowledge an emotional connection between a mother and a fetus. (Ironically, many of the same members of the religious right who have so emphatically demonstrated the emotional superiority of stories when it comes to abortion insist, when it comes to Genesis, on a reading of the Bible as a technical account. Thus do creationists, in the service of reason-giving exigency, force the Holy Scripture to do double duty as a high-school biology textbook.)

Tilly argues that these conflicts are endemic to the legal system. Laws are established in opposition to stories. In a criminal trial, we take a complicated narrative of cause and effect and match it to a simple, impersonal code: first-degree murder, or second-degree murder, or manslaughter. The

impersonality of codes is what makes the law fair. But it is also what can make the legal system so painful for victims, who find no room for their voices and their anger and their experiences. Codes punish, but they cannot heal.

So what do you do? You put Anne and her husband in a room with Anthony and Christy and their baby boy and you let them talk. In a series of such experiments, conducted in Britain and Australia by the criminologists Lawrence Sherman and Heather Strang, restorative-justice programs have shown encouraging results in reducing recidivism rates among offenders and psychological trauma among victims. If you view the tape of the Anthony-Anne exchange, it's not hard to see why. Sherman said that when the Lord Chief Justice of England and Wales watched it at home one night he wept.

"If there is anything I can do, please say it," Anthony says.

"I think most of what you can do is between the two of you, actually," Anne says to Anthony and Christy. "I think if you can put your lives back together again, then that's what needs to be done."

The moderator tells them all to take a break and help themselves to "Metropolitan

Police tea and coffee and chocolate biscuits."

Anne asks Christy how old the baby is, and where they are living. It turns out that their apartment has been condemned. Terry stands up and offers the baby a chocolate biscuit, and the adults experience the kind of moment that adults have in the company of babies, where nothing matters except the child in front of them.

"He's a good baby," Christy says. A convention. One kind of reason is never really enough.

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