

Rother Baron:

The Mirror Principle

*Sixth Conversation with Paula:
Talk about Noise and Freedom Rights*



On Paula's small South Sea island there are no prisons and no army, no parties and no property. She looks at what we take for granted with the astonished eyes of a child.

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"With her wrap-around dress, on which exotic birds screamed in bright colours, her face that seemed to be carved like out of ebony, her thick black hair, in which the sunlight sparkled, and her supple feet whose smoothness formed a striking contrast to the cracked asphalt, Paula looked so alien to me that I stared at her as if she were a hallucination."

from: [How I got to know Paula](#) (Conversations with Paula, Introduction)



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Leisure and Idleness

I hardly know anyone who can laze around as passionately as Paula. In summer, she often spends hours basking in a deck chair, only occasionally blinking at the sun winking at her through the dense foliage of the trees.

When she sits up, she is often fascinated by some animal, which she then observes with devotion. During her last visit, she spotted a nuthatch for the first time. She couldn't get enough of its vertical walk along the tree

trunks, where it seems to stick to the bark as if with magnetic soles, taking advantage of a rich buffet of insects.

I myself don't mind watching Paula lolling in the sun like a cat letting the first rays of spring burn on her fur. Nevertheless, I think that this might a bit too uneventful for her. Shouldn't she experience something more during her visits here than what she can have in a similar form on her South Sea island?

Once, when she was already lounging around for the third day, I tried to rouse her: "Come on, let's go to town! Idle hands are the devil's playground."

Paula blinked her eyes. "Sorry? What did you say?" She must have just dozed off a little.

"Idle hands are the devil's playground," I repeated. Since the phrase seemed a little trite the second time, I added: "Doing nothing is the first step to vice."

Paula narrowed her eyes, probably because I was standing in the sunlight. "Strange," she mused drowsily. "I would see it exactly the other way round. Is vice not rather rooted in this eternal bustle?" She yawned heartily. "In the hectic life of a person who is chased from one obligation to another, who loses his centre and thus strays from his path? Aren't those who still find time for leisure and regularly dream with their eyes open far more likely to avoid going astray?"

I was not sure whether Paula had understood the phrase correctly and whether her interpretation was not based on false assumptions. However, she had immediately turned away from me again to watch a squirrel jump. So we didn't delve any further into the subject.



Disturbed Idyll

On one of her visits to me, Paula had the misfortune to have her stay coincide with an extended period of rain. When the sun finally winked through the clouds again, she could hardly wait to stretch out once more under the big walnut tree she loves so much.

Unfortunately, however, the abundant rain had also caused the grass to sprout vigorously. And so, no sooner had Paula made herself comfortable in her deckchair than the first lawnmowers could be heard. Paula frowned discontentedly – it must have

been a painful contrast to the silence on her island.

"Please tell your neighbour that his noise is bothering me," she urged me after a while, as the lawnmower moved closer and closer to us.

Amused, I replied: "I can do that if you like. But I hardly think that it will impress him. After all, today is just a normal working day. So he has every right to mow the lawn."

"I see," Paula relented. "He must take advantage of the dry weather to bring in the hay for the winter feed."

"No," I laughed. "It has nothing to do with farming. It's simply a matter of keeping the grass short."

Paula shook her head in wonder. "That seems pretty illogical to me. If he doesn't want to use the grass as fodder, he'd better let it grow. Otherwise he'll miss out on all the beautiful flowers!"

"But the lawn is not for looking at," I explained, still amused. "It's like a green carpet

– an outdoor surface on which you can sit, play, eat or, like you, just lie around in the sun.

"And for that it is indispensable to make such noise and" – Paula wrinkled her nose – "spread such stench at regular intervals?"

I hesitated for a moment. "Not necessarily", I conceded. "In fact, it all depends on the way of mowing", I conceded. "Electric lawnmowers don't spread smells, of course, but they aren't noiseless either. The only way to do without noise and smell is to use a reel mower. But that is also more power-intensive, especially if the ground is not completely flat."



Mirror Principle and Lawn Mowing

Paula sat up in her deckchair and scowled in the direction the noise was coming from. "Does your neighbour have an uneven terrain? Or is he so old and frail that he can't be expected to use more silent equipment that requires more physical strength?"

"No, but..."

"Then you can ask him to stop making noise – because it is against the constitution," Paula stated.

"Here you are quite wrong," I contradicted her. "It's just the other way round! The constitution guarantees him the right to free personal expression, and therefore ..."

"But his actions violate the mirror principle!" Paula interrupted me. "Isn't that fixed in your constitution?"

I looked at her without understanding: "Mirror principle? What does that mean?"

"The mirror principle means that my freedom ends where it interferes with the freedom of another," Paula explained. "I always have to reflect my actions in the eyes of another person in order to judge whether I have the freedom to act the way I do. Conversely, I can also protest against the behaviour of another if it restricts my freedom. And that is the case with your neighbour: his noise makes my leisure impossible."

"Don't you think that this is a very subjective concept of freedom?" I objected. "On that basis, you can stifle the life manifestations of others at any time. Why don't you just

bask in the sun somewhere else or use ear-plugs?"

This suggestion, however, was brusquely rejected by Paula. "To do so would mean that your neighbour has the right to drive me away with his noise or deprive me of the pleasure of listening to the birds! No, I am clearly in the weaker position here. And this is exactly what the mirror principle is meant for: it protects the weaker expression of life from being made impossible by the stronger one."



Paula and the Lawnmower Gang

We fell silent for a moment, which allowed the sound of the lawnmower to come to the fore again – all the more so as the monotonous roar now also reached our ears from two other corners.

"So what now?" Paula finally urged me. "Are you going to tell your neighbour?"

"I don't know," I hesitated. "Freedom is spelt differently here. Besides, the noise is coming from several sides now."

"All right," Paula decided. "Then I'll sort it out myself."

"I'm not sure if that's a good idea," I tried to stop her – but she had already set off.

Just before she opened the garden gate, she turned to me again. "Why don't you put some snacks on the table?" she called out to me. "Then we'll have a more relaxed atmosphere for our reconciliation talk."

Reconciliation talk? I thought. Probably the conversation would end up in the opposite! Nevertheless, I complied with Paula's request and went to the bakery around the corner to get some pieces of cake.

When I came back, there was a heavenly silence around Paula's garden island. Well, I thought, the mowing work is obviously finished! So the problem has solved itself.

Despite this, to be on the safe side, I started the coffee machine, carried the garden table outside and set it. I had hardly taken my seat when Paula turned around the corner, with the entire lawnmower gang in tow. The men's eyes were glued to Paula's back, or more precisely to the lower end of it. It

looked like a performance of the Golden Goose from Grimm's Fairy Tales.

South Sea Diplomacy

So I had the opportunity to observe the high art of South Sea diplomacy from close up. Apparently, Paula had not yet made her complaint to the men in her entourage, but had invited them for coffee under some pretext. At the beginning, our conversation was accordingly free of conflict.



Paula skilfully steered the conversation to all sorts of innocuous topics, first and foremost the weather, of course. In addition, she was not sparing with her praise of one neighbour's flowerbeds and made appreciative comments about another's vegetable patch.

Was she aware that her guests paid less attention to her words than to her carelessly tied wrap dress and the coquettish sweep with which she tossed back her mane of hair? They would probably have hung on her lips just as much if Paula, instead of giving out honey-sweet compliments, had lectured on the life cycle of the threadworm.

However, Paula – suspiciously eyed by the female part of the neighbourhood, which had meanwhile also trickled in – managed to seamlessly move on from her charm offensive to her actual concern. Of course, she was cunning enough not to name it as such.

"By the way, what kind of lawnmower do you use?" she asked one of the men in a deliberately casual manner.

"We have just acquired a powerful machine," he boasted. "Our old junk machine stopped every few metres at the end."

"I got a ride-on mower last year," added another. "It's simply unbeatable for a large site like ours. Besides, since then I don't

even have to worry about mowing the lawn. My grandchildren are queuing up to go for a ride on the thing. For them, it's like riding a bumper car."

Everyone laughed. Even Paula tried to look amused.

"I prefer to use the cutter bar mower," said the next one. "It allows the grass to be a little higher – and it cuts through smaller bushes at the same time."

"But it's also very noisy," sighed the mowing master's wife. "I always make three crosses when the mowing work is done."

That was the cue Paula had been waiting for. "I heard there are lawnmowers that don't make any noise at all," she interjected, skilfully playing the naïve stranger card. "What are they called again?" She looked at me questioningly.

"Reel mower," I helped her.

"Ugh!" waved off the neighbour with the cutter bar mower. "That's nothing but a toy."

You'll only ruin your lawn with something like that."

"I wouldn't say so," one of the wives contradicted him. "They are supposed to be used in England especially for mowing golf lawns because the result is more even than with other lawn mowers."



The Noise Protection Agreement

Thus – almost without Paula's intervention – a discussion about the sense and purpose of lawnmowers began. Surprisingly, it turned out that everyone thought lawn mowing

was necessary, but at the same time at least the women felt bothered by the motorised gardening of the neighbours.

In the end, it was agreed that there should be a certain time corridor for more noise-intensive gardening work, so that everyone could adjust to the noise of the others or not be bothered by it at all, because they were also making noise. The core time should be on Saturdays between 3 and 6 pm, alternatively Friday evening between 5 and 7 pm. In case of deviations from this or for larger projects, each one promised to inform the others beforehand in the future.

Even the reel mower was suggested for use, at least on a trial basis. One of the women had a distant acquaintance who owned such a device. She wanted to borrow it and test it without obligation. Maybe it could be used at least for the front gardens.



Fragile Peace

So this is what it looks like when a South Sea queen waves the sceptre, I thought, while Paula winked at me triumphantly. She had indeed achieved what she wanted.

However, I wonder if her success will last. Isn't it rather the case that the men at the improvised coffee party only agreed to the

arrangement because they secretly felt that they could earn themselves an extra South Sea smile with this – even if Paula didn't openly reveal her preferences?

Whatever the case, summer is over now. For the time being, no ray of sunshine will cause a neighbour's hand to twitch in readiness to mow. The crucial question is therefore what will happen next spring. Won't the urge to free expression of noise then destroy all good intentions?

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