

ALASDAIR MACINTYRE

## *Notes from the Moral Wilderness—II*

### III

'Men make their own history, but ...' This phrase echoes through the Marxist classics. The political aim of Marxists is to liquidate that 'but'. Their theoretical aim is to understand it. In order to understand it we must first be clear what it is for men to make their own history, for men to act and not just to suffer. So the concept of human action is central to our enquiry. What is it to understand any given piece of behaviour as a human action? Consider the following example. If my head nods, it may be a sign of assent to a question or it may be a nervous tick. To explain the nod as a way of saying 'Yes' to a question is to give it a role in the context of human action. To explain the nod as a nervous tick is to assert that the nod was not an action but something that happened to me. To understand the nod as a nervous tick we turn to the neurophysiologist for a causal explanation. To understand it as a sign of assent is to move in a different direction. It is to ask for a statement of the purpose that my saying 'Yes' served; it is to ask for reasons, not for causes and it is to ask for reasons which point to a recognisable want or need served by my action. This reference to purpose is important. When social anthropologists come across some unintelligible mode of behaviour, obedience to a primitive taboo, for example, they look for some as yet unnoticed purpose, some want or need to which such obedience ministers; and if they find none they look for some past want or need which the practice once served, even though now it is nothing but a useless survival. That is to say, we make both individual deeds and social practices intelligible as human actions by showing how they connect with characteristically human desires, needs and the like. Where we cannot do this, we treat the unintelligible piece of behaviour as a symptom, a survival or superstition.

One of the root mistakes of the liberal belief in the autonomy of morality now stands out. The believer in the autonomy of morality attempts to treat his fundamental moral principles as without any basis. They are his because he has chosen them. They can have no further vindication. And that is to say among other things that neither moral utterance nor moral action can be vindicated by reference to desires or needs. The 'ought' of morality is utterly divorced from the 'is' of desire. This divorce is most strikingly presented in the position taken by Kant that it is a defining characteristic of moral actions that they shall not be performed

'from inclination'. It is repeated in contemporary terms by those writers who deny that one moral judgment can be based on anything except another more fundamental moral judgment, on the grounds that no 'is' can entail an 'ought' and that entailment is the only logically respectable relationship between statements. And this position does not need to be attacked any further for my present purposes, for it is obvious that to represent morality in this light is to make it unintelligible as a form of human action. It is to make our moral judgments appear like primitive taboos, imperatives which we just happen to utter. It is to turn 'ought' into a kind of nervous cough with which we accompany what we hope will be the more impressive of our injunctions.

At this point it is worth recalling one way of reconnecting morality and desire, namely that produced by the shock effect on eighteenth century moralists of travellers tales from Polynesia. A rationalist like Diderot is able to contrast powerfully the simple moral code of the Polynesians, which expresses and satisfies desire, with the complex moral code of Europe, which represses and distorts it. But this contrast may be used to support a simple hedonism, belief in which is as destructive of moral understanding as is belief in moral autonomy. It is no use saying simply 'Do as you want', for at first sight we want many and conflicting things. We need a morality which orders our desires and yet expresses them. The myth of the natural man who spontaneously obeys desire is only comprehensible as the myth of a society where desire appears utterly cut off from morality. How did this divorce occur?

The short and obvious answer would perhaps run like this. Morality expresses the more permanent and long-run of human desires. But for most human history, such desires rarely achieve fulfilment. And so the objects of desire disappear from consciousness. And the rules survive, as a primitive taboo survives. Only the rules still have point, but men have forgotten what their point is. And then as the possibility of the abolition of class society and the possibility of new forms of human community appear, the objects of desire come back into the moral picture. Men recall to consciousness the lost purpose of their moral rules. And if at this point they insist on treating the rules as purposeless and autonomous they contribute only to the frustration of morality. Thus the history of morality is the history of men ceasing to see moral rules as the repression of desire and as something that men have made and accepted for themselves and coming to see them instead either as an alien, eternal, disembodied yet objective law, which constrains and represses, or as an entirely arbitrary subjective choice.

Hegel in his early anti-theological writings thinks of the Jewish law written on stone tablets as the archetype of the objectification

of morality, and such objectification is for him symptomatic of human alienation. We can see why. Men objectify moral rules, have to objectify them, when the desires which they repress are too painful or too dangerous for men to know them as their own. (The resemblance between what Hegel says about society and what Freud says about the individual hardly needs remarking on). They appear instead as the voice of the other, the non-human, the divine; or they just appear. Belief in the autonomy of morality expresses this alienation at the level of philosophy.

One way of writing the history of morality would be this: to see it as the coming together of three strands which have been held apart in class society. The first of these is the history of moral codes, meaning by this not so much the history of which rules commend themselves in each society as the history of how different societies have conceived of the nature of moral rules. If I suggest in outline the type of thing that I mean it will obviously be no more than a caricature. But even caricatures have their uses.

For the Greeks the connection between the moral life and the pursuit of what men want is always preserved, even if sometimes very tenuously. The desires which the moral life is alleged to satisfy are sometimes a little curious, as for example Aristotle's conception of doing philosophy as the supreme fulfilment of human aspiration. But desire is always kept in the picture. So it is too in the Bible. What God offers is something that will satisfy all our desires. (The commandment that we love our neighbours as ourselves both presupposes and sanctions a high degree of self-love.) And desire remains at the heart of morality in the Middle Ages. It is true that now morality becomes a matter of divine commandments, but the God who commands is the God who created our human nature and His commandments are in consequence desired to be such as will fulfil his purpose of blessedness for that nature. So that in Thomist ethics an Aristotelian view of desire and a Christian view of the moral law are synthesised, even if somewhat unsatisfactorily. But the Protestant reformation changes this. First, because human beings are totally corrupt their nature cannot be a function of true morality. And next because as totally depraved beings, indeed even perhaps as simple finite beings, we cannot judge God. So we obey God's commandments not because they and He are good, but simply because they are his. The moral law becomes a connection of divine fiats, so far as we are concerned totally arbitrary, for they are unconnected with anything we may want or desire. At this stage two other considerations suggest themselves. The first is that if the moral rules have force, they surely do so whether God commands them or not. The second is that Perhaps there is no God. 'Do this, because it will bring you happiness': 'Do this because God enjoins it as the way to happi-

ness'; 'Do this because God enjoins it'; 'Do this'. These are the four stages in the development of autonomous morality. At each stage our moral concepts are silently redefined so that it soon appears self-evident that they must be used in the way that they are used.

The second thread in the history of morality is the history of human attitudes to human desire. For as morality becomes thought of as objective and eternal, so desire becomes something anarchic and amoral. Diderot and his friends could appeal to the 'natural man', his wants uncontaminated by the evils of society, and suppose that desire could be recalled to its central place in the moral life by such an appeal. But in class society desire itself is remoulded, not merely suppressed. Seeking to find an outlet it legitimates itself by becoming respectable. Men try to want what the ruling ethos says that they want. They never succeed, because desire is spontaneous or it is not desire. 'A man's self is a law unto itself', wrote D. H. Lawrence, 'not unto *himself*, mind you'. And again, 'The only thing man has to trust to in coming to himself is his desire and his impulse. But both desire and impulse tend to fall into mechanical automatism: to fall from spontaneous reality into dead or material reality'. But when social life takes on dead, acceptable, mechanical forms, desire reappears as the negative, as the outlaw. The counterpart of Diderot's myth of the happy Polynesia is the reality of 'Rameau's Nephew', a work which stimulated both Hegel and Marx. This is a dialogue between Diderot himself, the voice of the man who accepts the forms and norms of society, and Rameau, who represents the suppressed desires, the hidden anarchic consciousness. Freud saw in this dialogue an anticipation of his own contrast between conscious and unconscious mental life. But in the dialogue Diderot goes far beyond any individual psychology: here the voice of desire is not the voice of happy Polynesian society, but something become purely individual, the voice that can live only by hypocrisy and an extreme care for self-interest. One remembers Engels' comment on a remark by Hegel:

'One believes one is saying something great,' Hegel remarks, if one says that 'man is naturally good'. But one forgets that one says something far greater when one says 'man is naturally evil'. With Hegel evil is the form in which the motive force of historical development presents itself. This contains the two-fold meaning that, on the one hand, each new advance necessarily appears as a sacrilege against things hallowed, as a rebellion against conditions, though old and moribund, yet sanctified by custom; and that, on the other hand, it is precisely the wicked passions of men - greed and lust for power which, since the emergence of class antagonisms, serve as levers of historical development ...

Desire becomes recognisable only as something individualist, which tends, as in Hobbes, to the war of all against all, and morality.

when it is related to desire, becomes at best an uneasy truce or peace between warring desires, embodied in a social contract. So that even desire conceived as selfish is never conceived of as more than partly satisfied. And desire as a driving force is stripped of all these qualities which unite men. Nietzsche's superman is pure dehumanised desire despising the values of those who accept the autonomy of morality and 'transvaluing' them. Figures such as Nietzsche's are the reflection in a romanticising consciousness of an entirely non-fictional capitalist type. E. M. Forster in *Howard's End* makes Helen Schlegel say,

'Perhaps the little thing that says "I" is missing out of the middle of their heads, and then it's a waste of time to blame them. There's a nightmare of a theory that says a special race is being born which will rule the rest of us in the future just because it lacks the little thing that says "I". There are two kinds of people - our kind, who live straight from the middle of their heads, and the other kind who can't because their heads have no middle. They can't say "I". They *aren't* in fact ... Pierpont Morgan has never said "I" in his life. No superman can say "I want" because "I want" must lead to the question "Who am I?" and so to Pity and to Justice. He only says "want" - "Want Europe", if he's Napoleon; "want wives" if he's Bluebeard; "want Botticelli" if he's Pierpont Morgan. Never "I" and if you could pierce through him, you'd find panic and emptiness in the middle.'

The peculiar contribution of the Marxist critic here is the understanding that the 'I' can only be put back into 'I want' if the 'we' is put back into 'we want'. What Forster calls the non-existence of those who say 'want', what Lawrence calls their 'mechanical automatism', these are the outcome of a type of society in which paradoxically it is both true that individuals are isolated from each other and that their individuality is lost to them as the system demands an increasing identification of them with itself. How to regain the 'I' by asserting 'we'?

The fundamental answer to this is the whole Marxist theory of class-struggle. To have set the problem properly I ought to have set those changes in the moral consciousness about which I have written in their real, material context. The rift between our conception of morality and our conception of desire will never be overcome until the rift between morality and desire is overcome in action. But since we are already on the margin of the transition that will heal that breach, we can see in outline at any rate how the two may come together in consciousness. At this point the crucial concept for Marxists is their concept of human nature, a concept which has to be at the centre of any discussion of moral theory. For it is in terms of this concept alone that morality and desire can come together once more. How this is so can be seen if beside the sketchy histories of morality and desire I have given, I place an equally sketchy account of the emergence of this concept.

One can begin with the Bible. In the Bible the dealings of

individual men with God are all parts of the dealings of Man with God. Man appears like a character in a morality play, passing from his first nature as Adam (the Hebrew word for 'man') to his second nature as Christ (the 'last Adam', as St. Paul calls him). But the unity of human nature is something perceived only at rare moments and in symbolic form; original sin has broken it. So there is no necessary drive within Christianity to incarnate human unity. (This is not to say that some Christians have not looked for such an incarnation. The difficulty is that all the formulations of the Christian religion are politically double-edged. 'All men are equal before God and God wills them to be at one' can either be interpreted to mean that inequality and disunity are a scandal that Christians ought to strive to abolish, or they can be interpreted to mean that it is only before God that men are equal, and only God that can make them at one, so that a merely human equality and unity are neither desirable nor possible. I do not doubt that the original Gospel commands imply the former interpretation; but any Christian who wants to can always rely on the second. As most do.)

In the eighteenth century God becomes a deistic ghost in progressive thought. But the conception of Man remains as central. Only whereas the religious conception of Man was ideal in the sense of being a representation of what was believed to be ultimate human destiny, the eighteenth century conception is ideal in the sense of being concerned with what is human only in an abstract and formal way. Human rights are inalienable and eternal; only it is compatible with their possession that men should suffer poverty and exploitation. Man in the Bible has a cosmic history; Man in the eighteenth century has a rational nature whose history is the slow emergence of Reason into Enlightenment or as often a history in which Reason passes again into darkness (Gibbon); it is only with Hegel that Man begins to possess and with Marx that Man achieves a real history. The point of the word 'real' here is that in Hegel and Marx the history of Man becomes one with the history of men; with empiricist historiography the history of men becomes all the history that there is and the final outcome is Sidney Webb's view that there can only be the history of this or that particular institution, but that there can be no such thing as history as such. This is to say that in Hegel and Marx the history of man is seen as the history of men discovering and making a common shared humanity. For Hegel the subject of this history is Spirit. And individual human lives appear only as finite fragments of the Absolute. For Marx the emergence of human nature is something to be comprehended only in terms of the history of class-struggle. Each age reveals a development of human potentiality which is specific to that form of social life and which is specifically limited

by the class-structure of that society. This development of possibility reaches a crisis under capitalism. For men have up to that age lived at their best in a way that allowed them glimpses of their own nature as something far richer than what they themselves lived out. Under capitalism the growth of production makes it possible for man to re-appropriate his own nature, for actual human beings to realise the richness of human possibility. But not only the growth of production is necessary. The experience of human equality and unity that is bred in industrial working-class life is equally a precondition of overcoming men's alienation from this and from themselves. And only from the standpoint of that life and its possibilities can we see each previous stage of history as a particular form of approximation to a climax which it is now possible to approach directly.

How does this conception of human nature close the gap between morality and desire? I have given a one-sided and partial view of Marx's approach to history; I now have to give an equally one-sided and partial account of how this view of history bears upon morality. Capitalism provides a form of life in which men rediscover desire in a number of ways. They discover above all that what they want most is what they want in common with others; and more than this that a sharing of human life is not just a means to the accomplishment of what they desire, but that certain ways of sharing human life are indeed what they most desire. 'When Communist workers meet, they have as first aim theory, propaganda and so on. But they take for their own at the same time and by this token a new need, the need for society, and what seems a means has become an end.' So Marx. One meets the anarchic individualist desires which a competitive society breeds in us, by a rediscovery of the deeper desire to share what is common in humanity, to be divided neither from them nor from oneself, to be a man. And in this discovery moral rules reappear as having point. For their content can now be seen as important in correcting our short term selfishness, and thus helping to release desire. Moral rules and what we fundamentally want no longer stand in a sharp contrast.

To discover what we share with others, to rediscover common desire, is to acquire a new moral standpoint. One cannot, of course, make this discovery by introspection whether systematic or random. Whether one makes it at all will depend on whether capitalism places men in a position in which so deep dissatisfaction is born that only a realistic answer to the question 'What do I really want?' can be given. The history of all false consciousness is a history of evasions of this question. And this question can only be answered by a discovery that 'I want' and 'we want' coincide; I discover both what I want and how to achieve it, as I discover

with whom I share my wants, as I discover, that is, the class to whom I am bound. In a class-divided society, my desires draw me to this or that class. And because the rediscovery of moral rules as having their point in the fulfilment of desire is this sort of discovery, one sees how Marx's contention that all morality is class morality has to be taken. But what content has *our* morality?

The viewpoint we have to meet is the view shared by both the Stalinist and the moral critic of Stalinism, that the only Marxist criterion in moral action is the test of how far the proposed action will take us along the road to socialism. But we have already seen that for a Marxist who realises that the progress to socialism is not automatic, that the transition is a transition to freedom and not one that can be calculated, there can be in this sense no predetermined 'road to socialism'. Means and ends interpenetrate not just in some moral ideal, but in history itself. Yet this is still only to say what a Marxist morality is not. What is it?

#### IV

As against the Stalinist it is an assertion of moral absolutes; as against the liberal critic of Stalinism it is an assertion of desire and of history. To begin with the contrast with the liberal. The liberal sees himself as choosing his values. The Marxist sees himself as discovering them. He discovers them as he rediscovers fundamental human desire; this is a discovery he can only make in company with others. The ideal of human solidarity, expressed in the working-class movement, only has point because of the fact of human solidarity which comes to light in the discovery of what we want. So the Marxist never speaks morally just for himself. He speaks in the name of whole historical development, in the name of a human nature which is violated by exploitation and its accompanying evils. The man who cuts himself off from other people (and this has no content unless we realise that the vast mass of other people is the working class) says at first 'I want' and then just 'want'. His 'I ought' is the most tremulous of moral utterances. For it represents nothing but his own choice. So the liberal moral critic of Stalinism isolates himself, makes his utterance unintelligible and has no defence against the patterns of conformism which his society seeks at every point to enforce upon him.

To speak for human possibility as it emerges, to speak for our shared desires, this is to speak for an absolute. There are things you can do which deny your common humanity with others so that they isolate you as effectively as if you were a liberal. It is for this reason that the Marxist condemns the H-Bomb. Anyone who would use this has contracted out of common humanity. So with the denial of racial equality, so with the rigged trial. The condemnation of Imre Nagy was an act which cut off its authors from humanity. Because in denying the rights and desires of others you

deny that they and you share desires and rights in exactly the same way. You only possess either in so far as you have them in common with others. And thus Communist morality is by no means futurist. I think of Dherzhinsky in gaol, volunteering for the most servile tasks in order to show that labour dishonours no man no matter of what degree culture. I think of all those Communists who died; what made the moral stuff of their actions was not that it contributed to some future state of society. They may not have contributed at all. What was at the heart of what they did was an embodiment of a human nature of which Communism will be the great release.

The argument at this point, as indeed perhaps throughout this paper, has been so compressed that I may be in some danger of replacing precision by rhetoric. What is it in fact, it may be asked, that leads us as socialists to view with equal contempt those who failed to protest at Nagy's murder and those who jump to protest at the late Cuban trials? The answer to this could only begin from a detailed account of what Nagy did and what happened in Cuba. But to give such an account would be to see, for example, that Nagy abided by and his executioners fought against certain principles and values. The values in question may be only partly expressed in human nature to date, but the attempt to give them full embodiment in human life is that which alone can give meaning to the history of morality. That we take up this point of view is not, as I have already argued, simply the fruit of our own choice. We discover rather than choose where we stand as men with particular aspirations at a particular point in history. What the Stalinist fails to see is that although choice is not the sole basis of socialist affirmation, nevertheless as socialists we confront issues which cannot be understood in terms of the so-called 'objective' laws. It is not that Stalinists take a different view of the moral issues which I have raised in this article. It is that within their framework of thought such issues cannot even arise.

The concept of human nature is therefore what binds together the Marxist view of history and Communist morality. What it teaches is in part that the liberal moral critic is the one person who has no right to criticise Stalinism. The separation of morality from history, from desire discovered through the discovery of that common human nature which history shows as emerging, leaves morality without any basis. But this is not a logical necessity for morality, as the liberal would have it. For we can depict a moral alternative which is not without any basis. The liberal critic may speak against Stalinism; but he speaks for no-one but himself and his choices. We saw the fragility of his position at the outset; we can now see why it is fragile. Furthermore we can now see more clearly what the liberal critic and the Stalinist have in common.