

Ethics and Nature

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I am writing this in a rural area of the Rivers State, Nigeria. This is relevant to the rest of what I have to say, because it means that I have very few reference books available, and so I must ask the reader's patience for my failure to give accurate references. However, as I do not expect to be within reach of appropriate library facilities for quite some time, I feel I should write what I have to say without the appropriate backing of footnotes.

Long-time readers of *New Blackfriars* will no doubt groan on finding that I want to revive in some measure the controversy over artificial methods of birth control which filled so many pages in the late sixties. My intention is not to go over the whole ground, Papal authority, rights of conscience, and so on, but to argue that the "conservative" position is intelligible, given a certain number of presuppositions, which, admittedly, are far from being generally made explicit by those who in this matter are conservatives; and, moreover, if these presuppositions, which are not tied to specifically Catholic dogmatic positions, are denied, then those who deny them seem to be faced with problems of ethical philosophy much wider than the single question of contraception. To put it rather differently, the dispute over contraception seems to be a very close analogue of the process outlined by T. S. Kuhn in his *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Kuhn's argument is that scientific research is advanced neither by great minds making great discoveries nor by a multitude of small discoveries opening the way for major innovations; rather, once a scientific discipline is established, it possesses a "paradigm", a set of mutually consistent accepted ideas within which research is conducted and discoveries made. This paradigm will fail to provide explanations for certain items of knowledge, because these anomalies will require the elaboration of new kinds of explanations and hence a new paradigm. People who have found the old paradigm satisfactory will resist change of this order, and a period of vehement debate will ensue. Eventually, the new paradigm will triumph, but will suffer the same fate when attention is directed to its own anomalies.

This seems to have been what has happened with Catholic teaching on sexual ethics. Contraception was denounced with veh-

emence, but no very clear argument against it was outlined, in contrast to the appeals to common human experience which were used to buttress other aspects of Catholic teaching. When the ban on contraception began to be seriously challenged in the early sixties, no very powerful counter-argument seemed available, except an appeal to the consistent teaching of the Church, and, since Catholic disapproval of contraception had always been claimed as a matter of "natural law" this retreat to the mystery-shrouded heights of Authority appeared rather desperate. A few writers did argue that there was a symbolic meaning in the sexual relation of husband and wife which was somehow devalued by the use of contraceptives, but this argument was not presented in a very developed form nor, so far as I know, was it taken up by professional theologians. In any case, the period was one of the rapid dismantling of many elements of symbolism in the Catholic Church; indeed, much of the heat that went into the controversy may well have been because the ban on contraception had acquired a definite status as a symbol of a negative kind, a reminder of all that was autocratic and unreasoning in the Church's record.

What has happened since 1968 makes remarkably good sense if we apply Kuhn's theory. The ban on contraception was perceived as an anomaly, which had to be eliminated. Its elimination had as unintended and unexpected consequence the disruption of the old paradigm of Catholic sexual morality, with the result that Catholic writers are found who claim that abortion, adultery, fornication and homosexuality are not in themselves intrinsically evil, but can even be "life-enhancing" if approached with the right attitudes. This line of argument satisfies in one way or another a surprising range of viewpoints; radicals, pleased with their own radicalism, conservatives, delighted to see that the baby of traditional morality cannot safely be parted from the bathwater of *Humanae Vitae*, old-fashioned Protestants noting without surprise that progressive Catholics are even further from the New Testament than previous generations of Romanists were, and Kuhnians, pleased to find that theology can be claimed for their empire. The people who are presumably distressed by the new thinking are those who were, to adopt a hideous term, "moderate contraceptors", in 1968, and who had, and have, no taste for the radicalisation of sexual morality, but thought that a recognition of contraception could be fitted within the existing framework, and also a small, but not entirely insignificant number of people outside the Catholic, and sometimes outside the Christian world, who look to Christian teaching and witness for some kind of possible alternative to prevailing intellectual fashions.

Of course, if we accept the idea, common to all forms of mainstream Christianity, Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant, of some

unchanging central core of Christian doctrine and ethics, the applicability of Kuhn's theory to Christian thinking is limited. Even in this specific case of very marked shifts in moral evaluations, what may have happened is not so much a real revision of theological thought as a wave of conformism to contemporary ideas on personal ethics, which tend to be either empiricist-utilitarian or existentialist in their premises. Now at first sight there may not seem to be much in common between the rather superficial complacency of the empiricist-utilitarian tradition and the anguished introspection of the existentialist. Yet both effectively reject the idea of morality as being based on some kind of order of nature, or on their being any significant interplay between social morality and individual morality. Moreover, this atmosphere of doubt about there being any kind of morally significant natural order has been yet further strengthened by a third intellectual current, the Hegelian-Marxist one. Of its various tenets, the one that human nature is essentially historical, and therefore subject to a continual flow of change, has received more acceptance in the English-speaking world than any other. All three schools of thought reject the idea of morality as deriving from some essentially permanent foundation in human nature as a whole, existing prior to individual consciousness or the world-view of a given social formation. The idea of natural morality seems confined to two small and very opposed groups, the surviving adherents of the "natural law" tradition, which goes back to the Greeks and has inter-acted with Christian thought over many centuries, and the very different attempt, or attempts, for there have been a series of them, to draw an ethic out of biology, particularly from the evolutionary hierarchy of species. The "natural law" approach, which was particularly favoured in Catholic teaching seems to have lost ground even among Catholics because of its failure to relate itself to the development of history and the social sciences. Attempts at a biologically based ethic have failed to carry conviction, partly because they seemed to have reactionary, even racist, political undertones, but mainly because they have failed to take into account the cultural and historical factors in human life.

So far, then, this essay seems to be looking down a number of dead ends as far as any concept of nature is concerned, other than that of the material background against which the real human drama of history and the quest for meaning is played out. Yet this eradication of nature as being in itself a level of meaning and a source of value, as distinct from a morally neutral nature only possessing the meaning men project on to it, has not been achieved by any rigorous argument but rather by the adoption of paradigms which omit to consider it either because, as with empiricism and existentialism, it would conflict with their basic individualism, or

as with Marxism, it would counteract an extreme stress on man's self-creating in history. But if I am to bring nature back into the play of ideas, I have to find her a fashionable party dress; that is, some point in contemporary thought where there exists an image of the biological and physical order of things as potentially, at least, value-generating. To make the point more exactly; I have to find some ground between nature seen as mere background and limitation, on the one hand, and the various forms of "biologism" which reduce culture and human personality simply to biological by-products and side-effects.

I would like to suggest that social anthropology, particularly in its concern for ritual, occupies some of this desired middle ground, even though we may then find that the explanations of social anthropology are not absolutely autonomous but refer back to the inter-action of biology and linguistics. One more word on this "middle ground" between cultural reductionism and biological reductionism; to show that nature is in some sense the source of values, even if culturally mediated, we need to show some fairly general tie-in between human self-imaging as body and human self-imaging as moral being. Now this is surely what anthropologists have been doing for some time. Take the work of Mary Douglas on boundaries, classification and taboos; or the work of Victor Turner on the way symbolic referents of colours are formed from bodily experiences; or the discussions by Fortes, J. R. Goody, Leach and Willis on the way animals mirror in one way or another the experiences of us human beings; or the varied studies on the way the difference of right and left hand becomes associated with ideas of good fortune and bad; or in how the ritual of funerals, initiations and sacrifice have been interpreted to show how the experiences of physical dying and death can be rethought and reorganised to create idioms of moral and social death and new life. Social anthropology shows that the activities and imagery of the body are an appropriate language, perhaps the most appropriate language, for expressing matters of ultimate concern. This seems to be so also in the "world religions"; Hinduism hierarchically, Islam egalitarianly, are profoundly concerned with bodily purity and pollution; Judaism has its boundaried days and foods, and Christianity asserts that the Infinite became man. Even Buddhism has been shown, by anthropologists who have known it from within, to possess far more relevance to the world of eating and marrying than has been supposed.

I would like also to call attention to another merit of the anthropological approach to the role of symbolism in ethics. Empiricism has conditioned us to think of ethics in market terms, the maximisation of personal interest, presumed to be easily recognisable, within a framework which allows other people to do the

same; existentialism has sometimes suggested that to wear the symbolic masks provided for us by society may be "bad faith". Yet sufficient has been written by anthropologists (not to mention the analogous contributions of psychiatrists and socio-linguists) to show how large an element is played by symbolic determinants in the field of human choices that is the proper matter of ethics. Sir Edmund Leach has pointed out that even into what we think of as being purely technical decisions a symbolic element can be found to enter, and some striking examples of this can be seen in the recent work by Mary Douglas and her associates on the way the possibility of innovation in the use of food is closely dependent on the new kind of food fitting into the established symbolic patterns of food selection. Similarly, anthropologists have pointed out (not thereby making themselves more popular) that development schemes which simply identify development with economic growth are likely to fail because they will be seen as disrupting the symbolic structures of the societies they affect. Suspicion of, or failure to recognise the importance of, this symbolic element in mediating human relations may come from the empiricist tradition, whose readiness to assume that market relations are the model of all social relationships seems questionable, or from a Marxist distrust of "mystifications", but Marxism in power seems quite good at generating its own "mystifications". But if we accept that the symbolic element in any social relationship is the key to its ethical meaning rather than an ornamental addition, we still have to ask why human beings can and must think in symbolic terms which refer back to the body and to related nature.

Most anthropologists here have tended to fall back on Durkheim and his view of myth and ritual as the self-imaging and self-understanding of society. I would like to try and push the argument back to a point where man is a talking animal but not yet a political animal. If we think of man as a language-using animal, we immediately have to see what language, as distinct from the communication systems which other animals have, can do to express, extend, and resituate man's biological heritage.

Human language is not simply a collection of names for things and actions. The very concept of grammar involves the imposition of an abstract structure on these names which give them an additional meaning. Language involves also the creation of abstract information and the storage of information, with memory as the preserved past rather than mere learnt responses. It makes possible analogy, metaphor and myth. It obliges us to think about truth and non-truth, as distinct from present and not-present, this and not-this. Language cannot be a toy; its operation immediately gives a new direction to human nature. It is still disputed among scholars as to whether there was a long period of human existence

in which tools were made but language had not developed. If so, then one can speak of specific human skills, but hardly of human culture, since culture is analogous to language in being a common field of inter-acting signs, covering the whole range of human activity and values. As Meyer Fortes put it, in distinguishing the position of Levi-Strauss from that of British social anthropologists, "For us, language is spoken culture, for him culture is enacted language".

Can we say that ritual is the application of the capacities of language to the body, making it the carrier of different levels of meaning, allowing it to be the instrument of conceptual communication, setting it in the category of metaphor, giving it that re-energetic memory which liturgists call anamnesis? We can; but with two important reservations. First, while words are arbitrary signs, even supposed onomatopoeia varying from language to language, the formation of symbolic systems is tied to the biological basis on which they draw. Secondly, and perhaps following from the first point, in ritual the dialectic of language with its unbounded capacity for abstraction, conceptualisation and reference and the actual world of experience with its boundaries, divisions and limits result in extreme forms of what we already experience in daily life, the need for analogy and metaphor and for indirect means of communication. All that is said in ritual is said indirectly, is, and must be, coded. Perhaps I feel this point particularly strongly, because I am both an anthropologist and a priest; as an anthropologist, I do not think I overstate things when I argue that symbols can be analysed and made explicit; yet it seems to me also that the sacraments enact the unsayable.

Perhaps I could now shift my argument back to its starting point, the presuppositions of Catholic teaching on sexual morality. I have not been arguing that social anthropology "proves" Catholic teaching; I have been arguing that looking at the way social anthropologists analyse ritual helps us to conceive a universe of discourse within which even *Humanae Vitae* could be seen as possessing a degree of coherence and consistency which its critics have often denied to it. To restate the steps of my argument; modern thought, empiricist, existentialist, Marxist, largely rejects the concept of nature, except as providing the totally passive raw materials on which the human will operates. Yet an examination of the methods of social anthropologists suggests that, even if they are not themselves very clear as to what they are doing, they habitually refer back to the "natural", usually biological, roots of the particular rituals and symbols, while recognising that the human capacity for ritualising is tied to the available natural objects, principally the human body. It seems that it is not too big a step to make (though anthropologists do not, in practice, usually make

it) to argue that this points to there being moral exigencies present in nature prior to its being incorporated in ritual. Finally, if we look at the wider range of human choice, outside specifically ritual situations, we find that there is a very large symbolic content, not deliberately imposed from on top, but arising from man's identity as language-user, which habitually gives human words and actions additional levels of meaning beyond the apparent and intended one.

Take out of this now two points; the existence of moral exigencies in nature, prior to positive human formulation of them, and symbolic meaning as a necessary component of human ethical action. The first could give us something like "natural law", provided we do not attach to this term overtones of either an authoritarian command or scientifically measurable regularities. The second gives us a criterion for moral evaluation other than the direct intention of the person performing the act or the consequences coming, or likely to come, from the act itself. As Durkheim saw a long time ago, all societies are ultimately moral and symbolic systems, and a society is obliged to sanction in some way what threatens its symbolic foundation.

This brings us back to the Catholic objection to contraception. The implicit, seldom stated, argument seems to be; to be existentially valid, sexual intercourse, being the fullest available expression of the personality, has to take place only between persons fully and permanently committed to each other in marriage. It also has to relate to the moral exigencies contained in generation as a natural force, it cannot be simply reduced to a function of the affective relation of husband and wife. Hence artificial contraception which removes the generational aspect from married sexuality, and hence redesigns it by changing its symbolic content, is seen as in some way a distorting of the original given content of human sexuality. This does not apply to the use of the ovulation period, which is acting with the given biological pattern of generation, nor to sexual intercourse between an infertile husband and wife, since here there is no distortion or reformation or reformulation of the physical (and therefore symbolical) act. Put like this, the Catholic argument against contraception may not seem convincing, but it does not appear quite the total irrationality it is sometimes claimed to be.

This brings us back to Kuhnian paradigms. It was earlier noted that the eradication of the seemingly anomalous repudiation of contraception had, for many theologians and other persons who, like myself, scribble in Catholic periodicals, produced a disintegration of the old paradigm with the consequence that they now approve of many practices formerly regarded as perverse, provided that they can somehow be classified as "life-enhancing". Useless,

evidently, to quote St Paul on the matter, though it might be possible to argue that when St Paul classes homosexuality with idolatry he is not just mudslinging, but sees it as a refusal to accept sex on God's (and biology's) terms, an attempt to do rather better than the Creator. On this point, I would like to quote a passage from somebody standing quite outside any Christian position.

The author is the German Marxist literary critic, Walter Benjamin, speaking of the homosexuality of Proust.

“Proust’s analysis of snobbery, which is far more important than his apotheosis of art, constitutes the apogee of his criticism of society. For the attitude of the snob is nothing but the consistent, organised, steady view of life from the chemically pure standpoint of the consumer. And because even the remotest as well as the most primitive memory of nature’s productive forces was to be banished from this satanic magic world, Proust found a perverted relationship more serviceable than a normal one even in love. But the pure consumer is the pure exploiter – logically and theoretically – and in Proust he is that in the full concreteness of his actual historical existence. He is concrete because he is impenetrable and elusive. Proust describes a class which is everywhere pledged to camouflage its material basis.”

Walter Benjamin’s argument here relates to what I have been trying to say in three ways. A moral need is perceived for sexuality to remain in some way linked with generation, presumably implying that there is some such moral exigency in the human situation. Then it is seen that sexuality cannot be evaluated simply by reference to individual states of mind, but that its symbolic connotation has to be examined, even though Benjamin, as a Marxist, tends to see symbolism as merely the crystallisation of the values of a given social formation rather than as being an exigency of man’s combination of bodily existence and linguistic ability. Finally, he sees the repudiation of traditional sexual morality as being not a sign of some great liberation of consciousness but rather evidence of ethical consumerism. Interestingly, he also, no doubt unconsciously, echoes St Paul, like him seeing the metaphysical origin of homosexuality; with its narcissistic rejection of the primary dialectic of man-woman love, in a commitment to falsehood, even if for him this falseness is socio-economic rather than religious.

My case rests, as the lawyers say. If the steps of my argument seem to hang together rather loosely, I can only say that this is perhaps the usual way we come to understand moral truths. Of this I am sure, that if Catholic moral theology is either to find a

new paradigm, or reform the old, at any rate in sexual matters, it will have to rediscover in some way the concept of nature while coming to grips with the analysis of symbolic behaviour.

SOURCES

For the reason given in the first paragraph, I have not supplied a list of references, but here are some of the sources of the ideas put over here.

The quotation from Walter Benjamin is taken from *Illuminations*, English edition of 1970, pp. 211-12. My ideas on language and symbolism come from Suzanne Langer, *Philosophy in a New Key*, and also from Chomsky and his disciples, assuming I have understood them. For anthropological ideas about taboos as boundary-markers, see Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, and for the biological roots of ritual symbolism, see V. W. Turner, *The Forest of Symbols*.

The question of the reduction of population pressure by contraception is really a separate question to those considered in this article. However, I would ask anybody who thinks that I have been irresponsible in not discussing this question to look at Epstein and Jackson *The Feasibility of Family Planning* and the article by Alan Macfarlane on "Social Anthropology and Population" in RAIN (Royal Anthropological Institute News), February 1978. The relevant point which they make is that the availability of efficient contraceptives is not in itself sufficient to cause a fall in the birth rate. This in turn opens up enormous questions (e.g. the nature of the social changes required for fertility to fall) which it would take another article even to outline.

Faith and Experience VI

Is Conventional Religion Necessarily Naughty?

Simon Tugwell O.P.

One of the most intractable questions involved in the whole programme of research undertaken by the Religious Experience Research Unit is: "What kind of experience counts as religious?" Very wisely, RERU have not, as yet, given themselves any definite answer to this question. But at least some of them realise that an answer will have to be found eventually (*This Time-Bound Ladder*, 1977, p. 48). Sir Alister Hardy seems to envisage an answer emerging from the actual empirical research itself, but, as I pointed out in my last article, (*New Blackfriars*, February, 1979), he can be convicted of being more dependent on certain dogmatic presuppositions himself than he seems prepared to admit. I find it difficult to see how any collection of reports of experiences, backed up by any number of observations and investigations, could yield a definition of religion, independently of any kind of doctrinal principle. At some stage I strongly suspect that RERU will find them-