

Mowgli, Dr Doolittle and the Banshee

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Mowgli and Doctor Doolittle were my friends when I gave up fairy stories. Years later, as an undergraduate I was enabled to unmask them, or rather to site them accurately in the zoo of fantasy, for, so we were taught, while ants and monkeys might live in societies, man alone could be characterized by language and culture. Mowgli as the boy living among wolves, and Doctor Doolittle speaking the language of animals, represented in different ways the craving of fantasy to break through the bonds of necessity, either by sloughing off the second skin of transmitted human knowledge, or by discovering in the animal kingdom the same arbitrary and artificial codes by which we communicate. Lately, Mowgli and Doctor Doolittle have returned to the boundary of my reflections on the cultural and ethical significance of the biological aspect of human personality, perhaps to suggest that their very anomalousness indicates the necessary inadequacy of all attempts to categorize absolutely. Yet they retain the essential innocence of uncommitment, whereas this article is loaded in that not only was its starting point consideration of *Humanae Vitae*, but also that it leans very heavily to the Pope's point of view. I shall be concerned mainly with looking at underlying assumptions, rather than trying to synthesize. If the Pope or his critics are relying on principles which the development of the social sciences has shown to be inadequate, it does not automatically follow that the other side is right; but the terms of the debate must be recast. As it is, it is difficult enough to get adversaries in this matter to direct their fire at each other, and one begins despairingly to remember all the jokes about an Englishman and a Frenchman having a duel in a darkened room.

The basic arguments for the Roman position seem to be two, the first based on the traditional image of sexuality, the second based on the traditional image of the whole man. Traditionally, the Christian image of sexuality has been a generational sexuality. This does not mean that no other values were recognized in the relation between husband and wife, but rather that these coexisting values were coloured and integrated by the value of generation. Consequently, while sexual intercourse need not intend procreation, but does also express the mutual love of husband and wife (and, indeed, unlike procreation, this is an intention that must always be present), yet where the generative colouring of the act is expressly negated by an adjustment outside of the biological cycle, then the symbolic role of the act is changed so much that it no longer accords with the

total image, and is objectively warped. To put it another way, when one says by the sexual act 'You are my spouse', another phrase 'You are my children's parent' has to be in some way implicitly present. Using contraceptives is tantamount to saying, 'You are my spouse, but in this act not the parent of my children'. An indivisible role is thereby divided. This argument is essentially a phenomenological one, and my celibate status makes me rather chary of trying to develop it.

Being not husband, and father only analogically, but still essentially human, I shall try some development of the second argument. In the division between personality and technique, man's physical nature is very definitely placed on the side of personality. With his artefacts man has an I-it relationship, with his body (if this dualism of expression be pardoned) he has an I-thou relationship. Hence the human body cannot be simply incorporated into the word of technology without some wounding of its personal signification. Spectacles, clothes, anaesthetics, do not render this principle absurd since they assist or protect part or whole of the body. Anything completely changing the basic rhythms or organization of the body would constitute an alienation of personality. Now this leaves no end of scope for arguments as to what exactly would involve 'completely changing the basic rhythms or organization of the body', but the general principle does not seem to be self-evidently false. There are three propositions which, if true, would disprove it. The first would be any statement of body-soul dualism by which human personality would be seen as essentially resident in the soul, with the body of essentially the same category as artefacts. The second would be an affirmation of total positivism, in which the personality-technique boundary has no ultimate significance. The third would be as follows: human behaviour while having a biological foundation operates so completely in cultural terms that biological acts only possess personal significance when perceived in the setting of human, that is cultural values. I shall leave the first two propositions, and examine the third, which seems to me to link with the argument Fr McCabe has used for a Catholic acceptance of contraception when it is intended to build up the marriage relation.¹

If human behaviour is primarily biological, or at least requires biological as well as cultural description to describe it meaningfully, and at the same time man's behaviour can possess a metaphysical significance, then what we can call the cultural translation argument seems to lose its cogency. Unfortunately, this question of the characterization of human behaviour seems very little discussed by social scientists, partly perhaps through modesty with regard to their own biological knowledge and epistemological insight, partly as a result of the energy they have had to put into defending the

¹V. e.g. 'Contraceptives and Natural Law', *New Blackfriars*, November, 1964, p. 89; 'Contraception and Holiness', February, 1965, p. 294; 'Natural Law illuminated by revelation', *The Newman*, October, 1968, p. 178.

autonomy of their own subjects. Of recent years, however, there has been an advance from the biologists' side of the fence, principally in the field of primate ethology, although one should mention the influence of Konrad Lorenz's *On Aggression*.

While much that has been written on the social and technical life of the extinct pre-human hominids must necessarily remain probable rather than certain, it is interesting and important to note that it was not only tool-using but also such social developments as the recognition of kinsfolk over a largish territory, the emergence of fairly stable male-female links, and some division of labour that pushed towards hominization. In other words, there is evidence to show that social structure exists at the pre-human level and that it helped determine genetic development towards hominization in more than a marginal way.

V. Reynolds, in a fascinating article 'Kinship and the family in monkeys, apes, and man',¹ has sketched out the analogies between monkey and ape societies on the one hand, and contemporary hunter-gatherers on the other, and has advanced some convincing hypotheses about the role of social structure in hominid evolution. For Reynolds 'In ten million years of evolution, forms of behaviour conferring advantages on the human hunter, or his band, have been selected for . . . at the genetic level. . . . Institutions and sanctions have developed to promote some sorts of behaviour adaptive to settled societies and to discourage others. But the extent of cultural variation is more apparent than real, and the veneer is relatively thin.' While a social anthropologist might well change the phrasing, he would not, I think, deny the essential truth of this statement as regards the studies of kin systems which are the bread-and-butter of his subject. The autonomy of his discipline and the extraordinary richness of its subject-matter are surely by no means slighted if they are seen within a biological setting which provides the primary roles and skills of the task of being human. Nor is the picture essentially different if we turn to the world of myth, rite, and symbolism. Eating, drinking, anointing, washing, rubbing, burning, all the basic ritual acts are built up from bodily experience. Unlike the biological basis of kinship, this is a field which has been very little explored, although one may mention V. W. Turner's study of the symbolism of black, red, and white, and its relation to our bodily experience,² and, of course, the classical study by Robert Hertz on the symbolism of the right and left hands.³

Studies of this kind, which have attempted to show links between bodily experience and reactions and cultural and ritual values, are significant because if one habitually thinks of cultural values as

¹V. Reynolds, *Man* (N.S. 3, 209-223). See also S. L. Washburn, 'Behaviour and the Origins of Man', *Proceedings of Royal Anthropological Institute*, 1967, 21-27.

²V. W. Turner, 'Colour Classification in Ndembu Ritual', in *Anthropological Approaches to the Study of Religion*, edited by M. Banton, London, 1966.

³R. Hertz, *Death and the Right Hand* (translation) O.U.P.

built from, and on the analogy of, bodily experience, one gets a rather different awareness of the relation of man and culture than one does if one thinks of 'society selecting symbols'—more or less arbitrarily. For the moment we can indicate what is involved in such a different awareness only rather obliquely, from two different angles. On the one hand, we can say that one very powerful argument which has weighed against the traditional view of man implicit in the encyclical is that if this is a matter of 'natural law', how is it that Protestants, who are not merely 'naturally enlightened', cannot at all see the Roman position? To this I should reply that here we have the awareness of bodily existence coming in again, and that there is a link between Catholic (and Orthodox) positions on the sacraments and on, say, the Assumption, and the Catholic (and Orthodox) position on contraception. On the other hand, we might ask how awareness of the biological foundation affects the way anthropologists think. In the normal business of social anthropology, one can go on as if positivism were sound—as if all social relations and cultural values were artefacts, and this does no harm, except perhaps in a certain over-emphasis of the consistency and coherence of given societies and a neglect of ecological factors. But when social anthropologists get down to basic and universal or quasi-universal kinship relations, they do seem to be aware of meeting a frontier which is not mutable in the way other patterns of relationship are.

It has of course been argued that despite this biological foundation of behaviour the biologically-given human instincts lack sufficient coherence and automation to determine behaviour. Certainly, much of what we regard as instinctive behaviour is in fact culturally determined, but this cultural determination and control of the biological datum surely does not achieve a total transmutation of nature into culture. It would seem best to speak of a complex interpenetration feedback between them.

The assertion that human behaviour can be described in totally cultural terms, and that biological acts are only open to moral evaluation in so far as they are given cultural identification, tells us more about the society in which it is made than about objective reality.

To examine a little more closely the values of the commitment of a society to contraception. It is arguable that modern Britain has combined an individualistic private ethic with a public ethic of social positivism. Neither is by itself very attractive, but their juxtaposition does enable each to check to some degree the more extreme absurdities of the other, so that we do escape the extremes of *laissez-faire* anarchism, and state absolutism. Contraception does fit peculiarly well into both ethics, since it can be seen either as a sign of the advanced industrial society's control over nature, or of the unfetterable liberty of the individual in his purely personal life. Evidently Catholics are no more immune to influence from the ethics of contemporary society than they were in past ages—one recalls

St Bernard's charming remark that virtue seemed somehow more attractive in aristocrats. Yet if both positivism and individualism favour the image of man as living in an indefinitely plastic, technically controllable continuum with no real boundary between man's nature and his artefacts, they combine also to limit severely biological awareness and metaphysical insight and it has been earlier suggested that the strongest argument against contraception is one that perceives the metaphysical in the biological.

The metaphysical is to be perceived in the social by the sense of justice of the given society. This needs to be expounded. Gross social injustice abounded in Elizabethan England far more than it does today. If, however, we read the apolitical Shakespeare and then compare with any committed writer of the present day, we see that Shakespeare integrates private and public ethical problems, and perceives the links between individual and political corruption far more boldly than our contemporary. This is not simply a matter of genius, rather the contrast is between a man in a metaphysical, and a man in an unmetaphysical (that is, positivist and individualistic) society. We might, for example, compare *Macbeth* with *La Condition Humaine* by Malraux. Whereas in the former work, social relations appear as expressions of moral axioms, in the latter the moral order is perceived through essentially individualistic attitudes.¹

As for the limitation of biological awareness, this is a charge one hesitates to bring since it has been made so often before, with sparse evidence and muddled values—the natural consequence of all 'thinking with the blood'. Yet the very fact of its repetition does indicate a deep reservoir of discontent. The cure is not to abandon the analytical, critical, relation-seeking traits of the Western mind but rather to try the difficult, joyful ascesis of cultivating a sensuous, spontaneous, analogy-marking, inscape-searching, habit of seeing and understanding. However, the renewal of biological awareness, when it comes, will flood in through many cracks in the positivist wall.

Nevertheless the clamorous hostility among Catholics at the present time to the Papal position does need more explanation than either exposure to the values of an a-metaphysical society, or the appalling strains and sufferings to which the ban on contraception exposes such multitudes. The question has become drawn into a much wider context, that of the whole transition which the contemporary Church is undergoing; or is this talking in clichés? It is, unless we define our terms; and the fashionable authority-conscience dilemma being for me an inadequate framework, I am obliged to offer an alternative.

Authority, imagery, and piety in the pre-Conciliar Church were all largely expressed in a familiaristic idiom. Not only did one pray

¹Compare what Fr Fergus Kerr, O.P., notes about Shakespeare and his world-view under the pressure of Renaissance individualism, 'Resolution and Community,' *New Blackfriars*, June, 1969, pp. 477-478.

for and arrange Masses for, one's dead relatives, but the attitude towards the saints was that which one might have towards ideal relatives, a blend of ultra-human and super-human attributes inspiring a secure familiarity and tenacious possessiveness. The Pope himself (rather than the diocesan bishop) shared in this pattern of sacralized kinship ties as the 'Holy Father' with an image of universal benevolence and omniscient wisdom. I would suggest that the universal acquiescence in (if not always obedience to) the Papal ban on contraception which held for so long was a consequence not simply of the ecclesiastical censorship, or desire for an increasing Catholic population, but rather a feeling that the supreme earthly embodiment of familiar values had, albeit celibate, a right to make pronouncements on the most personal aspects of married life.

At the present time, however, we are experiencing an effort to express authority and ritual in terms drawn from the public community. The episcopal synod, priests' senates, parish councils, express this in one way, just as the emphasis on community and communication in the liturgy does in another. Inevitably, the familiaristic idiom of authority and practice has lost its old enveloping security. In this change of styles, the contraception question has become the symbol of the choice between a total or limited transition from a familiaristic to a civic society. The link between the familiaristic ethic and the familiaristic authority which formerly favoured acceptance now unleashes against both law and law-giver the bitterest criticism. In fact, when the smoke clears, we shall still find that a great deal of Catholic practice is expressed in familiaristic idiom, and this will always be the case, since the experiences of infancy, siblinghood, sexual love, and parenthood provide us with the analogues of all other deeply realized experience.

Just, now, though, the Church, under, I believe the pressure of the Holy Spirit, has placed herself in what anthropologists would call a *rite de passage*:¹ a holy, ultimately fruitful condition of passing from one status to another, but during which the marginality of the situation is stressed by the imposition of contra-customary rules of speech and conduct. In this situation, I find it difficult to see that this is a time when the Church as a whole can easily reach absolute finality on any question (and the Council was more concerned with opening doors than tying up packages), still less agree that the Church, having already decided the matter, the Encyclical is a distasteful irrelevancy. If Mowgli and Doctor Doolittle in combining contradictions were dialectical myths, the Papacy is a dialectical reality, being a charismatic institution. If John shocked Catholic juridicalism, Paul has enraged Catholic positivism; and juridicalism and positivism are both of the great family of the tidy-minded for whom charisms have the acceptability of a banshee.

¹A. von Gennep, *Les Rites de Passage*, 1909. For more recent developments of this theme, see *Essays on the Ritual of Social Relations*, edited by M. Gluckman, Manchester, 1962.