

REASONS FOR ACTIONS, by Richard Norman. *Basil Blackwell, 1971. £2.25.*

This book is a really excellent piece of philosophy. For all that, it argues for a conception of rational action and its relation to human needs and desires which I believe to be not only fallacious in the last analysis, but morally and politically dangerous. The complimentary reference to Hegel—a philosopher on whose works the above comments might also be made—on page 83, does nothing to reassure me.

The author's object is to attack the thesis (held incidentally by his reviewer) that all reasons for acting are ultimately derivable from human wants, desires and satisfactions. But what is to count as a want, he says, depends on social and cultural context; and so it is 'social norms which determine what is to count as rational action' (69). If wants were crucial, the mere fact that one wanted to maltreat a man on the ground that his skin was black would give one rational grounds for doing so. In the process of growing up, a child learns that it is itself the final authority on only *some* of its wants and desires; if it claims to have others, it is rightly told that it is merely being silly. We don't, as a matter of fact, start off with a collection of wants and desires, and then become socialized; on the contrary, becoming socialized is a step towards acquiring a large proportion of our wants and desires (74-6).

I believe that there is a confusion in this argument which is of great importance if one wishes to reflect on the grounds of morality. A distinction has to be made between, on the one hand, 'wants' which a child might claim to have, but which it makes no sense for it to have; and on the other hand, wants which, while it makes perfectly good sense for it to have them, are such that it is socially very inconvenient that they should find fulfilment. If someone claims to have a want or desire of the first

category, it is an indication that he does not know the meaning of the words he is using. But if he claims to have a want or desire of the latter kind, his claim makes perfectly good sense; though it may indicate that he is a very depraved individual, or his expression of the want may be symptomatic of an unreasonable expectation of the degree to which other people will feel obliged to defer to his desires. The satisfaction which I get out of maltreating a man for the colour of his skin *does* constitute for me a reason for maltreating him; there just happen to be much better reasons against, particularly that *his* needs and desires are by no means deferred to in my maltreatment, and that a society where people often behave as I do is one in which individual suffering and frustration are bound to be rife.

The author's conception is remarkable in providing the perfect justification for the kind of family situation described by R. D. Laing. If the child expresses certain wants, he is just told not to be silly, that he doesn't *really* have them. In the eyes of his immediate social circle, E. M. Forster's Maurice just *couldn't* have wanted anything so inconceivable as to be a practising homosexual. But the fact remains that many have been like Maurice, and their sufferings have been added to by the circumstance that their strongest desires have not only been baulked of satisfaction, but the very existence of them has been denied. So I persist in thinking, in spite of Mr Norman's highly accomplished arguments, that the ultimate criterion of rationality in action is whether the needs and desires of individuals—which include friendly relations with other persons within a community—are or are not met or fulfilled.

HUGO MEYNELL

THE LIFE OF G. D. H. COLE, by Dame Margaret Cole. *Macmillan. £4.95.*

In a diary entry for 1916 the not-always-compassionate Beatrice Webb implied that Cole was a professional rebel who had a contempt for all leaders other than himself. One has needed a slightly more elaborate explanation of a complex personality before indulging in any kind of biographical comment. Margaret Cole, although she has special knowledge about her subject that others can never acquire, is exploratory rather than dogmatic. She brings us towards Cole's greatness obliquely by her refusal to over-dramatise

a brilliant career or to become sentimental about a relationship that was real and fundamental from the time of their marriage in 1915 till the day of Cole's death in January, 1959.

Undeniably, Douglas Cole was ambitious but he was also vigorous and industrious, aware of his own powers, as teacher, thinker and writer. Born in 1889, he went to Balliol College, Oxford, held a fellowship at Magdalen from 1912 to 1919 and worked to advance the cause of Morrisian socialism through the Fabian Society and his books about guild socialism.