

Against 'Enlightenment'

by David Holbrook

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Not long ago I found myself on a platform, organized by the Young Publishers' Group, together with Sir Robert Maxwell, Mrs Mary Whitehouse, and Sir Basil Blackwell, speaking on the problem of censorship. It was a horrifying experience, because the nature and outcome of the meeting were predetermined. It was predetermined by the intolerant dogmatism of 'enlightenment'. Those who spoke against censorship resorted to facile declarations combined with facetiousness, as if any objections to complete permissiveness could only be ridiculous. On the other side individuals tried to be serious: but they were so selected and set side by side that they were made to appear to discredit one another. In any case, the amount of time available to each was so limited that no one could begin to say anything relevant or meaningful. I could myself have talked for an hour on the subject, in the endeavour to point out some dangers, and some fallacies, by which time I would have but nibbled the edge of the problem of hate in culture. But it was evident that the gathering did not want anything of the kind. It did not really want the issue debated. It wanted merely a ratification, by a kind of circus, of its own 'enlightened' prejudices.

Often, thus, what seems to be a real debate is really nothing of the kind. Some time ago *The Guardian* ran a series on the permissive society. I wrote an article and sent it as a contribution. It was rejected—and I came to find that the series was not even planned and produced by the feature editorial staff. It was organized by the advertising staff, in combination with a television project. Here we glimpse the vested interests behind 'permissiveness'. If one does get an article published it is often so badly cut as to be unrecognizable—an experience I have had with both *New Society* and *The Times*.

There is a *Gleichschaltung*, an 'equal switching' of everyone to the same standard, in such matters, which is intellectually deplorable—and menacing. To say so, of course, makes one feel isolated, even cranky: and the effect of being so often rejected makes one feel paranoiac. At the moment the predominant influence and power is in the hands of those who are willing to proclaim such statements as that 'A man is never more harmlessly occupied than when reading hard-core pornography'—as John Mortimer said, introducing the Arts Council declaration in favour of complete toleration of obscenity in art.

Everywhere one meets, as Leavis records, a bland blankness of resistance:

Enlightenment—the standard enlightenment of the *New Statesman*, *The Guardian*, clergymen and Members of Parliament—is a formidable aspect of the menace we have to defeat. . . . I have found myself confronted by it at the close of a discussion-opening talk addressed to a picked audience. . . . My tactical assumption of a

general concurrence in my sketch of the world in which schoolmasters have to do their work was not endorsed—I had in front of me an ostensible unanimity of disapproval, indignant and un-concessive, though (I thought) quaking—not with pure indignation.

English Literature in Our Time, p. 25

What Leavis records here, I believe, is a characteristic defence mechanism. The belief in ‘progress’ in a technological world, and in the benefits of ‘enlightenment’, have become a form of herd cohesion. And, at the same time, a means of obscuring deep issues which confront us—or which ought to confront us. It is a blind defence against seeing that ‘enlightenment’, in fact, far from bringing us the benefits we hoped for, is making things worse. It is itself a protest against the deadening effects of a dehumanizing environment, and a depersonalizing ethos, whose concepts of man are destructively homunculist: yet essentially it complements these.

The dogmatic intolerance of the ‘permissive’ faith centres on the claim that there is ‘no *evidence*’ that ‘release’ into a ‘new freedom’ in sexual conduct and in the cultural depiction of sex *can do any harm*. There is no evidence (it is claimed) that sexual freedom or pornography deprave or corrupt—and the same argument is sometimes now extended to cover the depiction of violence and even ‘soft’ hallucinogenic drugs. These new ‘freedoms’ bring us ‘enlargement of consciousness’, and are intended to break the bonds of a ‘restrictive’ society which ‘suppresses’ human potentialities. If anyone mentions the rising figures of (say) ‘unwanted’ pregnancies, abortion, sexual diseases, and so forth, it is declared that these are the ‘price we have to pay for freedom’, or else that there are other factors than the new freedom which have led to these.

This I believe is true: but not in the way that is meant. The ‘other factors’ include a fundamental lack of a sense of meaning in people’s lives. In such factors we may find the causes of the disturbances in sexual behaviour and the outbreaks of violence in our time: these are desperate attempts to feel real and human. But, in this, what effect does ‘permissiveness’ have? Despite some gains, it makes the problems worse, and promotes further false solutions—while disguising the real, deeper, problem.

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I have put forward such views in a great deal of my writing, and in consequence I have found it extremely difficult to get it published. So, it was a great satisfaction to me recently to have to review, for the *Harvard Educational Review*, an American book which tackles this whole problem of culture and human behaviour in our time—and which comes to parallel conclusions. Dr Rollo May’s book, *Love and Will*¹, is a more effectual and more tightly argued book than I could ever hope to write: and it has an especial force, because

¹W. W. Norton, \$6.95.

Dr May is a psychoanalyst in America, and concerned with the training of psychoanalysts there.

The terms used by 'enlightenment'—'release', 'inhibition' and so on—often imply that it finds its theoretical basis in psychoanalysis. When examined, however, there are many fallacies in the 'enlightened' assumptions. Not least is the claim that there is 'no evidence', which takes its stand on an objective or 'empirical' approach to a matter which is eminently subjective. In the area of the greatest intimacy, where the benefits or damage can only belong to the realm of the 'I-Thou', obviously there can be no 'evidence' of the kind which is acceptable in the law court, or in a behaviourist study of the consequences, in a cause-and-effect way, of certain forms of stimulation. However, if we accept any terms from psychoanalysis, then we are implicitly accepting another kind of empiricism—in the collocation of subjective reports. Here what is 'realistic' is subjective evidence gathered from reports by therapists on their 'inward' or imaginative insight into *what goes on inside patients*. As Dr May says:

neither . . . psychologists in their laboratories, nor philosophers in their studies can ignore the fact that we do get tremendously significant and often unique data from persons in therapy—data which are revealed only when the human being can break down the customary pretences, hypocrisies, and defences behind which we all hide in 'normal' social discourse. It is only in the critical situation of emotional and spiritual suffering—which is the situation that leads them to seek therapeutic help—that people will endure the pain and anxiety of uncovering the roots of their problems. . . . Such data are empirical in the deepest meaning of the term . . . (p. 19).

If the advocates of 'enlightenment', then, are genuinely interested in being 'realistic' about the 'evidence' of the effects of 'freedom' on human personality and behaviour, they should surely be seriously interested in the reports made by psychoanalysts on the dozens of patients from whom they make generalizations about human behaviour, and its meaning.

If they paid attention to the evidence provided by Dr Rollo May, discussed with distinguished insight in his book, what would they find? Dr May, it should be said, is no paternalistic, authoritarian figure, afraid of change. He persistently calls our age a 'transitional' age, and he calls us to embrace the future. His thought is much influenced by the group of 'existentialist' psychoanalysts grouped roughly around *The Journal of Existential Psychiatry*, influenced by Martin Buber, Husserl, Heidegger, and the Neo-Kantians such as Suzanne Langer. His diagnosis of the problems of our society is startlingly parallel to those made by Guntrip and, at his coolest, R. D. Laing. May sees our society as a 'schizoid' one, and his concern, like that of D. W. Winnicott, is to uphold faith in human nature,

believing that 'we are required to discover on a deeper level what it means to be human'. His concern is with 'meaning'—and he makes, in his explorations of the nature of man's relationship with his world, good use of the phenomenological theories of Merleau-Ponty and others. His work thus calls out to be linked, across the Atlantic, with that of Polanyi and his brilliant interpreter, Marjorie Grene. He can be seen as part of a world-wide movement in thought that seeks to dislodge habits of thinking which belong to the Cartesian and Newtonian in the Humanities, habits which restrict man's concepts of himself and his world. Dr May is a formidable figure for the 'enlightened' to deal with, if they are prepared to deal with anyone.

On 'permissiveness', let him speak for himself:

. . . therapists today rarely see patients who exhibit repression of sex in the manner of Freud's pre-World-War I hysterical patients. In fact, we find in the people who come for help just the opposite: a great deal of talk about sex, a great deal of sexual activity, practically no one complaining of cultural prohibitions over going to bed as often or with as many partners as one wishes. But what our patients complain of is lack of feeling and passion. . . . So much sex and so little meaning or even fun in it!

. . . Our paradox, therefore, is that enlightenment has not solved the sexual problems in our culture. To be sure, there are important positive results of the new enlightenment, chiefly in increased freedom for the individual. Most external problems are eased: sexual knowledge can be bought in any bookstore, contraception is available everywhere . . . couples can, without guilt and generally without squeamishness, discuss their sexual relationship and undertake to make it more mutually gratifying and meaningful. Let these gains not be underestimated. External anxiety and guilt have lessened: dull would be the man who did not rejoice in this.

But *internal* anxiety and guilt have increased. And in some ways these are more morbid, harder to handle, and impose a heavier burden upon the individual than external anxiety and guilt. (p. 41.)

In dealing with the problems which 'enlightenment' has not solved, or is making worse, we are hindered by the tendency to resort to moralizing attitudes. When I find myself on a platform with Mrs Whitehouse and Sir Robert Maxwell I am disarmed by being grouped with those who seem to wish to counter the hypomanic with the hypoparanoid. Even F. R. Leavis rejects 'enlightenment' because it is itself 'irresponsibility, righteously practising connivance in the interest (whether it knows it or not) of self-indulgent ease'.

'Self-indulgent ease' may not be the best way to conduct one's life. But one's objections to enlightenment are not likely to be effective if one seems merely concerned to protest against the sybaritic and

hedonistic, and to control others for their own good. This will merely provoke the response, 'Dost thou think that, because thou art virtuous, there shall be no more cakes and ale?'

There is a deeper problem, and a deeper objection to enlightenment, on which we can take a more adequate stand. 'Enlightenment' threatens the sense of meaning, and our concern with freedom is only justified in so far as it is a freedom to pursue *meaning*. Dr May has come, along with other existential psychoanalysts such as Viktor Frankl, to find that man's primary need is not in the will-to-pleasure, but in the *will-to-meaning*. The whole key to the disorders of our age is to be found in the yearning for meaning in their lives, which people do not find satisfied in our kind of society. But while sexual 'freedom' seems to offer a meaning, it has, at the same time, come to defeat those who seek it in sexual activity:

with rising divorce rates, the increasing banalization of love in literature and art, and the fact that sex for many people has become more meaningless as it has become more available . . . 'love' has seemed tremendously elusive, if not an outright illusion. Some members of the new political left came to the conclusion that love is destroyed by the very nature of our bourgeois society, and the reforms they proposed had the specific purpose of making 'a world in which love is more possible'. (p. 14.)

Moral objections tend to imply that man's basic urge is to pleasure—and this needs 'curbing'. A more adequate view is arising from 'philosophical anthropology' that the primary goal in man is meaning—that meaning primarily found through love and relationship. What we may object to is not 'irresponsible ease' but futile solutions to the problem of meaning.

Sex always seemed to give at least a facsimile of love. But sex under 'enlightenment' has become a test and a burden, rather than a salvation:

The books which roll off the presses on technique in love and sex, while still best-sellers for a few weeks, have a hollow ring: for most people seem to be aware on some scarcely articulated level that the frantic quality with which we pursue technique as our way to salvation is in direct proportion to the degree to which we have lost sight of the salvation we are seeking. . . . Whatever merits or failings the Kinsey studies and the Masters-Johnson research have in their own right, they are symptomatic of a culture in which the personal meaning of love has been progressively lost. (p. 15.)

Once, as Dr May points out, the major sexual issue was simple and direct—whether or not to go to bed. In past decades you could blame society's strict mores and preserve your own self-esteem by telling yourself that 'what you did or didn't was society's fault and not yours'.

And this would give you some time in which to decide what you do want to do, or to let yourself grow into a decision.

Now, the anxiety is all transferred to how well you perform in the sexual act: Dr May finds among his patients that this deepens anxiety: 'your own sense of adequacy and self-esteem is called immediately into question, and the whole weight of the encounter is shifted inward to how you can meet the test'.

What we did not see in our short-sighted liberalism in sex was that throwing the individual into an unbounded and empty sea of free choice does not in itself give freedom, but is more apt to increase inner conflict. The sexual freedom to which we were devoted fell short of being fully human. (p. 42.)

'Freedom' in sexual behaviour has led to a situation in which individuals who have problems of identity and relationship tend to fly too quickly into sexual activity, thus depersonalizing themselves, by separating sex from eros, from passion. Dr May's accounts of their sufferings, their lack of feeling, their yearning for a tenderness they cannot find, reads like an account of the sufferings of the damned. (It also makes Leavis's accusation of 'irresponsible ease' look cruel and punitive, and beside the point.)

In the arts, Dr May believes, the effect is parallel:

In the arts, we have been discovering what an illusion it was to believe that freedom would solve our problem.

He quotes Edel, who says there has been a *dehumanization* of sex in fiction—resulting in an impoverishment of the novel. Dr May's next paragraph should be studied by the Arts Council Working Party:

The battle against censorship and for freedom of expression surely was a great battle to win, but has it not become a new strait-jacket? The writers, both novelists and dramatists, 'would rather hock their typewriters than turn in a manuscript without the obligatory scenes of unsparing anatomical documentation of their characters' sexual behaviour . . .' [Taubman]. Our 'dogmatic enlightenment' is self-defeating: it ends up destroying the very sexual passion it sets out to protect. In the great tide of realistic chronicling, we forgot, on the stage and in the novel and even in psychotherapy, that imagination is the life-blood of eros, and that realism is neither sexual nor erotic. Indeed, there is nothing *less* sexy than sheer nakedness, as a random hour at any nudist camp will prove. It requires the infusion of the imagination (which I shall later call intentionality) to transmute physiology and anatomy into *interpersonal* experience—into art, into passion, into eros in a million forms which has the power to shake or charm us.

Could it not be that an 'enlightenment' which reduces itself to sheer realistic detail is itself an escape from the anxiety involved in the relation of human imagination to erotic passion? (pp. 42–3.)

Sexual 'freedom' thus becomes, in a schizoid society, yet another manifestation of the separation of feeling from activity: a failure of affect and of commitment, essentially psychopathological, and an

aspect of the same kind of horrifying dehumanization as is manifest in megalopolis or the Vietnam war. 'Coolness' in sex runs parallel to 'coolness' and apathy between human beings—a deadening of 'care'. But because it is impossible to tolerate such loss of affect, such fear of inward emptiness and meaninglessness, this apathy boils up from time to time into meaningless violence. Dr May makes clear the connection between a society of meaningless and affectless sexual activity, and outbursts of seemingly meaningless violence. Both are false ways of trying to feel real: in a world

where numbers inexorably take over as a means of identification; . . . where 'normality' is defined as keeping your cool; where sex is so available that the only way to preserve any inner centre is to learn to have intercourse without committing yourself. . . . (p. 32.)

In this situation, the preoccupation with performance and the orgasm manifest forms of escape from the anxiety involved in the relation of human imagination to erotic passion. These anxieties are hidden by sheer misinformation such as is provided by Timothy O'Leary about the supersexual effect of LSD (which in fact makes one impotent), or by concepts of the 'apocalyptic orgasm' of which Dr May says,

What abyss of self-doubt, what inner void of loneliness, are they trying to cover up by this great concern with grandiose effects? (p. 44.)

Even greater anxiety is caused by the 'new puritanism' of 'freedom'. It is immoral not to express your libido. It is therapeutic to use four-letter words. Even in psychotherapy in America it is now 'enlightened' to use the Anglo-Saxon terms. Dr May is highly critical of this—and implicitly indicates how erroneous was D. H. Lawrence's ambition to redeem the vocabulary:

Everyone seems so intent on sweeping away the last vestiges of Victorian prudishness that we entirely forget that these different words refer to different kinds of experience. . . . If the therapist does not appreciate these different kinds of experience, he will be presiding at the shrinking and truncating of the patient's bodily awareness as well as his or her capacity for relationships. This is the chief criticism of the new puritanism: it grossly limits feelings, it blocks the infinite variety and richness of the act, and it makes for emotional impoverishment.

It is not surprising that the new puritanism develops smouldering hostility among the members of our society. . . .

The word which reduces 'biological lust' to its '*reductio ad absurdum*', says May, 'is the most common expletive in our contemporary language to express violent hostility. I do not think this is by accident.'

There are many more aspects of sex with which Dr May deals in this book—the impulse in 'enlightenment' to deny biological and emotional differences between men and women, out of an un-

conscious fear of human nature and its differences: the over-concern with potency which manifests compensation for feelings of impotence of a general psychic kind. 'Impotence is increasing these days despite (or is it because of) the unrestrained freedom on all sides.' He believes that a 'revolt against sex' is even rumbling at the gates of our cities, out of a sickness with what 'enlightened freedom' has done: robbed sex of its significance:

By anaesthetizing feeling in order to perform better, by employing sex as a tool to prove prowess and identity, by using sensuality to hide sensitivity, we have emasculated sex and left it vapid and empty. The banalization of sex is well-aided and abetted by our mass communication. For the plethora of books on sex and love which flood the market have one thing in common—they oversimplify love and sex, treating the topic like a combination of learning to play tennis and buying life insurance. In this process we have robbed sex of its power by sidestepping eros; and we have ended by dehumanizing both. (p. 65.)

Sex has become a drug to 'blot out our awareness' of our needs for passion and for relationship. In 'ostensibly enlightened discussions of sex, particularly those about freedom from censorship, it is often argued that all our society needs is full freedom for the expression of eros' (*Eros Denied!*). But what is revealed under the surface is just the opposite:

We are in a flight from eros—and we use sex as the vehicle for the flight. (p. 65.)

In such a situation, 'the blanket advising of more sex education' and the rest merely 'act as a reassurance by which we escape asking ourselves the more frightening questions'. In consequence 'dogmatic enlightenment' 'contains elements which rob us of the very means of meeting this new and inner anxiety'.

'Enlightenment' fails to make the proper diagnoses of the problems of the sexual life. To a therapist like May, an 'unwanted' pregnancy, for instance, may be unconsciously very much *wanted*, for 'to be pregnant is to be real'. 'Free' abortion merely means that a woman goes on getting pregnant for unconscious reasons, while consciously defeating herself every time, in a *huis clos* of horrifying anguish. From such insights, Dr May comes to conclude the 'new sophisticate' is so afraid of his own procreative powers that he tends inevitably to pour out a kind of destructiveness into the world. Here he reaches the heart of objections to 'enlightenment'—behind its mask of freedom and reason it is destructive of life itself. May says of sexual freedom:

Surely an act which carries as much power as the sexual act, and power in the critical area of passing on one's name and species, cannot be taken as banal and insignificant except by doing violence to our natures, if not to 'nature' itself?

Sex may be 'the easiest way to prove we are not dead yet': but there are elements in our trivialization of it, and our essential self-

defeat in sexual activity, that run parallel to our destructiveness that manifests itself in the atom bomb. The preoccupation with sexual impotence parallels the paralysis of intentionality that is the curse of our time. May quotes from a film-script:

The nuclear age has killed man's faith in his ability to influence what happens to him. . . .

In his patients, Rollo May finds 'an inability to construct a future', not least in the sphere of fulfilment in personal relationship. In this, as in culture at large, 'talking about sex is the easiest way of avoiding making any decisions about life and sexual relations'.

Dr May virtually reaches the position of the Scottish psychoanalyst, W. R. D. Fairbairn, who insists that the goal of the individual in his libidinal capacity is not pleasure but the object of relationship. He finds in his patients that what matters to them, even in the most anonymous sexual activity, is that they should find love there:

My experience as a therapist suggests that the human being has to make the creature with whom he has sexual relations in some way personal, even if only in fantasy, or else suffer depersonalization himself. (p. 211.)

In a sense, such insights bring us back to Jane Austen—to the proper insistence that what matters most to human beings is their own integrity of relationship, and integrity to their own 'True Self' and its potentialities. Sexual love needs to take its place in the whole relationship between the individual and his world. This demands, however, a new kind of capacity in us, to commit ourselves to experience in a new, and more whole, way. Dr May, in the rest of his book, explores the philosophical problems of how we may discover and develop 'a new level of consciousness'. This requires a more adequate combination of love and will, in the pursuit of human meaning.

One requirement is that we should cease over-simplifying, and it is 'enlightenment' that oversimplifies so badly. Yet the goal is not so complex: it is expressed by Teilhard de Chardin thus:

At what moment do lovers come into the most complete possession of *themselves*, if not when they are *lost* in each other? (p. 311.)

Or, as Dr May says, 'the love act can and ought to provide a sound and meaningful avenue to the sense of personal identity'. But before we can begin to understand such problems, the superficial dogmas of 'enlightenment' have to be rejected. As every case-history shows, the discovery of one's capacities to love requires, as D. H. Lawrence said, 'centuries of patient effort'. Because of 'enlightenment', as Dr May shows, for instance,

many people tend not to give themselves time to know each other in love affairs . . . a general symptom of the malaise of our day. . . . (p. 282.)

So passive and apathetic have we become, under the coercion of enlightened dogma and intolerance, that we both commit violence

upon ourselves, and withdraw our feelings—a syndrome evident from the novels of Iris Murdoch, who seems, however, to endorse it, and to seek to persuade us it doesn't matter. Dr May quotes the director of a student health service at the University of Wisconsin:

the girls who, in these days of the pill, are promiscuous say . . .
'It's too much trouble to say no'. . . .

The implication is that it is too much trouble to be human, and to be oneself, in touch with one's own deepest needs, and one's intentionality.

'Enlightenment' has itself prompted this carelessness about doing violence to oneself, and the banalization which attends it. It has encouraged sexual activity without responsibility, along with all kinds of false solutions by which individuals insult their true selves—until they find themselves in the consulting room. This distinguished book, based on what they reveal there, exposes the malaise of which 'enlightenment' itself is a radical part, whose influence on us stands in the way of the release of our best potentialities.

Faith and Revolution

by Terry Eagleton

A good deal has been written, in the pages of *New Blackfriars* and elsewhere, about the points of theoretical convergence between Christianity and Marxism: their shared practical-materialist humanism and historicity, their common goal of an eschatological liberation from alienation through powers embodied in the dispossessed and so on. The question I want briefly to raise in this article is where, given all this, the two perspectives diverge.

To enumerate a series of doctrines held by the Christian and rejected by the Marxist is clearly no answer in itself to this problem. Marxists manifestly differ from Christians in rejecting God, the Virgin Mary, the eucharist, hell and any number of other such beliefs, but this can't in itself constitute the decisive point of divergence, for the simple reason that a Christian is not a humanist who subscribes simultaneously to a set of transcendental propositions. No doctrinal difference can *in itself* supply the point of divergence, since Christian faith isn't an intellectualist affair; if faith is to mean more than a subscription to certain categories which can be tacked on to the Marxist perspective as a kind of surplus value, it must manifest itself in a *praxis* peculiar, in some sense, to Christians.