

# Marx, Freud and Morality

Terry Eagleton

I said in a previous *New Blackfriars* (October 1975) that Marxism has had on the whole little to say about morality, because one doesn't engage in moral debate with men who can only grasp morality in moralistic – and so ideological – fashion.<sup>1</sup> It's in the provisional silence of those who refuse the term 'morality' that, perhaps, something of its true meaning may finally emerge. The condition for the emergence of that discourse is Marxism itself – the theory and practice of political revolution. Until that condition is fulfilled, our 'moral' discourse is bound to remain imprisoned within the ideological. That's to say, that when we speak 'morally', we won't, for much of the time, know what we are meaning. We'll be in the condition of all those imprisoned within the ideological, who, in the very act of speaking, fail to recognise that they themselves are being 'spoken', being constituted, by certain discourses quite independent of themselves, quite concealed from their consciousness, discourses which they betray, despite themselves, in the slips, contradictions, inconsistencies which fissure and deform their speaking. It's of the essence of the ideological that in speaking, in constituting myself as a *subject*, I must necessarily repress, remain in ignorance, of the very determinants of my discourse – determinants which are visible only to *science*, to that science of social formation which is historical materialism, or that science which is psychoanalysis. As 'I' speak – 'I', the coherent historical subject Terry Eagleton, *it* – the unconscious – speaks through me, constantly disturbing and displacing my discourse. I am a subject only because I continually strive to *centre* myself in a discourse which continually *decentres* me; struggling to become master of my words, striving to see myself as the authentic source and origin of my meaning, I'm continually confronted by those gaps, absences, contradictions and conflicts within my discourse which betray the determining presence within it of the ideological, of the unconscious, These

<sup>1</sup>I am indebted for some of the ideas in this article to the important work of the film-journal *Screen*.

already *put me in position*, ascribing to me a set of functions I can't escape, at the very moment my discourse struggles to deny this fact by its apparent 'naturalness', its apparent susceptibility to my subjective control, its 'obviousness' and spontaneity.

But the other reasons why Marxism has little to say about morality is that, to date, it lacks a theory of the constitution of the human subject. Only one such theory will do for historical materialism, and that is the other classical materialism we call psychoanalysis. The science of psychoanalysis is the science of how historical individuals come to be constituted as subjects – it's the science of what happens when the material body, equipped with its libidinal drives, is inserted into language – into culture. It's therefore a science relatively autonomous of any *particular* social formation – for whether we're serfs, slaves or bourgeois, we were all once babies, and we have all come to learn to speak. Psychoanalysis is concerned with the utterly devastating consequences which ensue when the material body is inserted into language; for the body is never at home in language, and, as I hope to show, is caught in a process of infinite regress or flight from language to some more secure home outside it – a home which is finally death. The theme of my paper, therefore, will be that the scenario opened to us by the greatest of 20th century scientists, Sigmund Freud, is essentially a tragic one. And my final consideration will be the relation, if any, of this tragic scenario to the Christian gospel.

It is important to see first of all that the validity of my discourse doesn't depend on me as a subject: that, precisely, is the delusion of *ideology*, that what's valid is valid because of its rootedness in the experience of the subject. Quite the contrary: validity, truth, science can emerge only by breaking that fatal complicity between the subject and his discourse, by the subject *removing* himself from any idea of being *author* of his discourse, recognising that, if he's to speak truly, scientifically, he must become no more than the bearer of certain conceptual categories whose validity depends in no way on himself. If what I say in this paper is to be scientifically correct, then I must become no more than the 'space' within which a certain play of conceptual categories is brought into being. I must break the complicity between myself and my discourse, which is never fully possible but which I can always strive towards, more or less successfully.

In the good old days of *Slant* and the Christian left, we consistently made a category mistake about Marxism and Christianity—we thought that they were more or less the same kind of thing, and dazzling homologies could be drawn between them. I

don't believe that any more: I don't think they're anything like the same kind of thing, they're not synchronous discourses, they can't be translated into one another without a great deal of merely idealist acrobatics. Marxism is a theory of the practice of resolving the contradictions of class society; it isn't a humanism, or an anthropology, or an eschatology, and it thus doesn't situate itself on the same ground as the Christian Gospel. But marxism currently lacks a crucial category, which is the process of formation of the individual subject; and here it has to have recourse to psychoanalysis.

What psychoanalysis has to tell Marxism, however, is bad news. Now I don't mean by that the kind of tedious liberal cliché which contrasts Marxism as a theory of historical emancipation with the grim Freudian stricture that you can't change human nature. For one thing, the mature Marx never believed that Nature would ever be wholly pliable to human activity: he always held that Nature was fraught and loaded and weighted in a way which would make *labour* an eternal necessity. And for another thing, Freud had some approving things to say about abolishing private property, and about the Bolshevik revolution, which negate any notion that he was just another old Viennese petty-bourgeois. It would not be hard to construct a pro-socialist problematic from Freud's work. I'm not, in other words, taking the line of the Tory stock-brokers: I believe that political revolution is possible and necessary, and that inscribed within the practice of political revolution must always be another one, known to Marxism as 'cultural revolution', which involves the radical transvaluation of the human subject. But Freudianism poses a question-mark over the extent of that transvaluation, and it's one we've got to take very seriously. For Freud was that most challenging and exasperating of all thinkers to come to terms with—a pessimistic rationalist. We can handle reactionary old pessimistic *irrationalists* like Schopenhauer or Malcolm Muggeridge, and we aren't thrown either by *optimistic* rationalists like John Stuart Mill or Harold Wilson; but pessimistic rationalism is just about the hardest case to crack.

In *The Interpretation of Dreams*, which must surely qualify as one of the greatest scientific masterpieces of our century, Freud remarks on the three revolutionary 'decentrings' of man which have occurred in modern history. First there was Copernicus, dislodging the earth from its privileged position within the universe. Then there was Darwin, dethroning man from his privileged status within the animal kingdom, within Nature. And finally, Freud adds, with that intellectual humility which shines through every page of his writing, there is psychoanalysis, displacing the ego

from its delusory belief in its own supremacy. Freud doesn't mention a fourth decentring very relevant to his own scientific enterprise—that of Marxism, which scandalously subverts the humanist illusion that it's human subjects who make history—which insists, against this ideological delusion, that the subjects of history aren't men but social formations—social formations which 'live' us even as we think that we're living them. Social formations reproduce themselves by engendering in their agents a belief in their own 'centredness' and centrality—this, precisely, is the role of ideology, which in constituting the subject as the source and meaning of his own activity, in folding him upon the world and the world upon him in a seamless unity, equips him with those beliefs, rights, duties and values which will ensure that he will fulfil his true function, one unknown to himself, which is to be no more than the 'bearer' of the social formation, to occupy a determinate place within a mode of production. The ideological is precisely this process of *misrecognition*, whereby individual historical agents, who are no more than the replaceable bearers of determinate functions within a mode of production, are mystified into that belief in their own 'centredness', into that imaginary relation with the world where the world is seen to exist for them and they for the world, which precisely ensures that they will carry out those objective functions which are deeply unconscious to them. The social formation has its reasons, of which the subject knows nothing. The subject can't *know* the discourses which produce him, the deep structure and laws of the social formation, because the very process of being *constituted* as a subject involves the *repression* of that discourse, the misrecognition of those laws of the mode of production.

It isn't exactly then, that human subjects are mystified; it's that mystification is inseparable from the very category of the subject. The mistake of all idealism and empiricism is to see knowledge as some sort of unity of subject and object: the subject creates the object, or extracts its secret essence from it, and this we call knowledge. But there can be no knowledge, in the strict sense, within the category of subject—science is a process without a subject, a process in which the subject so displaces himself as to allow a play of categories to occur of which he's merely the bearer, and which, in the end, appropriate the object, the real. Any epistemology which bases itself on some *complicity* between subject and object is automatically ideological. The empiricist epistemology, for example, which sees the object—the facts—as somehow being the 'cause' of knowledge in the subject. Except that, as we know, nothing is ever *given* to knowledge: there just

aren't any facts which are theoretically *unconstructed*, which are not the product of theoretical labour. Any theory of scientificity which hangs upon checking off your hypothesis against something out there called 'the facts' is merely one more instance of that fatal complicity between subject and object which is the very core and secret of the ideological.

Well, Freud (to return to him) has naturally much to say about the way in which the category of the subject is constructed only on the basis of a repression of the determinants which went into its making. This is the shattering, devastating paradox of human animals: that we become what we become—'sexed' individuals—only by a massive and painful repression of the determinants of our making. And the crux of this, of course, is the Oedipus complex. It's only by giving up, more or less successfully, our infantile libidinal desire for the parent, under the threat of castration, that we can effect that identification with the parent of our own sex which will establish us as 'sexed' individuals and thus as people who will in time come to contribute, by procreation to the reproduction of the social relations of the social formation. And to do that, we have first to shatter a pre-existing 'ideological' relation with the mother, the relation we have as babies. As the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan has argued, the small baby lives a relation of unreflective unity with the mother, and with itself: in the harmonious, subject-object relation to the mother, it, the baby, is *centred*, lodged, positioned, secure. This unity is then shattered by the recognition of *difference*, which is the intrusion of the father into the mother-child relation. The man has a penis and the woman doesn't—and this difference in turn opens up the fact of *absence*, that the girl has been castrated and the boy might be. The harmonious plenitude of the child's 'ideological' universe is ruptured—a *lack* is set up, and this lack sets in motion *desire*. The child moves from the 'imaginary' world of its primary narcissism, in which all is centred on the subject, into what Lacan calls the 'symbolic order'—the realm of language. For language—signs—exist only in their *difference* from and opposition to one another, each word has meaning only in terms of the *absence* of certain other words it implies. As I articulate one sign, I'm caught up in a network of other possible signs which are always absent from what I say; I move along a chain of signification, along a chain of absences and differences, and it's this fundamental *lack* at the very heart of language—that what I say involves other signs not present to my consciousness, that language—is always outstripping my control—which is the very movement of desire, and of the unconscious. The unconscious is exactly the

fact that as we speak, what we say must always escape us, that as I say one thing it means something else, that as my own discourse unrolls, it reveals in its knots and breaks and crevices those other possible signs which must always be absent. Language is just a play of differences; and so as I'm expelled into the symbolic order by that first recognition of difference which is sexual, I'm merely caught up in an endless play of absences and differences, unable to recapture that pure *plenitude* of meaning which belonged to my primary narcissistic phase. To speak is to lack: and it's in this lack that the movement of desire is set up, the movement whereby I move restlessly from sign to sign without ever being able to close my fist over some primordial plenitude of sense, a movement which will be satisfied only in death. My words are always haunted, creased, inscribed by other possible words which can't be present to my consciousness as I speak, and it is this, precisely, which is the structure of the unconscious. As I speak, 'it' speaks through me: in Lacan's famous rewriting of Descartes, 'I am not where I think, and I think where I am not'. Striving always to constitute myself as a coherent subject, as a source and plenitude of sense, I find myself merely the function of an endless play of differences which 'live' me at the very moment of that ideological delusion which persuades me that my discourse is my own, that I 'live' and produce it. At the very heart of my discourse is a radical loss, for discourse is nothing but difference and absence; and just as the child, terrified by its first recognition of sexual difference, of the 'loss' of castration, the 'mutilation' of the mother, repressed this knowledge and believes contradictorily that all people have penises and some do not, so I, the adult, am continually tempted to repress that ceaseless movement of absence and difference—that movement of desire—through which my language conducts me, by erecting a *fetish*, by fixing myself in some security as a subject through relating myself to some fetishized object which will be the guarantor of my security, of my being in place, of my imaginary, ideological relation of unity with the world. What I can't accept is that the world is independent of my consciousness, that the language I speak betrays, at every point, that *it* is speaking me; what I can't accept is that the world is independent of me, because that means I can die. As I hurtle from side to side, caught up in that process of desire which language itself instigates, I want always to fold myself in some utter fixed fullness of sense and identity; driven as I am along that chain of absences which is language, I fight to return to some primordial plenitude of sense, some moment in which I cannot die because the world depends upon me. I'm torn, constantly, between the 'imag-



inary' and the 'symbolic'—between believing that my discourse is *my* discourse, and finding constantly that it's already structured, it already offers positions to me, which displace what I say, which outrun my conscious control. As the text of my speech unrolls, as I position myself as the author-subject of it, I find constantly that beneath the 'coherent' discourse I'm conducting is that true, invisible, scarred and mutilated discourse which is the unconscious, which is the sum of words which invade and contradict and escape all I say. The Freudian concept of the *parapraxis*—the famous Freudian slip in which 'it' speaks and betrays me as I speak—is merely the visible symptom of the latent structure of all discourse. When, in a sentence, I refer to myself as 'I', when I make use of the personal pronoun, the 'I' I refer to is the coherent subject Terry Eagleton; but the 'I' which speaks that 'I', that coherent subject, has no such coherence: is, in effect, merely a function, self-divided and distraught, of the unconscious which speaks me, but which allows me the comforting illusion that it is 'I' who speak.

We become subjects, then, by lack and loss. The castration complex, which we all have somehow to overcome, is no more than a metaphor of all the losses we suffer as children: the 'loss' which is birth, the loss of the mother's breast, the loss of excretion, and the rest. To enter into culture is to embark upon that ceaseless chain of losses, lacks and absences which is the very form of language, where signs have value only by virtue of their difference from other signs. Haunted as we are by the delusion of the absolute signifier, the transcendental source of all sense, we are nonetheless condemned to inhabit the empty spaces, which is nothing more than the ceaseless play of language, which knows no end, no finality, which is grounded on nothing, which seems to offer us the comfort of a 'signified'—of a real thing we can talk *about*, which seems to anchor our discourse in the real—only then to show us that this signified is yet one more signifier.

Let me try to draw together what I've said about the Marxist concept of ideology, and the Freudian notion of the unconscious. When Freud speaks of the neurotic symptom, and the process of symptom-formation, he sees the symptom as having an inherently dual structure. On the one hand it's an expression of the unconscious: on the other hand the symptom exists to conceal and displace the unconscious drive which produces it. Now the relation of the symptom to the unconscious is in this sense, perhaps, analogous to the relation between the human subject and the social formation. The human subject is a *product* of the social forma-

tion, but must, at the same time, conceal it—must be unaware of its true determinants, of the process of its production, just as the neurotic symptom is a displacement of the true determinants of the unconscious. The unconscious has its reasons of which the subject knows nothing, and the same is true about the subject in relation to the social formation. This isn't, let me stress, because the subject is ignorant, or mystified by bourgeois ideology, or whatever; it just is intrinsic to the category of the subject that it constitutes itself on the basis of determinants it must simultaneously repress. The subject can't, as it were, round upon those determinants, appropriate them in consciousness, because it exists as a subject only by their repression.

And this, clearly enough, is a pretty tragic scenario. For Freud, the ego just can't win, torn as it is between the imperious demands of the id, the upbraiding of the superego, and the batterings of the external world to which it's exposed. Freud's compassion for the ego is remarkable. Moreover, translating all this into historical terms, it's clear that we can't win out there either. Because history, for Freud, is a battle between Eros and Thanatos—between the life-building drives and the death-drive. And the more we sublimate libido into the creation of civilisation, the more we desexualise libido, the more, correspondingly, we must strengthen those very forces of aggression which are the opposite of Eros. The message of Freud's work, then, is clear: we just aren't going to make it. The human enterprise, focused as it is on that pathetic self-contradictory phenomenon we call the ego, is doomed from the outset. Of course, Freud's enterprise was redemptive rather than cynical: 'where id was, there shall ego be'. But that Freud is a deeply *tragic* thinker, despite that rationalism, seems to me clear; and the question then becomes what we make of that tragic scenario in terms of the Christian gospel.

For Freud, in *Civilisation and its Discontents*, one of the central injunctions of the gospel—love your neighbour as yourself—was simply absurd. There just wasn't that much libido to go around. And of course he was right: there isn't. As a scientific theory of how we're to rescue ourselves from the current mess, the gospel has absolutely nothing to say. That's why it has little in common with Marxism, which is precisely, such a theory, and which has the advantage of being correct. Freud saw, quite rightly, that the Christian gospel, as any sort of response to our condition, is simply foolish. Given the way human beings are—and I mean the way they are through their material insertion into language, not the way they are for certain transitional historical reasons—the gospel makes very little sense. What he didn't see was that its



foolishness is the point: that 'love your neighbour as yourself' isn't an ethical rule like 'always close gates in the countryside behind you', but a mystery. Because if we take Freud's findings seriously, then it's only by foolishness that we're going to make it at all. It's only by being committed to the utter foolishness of Jesus that any sort of constructive response to the scientific findings of Freud is going to be possible. I don't want here to argue some high-level apologetics, that the gospel is true *because* of Freud. The gospel may be true or it may not be; but if Freud is right, as I think he is, then nothing short of the gospel will save us. And if Freud is right, then Marxism will not save us either, though it will certainly make life a good deal easier. That love is vital for our salvation, and yet that love is impossible: this is the contradiction we confront. Marxism is a discourse which quite rightly is silent on the question of love, just as nuclear physics is; Freudianism is a discourse which faces us with the fundamental impossibility of loving. If we're going to make it at all, then there seems the need for some other form of discourse which insists that the kind of loving we need is at once beyond our capacity and yet absolutely necessary. That, I take it, is the message of the gospel: that the Father won't abandon his children. Whether that discourse is *true*, though, is of course another question. All I can say for myself is that, if I'm no longer sure of the answers, I think I'm beginning to listen to the question.