

Reflections
on
Drawing
the
Line

I.

A free society cannot be the substitution of a “new order” for the old order; it is the extension of spheres of free action until they make up most of the social life. (That such liberation is step by step does not mean, of course, that it can occur without revolutionary disruption, for in many spheres--e.g. war, economics, sexual education--any genuine liberation whatsoever involves a total change.)

In any present society, though much and even an increasing amount is coercive, nevertheless much is also free. If it were not so, it would be impossible for a conscientious libertarian to cooperate or live there at all; but in fact we are constantly “drawing the line” beyond which we refuse to cooperate. Especially in creative work, in episodes of passion and sentiment, and in spontaneous recreation, there are healthy spheres of nature and freedom: it is the spirit of these that we most often extrapolate to all acts of a utopian free society. But indeed, even the most corrupt and coercive functions of the present society draw on good natural power--the pity of it--otherwise the society could not survive for one moment; for free natural power is the only source of existence. Thus, people are fed, though the means, the cost, and the productive relations are coercive; and the total war would be the end of us all were it not for the bravery and endurance of mankind.

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Free action is to live in present society as though it were a natural society This maxim has three consequences, three moments:

(1) In many spheres which in fact seem uncoerced, we exercise personal excellence and give mutual aid.

(2) In many spheres which in fact seem uncoerced, we have nevertheless been trapped into unnatural ways by the coercion that has formed us, for example we have become habituated to the American time-table and the standard of living, though these are unnatural and coercive through and through. Here the maxim demands that we first correct ourselves.

(3) Finally, there are those natural acts or abstentions which clash openly with the coercive laws: these are the "crimes" which it is beholden on a free man to commit, as his reasonable desire demands and as the occasion arises. (See below, "A Touchstone, etc.")

The libertarian is rather a millenarian than an utopian. He does not look forward to a future state of things which he tries to bring about by suspect means; but he draws now, so far as he can, on the natural force in him that is no different in kind from what it will be in a free society, except that there it will have more scope and be immeasurably reinforced by mutual aid and fraternal conflict. Merely *by continuing to exist and act in nature and freedom, the libertarian wins the victory, establishes the society*; it is not necessary for him to be the victor over any one. When he creates, he wins; when he corrects his prejudices and habits he wins; when he resists and suffers, he wins. I say it this way in order to teach honest persons not to despond when it seems that their earnest and honest work is without "influence." The libertarian does not seek to influence groups but to act in the natural groups essential to him—for most human action is the action of groups. Consider if several million persons, quite apart from any "political" intention, did only natural work that gave them full joy! the system of exploitation would disperse like fog in a hot wind. But of what use is the action, really born of resentment, that is bent on correcting abuses yet never does a stroke of nature?

The action drawing on the most natural force will in fact establish itself. Might is right: but do not let the violent and the coward imagine for a moment that their weakness is might. What

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great things have they accomplished, in practice, art, or theory?

II.

Now I have been freely, even liberally, using the terms "nature," "natural," and their contraries to attribute value and disvalue, as: "natural and unnatural institutions." Do not these terms in this use lead to self-contradiction? for obviously the bad institutions as well as the good have come to be by natural process. A bad convention exists by natural causes; how are we to call it unnatural?

Let us consider the example of a language like English, and I want to distinguish three notions: physical and social nature, natural convention. and unnatural convention. It is physically and socially natural for people to speak: they have speech organs; they communicate with these; children express their feelings with determinate cries and imitate their parents' speech behavior. But any speech is some language or other. Speech organs, need to communicate, the expression of feelings, the desire to identify by imitation: these give the potentiality of speaking some language or other; historical circumstances make the language in fact English. It is usual to call the historical language conventional, but surely it is a "natural convention."in that the convention of English is a means of making the power of speech into a living act. Here at once we have the clue of how we can speak of an "unnatural convention": an unnatural convention is one *that prevents a human power from becoming a living act*. Thus, English is becoming unnatural because of its use in advertising. The technique of advertising is to establish an automatic reflex response, and immediate connection between certain words and the behavior of paying out money: thus it debauches the words so that they no longer express felt need, nor communicate a likeness of affection between persons, continuous with the original imitation of parents, nor correspond to the desire for objects really experienced—all these functions of honest speech are shunted over by a successful advertisement. But these functions are the strongest and the creative power in speech. Therefore we can say that such a use of English prevents the power of speech from becoming a living act; it is unnatural.

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On the other hand, it is objected, automatic response is also natural: it is physically and socially necessary for life, as consider the words "Look out!" or "Fire!" To this objection the libertarian responds: Let us patiently consider the order and ratio of such alarm-words to the rest of speech. If they are too numerous, their emergency is blunted, just as indiscriminate profanity has no expletive force. What is the natural order of emergency and non-emergency situations, so that the strongest powers of health, safety, and pleasure may not be prevented from becoming living acts? The sense of emergency, natural in itself, inhibits vegetation, memory, reflection. (It likewise inhibits, by the way, the religious, eschatological sense of emergency.) Taken at face value, the techniques of advertising and automatic political slogans express a state of continuous alarm!

Yet to be sure, as we consider it deeper, this is the true historical situation; there is nothing conventional about such techniques; and our poor English, like a faithful servant, is sacrificed to urgent need. The society that needs to buy up the products of its industry is in a state of continuous alarm: what time has it for vegetation, memory, reflection? And the "high" standard of living thus purchased exists in emergency conditions that are preventive of any natural standard of living whatever, for there is no vegetative pleasure and reflection; it is unnatural. But further: this habit of alarm, in the hearing of words and the consumption of commodities, lays people open to still further coercion in whatever direction, for a man is swept along.

One does not need to go thus roundabout through the analysis of linguistic usage to show that the modern industrial system, with its time-table and minute division of labor is against reason, freedom and nature! But in general: *the analysis of the forces constraining any strong natural power will show that they themselves are under constraint.* (Thus libertarian argument, like any other free expression, gathers force by its exercise.) Conversely-tho I shall not attempt to prove it here-the analysis of any great synthetic achievement, in art, theory, or practice, although it will show the cooperation of many powers in one effort, will also finally show the direct expression of each of these powers in the result.

III.

Concerning coercion itself, to take an extreme example, the libertarian must ask: *what is natural and what is unnatural coercion?* I doubt that I can answer this question to my own satisfaction, but perhaps we can find a clue in the following considerations.

Natural coercion would seem to be the correlative of natural voluntary dependency. An infant is dependent; a child is voluntarily dependent: it is on a basis of security of felt love and care that it grows in independence, partly by imitation of and withdrawal from precisely those in whom it is secure. A certain amount of coercion and even apparent violence strengthens this necessary security. (Obviously the violence is only apparent, that is, it is action that would be violent among adults; for absolute violence is destructive.) So much is matter of common observation. Again, a pupil voluntarily depends on a teacher who exercises authority and intellectual coercion; and again, the progress of the pupil and the aim of a good teacher, as Fromm has said, is the independence of the pupil from the teacher. If the previous childish dependency has been unfortunately insecure or cowed, a young person both will not trust his teachers and cannot grow to become their brother: he is prevented from drawing on new knowledge and power. (Thus we can say that the parental coercion was violent and unnatural.) Again, it is certain that discouragement of childish sexuality, or even *lack of encouragement--as* good parents encourage other developing powers such as walking, talking, drawing--leads to later general anxiety and timidity and may therefore be called unnatural coercion. (So Wilhelm Reich.)

Given these few, but important facts, let us psychologize as follows: The Ego gradually forms in between the inner desires and the stream of outer impressions, both sources of natural power. And the Ego must be said to have a power of its own; Freud calls it the "organized part of the Id." but I should say boldly that it is the organizing part of the Id: when the specific work of organizing has constructed enough patterns of concrete experience, the gradually cohering Ego comes to its great roles of interpreter, defender, purveyor. Now the danger to the child, it seems to me, is not

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generally that the Ego will not fail to crystallize, a case of extreme psychosis, but that it will crystallize too rapidly and inflexibly, in too tight a system, against the inner and outer worlds from which, in the end, we must draw the forces of life. This has been especially noted with regard to the inner sexual drive, against which the Ego sets itself (becoming erotized in turn); but not enough stress has been laid on the uncanny ignorance, stupidity, incuriosity, and lack of observation and perception which characterizes us all and which are also to be attributed to inhibition by the too narrow, shut-in, and erotized Ego. Now natural dependency, the need for security, is twofold: first, of course, the satisfaction of the vegetative and erotic instincts of the child; but secondly-and this is the point I am driving at for our purposes-the ***furnishing by the adults of large imitable patterns of interpretation and attitude by using which the Ego can take its time and not feel called on too quickly to stand alone as sole authority.*** The adult decides, where the Ego ought not yet to decide: this is coercion, always partly corporal, putting the child in the way or out of the way of some experience. Natural coercion is the adult decision that in fact gives the Ego the greatest inner and outer power to work up into experience and art. Since such decisions are imposed, cultural, and not spontaneous, I should call such adult coercion a natural convention. (For the purpose of this analysis, "adult" may mean single, dual, or multiple parents, or natural or foster parents.)

A pupil, even very small, is not dependent in the same way, for it is only of the parents that there are actual pre-ego memories. The relation with the parents remains always somewhat intra-personal. (Intra-personal ***and*** social; it has been the shrewd disservice of Sullivan and others to equate the social with the interpersonal.) The relation with the teacher is interpersonal, ego to ego; but the intra-personal dependency persists in symbols and attitudes, and the teacher is symbolically ***in loco parentis*** (this is sufficient, for the arts and sciences are also at first only the teacher's voice; a person who **cannot** surrender to such archaic attitudes is probably not truly docile.)

We come finally to our present goal: Of the simple goods, food, shelter, safety, over which great constituted bodies like governments and industrial systems claim authority, there is not a

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single one that the average adult person is not competent to decide about. If his ego has not developed to this point, it is that it has been maimed by previous unnatural coercion. I mean simply that every one knows he is hungry and it is food he wants, or knows enough to come in out of the rain. I am saying the same thing as the Tao, that it is "the affair of government to keep the people's bellies full and their minds empty." not that empty minds will not generate ideas but that this is not the affair of government. Therefore, all dealings on such simple matters should be ego to ego without dependency whether physical or symbolical; these are matters of discussion and reason, not persuasion and force. A man must make his own commitments. Any coercion in this sphere is unnatural in that, first, it prevents the ego from realizing its living power of interpreting and defending the most original instinctual demands; second, perhaps more important, it awakens archaic attitudes that then shunt off the power of the ego altogether and reduce the man to a child. What is the use of a man who cannot decide that he is cold or hurt, or who allows himself to be talked out of this primary experience by words and symbols?

At present of course, a man is not competent to cope with the arrangements for the simplest goods. The state does decide for him. And it exercises coercion. The ego is isolated from the primary facts by organizing which it first formed itself at all. It is in a continuous state of alarm. Under these circumstances, orators easily pose as fathers and leaders. Are we to call all this progressive and excellent?

IV

A man is dependent on his mother Earth.

It is false that social relationships are primarily interpersonal. The strongest bonds in natural groups are continuous with passions and impulses previous to the organization of the egos of the members. These are love and fraternity. How different is the juridical equality of the social psychologists of "interpersonal relationships" from the creative unanimity and rivalry of revolutionary fraternity! the brothers vie to excel individually, but

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catching fire from each other they achieve what none of them had it in him to do alone.

The libertarian manifests the nature in him much more vehemently than we who have been trained to uniformity. His voice, gestures, and countenance express the great range of experience from child to sage. When he hears the hypocrite orator use words that arouse disgust, the libertarian vomits in the crowd.

We can conceive of a man whose ego takes far longer to crystallize than ours; whose ego still is forming out of vast systems of inner and outer experience, and works with forces beyond those that we have settled for. Such a vast ego belongs to a Christ or Buddha; we may confidently predict that it will perform miracles.

In the mixed society of coercion and nature, the characteristic act of libertarians is *Drawing the Line*, beyond which they cannot cooperate. All the heart-searching and purgatorial anxiety concerns this question, *Where to draw the line?* I'll say it bluntly: the anxiety goes far beyond reason. Since the extreme positions are clear black and white, and they exist plain to suffer and enjoy, and since it can be shown that one step leads to another in either direction: in the in-between murk any apparently arbitrary line is good enough. And one's potential friends among the people, to whom one wants to set an example, are moved by the big facts not the little details.

No particular drawn line will ever be defensible logically. But the right way from any line will prove itself more clearly step by step and blow by blow.

Yet to each person it seems to make all the difference where he draws the line! This is because just these details are the symbolic key to his repressed powers--and with each repression guilt for the acceptance of it. Thus one man will speak in their court but will not pay a tax; another will write a letter but will not move his feet; another is nauseated by innocent bread and fasts. Why are the drawn lines so odd and logically inconsistent? why are they maintained with such irrational stubbornness--precisely by libertarian people who are usually so amiable and easy-smiling? The actions of nature are by no means inconsistent; they are sequences of even rather simple causes: following the probabilities does not lead one astray but to see one's way more clearly. But the fact is

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that each of us has been unconsciously coerced by our training and acceptance; the inner conflicts now begin to appear, in the details of drawing the line, and all the fear, guilt, and rage. Let us draw our lines and have this out!

A free man would have no such problems; he would not have finally to draw a line in their absurd conditions which he has disdained from the very beginning. The truth is that he would regard coercive sanctions as no different from the other destructive forces of brute nature, to be prudently avoided.

A free man, so long as he creates and goes by his clear and distinct ideas, can easily maintain in his soul many apparent contradictions; he is sure they will iron out; a loose system is the best system. But woe if at the same time he is persuaded into mere prejudices and coerced into mere habits: then one day he will have the agony of drawing the line.

Well! there is a boyish joke that I like to tell. Tom says to Jerry: "Do you want to fight? Cross that line!" and Jerry does. "NOW," cries Tom, "you're on my side!"

We draw the line in their conditions; we proceed on our conditions.

May 1945