



A Reflection on Robert M. Young

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One thing about Bob and his work – his presentation in writing and in person, and his presence in general – is the dedication to a moral task that he advocated for himself and for all of us. All that we do, in science as well as in politics, should have a moral purpose. I would summarize it by saying that one should act honourably.

One of his fundamental questions was how an area of behaviour, thinking and attitude got roped off from a moral purpose and bounded as an object of interest, without regard to how it played into an oppressive or destructive system; how it then could be pursued as a good or a pleasure in its own right. Bob called it an ‘aesthetization’ of science and technology, as when the physicist, Edward Teller, thought Robert Oppenheimer’s technical solution to detonating the H bomb was beautiful (2018, p. 24).

As a general thesis, Bob held the view that humanism was lost into human nature, and human nature was lost into nature, where nature lay outside a humanistic urge to do good. That is a line that carries from his early work on phrenology to his latest on psychoanalysis. His first book, *Mind, Brain and Adaptation in the 19th Century* (1970), a book centred on the place of phrenology and brain localization research within a biological and philosophical context, begins the exploration of the slippage of human nature into nature as an alien environment. Over the years, he came adamantly to oppose this trend and aimed to reverse it.

But of course, there is no science without boundedness; research goals are necessarily embedded in an immediate research strategy and also in an ideological environment. From the inside, there are assessments of the impact on society, as well as judgments of consequences for the growth of knowledge. From the outside, the history, philosophy, sociology and politics of science aim to reveal the embeddedness of research in the organization of power, hidden as it is inside the ideological and social apparatuses within which scientific questions and research goals are validated. Politics, including evaluations of the consequences of scientific knowledge, are ‘only values in action, values harnessed to power, policies, resources, administration’ (2018, p. 25), and it is imperative to uncover the organization of consent, which is imposed without overt force.

Values vanish into this ideological universe, becoming invisible as they are absorbed into nature, including the nature of things. The historical mapping of the emergence of this universe aims to make visible the invisible, the way histological staining and other contrast markers make tissue structures and their pathologies visible. Bob aimed to uncover self-interest and base motives hidden in this naturalization of values: somebody is profiting in every sense of the word. In his analysis of the construction of the modern ideological universe, the philosophical turning point was the shelving of Aristotle’s final cause, signifying the loss of an organic apprehension of the world. Alfred North Whitehead was his ideal among modern philosophers who opposed

this reductionism. Psychoanalysis, with the unconscious as its object of research, offered a way to approach this blindness to underlying, concealed intentions.

Yet psychoanalysis is lured into the same scientism as other knowledges. It too can slip into a reductionist, anti-humanist reification of humanness into human nature and nature, losing awareness of the object of its understanding. But unlike other sciences, psychoanalysis has a rich vocabulary for describing the origins of unawareness and a methodology for its recovery. It is self-critical and built on the investigation of the ways and aims of self-deception. Psychoanalysis became a haven for Bob's thinking and practice. Even more: he fell in love with object relations theory and practice, which he believed offered a self-reflective escape from this scientism, since it saw the inner world and its relationship to the outer world as human relationships. The passions of the unconscious, internal world were deeply human in their capacity to make better the evil that human beings inflict. And psychoanalysts, by their own adherence to an idea of a science of the inner world based in object relations, find themselves drawn into a reflective reclaiming of the very notion of an internal world as a humanistic dimension of the organic world. As he says,

[T]he object relations version of the rites of passage [into] adulthood – becoming a responsible adult – appeal to me enormously. They give back a hook on which to hang matters that the gleefully iconoclastic side of scientific and postmodernist reductionists and deconstructionists has seemed on the point of making irredeemably fudddy-duddy... I am glad the object relations theory is available as a touchstone grounded in an essentially moral vision of human nature... (2019, pp. 9, 11)

Moral vision begins in ordinary relationships. The psychoanalyst Ronald Britton (1989) attributed an ability to be in relationship with others, while retaining a self-reflective relationship with ourselves, to the child's toleration of the parental relationship. Bob says

It provides the psychoanalytic key to notions of self-knowledge, altruism, fairness and generosity. [It] gives me back aspects of human nature which the scientific world-view and the temptation to give way to fragmentation that is characteristic of postmodernism cannot sustain. (p. 10)

Bob was happy with his old-fashioned values, which object relations could retrieve, and with the moral vision that they implied. I would say that it fits the idea of acting honourably.

The expanse of Bob's thinking was global. The struggles he engaged in, which we have in the legacy of his writings as well as in memories, are also global; that is, he sees the struggle to extricate humanism from ideological imprisonment everywhere. This vision gives his thinking an embrace that is ample enough to draw anyone of whatever persuasion into it. It also has an exhortative passion and a heroic mission. He became something of a secular evangelical preacher, one whose humanism repudiated religiosity. At the same time, I think that the largeness of his vision – also a largess – contains a hidden plea to be recognized as caught in an internal struggle to be moral, which is equal to the need to extricate humane values from the hidden, typically destructive, values of ideology in the outside world. He wanted to recruit allies who would also be

friends of like mind. The largess of his presence could at times feel oppressive, but it contained a communication of this plea.

I think he would say that his upbringing in the American South, with its sense of honour, was at the core of his character. His moral quest was to act honourably, but honour in this environment must have been confusing. Standing proudly for humane values in a society that was racist at the core included pride in values that oppress. In this vexed, contradictory honour culture, he loved his Black nanny. The very idea of honour – the lived experience of honour, acting honourably – must have been internally distorted.

This sort of deep, pre-verbal conflict comes with mother's milk. At heart, it is not yet a quest, but an internal unease. It can be taken into – and up-graded into, so to speak – conflict in which one tries to stand for the good. It can become the passion that drives a moral vision for changing the world. Bob left the riven culture of his youth and struggled to understand it, reveal it in all its duplicity, oppose it, oppose ideology wherever its unseen hand could be discovered. Try as he did to lock this unease-conflict-morality into a struggle against the evils of the world, he remained haunted by its uncanny re-infiltration into himself. That is where psychoanalysis promised relief and re-dedication to the quest for the good. Psychoanalysis also offered a language in which everyone could share his unease and maybe offer a practice through which to work for the good.

References

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