CHAPTER 1

Two models

Recipes for the Good Society used to run, in caricature, something like this –

1. Take about 2,000 *hom. sap.*, dissect each into essence and accidents and discard the accidents.
2. Place essences in a large casserole, add socialising syrup and stew until conflict disappears.
3. Serve with a pinch of salt.

Such recipes have produced many classic dishes in political theory. All take men as they are and laws as they might be (to echo the opening sentence of Rousseau's *Social Contract*) but the exact ingredients vary with the chef. In particular the magic formula for the socialising syrup varies with the analysis of human nature. For instance, if men are essentially greedy egoists in pursuit of riches, fame and honour, then the syrup will be a blend of repression through fear and reward for cooperation. If men are born free, equal and good, they need only to be stewed in Enlightened education amid democratic institutions. If men are by nature the sinful children of God, then a conservative chef will distil his brew from notions like law, authority, tradition, property and patriotism, tinged with distrust of reason. But, whether the cuisine is *cordon bleu, rouge* or *sanitaire*, there is always an essence of man and a consequent syrup. The idea that political cookery is wholly an empirical, rule-of-thumb business is a fairly recent one and old-fashioned chefs would certainly retort that Michael Oakeshott, for example, cannot cook. I hope to lend some power to their elbows.

In telling us whom to obey and how to live, political theories have traditionally tackled three sorts of question. Firstly there are questions of quasi-fact about how men are constituted and how societies function. They ask, for example, how aggressive men are in a state of nature, what needs they must satisfy for self-realisation, what happens when they form groups. I dub these questions of quasi-fact because their use is scientific in

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intent, while their status remains crucially unclear in upshot. Secondly
there are those of normative analysis, which anatomise the concepts of the
theory in a way that has implications for social ethics. Examples might be
'What is justice?', 'Are freedom and equality compatible?', 'How does
authority differ from power?', 'Does every man have a property in his
own person?' Thirdly there are questions of praxis meant to show how
theory is to be put into effect. They enquire, for instance, how to educate
good citizens, how to distribute welfare benefits, how to create revolution-
ary consciousness. The three categories of question are not wholly
distinct – indeed one aim of an ingenious theory is to interweave them –
and they amount together to a way of finding how men interact, how they
should interact and how they can come to interact for the best. The point of
departure is a model of man and, although some tinkering with the model
is allowed by means of fear, incentives, education or kindness, the task is
mainly a tailoring job. Society is to be tailored to men as they truly are,
with the aid of laws as they might ideally be.

But traditional political theory is dead. Or so we are often told by social
scientists, bent on making man a subject for science. The old insistence on
an essential human nature gave rise to social theories which were meta-
physical and normative. Orthodox modern theories, by contrast, strive to
be empirical and ethically neutral. Given the textbook canons of empirical
science, models of man become metaphysical posits without utility or
justification. Given the stock distinction of fact and value, neither evidence
nor theory yields a warranted praxis. The start of wisdom is recognition
that there is no essence of man. Human wants and needs are dependent
variables, functions of social, psychic or biological forces. The individual is
no longer *causa sui* in the explanation of social action. Empiricism has
triumphed and traditional assumptions are dead and buried. Or so we are
often told.

They are buried perhaps, but certainly not dead. They are buried in the
roots of the very theories which purport to reject them and they still act as
premises for metaphysical systems with implications for social ethics.
There is no dispensing with a model of man. The point is not as conten-
tious as it would have been when logical positivism commanded the stage.
Even empiricists are again flirting with notions of essence, metaphysicians
have re-emerged as pedlars of paradigms and values prove resistant to
Positive surgery. But since textbooks of social science are still confident
that we have progressed from religion through philosophy to science, it
remains worth saying that older assumptions are not so easily shed.
Indeed, they cannot be shed. Every social theory needs a metaphysic,

I shall contend, in which a model of man and a method of science comple-
ment each other. There is no shirking questions of quasi-fact, of normative
analysis and of praxis.

What do I mean by a model of man? I would rather answer indirectly by
sketching two rival models which have influenced the study of society
since the Enlightenment. One will be fleshed out philosophically in the
first part of the book, the other in the second. We shall then ask epistemol-
ogy to umpire between them. Tactics are best left unrevealed, until we
have drawn the models but a word about the relation of sociology and
philosophy is called for straight away.

Durkheim remarks at the end of the *Rules* that 'sociology does not need
to choose between the great hypotheses which divide metaphysicians'.
This strikes me as wholly false, for reasons which will emerge. But it
would be equally false to say that philosophy does not need to choose
between the great hypotheses which divide sociologists. Both parties have
a need to poach and a duty to preach. There is an overlap, too little
explored amid the growing division of academic labour but not untrod-
den. Philosophers and social scientists tramp cheerfully through it when-
ever they propound theories of human action. So I shall dispense with the
usual pieties about the sanctity of each discipline in its own realm. To save
needless offence, however, let me add at once that I claim no right to sit in
judgement. I am not a social scientist and the line I shall take in philosophy
is, at the least, contentious. This book is therefore meant to evoke the
philosopher in every sociologist and the sociologist in every philosopher.
In echo of Montaigne, 'all I say is by way of discourse and nothing by way
of advice. I should not speak so boldly, were it my duty to be believed.'

By way of discourse, then, let us think of a man as a black box, whose
inputs and outputs are before us but whose workings are an enigma. We
can pose the problem in picture form (see fig. 1). The reader should not try
to read too much into the figure or the two which follow. They are offered
solely as *aides-memoire*, perhaps useful if taken lightly but confusing if
dwelt upon. None the less let us ask how the box might be filled in. I do
not mean how it is to be filled in on some particular occasions of action,
since it is a general picture and the inputs are not so much particular
stimuli as fundamental processes. The inputs would typically be Nature
and Nurture, rather than a door slamming or the arrival of a telegram.
Taking the question as a very broad one, we are to fill the box in with a
model of men. How many models can be usefully distinguished in this
way depends on the purpose of enquiry and the point of view. So, since
I propose to pick out just two, I shall impose a simple dichotomy. Social
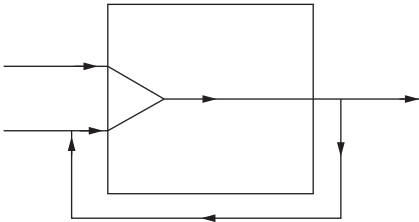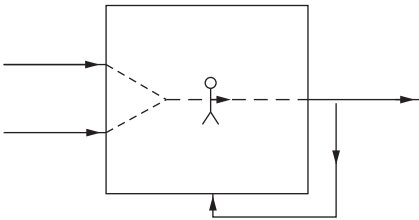
Fig. 1

Fig. 2

Fig. 3

theories will be grouped by whether they treat human nature as *passive* or as *active.* The idea is as old as the problem of free will and loose enough to embrace much of human thought; but it captures a crucial division of opinion in the social sciences and gestures to many concerns of philosophers.[1]

1 That there are two perspectives on human behaviour in society is a commonplace of sociology, although there are several different accounts of the divergence. The version I shall give reflects the distinction drawn in Alan Dawe's striking article 'The Two Socio-logies', *British Journal of Sociology*, 1970, reprinted in *Sociological Perspectives*, Penguin in association with the Open University Press, 1971. Debate between passive and active

In pictorial terms, passive conceptions of man give us what I shall call *Plastic Man* (see fig. 2). Plastic Man is a programmed feedback system, whose inputs, outputs and inner workings can be given many interpretations. Active conceptions of man, by contrast, present what I shall call *Autonomous Man* (see fig. 3). Autonomous Man has some species of substantial self within. But what species of precisely what is an open question and nothing should yet be read into the drawing of a little match-stick man inside.

Even by way of discourse, however, we cannot start with a massive contrast amorphously drawn, and a specific context is needed. Current tensions between passive and active seem to me to stem from the thought of the Enlightenment and I propose to trace the theme from there, before finding examples of them in the social theory of the last few years. (Readers who share my distrust of cornflake-packet intellectual history will perhaps grant some excuse for an impressionistic start.) The mark of an Enlightenment thinker is to hold that man is perfectible through science. When this idea is rendered precise, some conflicts in modern attempts at understanding human agency become instructively clear.

Faith in the perfectibility of man can be put, less bombastically and more in keeping with the political theories hailed earlier, as the belief that the laws of human nature can be harnessed to produce a society which satisfies human nature. Breaking the belief down further we find three presumptions, the last of which combines conflicting elements of the others. Firstly, there are held to be, in Hume's phrase, 'constant and universal principles of human nature' (*Enquiries* VIII); secondly, social engineers are deemed to have a power of initiative and innovation, which somehow transcends these constant and universal principles; thirdly, human nature is taken to be fixed enough to have given needs or wants, yet mutable enough for those needs and wants to be satisfiable. These presumptions embody both the models of man, which are our points of departure.

The conflict lies in the interplay between the fixed and mutable elements of human nature. There has to be constancy, partly so that a science of man is possible and partly for the sake of a criterion of progress. If men were wholly unpredictable, they could not be manipulated; if they were wholly

conceptions is conducted more obliquely in philosophy and many disputes about the explanation of action, the interpretation of experience or the nature of responsibility, for example, bear on it without always being directly addressed to it. But some works which do treat the issue in the spirit defended here are cited in the bibliography.

pliable, they could be manipulated too easily. It is no part of Enlighten-
ment thinking that freedom and happiness for men could be gained by
prefrontal lobotomy. Yet, we may suppose, a cheerful imbecile is con-
scious of no unsatisfied desires. The objection to utopia through oblivion
therefore has to be the loss of human dignity or identity. There have to be
needs and wants whose satisfaction is crucial for self-fulfilment. This is a
sine qua non for an ethic which takes men as they are and for a science
which bases the understanding of society on constant and universal prin-
ciples of human nature. On the other hand progress has to be possible.
Since most of our current ills are traced to defects in human nature, there
has to be scope for improvement without destroying human identity.
Social engineering does not change the universal principles but it alters
the initial conditions. Men behave predictably better in an environment
better suited to their needs. The social engineer harnesses science and so
he has to know what he is doing and have the power to do it. His
innovations involve initiative, in an uncompromising sense, as we shall
see. There is thus a tension in the basic view of man, who is sometimes
puppet and sometimes puppeteer, sometimes passive and sometimes
active.

Before we fill out these two models in turn, there is an objection to
parry. We began by speaking roundly of an essential nature of man and of
separating his essence from his accidents. It will be objected that few
theories deal in such essences. Plastic Man, for instance, is surely a creature
without an essence, as his name suggests. Indeed Autonomous Man, even
if somehow possessed of a self, need not be a scholastic substance. Why
confuse the issue in this antiquarian way? In reply, I do not quite mean
'substance' and 'essence' to be taken as part of an ontology of necessary
beings and subsistent attributes. But I do mean to stress the presence of
some ontology and metaphysics in basic assumptions about human
behaviour. Paradoxically, any claim that Plastic Man has no essence will
turn out to be an essentialist thesis, in that it asserts *a priori* and on
epistemological grounds an informative proposition about the stuff of
human behaviour. However, it is too early to deploy the view of scientific
knowledge which removes the paradox or makes it more than banal that
the man who denies one metaphysic thereby asserts another, and, for the
moment, terms like 'essential human nature' are being used somewhat
lightly. If the objector will agree that there is some basic distinction
between passive and active conceptions of man, I will settle for calling
them assumptions.

Now let us attend to Plastic Man. Talk of 'constant and universal principles of human nature' suggests that we are natural creatures in a rational world of cause and effect. This is an Enlightenment theme which has dominated orthodox sociology and it implies that we are objects in nature differing from others only in degree of complexity. 'Man is not fashioned out of a more precious clay; Nature has used only one and the same dough in which she has merely varied the leaven', as La Mettrie put it in *L'Homme Machine.* There is scope for much dispute about how she has done her work, however. Plastic Man has many variants and I impute no simple-mindedness to his proponents. The common factor is more abstract. It is that passive conceptions are naturalistic and deterministic. Neither term is straightforward.

Naturalism is a bland doctrine in its own right, asserting only that whatever is not supernatural belongs to a unitary natural order. Historically, it gets its point in opposition to Cartesian dualism (or, rather, to received interpretations of that doctrine). Descartes, in founding modern philosophy, also founded some of its hardest puzzles. Partly in order to reconcile the duties of a Catholic with the hopes of a scientist, he divided heaven and earth into three substances or orders of being: God, mind and nature. Nature was a realm of matter in motion, governed by iron laws which made the succession of its states utterly necessary and so, he hoped, open to explanation by mathematical methods. Mind was a realm of subjects of consciousness and each self or soul in it had a free will untrammelled by the laws of nature. Borrowing from an older notion of substance, he took each order of being to be a self-contained system whose essential attributes were unique to itself and whose states could all be explained from within. (I ignore the fact that he held all things to be dependent on God, who was thus the only true substance, in order to concentrate on the relation between man and nature.) Natural objects essentially occupied space and therefore mental objects did not; mental objects were essentially conscious and therefore natural objects essentially were not. The plan was to secure nature for science, while saving the divine spark in man. Man was to be, in the words of Sir Thomas Browne, 'that great and true Amphibium whose nature is to live not only like other creatures in divers elements but in divided and distinguish'd worlds'. This great and true Amphibium was caught on a frontier between two essentially different orders of being, one of which included all his physical behaviour and the other all his perceptions, beliefs, intentions and, if you will pardon the anachronism, subjective meanings.

Although empiricism came to replace Cartesian rationalism as the phil-
osophy of nature and although Descartes himself no longer seems a giant
in the history of scientific discovery, his role in clearing the road for the
natural sciences, while barring it for the social sciences, has been of lasting
effect. To put it as mildly as possible the mental workings of a great
Amphibium could not be studied by the methods of natural science.
Naturalism is, historically, the thesis which, if true, extends nature to
include man. Mind and nature form a single system with those features
of nature which make it a subject for science. It is thus a negative and
bland thesis and does not in itself specify the features. It does not, for
instance, commit one to materialism or behaviourism, although these are
among the more specific -isms compatible with it. Its sole implication is
that there is only one general form of scientific explanation. There is no
reason in nature to halt a chain of explanation at any point short of the
system as a whole. In particular there is no boundary between inner states
and environment or between self and society. The scientist may impose
stopping points, because his life is short, his intellect finite, his interests
selective or his habitat departmental. But nature is a total system without
internal boundaries or *ceteris paribus* clauses. Natural and social sciences
attack the same one world with the same one method of validation.

Determinism can be taken as specifying the one form of scientific
explanation. It has, in fact, several senses, some of them too broad for this
purpose and others too committal. It may save confusion if we list some of
them.

1. Every event has an explanation.
2. Every event has an explanation in the same mode.
3. Every event has a causal explanation.
4. Every event, together with some other event, is an instance of a
   natural law.
5. Every event is the only possible outcome of some other event, being subject
   to laws which could not possibly be otherwise.

Of these the first expresses only the blankest rationalism (with a small 'r',
in that literary sense in which empiricists are rationalists too), and puts no
limit on the kinds of explanation there may be. The second puts a limit
without saying of what kind. The third looks more tempting but leaves
the analysis of 'causation' so open that it is no advance on the second. The
fourth is more useful. It picks out the group of analyses which turn on the
idea that causal explanation is of the particular by means of the general
and it introduces the term 'natural law', which will concern us later. The

fifth continues by glossing the notion of a law in terms of a very strong notion of necessity, a distinguished line but no longer a common one and so too specific for our purposes.

Accordingly we shall fare best with the fourth. However, some amendment is called for, partly because we are not concerned here with whether there are random events and elements and partly because there may also be causal explanations for states, conditions, dispositions, processes or objects, depending on the kind of ontology accepted. There is also a case for using a less non-committal phrase than 'natural law' but that had better wait until Chapter 3. As amended, then, the sense which asserts just enough is that *every fact which has an explanation is, together with some other fact, an instance of a natural law.* (The 'other fact' will be the *explanans.*) Naturalism and determinism now go agreeably together, combining to assert that there is a unitary law-governed world and that knowledge of it depends on identifying its laws.

The mark of a passive conception, then, is to treat human agency as a natural and determined phenomenon, which does not provide, in Leibniz' phrase, 'a necessary being with which we can stop'. The diagram for Plastic Man simply connects inputs to output by an arrow just like the other arrows, thus emphasising the unity of scientific method and abolishing any ultimate hiatus between the inside and the outside of the box. Apart from any random factors, the creature portrayed behaves predictably in given conditions and can be manipulated by engineering apt conditions. Science is thus ready to guide us to the Good Society, where 'the sun will shine only on free men who own no other light than their reason'.[2] We see the point of Helvetius's remark that 'it matters not whether men are good or bad – law is everything'. 'Ethics,' he adds, 'is the agriculture of the mind.'

But the thought that 'law is everything' contains an ambiguity and hides a problem. It gestures both to the laws of nature as they are and to the laws of government as they might be. The former are constant and universal, the latter are prescribed. Someone must innovate, performing actions not readily explained as instances of a natural law. Certainly most Enlightenment texts allow a free man a power of initiative which comes from the use of reason. Helvetius himself was a thorough determinist but Condorcet, just cited, is more typical in allowing men of reason to transcend the laws of nature. 'Knowledge, power and virtue,' he declares, 'are bound together

2   These words are taken from Condorcet's *Historical Sketch for the Progress of the Human Mind*, xth stage, where the Enlightenment vision is movingly set down.

by an indissoluble chain.' In deference to those who hold that science is ethically neutral, we may ignore the intrusion of virtue but we are bound to wonder how knowledge can give power to Plastic Man. I raise this here not to score an objection, since passive conceptions have several answers which we shall consider later, but to point out how easily Enlightenment thought yields a second and active principle in human nature. Innovation is merely the doing of something for the first time; initiative is a concept with a sharper edge and seems to require a fresh model of man.

By the same token, although Enlightenment theories are discernibly individualistic, Plastic Man is not much of an individual. Within a passive conception each of us is unique only in so far as he is the only instance of the intersection of a complex of laws. If there is also a random element, it is to that extent inexplicable and so, to the Enlightened if not to the Romantic eye, offers no source of individuality. Again I point this out, not to score (especially since recent passive theories are often not individualistic at all) but to introduce the other model. Those who take initiative to be the work of an active individual will now be ready for an active conception of the self.

Plastic Man is a natural creature in a rational world of cause and effect. The antiphonal theme in Enlightenment thought is that we are rational creators in a natural world of cause and effect. With the aid of reason we can master nature, manipulate society, change culture and, indeed, shape our own selves. As a political premise loosely shared by many liberals, socialists, revolutionaries and anarchists, the idea is too familiar to need rehearsal. But the mention of reason indicates a tighter bond than mere enthusiasm for the whole man and one which excludes romantics in the name of science. The key to explaining social behaviour lies in the rational activity of the subject self. The black box is equipped with a rational subject self, which we dub Autonomous Man.

The last sentence puts together three distinct themes, each too perplexing for more than a word of introduction here. There is to be a self, whatever that may turn out to be. The self is a subject, in one or more of the senses which that term can take. It is rationality which marks out man, however rationality is to be construed. We should note at once that the three elements are not always all present, even in active conceptions derived directly from the Enlightenment. Individualism can be disavowed; contrasts between subjects and objects are often declared distracting; rationality is not the only contender. In making Autonomous Man a rational subject self, I am generalising only very broadly and, for the rest, giving warning of the line which I shall endorse myself. Nevertheless the