MARTIN HOLLIS

James Martin Hollis
1938–1998

JAMES MARTIN HOLLIS (always known simply as Martin) was born on 14 March 1938 into a family well-known for its commitment to public service. His father was a senior diplomat; one of his uncles was the MP Christopher Hollis; another was Roger Hollis, the head of MI5. Following a well-trodden mandarin path, Martin attended Winchester College as a Scholar, and duly went on to win the expected Classical Scholarship to New College, Oxford. Before going to University he did his national service in the Royal Artillery. This was a period of his life about which he seldom spoke, but it evidently left its mark, if only by turning him into a heavy smoker for many years.

At Oxford Martin was taught by two philosophers for whom he always professed the highest regard. One was A. J. Ayer, whom Martin particularly admired as a teacher. Ayer, he would say, invariably treated even the most unpromising remarks of his students with complete respect and tried to find some truth in them. This experience too must have left its mark, for Martin's own teaching was inspiring and encouraging in a very similar way. The other Oxford philosopher about whom Martin always spoke with admiration was P. F. Strawson, to whom Martin acknowledged a debt for the way in which he had formulated his account of the role of rationality in explanation. This was to become a master theme—almost an obsession—of Martin's own philosophical work. Martin's belief in the power of reason was unshakeable, and he viewed all manifestations of religious sentiment with a sense of amused disbelief. He was never in the least abashed by critics who complained that his own

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commitment to the ideal of rationality was so fervent as sometimes to seem unreasonable. As always, he merely relished the irony.

After gaining a First Class in PPE in 1961, Martin took up a Harkness Fellowship at Berkeley and Harvard Universities. While at Harvard he clearly fell under the spell of W. O. Quine, but he nevertheless decided against an academic career. He sat the civil service examinations, passing out top, and joined the Foreign Office in 1963. With his long string of youthful triumphs behind him, he now seemed set for an equally triumphant public career.

Very soon, however, Martin found himself drawn back to philosophy. He began to combine his work at the Foreign Office with teaching back at Oxford, and in 1964–5 he held a lectureship attached to Balliol College. He was not finding the civil service especially challenging, and his employers soon found themselves accused of behaving irrationally, always the worst sin in Martin's book. Having sent him to Heidelberg to learn German, they announced that his next posting would be to Moscow. A further reason why this prospect seemed out of the question was that in 1965 Martin had married Patricia Wells, whom he had met while they were both Harkness Fellows in the United States. Martin resigned from the Foreign Office in 1966 and embarked on an academic career instead.

Patricia and Martin both obtained lectureships at the fledgling University of East Anglia in 1967, and there they both stayed. They quickly became prominent in the local community as well as in the university. Martin served as a JP between 1972 and 1982, while Patricia joined, and later led, Norwich City Council. Martin took immense pride in the fact that it was Patricia who went on to combine her distinguished academic life with a career in politics, a career that culminated in her appointment to a government post in the House of Lords as Baroness Hollis of Heigham after the General Election of 1997.

Meanwhile Martin pursued his own academic career with a remarkable combination of intensity and steadiness. He proved to be extremely prolific, writing with a seemingly effortless ease and lucidity, and by the 1990s he had gained an international reputation. He made a visit to China in 1996, and was much in demand as a visiting lecturer in Europe and in the United States. His own university was not slow to recognise his gifts, and he was promoted to Senior Lecturer in 1972 and to the Chair of Philosophy ten years later. Although he always appeared genuinely indifferent to academic honours, the mark of recognition that perhaps gave him the greatest pleasure was his election in 1990 to the philosophy section of the British Academy.

Although Martin was unremitting in his dedication to his research, he also liked to run things. He was editor of the Anglo-German journal *Ratio* from 1980 to 1987, and did much to broaden its coverage while at the same time sustaining its high standards. He was President of the Aristotelian Society in 1986, and in the early 1990s was exceptionally active as a Fellow of the Academy, acting as chair of the Philosophy section in addition to serving on Council. His university was likewise fortunate in being able to call on his administrative talents, and he gave unstinting service, acting in turn as Head of Philosophy, Dean of his School between 1983–6 and Pro-Vice-Chancellor between 1992–5.

Martin disclaimed any ambitions as an administrator, but his exceptional intelligence, combined with his deeply ingrained sense of civic duty, made him a highly effective one. All letters and memos were instantly answered in neat handwritten notes, and only by the faintest tones of irony did he ever convey that one might be wasting his time. Unusually for someone of such preternatural quickness, he was remarkably tolerant of colleagues whose superegos were less well developed or who simply thought and worked at a slower pace. He himself was steely in his efficiency, utterly to be trusted and utterly to be relied upon to do whatever he had promised to do, come what may.

Although he always worked hard, Martin was devoted to his family and domestic life. While incapable of speaking boastfully about himself, he took tremendous pride in Patricia's achievements and in those of their two gifted sons. Visitors to the house were always welcome, and when the children were young there was a motor-cruiser on which one would be taken for trips on the Norfolk Broads. There were certain snares, however, for unwary guests. One was that Martin liked to throw off the modest observation that he enjoyed a bit of chess. (He was an extremely strong and competitive player.) Another was the delight he took in setting puzzles for his guests to solve. He himself adored brainteasers, and for some years contributed a weekly column of logical puzzles to the *New Scientist*, publishing a selection of them in 1970 under the title *Tantalisers*. This was considered by aficionados to be a work of real originality, although Martin failed to mention it in his list of publications in *Who's Who*.

What Martin really enjoyed was philosophical conversation, or better still argument. Best of all he liked to throw off epigrams that left his interlocutors unsure about their relevance to the question in hand. This quizzical and deeply pedagogic aspect of his character is nicely captured by Malcolm Bradbury—another eminence from the University of East Anglia—in the Preface to his last novel, *To the Hermitage*. 'Martin Hollis',

he writes, 'contributed greatly. A believer in the cunning of reason, he often led me, wandering and peripatetic, up the Enlightenment Trail, aiming for the pub at the top, The Triumph of Reason. I fear we never reached it.'

After thirty years at the same institution, there were signs in the mid-1990s that Martin might be ready for a change. He thought about Chairs elsewhere, and there was talk of his becoming the Head of one of the Cambridge Colleges. But it was not to be. The last academic occasion on which he was able to take part outside his own university was in February 1997, when he helped to organise and lead a *conversazione* at the Academy on 'Philosophy and its History'. Although he read his own contribution in his usual impeccable style, it was clear that something was wrong, for in the course of a long discussion he sat almost silent, a thing unknown. A brain tumour was diagnosed shortly afterwards, and proved resistant to treatment. Most heartbreakingly for such a lord of language, his linguistic powers were the first to go. Before the end of the year he was bedridden, and thereafter he was devotedly nursed by his family at home, where he died on 27 February 1998.

It was possible to know Martin well for many years without feeling that one really knew him. He was always thoughtful and generous, and always wonderfully witty company, but he maintained a considerable reserve. Even in the midst of social occasions it sometimes seemed that (humming to himself the while) he had somehow withdrawn. With his reserve went a genuine stoicism. He never complained about his life, which he recognised as privileged, nor about his colleagues, feckless though many of them must have seemed if judged by his own relentless standards of efficiency. He was not without intellectual aggression, but he was totally devoid of malice. His courtesy was invariable, and he extended it equally to everyone. Even *in extremis*, these qualities of equability never deserted him. A colleague who visited him shortly before he died remarked that university life was becoming so harassing that one was probably better off in bed. By then Martin could no longer speak, but he was still able to give his inimitable smile.

A memorial occasion in Martin's honour was held at the University of East Anglia on 5 May 1998. The university theatre was packed with well-wishers who had come from several countries to pay their respects. The occasion was a wholly secular one but was made intensely memorable by the way in which Martin's immediate family commemorated him. His wife Patricia spoke finely of his intellectual brilliance (and of his domestic incompetence); his younger son Matthew read out one of his own

poems, a moving meditation on his sense of loss; and his elder son Simon quoted passages from Martin's philosophical works that left the audience alternately reflecting on the argument and helpless with laughter at the wit.

At the heart of all his work was a passionate and unwavering rationalism. Starting from the assumption that there is an 'epistemological unity of mankind', the idea that there is, in P. F. Strawson's words, 'a massive central core of human thinking which has no history', he devoted his scholarly energies to exploring, often in close collaboration with social scientists in a variety of disciplines, the meaning and scope of rationality. Are the criteria of truth and rationality universal and objective? Should we accept a picture of rational agents as pure calculators of the consequences which best satisfy their given preferences? Can reason extend to a concern with the rationality of ends? Can we accept that social norms are a source of reasons for reasonable persons without sliding into relativism? Can we aspire to a single account of practical reason for all species of rational action or single definition of rationality for all purposes of social science? Such were the questions he repeatedly and insistently addressed as his thought evolved and deepened over three decades.

His serious engagement with the social sciences and collaboration with their practitioners was both characteristic and distinctive. His first book, *Rational Economic Man* (1975), was co-authored with the economist Edward Nell and he subsequently published an Oxford book of readings on *Philosophy and Economic Theory* (1979) with Professor Frank Hahn, who has remarked that he was 'one of the few non-economic theorists I know who had a serious understanding of the subject; indeed, a good deal superior to that of many economists'. His last collaboration was the strikingly successful collective work, *The Theory of Choice: A Critical Guide* (1992), co-written with four colleagues in the School of Economic and Social Studies at the University of East Anglia, three of them economists and one a Professor of Politics. Another early collaboration was with Steven Lukes. Their widely-discussed edited volume *Rationality and Relativism* (1982) brought together influential essays by philosophers, sociologists of science and anthropologists. His *Models of Man* (1977) addressed issues central to contemporary sociological theory. And with another colleague from East Anglia, Professor Steven Smith he wrote *Explanation and Understanding International Relations* (1990). He also wrote an engaging *Invitation to Philosophy* (1985) and a (very demanding) 'introduction' to *The Philosophy of Social Science* (1994) and

two major works which develop and synthesize his thoughts: *The Cunning of Reason* (1987) and the posthumously published *Trust within Reason* (1998). He also wrote many lively and interesting papers, on all these and other subjects, some of them collected in his *Reason in Action.*

His first writings were stimulated by the debate in the 1960s opened up by Peter Winch's Wittgenstein-influenced *The Idea of a Social Science* and his much-debated article 'Understanding a Primitive Society' which, discussing Zande witchcraft and Nuer symbolism, maintained that standards of rationality could be plural. According to Winch, 'standards of rationality in different societies do not always coincide': thus Professor Evans-Pritchard had misunderstood the Zande by 'pressing their thought where it would not naturally go'. In a series of articles and chapters Martin firmly rejected this apparently relativist line of thought, which can also be found in the work of the so-called 'Edinburgh School' in the sociology and history of science, whose 'strong programme' consisted in denying any form of knowledge a 'privileged status' and in tracing the local modes of cultural transmission, socialisation and social control as constituting the specific local causes of beliefs being held. The anti-relativist case can be argued either on empirical grounds (along Humean lines: that mankind is 'much the same in all times and places') or on a priori grounds. Martin firmly took the latter course. He saw the problem of interpreting the beliefs and practices of other cultures as merely a colourful version of the problem of Other Minds and maintained that all understanding presupposes a 'bridgehead' of true and rational beliefs: that 'some assumption about rationality has to be made *a priori*, if anthropology is to be possible; and that we have no choice about what assumption to make'. On this issue he never wavered though his thought became ever more nuanced in successive discussions of the hermeneutic circle. His settled views on the relations between rationality and relativism were as he set them out in *The Philosophy of Social Science*:

> The first step towards charting a world from within is to understand what its inhabitants believe. When one is convinced that a belief is both true and held for good reason, no further step is required. False beliefs which are held for good reason can be understood by relating them to 'bridgehead' beliefs. Bad reasons, however, call for explanation at a causal level, which supplies an external structure to account for them. Rationality thus comes first but relativism then has its turn.

A second major theme in his writings was the issue of how to conceptualise personal and social identity: how to account for autonomy and individuals' relations to their social roles. This theme was first treated

extensively in his *Models of Man* whose argument is structured around the contrast between the two models of 'plastic man' and 'autonomous man' and proceeds by taking up the idea, following on from that just indicated, that reasons are 'the explanation but not the cause of rational action', so that 'fully rational action' is 'its own explanation, given the context and the actor's identity', concluding with the idea that social action is to be understood as 'the rational expression of intention within rules' and 'where models of rational action give advice which actors do not follow and call for skills which they do not have, two kinds of explanation co-exist'. This theme was carried further in the chapter on 'Reasons and Roles' in *The Cunning of Reason* in an ingenious discussion of how to explain action by reasons by using two frames of reference in seeking to explain bureaucratic behaviour:

> One is the role-playing frame, where the reasons for action derive from normative expectations. That a situation is of a declared sort makes it the particular responsibility of those in some set of offices. They thereby have a reason for doing something appropriate about it. A Bureaucratic Politics model is excellent for pinning down this point and spelling it out. The other frame is a problem-solving one. It will not do to come up with any old appropriate solution. The problem calls for a best, or at least, a good one. A rational actor model is excellent for studying those aspects of decision-making which are fairly independent of normative context.

Roles, he insisted, are not 'fully scripted in advance of every situation', must always be interpreted and so call for judgement of what in particular is required of social actors who are best seen, not as impersonating but as personifying characters—an older idea and one 'closer to the roots of drama than the idea of dressing up and pretence'. We are 'rational stewards', he liked to say, not players of our social roles. The rule-governed games of social life are not like the strategic interactions of game theory. This was his version of *homo sociologicus*:

> The games we play become open-textured and our motives or real reasons for making our moves can be distinguished from the intentions expressed in the act of making them. But this leaves an ambiguity, if we, the actors, hoped to emerge as persons whose identity is not defined by any or all of the games of social life. Talk of motives or real reasons may signal only a deeper level of intentions, as when a chess master who seems to be merely defending against a threat is really setting a trap. Or where motives are external to the game of the moment, they may still belong to another game.

He turned a last time to the topic of autonomy in the chapter devoted to it in *The Theory of Choice*, in which he argued that rational choice theory,

concentrating upon internal coherence among preferences, among beliefs, and between preferences, beliefs, and actions, cannot give a satisfactory account of autonomy, which, he thought 'must take on moral shape', for the satisfied fool's and the happy slave's autonomy are illusory:

> Self-direction becomes the moral independence which goes with individuality in Mill, especially if Kant's connection is made between a free will and a will made under moral laws.

Which leads us directly to the third major theme of his writings: an elaborate and deeply thought-out critique of rational choice thinking and its extensions, which explored the instrumental notion of practical reason central to microeconomics and critical for 'economic' theories of social action at large. His work on economic theories began with his first book, written with Nell, *Rational Economic Man*, in which he endorsed the idea, also found in von Mises, that the formal abstractions of economic theory constitute a priori knowledge, furnishing 'Kantian conditions a priori of the possibility of finding a kind of describable order in social experience'. He continued to hold this view and explicitly endorsed it in later writings, but his critique of rational choice does not require acceptance of this admittedly contentious position. That critique is complex and rich, but its bottom line is characteristically Hollisian: an objection to the Humean idea that reason is the slave of the passions.

The critique is most fully developed in *The Cunning of Reason*. This begins with an exceptionally lucid presentation of the elements of rational choice theory and game theory. He shows how it presumes desire, rather than belief, as the only motor of action; that the theory of efficient choice is unconcerned with the ends pursued; and that belief is assimilated to information and deliberation to its processing. He then challenges all three presumptions, at length and in detail, arguing that the decision-theoretic model of human action and interaction—in which 'the agent is simply a throughput' and individuals are interchangeable computing units who differ only in their preferences or individual sources of satisfaction—cannot account for the phenomena of trust and morality in social life. Extended discussions of rational expectations and of 'maximising' and 'satisficing' lead back to the idea of social actors as rational role players.

Martin's last book, *Trust within Reason* takes up the theme of trust and the inadequacies of 'current versions of reason' to account for it. It merits a somewhat more extended treatment here, since it represents Hollis's mature and, sadly, his final reflections upon the themes we have

considered, gathering them together in addressing a central and pressing contemporary question. Why do we keep our promises, obey the law, honour contracts, vote in elections, pick up hitchhikers, give blood, and so on? Why do people play their part in social life (rather than 'defecting') and is it rational to do so? Martin's objective is to show that it is, by 'defining reason aright'.

He begins with a memorably vivid parable of a proposed journey of Adam and Eve 'through smiling uplands along the Enlightenment Trail', lined with six inns ('The Rational Choice', 'The Social Contract', 'The Foole', 'The Sensible Knave', 'The Extra Trick' and 'The Triumph of Reason'). They agree to end their walk at one of them and to take turns in deciding where to halt or walk on. Each of the two would-be travellers, armed with different preference-orderings, will, starting from the last of the inns, which they both much prefer to the first but rank differently, foresee the other's defection and so, through backward induction, they will never get going. Rational choice precludes the journey to the Triumph of Reason.

First, he considers rational choice theory and the attempts within that tradition to answer objections and fix things by modifying assumptions and making technical improvements. He judges such attempts as failures, the central problem being that 'the standard theory of rational choice defines rationality by reference to the agent's own expected utility, whereas trust requires that we can expect people to ignore this siren call' or, in game-theoretic terms, that trust requires 'out-of-equilibrium play—strategic choice which is not a best answer to the other player's move'. Neither Hobbes's attempt to rely on negative sanctions nor Hume's appeal to sympathy can solve the problem which resides in part in the assumption of philosophical, rather than psychological egoism and in part on exclusive reliance on forward-looking reasons. For these moves can only change the balance of reasons while leaving their character unchanged and thus can only render 'rational' people more trustworthy under favourable circumstances. Nor can we solve the problem by reconceiving utility as a purely formal notion, 'bleaching' it of all psychological content, thereby depriving it of motivational and thus explanatory force. Nor can we solve it by injecting probability considerations or by positing a series of games of infinite or indefinite or unknown length. We can reduce defection in these ways, but we cannot remove it while 'reasons for being amiable remain only forward-looking'. This version of reason still leaves 'many occasions to rat and would undermine people with irrational motives'. As Hume put it, 'the sensible knave' may still 'think that an act of iniquity or infidelity will make

a considerable addition to his fortune, without causing any considerable breach in the social union and confederacy'.

But what about subordinating instrumental rationality to a higher kind, namely Kantian reason? This would render Adam and Eve's journey possible but only because they both adopt the moral point of view, acting on universalisable maxims, on categorical and not hypothetical imperatives, and casting aside concern for consequences and mutual self-interest. But this, Martin argues, misses 'the secret of trust': it requires too ruthless an abstraction of individuals from social life, from 'personal ties' and 'particularised social relations', since it posits that people 'recognize one another as selves distinct from their human and social peculiarities and treat one another impersonally and fairly, as required by the universal maxims that guide moral action'. It would not, for instance, explain why people used to leave their doors unlocked. Such a social norm has moral content and yet could not plausibly be construed as a universal maxim: it is grounded in social relations and is also strategic, depending on how trustworthy others are.

Nor does a contractarian perspective on reason help, for this, according to Martin is rooted in mutual self-interest and is thus not combinable with a Kantian perspective. What is needed, and missing in all contractarians, is an account of why, if A has helped B, C owes something to D. Here too the persistent question remains: why rational persons are morally bound to keep their covenants when prudence dictates otherwise?

Nor, finally, can a Wittgensteinian version of reason in terms of the 'games' of social life solve the problem, suggesting that, since understanding advances in finding rationality in what is understood, what is rational derives 'from the rules followed'. But there are many 'forms of life' that cannot be endorsed as 'reasonable'. For, self-evidently, although a mafioso and a cannibal have reasons 'internally and intersubjectively', one cannot forsake the 'right and ability' to question their social relations from the outside and the need for a 'universal standpoint from which to discriminate between different ways of embedding the self in social relations'. For we cannot avoid keeping 'a space for questioning institutions at large; and asking what are 'the social relations that reason can endorse'.

Adam and Eve never reached their destination, but, we may ask, did Martin Hollis reach his? Did he arrive at 'a different idea of practical reason, deeper than prudence and morally charged' that unlocks 'the secret of trust' and 'illuminates the bond of society after all'? His readers will decide. What he has certainly left them with, in this and other works, is a series of thought-provoking negative injunctions and positive suggestions.

Among the negative injunctions are: distrust individualist theories of human nature and practical reason; reject consequentialist views that exclude backward-looking motivations; view with suspicion the distinction between procedural and substantive values, between the right and the good; reject accounts of the social sciences that lend themselves to social engineering, promising to reconcile the interests of each with the interests of all. Among the positive suggestions are: think about fully generalised reciprocity, by reflecting upon team spirit, and on Titmuss's account of blood donors in Britain where 'creative altruism is local and conditional—a matter of there being enough members for a joint undertaking'; think about how Rousseau's account of how individuals are transformed into citizens, where preferences are both consulted and constructed; imagine schemes of generalised reciprocity that 'offer to settle who we are and where we belong' but 'do not define us immutably' and 'are not beyond criticism'; and 'regard the social world as an interpretative fabric spun from shared meanings which persist or change as we negotiate their interpretation among ourselves.'

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