

The Cullybackey Fox-Weasel



THE DIFFICULTY OF RECOGNIZING THEM for what they are, as they unfold before us in the real time of actual experience, can make moral dilemmas more or less invisible as they happen. It's only later, in the controlled environment of retrospect, considering the carefully distilled pros and cons of debate, that we come to realise some of our direct encounters with the raw material of ethics. Perhaps this is just a long-winded way of saying that I've led a comparatively sheltered life, one in which many of those sombre questions of life and death that spark such huge controversy have been manifested more as topics for discussion than as immediate concerns, breathing the hot breath of immediacy on my neck. So, questions about capital punishment, euthanasia, just war (to take three examples) have, for the most part, been asked only in a ritual sense, a going through of possible responses, rather than finding my life violently contorted by their direct impact. They've not, in other words, occurred as real interrogations thrust upon me by events, bearing down upon my life with the massive tonnage of urgent actuality, catastrophically unavoidable, allowing no possibility of evasion through indecision or postponement.

Like the vast majority of my fellow citizens, the cues of right and wrong that guide my conduct are largely the result of osmosis rather than of any consciously weighed-up series of decisions. They're the obedient echoes of custom, as reflected by family, friends, and society-at-large, not independent, self-conscious choices. In consequence, daily life is not fraught with much anxiety about good

and evil. Instead, for most of the time I'm on automatic moral pilot — a state of being that has been responsible for allowing some of history's most appalling acts; a state which ought, perhaps, itself to be included in any list of ethical dilemmas confronting us. All this ruminative preface is intended to set the scene for an occasion when, quite unexpectedly, a moral dilemma was thrown right into my lap and recognized more or less at once for what it was, rather than only coming into focus later when I stopped to think about it.

The circumstances were mundane, indeed mildly comical. So much so that I've often wondered if my interpretation is not just exaggeration, the inflation of a trivial misnomer into moral dimensions it doesn't really warrant. Readers must judge for themselves how to view the matter and consider how I should have acted (how *you* would have acted). Though I've always viewed myself as being more or less on the side of the angels and among those ranged resolutely, if unheroically, against the demons, my reaction in the face of this particular moral dilemma makes me doubt the sincerity and worth of such casually assumed allegiance. No doubt everyone likes to think they're aligned with the better side in any conflict. But between the camps of good and bad there's a massive wasteland of indifference, cowardice, and inaction, a moral no-man's land where I suspect, if truth-be-told, the vast majority of us are stationed.

The moral dilemma in question happened when I was travelling by train between Antrim and Coleraine. It was a mid-morning Saturday service and the carriage was nearly full. It was one of those sheer blue icy winter days with superb visibility. The fields and hedges were still heavily frosted, and here and there were light coverings of snow. Just out of Cullybackey, I noticed a fox loping agilely across a field. You could see the tracks it left and the breath clouding whitely from its mouth. A magnificent specimen, its coat a deep russet red, it stopped momentarily as the train went slowly past, as if inspecting this strange, lumbering, mechanical animal. An elderly couple were sitting opposite me. The woman, sitting next to the window, turned

to her husband (at least I assumed they were married) and said, "Look! There's a fox. Do you see?" He craned his head to look where she was pointing. "That's not a fox," he said abruptly. "It's a weasel." His wife objected, but with a lack of confidence that suggested years of compliance with someone else's views, rather than any doubt about the correctness of her own opinion (or so, at least, it seemed to me). "Surely it's a fox, John. I thought...aren't weasels much smaller? Isn't it...are you sure?" Her voice trailed off uncertainly. Her face was fixed in an expression of tiredness, defeat and disappointment, as if it had been gradually eroded by the constant weathering of her husband's dogmatism. He was insistent, unyielding in his view. "No. Not a fox. It's a weasel. I told you, definitely a weasel. Fox indeed, pah!" And then, as if some sort of gentling concession to so blunt a contradiction was needed, he added in a softer tone, "Well, well. I've not seen one of them for years."

It was, indubitably, a fox. Anyone with any claim to the basic natural literacy that knows an oak tree from a dandelion, a sparrow from a swan, a viper from a frog, could not possibly confuse a fox and a weasel. (Not, at least, when the animal in question was in full view, at no more than twenty yards, in bright sunshine.) To make such an error was like saying black is white or A is Z. The man was clearly wrong. His mistake hung heavily in the air, inviting challenge. I looked at the other passengers sitting nearby, trying to glean from their expressions if they'd seen the fox, or overheard this solecism and, if so, whether they were going to intervene. Though all bore the deliberate inscrutability we so carefully take on in public, I was certain at least three others had heard the man's remark and shared my knowledge of the little untruth apparently allowed to win the day. There was a minute or so of silence in the carriage, a heaven-sent lacuna perfectly placed to invite correction. No one said anything. Then the man started to read out snippets to his wife from some shocking story in his paper about a recent bombing. She listened attentively, occasionally tut-tutting and saying things like, "How awful," and, "How can people be like that?" Her husband

muttered about how he'd shoot the lot of them, that it was the only thing people like that understood. A baby started crying four seats along from me, and the ticket collector appeared in the carriage and started checking our tickets. The moment for intervention was lost, the fox was left miles behind, and the train trundled on towards Ballymoney, the last stop before Coleraine, invisibly freighted with its cargo of a falsehood allowed to stand.

How can so silly and minor an incident be cast in the role of something so grand as a "moral dilemma?" It's not as if anyone's life or liberty had been threatened. No one's freedom of speech had been taken away; no appalling injustice had been allowed to happen; nothing remotely resembling the gravity of torture or genocide had been perpetrated. We hadn't witnessed, surely, any epochal encounter between good and evil. All that had happened was that one ignorant and obtuse individual had insisted — in a loud, carrying voice — that his demonstrably false opinion was correct. And is everyone not entitled to their own opinion, even if it is mistaken? What happened was surely just a trivial error, a voicing of a two-syllable name instead of a one-syllable one, the substituting of a six-letter word for a three-letter one. To see this mistaking a fox for a weasel as anything so serious as a moral dilemma would surely be to puff up a negligible error into so swollen a condition that the original event would no longer be recognizable beneath it.

It's easy to make the case against, to argue that it is indeed an unwarranted exaggeration to present as a moral dilemma the question of whether or not one should attempt to correct such a little error overheard in public. And yet, if we fail to nail a germinal lie, an error, an untruth, a mistake in embryo, when *will* we sanction the corrective process? When *is* it right to intervene? If we dismiss such an occurrence as too trivial to bother about, do we not risk postponing any corrective action until error has assumed such proportions that dealing with it may be impossible? Is it an individual's inalienable right to decide what to say and to have their utterance go unchallenged? If that utterance strays, however

unintentionally, into the public domain, is there not some communal responsibility to correct it if it happens to bear the bacillus of error (so posing a threat to everyone's well-being)? If our train had passed a field where a crowd was beating a human victim and the woman had said, "Look, that poor man, we should help," and her husband had replied, "No. It's only a terrorist, that's what they deserve," would it be acceptable to say nothing?

Of course, I was able to invent all sorts of reasons to justify my lack of intervention. It's easy, for example, to erect some sort of border around marriage and assume that any incursion into its private dialogues would be unwarranted, a trespass of a particularly odious and contemptible kind into intimacy's hallowed territory. And the threat of escalation, of creating an "incident" also came readily to mind as a disincentive to correction (but hadn't an "incident" already been created by the utterance of so obvious an untruth?).

It may seem harmless to confuse a weasel and a fox. Isn't it just a matter of mistaken identity, getting the wrong word? But it's as well to bring to mind just where using the wrong words can lead. Hannah Arendt's observations about the Nazi's liking of anodyne terms for mass murder are instructive. Only very rarely do their documents refer to "extermination," "killing," or "liquidation." Instead, the prescribed code words were "evacuation," "special treatment" and, most infamously, "final solution." Treblinka, Auschwitz and other concentration camps were referred to, grotesquely, as "Charitable Foundations for Institutional Care." What actually happened in them was masked by a euphemistic vocabulary in which shower signs pointed the way to the gas chambers. A long, long way from foxes and weasels, but the path to such hellish destinations has to start somewhere. As Confucius insisted, social harmony is dependent on correct naming. Does that not mean that incorrect naming imposes an obligation on all of us to put it right?

Thinking about right and wrong, truth and error, good and evil is, of course, a complex business in our ever more complicated world. So much so that it's tempting for a mere essayist to shrug it off as an

unsuitable topic for his gently reflective, meandering genre and re-direct it to the hard-edged analyses of philosophers, theologians, ethicists — professional systematic thinkers. Yet in that shrugging off, and in our failure to see things as significant before they've acquired the dimension of nightmare, we surely have one of the most dangerous of our failings. Until “moral dilemma” loses its distant, aseptic, academic ring, until we learn to see in daily life the crude everyday ore from which such heady abstractions are distilled, and become willing to dirty our hands with it, it seems likely that the weasel-men of history will continue to wreak their havoc on us.

There are, I think, some parallels that might be drawn between the incident on the train just outside Cullybackey and what has happened in Northern Ireland's troubled history. Perhaps the closest and most serious one has to do with the importance and difficulty of contesting identifications we disagree with in those first germinal moments of their utterance, when they may seem entirely trivial. For a great deal of bitterness and hatred is ravelled almost invisibly into our conversation in the casual vocabulary of abusive terms each side uses to refer to the other. This lexicon of suspicion and contempt needs to be picked out before we can begin to talk to each other face-to-face, unencumbered by prejudice. Northern Ireland has had more than its share of weasel-men, insisting that some position of obdurate inflexibility is a principled stand, that fellow citizens are somehow not due equal treatment, that one side's entitlement to the upper hand is some sort of God-given right, that acts of pitiless barbarity are somehow patriotic. We should not allow such errors to stand. Thirty years of violence has shown well enough where they take us.

To attempt to draw too close a parallel, though, would be simplistic and unhelpful. The Ulster situation is much more complex than mistaking a weasel for a fox. The real problem we're faced with is that the animal that lopes threateningly alongside us, keeping pace with our tragic, bloodied journey through the last few decades, is seen by one side as a fox and by the other as a weasel, but —

unlike the incident I witnessed — there's no independent standard of correctness that can be appealed to in order to say conclusively which it really is. Each side uses tribal identification keys, matching up events according to a catechism of accustomed, but unexamined, loyalties. The beast that shadows us is like Wittgenstein's duck-rabbit, irresolvably ambiguous in its equal amenability to two strains of warring interpretation. As we career towards an uncertain future in the train of Northern Ireland's history, we need to recognize that the spectral Hound of Ulster, which has savaged so many innocents, is a deadly chimera. We'll never safely muzzle it until we learn to see it thus and refuse to give our assent to the correctness of either half of its dual fox-weasel identity.