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Is Humanity Naturally Good? Transcript

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Is Humanity Naturally Good? Richard Dawkins's Selfish Gene

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What is the future of humanity? Nobody knows. For a start, we might suffer the same fate that is thought to have wiped out the dinosaurs – an ‘extinction event’ caused by collision with a meteorite or comet.^[1] These events are certainly unpredictable; with due respect to the imaginations of Hollywood movie-makers, they are also probably unavoidable. Yet the biggest threat to our future might not come from the unpredictabilities of cosmic collisions, but from human irrationality. The problem is that we, as human beings, have developed technologies that now put us in a unique position. We, alone among earth's species, are able to bring about our own mass destruction – perhaps through the reckless use of nuclear weapons or designer pathogens. Never before has a species emerged which might bring about its own extinction event.

But why, some will ask, would humanity do something so utterly stupid and perverse as to bring about its own destruction? If we were the idealized rational calculating machines of the ‘Age of Reason’, we would never dream of doing something so bizarre. Yet as we reflect on our future, we need to ask an awkward question. Are we really that clever? Or is there something wrong with us, that allows or impels us to do some very unwise things?

We need to understand ourselves – who we are, what we are meant to be, and why we so often get things so badly wrong. I'm not a great fan of the English essayist William Hazlitt (1778-1830). Yet some of his aphorisms strike home powerfully, their crystalline prose softening the blow of the hard truths they contain. That's certainly true of his comment on human nature. ‘Man is the only animal that laughs and weeps; for he is the only animal that is struck with the difference between what things are and what they ought to be.’^[2] Both Hesiod and Plato spoke of a lost ‘Golden Age’ of harmony, stability, and prosperity, whose memory tantalizingly haunted the present, intimating that this was not the way things were meant to be. The rich and complex Christian worldview frames human history in terms of fleeting memories of a lost paradise and the hope of its future restoration. Something is wrong with us. But what? Is there something that can be done about it? And how can we make sense of the vast gulf between what things are and what we feel they ought to be?

So what if human nature is flawed? It is a thought that cuts to the core of the almost dogmatic belief in the fundamental goodness of human nature that is characteristic of recent atheist writings. The Enlightenment had a thoroughly optimistic view of human nature; we are good people, who do good things. Or do we? From a Christian perspective, human nature is frail, easily led astray, and prone to sin. Tennyson's famous words in his great poem *Guinevere* often seem hopelessly optimistic and idealistic: ‘We needs must love the highest when we see it.’ Does this bear any relationship to the realities of human experience?

In a letter of 1887, Lord Acton famously observed that ‘power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely.’ From this, he drew the conclusion that ‘great men are almost always bad men’. It is an idea that has become part of the settled assumptions that govern our thinking about public office, and the risks of concentrating too much power in too few hands. The British Prime Minister William Pitt made a similar comment a century earlier, perhaps drawing on his own experiences in government: ‘Unlimited power is apt to corrupt the minds of those who possess it.’ The idea, here focussed so pointedly, is that an essentially benign human nature is corrupted by power. The natural goodness of humanity is placed under such severe stress by the temptations and privileges of power that it mostly proves incapable of resisting the shadowy side of this poisoned chalice.

Yet this idea of power corrupting innocent, well-meaning people is only one way of looking at this matter. There is an ancient Anglo-Saxon proverb, preserved in a collection in Durham Cathedral, which offers a more disturbing way of considering the influence of power on human nature. A very literal translation of this proverb would be: ‘Man does as he is when he can do what he wants.’ In plain English, it means: ‘We show what we are really like when we can do what we want.’ In other words, when all constraints are removed, when there is no accountability or limitations, we behave according to our true natures, rather than according to what we think others might expect of us. When we are absolutely free, we are absolutely true to our natures. The possession of absolute power thus allows us to behave as we really are.

It is a very troubling thought. Power, on this reading of things, does not tend to *corrupt*. It tends to *expose* – to bring out what is already there, but which is suppressed through the force of social convention or the need to conform to customs and expectations. Power, on this view, is a mirror of the soul, a diagnostic tool which reveals what we are really like. What is most disturbing of all is that we may not realize our true natures until we are put in a situation when those limits are finally removed. Readers of William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* will recognize the point immediately. We might long to be good; we often seem to end up, however, in a very different place.

This is why Hazlitt's words, which I quoted towards the beginning of this lecture, demand careful engagement. How can we make sense of the vast gulf between ‘what things are and what they ought to be’? Human history is littered with bright hopes and dismal failures; with technological inventions that could have ended war and

suffering, yet which seem to end up being used to promote them; with dreams that turn to nightmares. How are we to make sense of this enigma? What is it about human nature that seems to destroy paradise? What 'big picture' of human nature helps us make sense of the worrying patterns of history?

To begin with, let us consider how we might make sense of the progress of history, and the distinctive features of human culture. A number of controlling narratives have been proposed to make sense of these. One of them, favoured by writers of the 'New Atheism', such as Christopher Hitchens, is that of the progressive improvement of the human condition through the erosion of religious superstition, and the emancipation of humanity from all taboos and arbitrary limits. It has become much more difficult to sustain this metanarrative in the west recently, as the manifest failings of western liberalism have become increasingly clear. Indeed, it is significant that this metanarrative is one of the chief targets of Terry Eagleton's recent withering critique of the 'New Atheism.'

Eagleton describes the 'dream of untrammelled human progress' as a 'bright-eyed superstition', a fairy tale which lacks any rigorous evidential base. 'If ever there was a pious myth and a piece of credulous superstition, it is the liberal-rationalist belief that, a few hiccups apart, we are all steadily en route to a finer world.' It is interesting that Christopher Hitchens ends his polemic against religion with a plea for a return to the Enlightenment, especially the form it took in the eighteenth century. The myth of a lost golden age, it seems, persists in this most unlikely of quarters. Yet we are surely called to question fictions about both human individuals and society, even if these fictions are deeply embedded within the secular western mindset.

So what of a Christian reading of culture and history? It lies beyond the scope of this book to develop even the outline of a Christian philosophy of history; what I can do, however, is to note, however briefly, some themes of such a way of looking at history and culture, and explore how they map onto what we actually observe. Two controlling themes here are the ideas of humanity as in the first place, created in the 'image of God', and in the second, sinful. While theologians and religious communities differ in the relative emphasis placed upon these two elements of a Christian understanding of human nature, they are nevertheless twin poles around which any attempt to make sense of the enigmas and puzzles of how we behave, as individuals and in society.

We find ourselves excited and inspired by the vision of God, which draws us upwards; we find ourselves pulled down by the frailty and fallenness of human nature. It is a familiar dilemma, famously articulated by Paul: 'I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do' (Romans 7:19). From a Christian perspective, it is clear that we must recognize at one and the same time a greater destiny or capacity in humanity than most political systems or philosophies allow, and a corresponding capacity to fail to achieve such aspirations. Christian theology gives us a critical lens through which to view the complex motivations and mixed agendas of human beings. We bear God's image, yet we are sinful. We are capable of good, just as we are capable of evil.

This way of thinking allows us to frame the complex picture we see of human culture and history, characterised by aspirations to greatness and goodness on the one hand, and oppression and violence on the other. Many have commented on the profound ambiguity of history, and the havoc which it wreaks for naïve theories of the goodness of humanity. Terry Eagleton is one of a series of commentators to point out the darker side of contemporary human culture ('corporate greed, the police state, a politically compromised science, and a permanent war economy') and history ('the misery wreaked by racism and sexism, the sordid history of colonialism and imperialism, the generation of poverty and famine').

As a species, humanity may indeed have the capacity for good; this seems matched, however, by a capacity for evil. A recognition of this profound ambiguity is essential if we are to avoid political and social utopianism, based on naïve, ideologically driven, non-empirical value-judgements about human nature. As J. R. R. Tolkien wrote so presciently in 1931, on the eve of the rise of Nazism, a naïve view of humanity leads to political utopianism, in which 'progress' potentially leads to catastrophe.

"I will not walk with your progressive ages,

Erect and sapient. Before them gapes

the dark abyss to which their progress tends."

Nobody yet knew of the depths of depravity and cruelty that would be created by the rise of Nazism and Stalinism in the 1930s. Yet Tolkien rightly and perceptively saw something that most Enlightenment writers failed to see - that everything rests on the moral character of human beings. As we saw in the previous lecture, technological developments can be used to cure or to kill. Sadly, the choice is made by human beings, and the choices they make can be disastrous.

Scientific advance has placed into our hands new technologies and techniques which means that we can do things today that our ancestors could only have dreamed of. Yet this progress raises some real problems. A medical advance that helps us understand how the human body works might lead to new cures; yet it could also lead to a weapon of mass destruction, designed to use this knowledge of human physiology to destroy populations.

Now there is nothing wrong with science. The problem concerns how we, as human beings, choose to use it. Science is morally neutral. Perhaps we might go further. Science is morally *neutral*, precisely because it is morally

blind. We decide how it is to be used. And how trustworthy are we? Thoughts like this led the German social philosopher Theodor Adorno (1903-69) to raise some awkward questions about faith in human progress. For Adorno, the 'progress' in question was from the sling to the atom bomb.

So how can we make sense of our human situation? The leading sociobiologist Edward O. Wilson has long argued for the need for *consilience* - the ability to weave together multiple threads of knowledge in a synthesis which is able to disclose a more satisfying and empowering view of reality.^[3]

"We are drowning in information, while starving for wisdom. The world henceforth will be run by synthesizers, people able to put together the right information at the right time, think critically about it, and make important choices wisely."

If Wilson is right, and we are indeed 'starving for wisdom,' how can we become wise about the great questions of life, rather than merely informed about how our universe seems to function? We seem to be like people who know how a piano works, but can't actually use it to play a melody. As Wilson rightly observes, we need to *synthesize* - to weave together insights, uncovering a deeper and richer vision of humanity which can guide and inform our life in the present, and our hopes for the future.

In this lecture, I will explore how we might begin to synthesise some ideas about human nature. My dialogue partner will be Richard Dawkins, who is well-known both as a biologist and a leading atheist. Dawkins published his *Selfish Gene* in 1976. The work is now regarded as one of the most influential studies of human nature published in the last generation. The work is unusual, in that it popularised a scientific idea with such elegance and sophistication that it had a significant impact on wider cultural conversations of the 1980s. *The Selfish Gene* developed a series of memorable analogies and lucid explanations to explain the core themes of Darwinian orthodoxy in general, while at the same time advocating Dawkins's own 'gene's eye' view of evolution.

The Selfish Gene was published by Oxford University Press in 1976, and it established Dawkins' reputation both as an original thinker and as a scientific popularizer and communicator. Let me tell you something of how this book came to be written, and reflect on why it was so successful.

Dawkins had taken his undergraduate degree in zoology and his doctorate from Oxford University, after which he spent a few years as assistant professor of zoology at the University of California, Berkeley. He then returned to Oxford to take up a lectureship in Oxford University's Department of Zoology, and engaged in teaching and research. Industrial discontent was widespread in England at this time. In January 1974, the British government implemented the 'Three-Day Work Order', introducing a three-day working week, intended to reduce the commercial use of electricity to three consecutive days a week, and thus conserve dwindling coal stocks. This significant reduction in electricity supplies inevitably impacted on scientific research at Oxford.

Unable to carry out research throughout the week, Dawkins decided to make good use of this enforced spare time. He would write his first book. The portable typewriters of that day required no electricity, so there was no problem in getting on with this when electricity was not available. Dawkins had already mapped out the leading themes of the work; it was just a question of getting them down on paper. The result was *The Selfish Gene*.

So why was this book so successful? Well, for a start, it is very well written. Alongside a series of beautiful analogies and lucid explanations of Darwinian orthodoxy, Dawkins introduced fresh insights, many of which have stood the test of time well. A good example is Dawkins' emphasis on so-called 'outlaw' genes.

Is this enough to account for the success of the *Selfish Gene*? Perhaps. Yet some have suggested that the work needs to be viewed against a cultural backdrop, which created an interest in its ideas which transcended their scientific significance. Dawkins seemed to some to advocate a view of human beings as collections of 'selfish genes' which lent moral credibility to individualist political ideologies such as those of Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher which argued that greed was good for society. Frans de Waal famously saw *The Selfish Gene* as lending weight to the neoliberal ideology that pervaded western thought in the final quarter of the twentieth century. '*The Selfish Gene* taught us that since evolution helps those who help themselves, selfishness should be looked at as a driving force for change rather than a flaw that drags us down.'^[4] Perhaps Dawkins' ideas did chime in with wider cultural concerns and debates; yet for most, the appeal of *The Selfish Gene* lay primarily in its scientific ideas, irrespective of their deeper resonances with the cultural emphases of the late 1970s.

So let's look at the ideas. Dawkins had come to the conclusion that the 'most imaginative way of looking at evolution, and the most inspiring way of teaching it' was to see the entire process from the perspective of the gene. This 'gene's eye' approach is best seen as a creative reworking of the 'fundamental logic of Darwinism,'^[5] which allows the fundamental coherence of Darwinian evolutionary theory to be grasped imaginatively.

The core theme of Dawkins's approach can be summed up in a sentence from his lecture notes of 1966: 'our basic expectation on the basis of the orthodox neo-Darwinian theory of evolution is that Genes will be selfish.'^[6]

This idea is developed and given further substance and justification in *The Selfish Gene*: 'A predominant quality to be expected in a successful gene is ruthless selfishness. This gene selfishness will usually give rise to selfishness in individual behaviour.'^[7] [Human selfishness is thus an expression of an underlying genetic predisposition, over](#)

[which we have no control. Even altruism, Dawkins argues, can be explained in terms of this paradigm of selfishness, in that it represents a mechanism by which genes are able to ensure their survival overall, even if some individual gene-bearing individuals have to be sacrificed along the way.](#)

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[The cultural background of the age created an interest in the core ideas of *The Selfish Gene* which went far beyond their scientific significance. As I pointed out earlier, Dawkins's suggestion that human beings could be seen as collections of 'selfish genes' helped to make sense of some of the social and political developments of the 1980s, such as the individualist political ideologies of Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher which argued that greed was good for society, as it generated an appetite for new possibilities and liberated humanity from the burdens of the past. Since evolution seems to help those who help themselves, selfishness should be seen as a driving force for positive change rather than as a flaw that drags us down.](#)^[8]

Dawkins argues that our genetic history predisposes us to act in certain selfish manners. So what can be done about this? Dawkins suggests that he is like an oncologist, whose professional speciality is studying cancer, and whose professional vocation is fighting it. The future of humanity depends on resisting, not endorsing, this genetic legacy. 'Let us try to *teach* generosity and altruism, because we are born selfish. Let us understand what our own selfish genes are up to, because we may then at least have the chance to upset their designs'.^[9] Our genes may 'instruct us to be selfish,' but we are under no obligation to obey them.

Dawkins develops the idea that, although we are shaped and conditioned by our 'selfish genes', we can achieve a state of enlightenment in which we realize the manner in which we are trapped by our genes, and devise strategies for resisting their malign influence. Humanity is trapped in patterns of thought and action which are ultimately not of their own choosing. However, Dawkins declares, humans are able to assert their autonomy in the face of this genetic determinism. We can rebel against our selfish genes:^[10]

"We have the power to defy the selfish genes of our birth ... We have the power to turn against our creators. We, alone on earth, can rebel against the tyranny of the selfish replicators."

For Dawkins, human beings alone have evolved to the point at which we are able to rebel against precisely the process that brought us here in the first place.

Understanding the evolutionary process thus allows us to subvert its influence, and redirect its possible outcomes. We shall explore this line of thought further in this work, especially when we consider the notion of 'transhumanism'. Can we now take charge of our own evolution, and decide what we should be?

Now this is fascinating, as I am sure you will agree. For Dawkins, our biological legacy inclines – even impels – us to be selfish. Let me repeat some of those core ideas. Our genes 'instruct us to be selfish.' 'We are born selfish.' So how can we break free from this selfishness? Again, let's listen to Dawkins's answer. 'Let us understand what our own selfish genes are up to, because we may then at least have the chance to upset their designs'.^[11]

Dawkins, of course, is writing from a scientific perspective. But what about a religious perspective? It is fascinating to consider how Dawkins's ideas and those of Christianity might illuminate each other. The Christian language of sin both affirms and attempts to explain humanity's rationally inexplicable yet seemingly inescapable tendency to debase and destroy its own best achievements.

The enlightened philosophers of eighteenth-century France dismissed the notion of sin, regarding it as insulting to human beings. It suggested that they were flawed and fallible, prone to selfishness and violence. Critics of the Enlightenment made the obvious counter-argument that the irrationality and violence of the 'Reign of Terror' which followed the French Revolution seemed to confirm precisely these tendencies, and called out for them to be recognized and expressed properly. However archaic its language may seem, the vocabulary of sin engages the fundamental ambiguity of human nature, and challenges naïve utopian visions of the human future.

Why is it that every human institution seems to subvert its own goals? The Christian church, considered as an institution, regularly falls victim to social forces and pressures – such as the need to accumulate resources in order to continue its mission – which end up compromising its core values. And it's not on its own. Countless institutions, religious and secular, find themselves failing and collapsing through human flaws. For example, in the first decade of the twenty-first century, the United Nations sent 'peacekeeping' troops to protect vulnerable communities in Africa. What happened? These troops ended up raping and abusing local women, giving rise to a new social problem – 'peacekeeper babies'. United Nations Secretary General Ban Ki-moon described this outrageous sexual abuse by peacekeepers 'a cancer in our system'.^[12]

Yet as the theologian Reinhold Niebuhr so prophetically remarked, the flaws in human institutions ultimately arise from corresponding flaws in human nature itself.^[13] The 'cancer' lay not only in the 'system', but in its constituent human beings. This was one of the reasons why Niebuhr came to develop such a respect for the American constitutional system, with its checks and balances, and its genius for recognizing the inevitable

conflicts that would arise within society, demanding workable means of preventing the excessive localization of power.

It seems to me that we need to ask whether the myth of a fundamental and incorrigible human goodness should be allowed to shape such important issues as social policies or ethical thinking. The empirical realities of life demand that we realize that there is something wrong with us, and force us both to confront this awkward truth, and figure out how to minimize its impact. The Christian tradition offers what it regards as a totally realistic account of human nature, which is dismissed as 'pessimistic' only by those who close their eyes to what is happening in the world.

Christianity offers an evaluation of human nature. This can be framed as a forensic judgement that we are guilty or negligent, having failed to pursue goodness and combat evil. Perhaps we all need our delusions of moral perfection to be challenged from time to time in this way. Yet this evaluation of our condition can also be framed as a *medical* judgement – a diagnosis which tells us what is wrong with us, what might be done to cure us, or what could help us to manage a chronic and persistent condition, which prevents us from being the people that we are meant to be.

The Christian understanding of human nature has two key points of focus: the notion of humanity bearing the 'image of God', and the concept of sin. Although there is some latitude of interpretation concerning both these ideas, there is a generous consensus within the Christian tradition about their core themes. The idea of humanity bearing the 'image of God' speaks of some inbuilt drive within human nature, which perhaps could be conceptualized as a 'homing instinct' for God. Just as a compass needle is drawn towards the magnetic pole, so the human imagination is drawn, as much by intuition as by reason, towards its origin and goal in God.

Perhaps more importantly, the notion of the 'image of God' expresses the notion that human beings are drawn upwards, avoiding collapsing into the material order from which they emerged. We emerge from dust; we shall return to dust; but we are more than dust. The human urge for self-transcendence can be seen in the light of this theological framework as a hidden or disguised yearning for God, which calls out for interpretation.

The term 'sin' is used in a theological sense to designate a flaw within human nature which prevents us from achieving our true goals. It is not a moral or existential concept; it is essentially a theological notion, with moral and existential *outworkings*. The term sin can be used both to designate individual actions which represent a failure to achieve our true goal, and to the underlying human state which gives rise to those individual acts of sin. Writers such as Augustine suggested that human nature could be seen as damaged, wounded, and broken. It needed healing and restoration, if we are to achieve our true aspirations and goals. We are trapped – by our evolutionary past, by our personal weaknesses, and by the seductive whisper of delusions that have become the received wisdom of our day.

If the word 'sin' didn't exist, I think we would need to invent it. But the idea is already there, precisely because earlier generations recognized the problem, and knew that the first step in dealing with this problem was to name it. In and through its concept of sin, Christian theology gives us a critical lens through which to view the complex motivations and mixed agendas of human beings. We bear God's image, yet we are sinful. We are capable of good, just as we are capable of evil. If the 'image of God' affirms our need to reach upwards – to grasp and be grasped by the love of God – the notion of sin affirms a darker reality, namely our tendency to be drawn and dragged down.

We thus find ourselves excited and inspired by the vision of God, which draws us upwards; at the same time, we find ourselves pulled down by the frailty and fallenness of human nature. In his famous *Essay on Man*, Alexander Pope set out the view that human beings were poised in the theological space between angels and beasts. The 'image of God' causes us to yearn to be angelic; sin inclines us towards our animal natures, driven by deep Darwinian instincts of survival, dominance, and power. In a sense, Christian ethics is a principled refusal to conform to these social Darwinian principles, however pragmatically they are stated.^[14]

Much the same point was made by Thomas H. Huxley in his 1893 Romanes Lecture at Oxford University, entitled 'Evolution and Ethics'.^[15] Huxley notes that human animals have triumphed in the 'struggle for existence' through their cunning and 'ruthless and ferocious destructiveness'. Yet human beings, having subdued the remainder of the sentient world, now find that these 'deeply ingrained serviceable qualities have become defects'.^[16] The violence and ruthlessness that secured their triumph over other animals are now seen as 'sins'; there is a recognition that the methods used in the 'struggle for existence' are 'not reconcilable with sound ethical principles.'^[17]

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[Ethics, for Huxley, is thus a principled resistance to precisely those animal qualities that secured human domination of the living world, and the Darwinian processes that underlie them. Yet - and here Huxley must be heard - this demands the subjugation of animal instincts that linger within us. Our hereditary history continues to shape our present - and it must be resisted, even though it cannot be eradicated. 'The practice of that which is ethically best - what we call goodness or virtue - involves a course of conduct which, in all respects, is opposed to that which leads to success in the cosmic struggle for existence.'](#)^[18] [Evolution may explain the origins of](#)

[ethics; it cannot itself function as the basis of ethics, in that we are now called to leave behind those former virtues of violence and aggressiveness which are now seen as vices.](#)^[19] Here's what Huxley has to say:

"Evolution may teach us how the good and the evil tendencies of man may have come about; but, in itself, it is incompetent to furnish any better reason why what we call good is preferable to what we call evil than we had before."

Huxley's emphasis on the tension between hereditary forces that linger within us and our sense of justice and ethical principles finds echoes within the Christian tradition. Augustine of Hippo's basic criticism of Pelagius was his failure to allow that continuing presence of habits of thought and action, carried over into the life of faith. It was impossible to break free totally from our origins and contexts. Today, we would probably amplify his comments with reference to our evolutionary past.

The Christian 'big picture' depicts humanity as containing within itself a tension between two different modes of being. The New Testament uses the terms 'flesh (Greek: *sarx*)' and 'spirit (Greek: *pneuma*)' not to refer to parts of the human body, but rather two different modes of human existence. Paul adopts what scholars term an 'aspective', rather than a 'partitive', understanding of terms such as 'soul', 'flesh' and 'body'.^[20] To 'live according to the flesh' means to live at a purely human level, disregarding the spiritual side of life. Yet this theological framework can be extended to the moral and existential realms. It affirms that there is a tension within us as we feel drawn to good and to evil.

This framework emphasises the importance of divine grace, in that it recognizes the limits placed on human beings for self-improvement and self-transcendence. We cannot heal ourselves; we need to be healed by someone else. We find ourselves drawn to sin, despite knowing that it is wrong; we find ourselves unable to achieve the good, despite knowing that this is what we should be doing. This dilemma was known and expressed by Paul: 'I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do' (Romans 7:19).

The Christian insistence that Jesus Christ is the saviour of humanity - not simply its teacher and moral example - reflects this view of the human situation. Salvation is not something that humans can achieve or earn; it is something achieved and given by God. Yet salvation is a process, in which a changed status in relation to God is gradually effected in terms of a transformed inner reality, often expressed using the language of 'renewal' or 'regeneration'. These do not designate an instantaneous change, in which someone suddenly breaks free from the power of sin to pull us down.

The early church theologian Augustine of Hippo used an analogy in making this point: we are like someone who is ill, but is receiving appropriate treatment, and is in the process of recovering. She is still ill; however, the healing process has begun, and she will eventually get better. She is thus both ill and better at the same time. She is ill in fact, in that she has not yet recovered; yet she is healthy in hope, in that her healing is under way. Martin Luther famously expressed this notion when he declared that a Christian is 'at one and the same time a righteous person and a sinner (*simul iustus et peccator*).^[21]

Christianity thus sets out a vision of human nature which recognizes its enormous potential on the one hand, while affirming that it is wounded, damaged, and broken on the other. The New Testament uses the language of putting our old nature to death, and putting on a new nature - while at the same time recognizing the lingering influence of our older selves in the life of faith. The 'Old Adam' lingers within us, shaping our motivations and actions (the parallels with Huxley's reflections on our hereditary history are worth exploring here). Human nature needs to be healed, and does not possess the capacity to heal itself. This framework helps us make sense of the complex picture we see of human culture and history, characterised by aspirations to greatness and goodness on the one hand, and oppression and violence on the other. From a Christian perspective, it is clear that we must recognize both the greater destiny of humanity and a corresponding capacity to fail to achieve such aspirations unaided and unhealed.

Individuals may indeed have the capacity for good; this seems matched, however, by their intrinsic capacity for evil. We are morally ambiguous, easily led astray. Recognizing our own innate capacity for sin makes us less judgmental about others, in that we realize how easily we too might fall into such patterns of thoughts and behaviour. A recognition of this profound ambiguity and tension within us is essential if we are to avoid political and social utopianism, based on ideologically driven value-judgements about human nature.

Since the advent of Darwin's theory of natural selection, the imagery of conflict and a struggle for survival within the biological world has come to dominate discussion of human beings. Having emerged from within the biological realm, should we be surprised that humanity is characterised by tendencies towards violence? Darwin's own language is highly suggestive here.^[22]

"The inevitable result is an ever-recurrent Struggle for Existence. It has truly been said that all nature is at war; the strongest ultimately prevail, the weakest fail. ... The severe and often-recurrent struggle for existence will determine that those variations, however slight, which are favourable shall be preserved or selected, and those which are unfavourable shall be destroyed."

The development of related approaches within sociobiology also opens up some important possibilities for

expanding our understanding of the nature of sin.^[23]

We've already noted how both Thomas Huxley's lecture 'Evolution and Ethics' (1893) and Richard Dawkins's *Selfish Gene* (1976) opened up some fundamental questions about the biological origins of human tendencies towards violence and selfishness, and how this might be alleviated, if not entirely eliminated. The geneticist Steve Jones – who, of course, has important links with Gresham College – develops this point further,^[24] reflecting on the dark side of human nature, and pointing to hereditary factors which might shape contemporary human attitudes. Traditionally, Christian theologians speak of 'original sin' in the sense of tendencies that lie within us from birth – rather than being acquired from our social context.^[25] This resonates with genetic reflections on violence and self-centeredness.

In her important work *Fall to Violence* (1994), Marjorie Suchocki considers sin in terms of instinctive human violence.^[26]

"A tendency toward aggression is built into human nature ... we are by nature an aggressive species with a history of physical and psychic violence ... The capacity for violence is built into our species through aggressive instincts related to survival. When that violence is unnecessary and avoidable, it is sin."

This innate human tendency towards violence is expressed in multiple cultural forms, which extend far beyond the extreme case of international wars.^[27] Yet it is important to notice that warfare does not represent a departure from basic human instincts, but actually represents their fulfilment.

Why are these scientific insights into human nature so important? In my view, their significance lies in their challenge to the rather charming but misplaced optimism of the 'Age of Reason', which held that humanity was naturally good. The notion of original sin was rejected as insulting and demeaning to humanity, as it implied that human beings were born with some innate tendencies towards evil or irrationality. This, Enlightenment writers declared, was patently unfair. Yet we now know that we are born into this world with certain genetic dispositions, which may be further enhanced through our social context – just as they can be reduced.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau famously declared that humanity is 'born free, and everywhere he is in chains' – implying that this imprisonment is the result of an unjust society, which must be overturned and reformed. The science of genetics suggests that we are not born 'free,' but with inbuilt genetic tendencies which in themselves imprison us. Dawkins believes that we can overcome this by ourselves; I think we need help if we are to do this, and transcend our natural limits and boundaries.

Now there are lots of issues arising from our interaction with Dawkins, and I have probably been unwise to try and pack so much into this single lecture. But I hope that you will feel this was worthwhile! Next time, I will be looking at Philip Pullman's *Dark Materials* trilogy, and asking how this helps us to think about this material universe in which we find ourselves.

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[\[1\] Charles Frankel, *The End of the Dinosaurs: Chicxulub Crater and Mass Extinctions*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999; Michael J. Benton, *When Life Nearly Died: The Greatest Mass Extinction of All Time*. London: Thames & Hudson, 2003.](#)

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[\[2\] William Hazlitt, *Essays*. London: Walter Scott, 1889, 269.](#)

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[\[3\] Edward O. Wilson, *Consilience: The Unity of Knowledge*. New York: Vintage, 1999, 294.](#)

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[\[4\] Frans de Waal, *Our Inner Ape: The Best and Worst of Human Nature*. London: Granta Books, 2006, 21.](#)

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[5] Alan Grafen, 'The Intellectual Contribution of *The Selfish Gene* to Evolutionary Theory.' In *Richard Dawkins: How a Scientist Changed the Way We Think*, edited by Alan Grafen and Mark Ridley, 66-74. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006; quote at p. 73.

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[6] Typewritten text of 1966 reproduced in Richard Dawkins, *An Appetite for Wonder: The Making of a Scientist. A Memoir*. London: Bantam, 2013, 200.

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[7] Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene*. 2nd ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989, 9-10.

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[8] Frans de Waal, *Our Inner Ape: The Best and Worst of Human Nature*. London: Granta Books, 2006, 21.

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[9] Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene*, 10.

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[10] Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene*, 200-1.

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[11] Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene*, 10.

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[12] *Washington Post*, February 27, 2016.

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[13] Richard Crouter, *Reinhold Niebuhr on Politics, Religion, and Christian Faith*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2010, 101-2.

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[14] Some liberal Protestants unwisely melded some Darwinian values into their ethics in the name of 'progressive religion': see, for example, Gary J. Dorrien, *Social Ethics in the Making: Interpreting an American Tradition*. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009, 69-73. Most, however, recognized this was a false turn.

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[15] Thomas H. Huxley, 'Evolution and Ethics;' In Thomas H. Huxley, *Evolution and Ethics and Other Essays*. London: Macmillan, 1905, 46-116.

[\[16\] Huxley, 'Evolution and Ethics,' 51-2.](#)

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[\[17\] Huxley, 'Evolution and Ethics,' 53.](#)

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[\[18\] Huxley, 'Evolution and Ethics,' 81-2.](#)

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[\[19\] Huxley, 'Evolution and Ethics,' 81.](#)

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[\[20\] James D. G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998, 51-78.](#)

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[\[21\] Alister E. McGrath, *Iustitia Dei: A History of the Christian Doctrine of Justification*. 3rd ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005, 197-206.](#)

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[\[22\] Charles Darwin, *The Variation of Animals and Plants Under Domestication*. 2 vols. London: John Murray, 1868, vol. 1, 5-6.](#)

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[\[23\] Patricia A. Williams, 'Sociobiology and Original Sin.' *Zygon* 35, no. 4 \(2000\): 783-812.](#)

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[\[24\] Steve Jones, *In the Blood: God, Genes and Destiny*. London: HarperCollins, 1996, 207-42.](#)

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[\[25\] For an excellent study, see Alan Jacobs, *Original Sin: A Cultural History*. New York: HarperOne, 2008. For a thoughtful theological defence and exploration of this important concept, see Tatha Wiley, *Original Sin: Origins, Developments, Contemporary Meaning*. New York: Paulist Press, 2002.](#)

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[\[26\] Marjorie Suchocki, *The Fall to Violence*. New York: Continuum, 1994, 85.](#)

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[\[27\] A point stressed by Susanne Kappeler, *The Will to Violence: The Politics of Personal Behaviour*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995, 9.](#)

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