Public opinion in Britain, at least as represented by the self-designated quality press, has moved considerably over the last few decades on the question of the relation of morality to religion. At the beginning of the twentieth century it was largely taken for granted that morality depended on religion. In a well-known debate between the lawyers H. L. A. Hart and Lord Devlin, Devlin argued that the whole system of British legal and moral values depended on the basic tenets of the Christian faith. So Devlin held that the law should continue to be based upon and to support Christian values. Hart, however, defended a secular liberal view that the law should simply seek to prevent avoidable harm, and should not protect any specific value-system. At the present time, the beginning of the twenty first century, Britain is widely held to be a multi-cultural and multi-religious society. So no preference should be given to one religion or one set of cultural values. It looks as if Hart has won the argument, and morality is largely left as a private matter for individual or sub-groups, while public law just keeps the peace and mediates social conflicts as well as it can.

But things have gone further than that. Not only have morality and religion been divorced, so that public morality is no longer thought to be based on Christian or religious values. It is often said that religion is actually a danger to morality, that it is a cause of intolerance and violence, and that morality would be better off without religion. Morality should be wholly autonomous, paying no regard to religion, which often threatens the foundations of morality.

In these talks, I shall be looking at various areas in which religion and morality interact - the areas of war and violence, respect for nature and for life, sex and justice. In this first talk I want to address the question of what morality is, what its fundamental bases are, and of whether or not morality is autonomous, whether religion is a dangerous influence on morality, a necessary support for it, or just a neutral and quite different area of human life.

As always in lectures on philosophy, we have to begin with matters of definition. We have to get some idea of what we mean by ‘morality’ and by ‘religion’. That is not easy. But at least we can be fairly sure that morality is connected with human action, and with actions for which people can claim some responsibility, which they are free to do or not to do. The McNaughton rules in English law give a fairly good idea of the area with which morality is concerned. They are rules for assessing when a person is responsible for their actions. They say that a person must know what they are doing, must know the difference between right and wrong, must know that what they did was wrong (if it was), and must have been able to do otherwise.

There are all sorts of problems about whether there a natural and universal knowledge of right and wrong, and whether anyone is very truly free, but if I dealt with those, I would never get round to the central subject of this lecture. So I will just assume that in general reasonable people do not what sorts of things are right and wrong, and they are free, most of the time, to decide how to act. I we accept those assumptions, then morality deals with the area of responsible action, and with generally accepted rules of right and wrong conduct.

In fact I do not think it is too difficult to get universal agreement on the sorts of acts that are right or wrong. You just have to think what sorts of things you like and dislike, and see that other beings like you will like or dislike the same sorts of things in many cases. Anything you like will be considered by you to be good. If you like ice-cream, that will be good. However, you quickly realise that not all people like ice-cream, so you say this is not a universal good. It is just good for some people. However, you also dislike extreme pain, and that is bad. And in this case, virtually everyone dislikes pain. So pain is a universal evil. Every sentient being has a good reason to think it evil, and to try and avoid it. From this, it is a short step to say that acts causing pain to any sentient being are morally wrong. It is also true that acts alleviating pain or causing pleasure are morally right, or at least morally permissible.

There will be lots of complications when we come to consider complex cases. But in some very simple and very general cases, there is no difficulty in identifying acts that are morally wrong. They are acts that bring about what all rational agents would agree to be bad states. They will include extreme pain, frustration of desires, prevention of freedom to do what one wants, or subject to oppressive working conditions.

Morality is related to what can be rationally desired. As Aristotle said, the ‘good’ is the object of rational desire. And moral goods are what all beings have a good reason to desire or to avoid. This gives us the Golden Rule in its negative form as the basis of morality: Do not do to others what you would not want done to you. This rule needs no religious basis, no beliefs about
supernatural beings or spiritual realities. It just needs rational reflection on universal human desires. In that sense, morality is indeed autonomous; it does not depend on religion.

2. I may seem to have finished the lecture. But of course things are much more complicated. We can indeed see what things are good and bad, what acts are right and wrong, in general. They are states and acts that would be chosen or avoided by some completely impartial rational observer of the human scene. The Commandments: do not kill, do not steal, and do not lie, do not need any divine revelation. The main Christian tradition has always said this. ‘Natural Law’ is the natural knowledge of right and wrong that God has implanted in the human mind, and it does mean that all people have a reasonable knowledge of what is right and wrong, whatever their religious beliefs or lack of them.

The Second Vatican Council of the Roman Catholic Church stated that in such natural knowledge of right and wrong, all people have a sort of knowledge of the will of God. In obeying this will, the way of salvation is open to them: ‘those who without any fault do not know anything about Christ or his Church, yet who search for God with a sincere heart and under the influence of grace, try to put into effect the will of God as known to them through the dictate of conscience...can obtain eternal salvation’ (The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, Lumen Gentium, 16).

According to this ancient Christian tradition, all human beings have a natural knowledge of right and wrong, at least with regard to very general principles. And they also have an inborn sense that they ought to do what is right. That sense is in fact the felt pressure of the will of God, though people may not be aware of that. Even if people do not believe in God, they still have a sense of the categorical obligation of duty, a sense that some things simply ought to be done or avoided, just because they are right, and for no other reason.

That is where it gets difficult. Suppose someone commits murder. He then says, ‘I know murder is morally wrong; that is, being killed is something everybody has good reason to avoid, so it is a universal evil. I know I did what was morally wrong. I was not compelled to do it. So according to the McNaughton rules I am responsible. I accept all that. But so what? It was still sensible of me to do it, because I would have made a great deal of money, if I had not unfortunately been caught, which was a small but acceptable risk’.

The murderer is claiming that it is not always reasonable to be moral. For what is reasonable for me to do is what pays, what increases my comfort and so on. What is moral may actually decrease my personal comfort. So being moral is not always reasonable. But we must remember Machiavelli’s advice that it usually pays to make others think that we are morally upright.

The best policy, then, is to seem moral, while actually breaking the moral rules when it is to my great advantage.

It sometimes seems that this is the policy of most human beings. We all know what moral rules are. For the sake of general security and the efficient functioning of society, we will probably have something like police to enforce those moral rules. And we will probably try to train children to keep them, or feel guilty. Then most people will behave morally, most of the time, out of a combination of fear and guilt. But really sensible people will quietly break the rules, for the sake of their own advantage, or that of their families and friends. And they will most of the time get away with it.

The crunch question is: do you secretly admire such people (it would have to be secret, or people would suspect you yourself were not moral or trustworthy)? Or do you feel that they are not to be admired, that they are less than human, and that they are corrupt? What this question reveals is that it is not enough to have a natural knowledge of right and wrong. Some people at least think there must also be a natural sense of obligation, a sense that it is right to do your duty, even at the cost of your own life. Perhaps most of us do have such a sense, though it does not seem to be quite universal - we call people without it psychopaths, but they could also be successful criminals or even business men. But how can a sense of obligation be justified?

This is where religious belief has an important part to play. For religious beliefs give an account of the place a sense of obligation, a moral sense, plays in human life. In the world, there are in fact two main religious ways of doing this. The Abrahamic traditions see moral precepts as the commands of a personal God. God has created the universe, and has created human beings for an eternal destiny of friendship with God. So human existence has a purpose, and human fulfilment lies in the realisation of this purpose, which is conscious relationship to God. In view of this, the only reasonable course of life is one that leads to friendship with God. The good human life begins and ends with the love of God, and life on earth is a process of learning to love God more truly. We cannot love God without wanting to do what God wants. God tells us what God wants in the commandments, and through the natural moral law engraved in our hearts. So morality is deeply reasonable, as obedience to God, rooted in the love of God, which will lead to eternal life with God. It would be stupid not to obey the moral law. And such disobedience can only be accounted for by the deep ignorance of God that exists in the human world, and by the power of
reflection or social pressure can modify natural tendencies to a great extent. But it makes good sense to say that there are musical by nature, so some people probably are religious by nature. I am just talking about tendencies, and education or some mystical. To the extent that these are inborn tendencies, they probably are genetically based. Just as some people are there are other ways of being religious. Some believers have a very intellectual approach, some practical, some devotional, and some mystical. To the extent that these are inborn tendencies, they probably are genetically based. Just as some people are musical by nature, so some people probably are religious by nature. I am just talking about tendencies, and education or reflection or social pressure can modify natural tendencies to a great extent. But it makes good sense to say that there are

The Indian religious traditions provide a rather different account, which does not appeal to a personal creator. It appeals primarily to the law of karma, of cosmic justice. All that we do in life has karmic consequences. If we cause harm, then in this or some future life, harm will be caused to us. If we do good, then good will be done to us. Karma is a sort of cosmic law of equilibrium. The harm and the good we do always comes back to us. If we suffer now, it is because of harms we causes in the past. If we have a good life now, it is because of our good efforts in the past. So morality becomes a matter of long-term prudence. You should keep moral precepts because if you do not, you will suffer. Karma is the Indian equivalent of a Day of Judgment. Such cosmic judgment cannot be avoided. So again the only reasonable way to live is to obey the moral law. The sense of obligation is our instinctive knowledge of the things that will bring harm or good to us in future lives. It should be said that this is not just a form of long-term selfishness. It is rooted in a sense of compassion for all suffering beings, and ultimately in a desire for union with a supreme state of compassion, wisdom and bliss (Nirvana). But if you ask whether it is reasonable, as well as compassionate, to follow the promptings of such a sense, the answer is that suffering will come to you if you do not, and so the ultimate justification for moral conduct is the avoidance of suffering and the attainment of supreme bliss. That is certainly a strong reason for moral obedience.

Both Abrahamic and Indian religious views obviously depend on beliefs that are not widely shared in secular society. If their justifications of moral obligation are to work, there must either be a personal creator, or a cosmic law of justice and rebirth for all souls. So these justifications of a moral life depend on metaphysical beliefs that are not shared by all. What, then, of those who do not share them? Is there any real justification for living a moral life?

3. At this point the relatively new science of sociobiology, now usually called evolutionary psychology, comes into the picture. By using the insights of Darwinian evolution, it claims to provide an account of the origin of our moral sense, and to show the limits of its justification in the modern world. Sociobiology originated with the work of E. O. Wilson, as an attempt to explain characteristics of present day human behaviour in term of the conduciveness of such behaviour to survival in the far past.

Biologists had often talked rather loosely about instincts, and agreed that much animal behaviour seemed to be instinctive, rather than learned. When ants scavenge for food, when birds build nests, or when animals hibernate, they seem to do so because of some inherent behaviour-pattern, not because they have learned to do so from their parents. Knowledge of genetics enables us to say that genes, segments of DNA molecules, contain a code for making proteins which in turn build organic bodies. Genes are passed on through inheritance, and the genetic codes build bodies of a specific sort, which behave in specific ways.

Properties like eye and hair colour, height and girth, are passed on through genetic codes. So are basic behaviour patterns and tendencies to behave, feel and think in specific ways. So some people are interested in ultimate questions of why they exist, or they tend to have intense feelings of awe and reverence. Others do not. Such differences in human beings can be well explained by reference to the basic genetic codes that construct bodies with inbuilt tendencies to act and with brains that tend to think and feel in specific ways.

There is not a gene for God, in the sense that there is just one slice of DNA that makes people believe there is a God. But there probably are genes that give people a tendency to believe in transcendent realities, or to have some form of religious sensibility.

We know that belief in God is specific to some cultures and not to others. The Chinese do not seem to have it, or to regard it as very important. Arabs seem to have it in abundance. So there is a very large cultural element in religious belief. But there also seems to be an inherited element. A number of social surveys suggest that about 50% of human beings have a tendency to regard worship or devotion as an important part of life, whether that devotion is directed to an ancestor, an enlightened human being or to God. If this is so, the other 50% will not share such tendencies, they will not tend to be religious in that way.

There are other ways of being religious. Some believers have a very intellectual approach, some practical, some devotional, and some mystical. To the extent that these are inborn tendencies, they probably are genetically based. Just as some people are musical by nature, so some people probably are religious by nature. I am just talking about tendencies, and education or reflection or social pressure can modify natural tendencies to a great extent. But it makes good sense to say that there are
genes which implant tendencies to religious thoughts and feelings in quite a large number of the human population.

It is much the same with morality. The tendency to feel sympathy for others, or to regard obligation as categorical and objective, is probably genetically based. There is nothing much we can do about such tendencies, they are just given in human nature. They do not seem to be universal - some humans seem to lack a moral sensibility altogether. But a sense of morality seems to be even more widespread than a religious sense, and there may be a genetic link between them. This seems plausible, since the religious tendency to think of ultimate reality as in some way personal or conscious naturally coheres with the moral tendency to think that there are objective obligations or duties. The link is that if there is a personal supreme reality, it may well be a source of moral obligations, as humans seek to relate positively to that reality, either by helping to realise its purposes (in Abrahamic views) or by seeking to achieve union with it by setting aside purely selfish desires (in Indian traditions).

Evolutionary biologists go on to explain how such tendencies have come to be encoded in human DNA through a long process of trial-and-error in the human and pre-human past. The basic hypothesis is that various permutations of DNA arise through a natural process of mutation, and they give rise to various behavioural tendencies. In the ruthless process of natural selection, some of these behaviour patterns lead to extinction while some may be beneficial to their reproduction.

For example, if an animal has a strong tendency to run away when its young are threatened by a predator, the young are likely to get eaten, and then the genes of that animal will not be reproduced. It will die out, and all its tendencies will die with it. If, on the other hand, there is a mutation that causes the animal to protect its young by diverting the predator’s attention, and it sacrifices its life for its young, then the young are likely to survive, and the genes of that animal will be reproduced. Those genes will carry the tendency to die for one’s offspring. Then, surprising though it may seem at first, the tendency to be self-sacrificing for one’s family or kinship group will be propagated very successfully, while the tendency to individual selfishness will be eliminated.

Some people have been influenced by Richard Dawkins' expression ‘The Selfish Gene’ to think that all natural biological processes must be selfish. That is the opposite of the truth. Dawkins asserts that to talk about genes as selfish is really just a tautology. All it says is that those genes that survive are the ones that reproduce most rapidly or most extensively. Genes are blind. As they mutate, they give rise to different sorts of animal behaviour. Some of those are eliminated, and the ones that favour the most fruitful reproduction will soon predominate in the gene pool of a species. As the example I have given shows, genes likely to favoured are those that produce tendencies to self-sacrificing behaviour in certain circumstances. So while evolution favours lust (which produces more offspring) and aggression (which eliminates competitors), it will also favour self-sacrifice (which protects offspring against predators) and strong social bonding (which is a better defence against predators). We might expect, then, that the natural processes of evolution will produce animals which are lustful and aggressive, but are also self-sacrificing and socially co-operative, at least within limits. And this is just what humans do look like. The hypothesis seems a good one.

For evolutionary biologists, mental processes build on basic physical processes. So a tendency to self-sacrifice will come into consciousness as a feeling that this is what one ought to do. We can account for the sense of moral obligation as built on a physical behaviour-pattern that is caused by a specific genetic coding sequence. That has been selected because it proved conducive to the survival of the species in the evolutionary history of the species, perhaps millions of years ago.

There will be all sorts of genetically based mental patterns. Some will have been positively conducive to survival at a certain stage. Some will be neutral, neither good or bad for survival, but harmless enough not to have been wiped out. And some may be harmful to survival, though that harm is compensated by side-effects that are very useful - pain may be a good example of that, being apparently harmful but having the beneficial effect of warning animals of dangerous behaviour.

So in the modern world we may expect that a good many humans will have a strong sense of moral obligation, though many will have genetically based tendencies to immoral actions (acts based on lust and aggression) as well, and some will lack a sense of obligation altogether. It all depends on their genes.

4. This account is an illuminating one. It helps to explain why humans are as morally confused as they are. But what does it say about the status of our sense of moral obligation? It is at this point that some evolutionary biologists have adopted views that seem to undermine the sense of obligation altogether. The philosopher Michael Ruse, for example, in his book, *Evolutionary Naturalism* (Routledge, 1992), writes that ‘morality is no more...than an adaptation, and as such has the same status as such things as teeth and eyes and noses’ (241). We are not responsible for our noses. So the implication is that we are not responsible for our sense of morality either. Some people are moral and some are not, and there is nothing we can do about it.
He goes on to say that the sense of oughtness is ‘a collective illusion of the genes’ (250), and ‘a better understanding of biology might incline us to go against morality’ (283). So if we accept evolutionary theory, we might realise that our sense of obligation is an illusion which we might do well to get rid of, if we can. Morality is no longer categorically commanding. It is the result of a million evolutionary accidents, and if it is an inconvenience, if for instance it gets in the way of our pursuit of pleasure, we might be well rid of it.

There is a sense in which Professor Ruse is correct. Some people have an over-developed sense of obligation, something of which Freud made us well aware. They might feel obligated to do things that most of us would feel are irrelevant or even absurd, like not stepping on the cracks of the pavement. In such cases, the recommendation is to replace a sense of absolute taboo, for which we can find no reason, with a course of action that can be seen to be reasonable.

We are back to reason again. But we have not avoided the problem of the two sorts of reason - the impartial reason that regards all humans, and perhaps all sentient life, as proper objects of moral concern, and the prudential reason that puts the interests of ourselves and our kinship groups first. Morally serious people feel that they ought to put impartial reason before prudential reason - though if would be nice if both sorts of reason agreed, and fortunately they often do. But is that just ‘an illusion of the genes’, which some of us have and others do not?

It seems to me that we must distinguish between a sense of obligation that is simply the feeling that we ought to do something, whether or not it can be rationally justified, and a sense of obligation to do what we can see to be reasonable because it contributes to the existence of goodness and value, to human flourishing and well-being. A rational morality is one that thinks about what makes for human flourishing. This may make us go against some forms of customary morality that do not seem conducive to human flourishing. But it will not be ‘going against morality’. It will be seeking a more reasonable morality, one that has a rational order and structure.

The evolutionary process itself is not morally based. The processes of nature do not always aim at the morally commendable. What they favour is survival and reproduction. They have given rise to us, with the natures we have. But we can now, at least within limits, decide what we shall do with those natures. As Richard Dawkins puts it, ‘We alone, on earth, can rebel against the tyranny of the selfish replicators’ (The Selfish Gene, Granada, 1978, 205). And Michael Ruse seeks to modify his remarks about morality being an illusion when he says, in a later book, ‘The sociobiologist is committed absolutely and completely to the genuine nature of human altruism’ (Can a Darwinian be a Christian? CUP, 2001, p. 195). I am not wholly convinced by this affirmation, however. For if we think that our altruism is an accidental mental mutation that we have because it proved conducive to survival in the far past, there does not seem any positive reason to continue to be altruistic now. Perhaps we can rebel against our genetic dispositions, to some extent. If so, why should we not rebel against our disposition to believe in absolute moral obligations?

If indeed we are free, to some extent, to modify our genetic tendencies, how shall we do so? What shall we do? We might seek to modify our natures in accordance with the most satisfying values we can conceive. That means we shall seek to modify lust and aggression, and cultivate sympathy and co-operation. It is not that only some people have a moral sense, so only some people can be expected to be moral. Everyone should be moral, but those who can devise a rational morality should seek to encourage moral impulses in others, and to encourage reason to rule the passions so far as is possible. Evil must be discouraged by sanctions and punishments, and good must be rewarded by marks of social esteem. Evolutionary biology, then, does not undermine morality and moral sense. It explains why we are the very mixed moral creatures we are, confused mixtures of altruism and egoism, and shows how our nature should be modified by reason in order to be shaped towards what we can rationally see to be good.

5. This may seem to be a vindication of humanism, of the view that moral views should be based on what makes for human flourishing. Religion has no essential part to play, and it may safely be left to personal choice.

To this proposal I would say yes and no. Moral views should be based on what makes for human flourishing. But religion still has an essential part to play. In the first part of this talk I argued that the sense of obligation, of what impartial reason would require, is only fully compelling if we believe that there actually is an Impartial Reasoner who requires us to do what it commands, and who can ensure that in the end goodness will flourish, that our moral efforts will not be in vain.

In the second part, I argued that a genetically produced tendency to believe in a supreme reality in some way personal is likely to be closely associated with a tendency to believe in moral obligation, since such an association will strengthen the sense of altruism that is conducive to the preferential survival of social animals.
In fact I suspect that the relation between religion and morality is even closer than that, and that to have a strong sense of morality is already an important part of a religious consciousness. To be a good humanist you must think that human life is important, that it has a value that makes it intrinsically worth-while. Part of that value will almost certainly lie in the distinctive properties of human nature, properties of intellectual awareness and responsible agency. We value humans because they have a sense of continuing awareness and agency, a sense of a self that can be, and that ought to be, developed and realised, a sense of moral nobility that outweighs all considerations of purely personal pleasure or satisfaction.

In short, for humanists one of the greatest human excellences is the sense of moral responsibility and obligation. But the sense of obligation is already the sense of some objective pressure, some encounter with a will greater and purer than our own, a will to the good. Sociobiologists sometimes speak as if a belief in a divine commanding will - or, to put it in a less authoritarian-sounding way, a moral ideal that attracts us simply by its intrinsic value - exists solely because it has had survival value. But no conscious agent would say that a good reason for having such a belief is that it helps the species to survive. No reasonable person would search around for beliefs that will help the species (or some set of genes) to reproduce, and adopt the beliefs for that reason. The only good reason for accepting beliefs is that we think they are true, that they are in accordance with the facts, whether or not they help anything to survive.

In fact belief in moral obligation and in a transcendent source of such obligation would only be conducive to survival if the agents concerned really believed it. Such agents would have to have some experience that convinced them of the truth of the belief. Historically, this has been an experience of God, or of a liberated state, or of some more than physical reality (perhaps the Tao or the Way of Heaven, in non-theistic religions) that has the authority to impose obligations on humans. Without such experiences belief in the objectivity of obligation would not have survived.

Sociobiologists are in danger of putting the cart before the horse. That is, seeing that belief in objective goodness has survival value, they sometimes conclude that having survival value is the reason the belief is now accepted. Whereas it is more likely that it is because the belief has been thought to be true over many generations, on grounds of experience, that it has survival value. On the whole, beliefs that endure over generations need to have some experiential confirmation, or they fade away. It is clear that there are many differences in religious beliefs, and that not all can be equally true. But the general belief that there exists a transcendent reality of supreme value - and therefore with objective moral authority - seems common to most human cultures, and constant over thousands of years.

My argument is that the core of moral belief is a sense of objective moral obligation, a sense that it is a noble thing to pursue what is good for its own sake. That is often these days thought of as humanism. But I am proposing that the core of religious belief is some experience of a reality of supreme goodness, a goodness that objectively exists, a sense that the moral ideal actually exists. That core religious sense is the ground for the tendency to seek the good for its own sake. Such a tendency seeks greater knowledge of something supremely real, something supremely desirable and attractive, not just of a bare or abstract obligation or command.

Humanism tends to see human beings as moral agents in a morally indifferent universe, heroically alone in a noble commitment to goodness for its own sake. But humanism is under attack from within, from forces beginning to ask why we should consider moral commitment to be of special moral importance. If we wish to preserve a distinctive importance for goodness, perhaps we need a form of transcendent humanism, a humanism that sees the moral as rooted in a transcendent dimension, in a quasi-personal or conscious reality transcending the physical world. Then we could see humans, not as accidental by-products of an indifferent physical process, but as beings whose essential nature transcends the physical, who have an inner affinity with what is beyond the physical, and whose final destiny lies beyond the physical. Humans are important, because personal and moral existence is the goal of the whole cosmic process, and human distinctiveness lies in making a creative and responsible contribution to achieving that goal.

Humanism can purify religion of its tendencies to dogmatism and intolerance, by giving a reminder that all moral action should be for the sake of good, which importantly includes human flourishing. Religion can strengthen humanism by providing a cosmic background within which moral effort makes sense, has an achievable goal, and relates human life to a supremely good reality in which true fulfilment lies.

I believe that at the present time humanism needs religion if it is not to collapse under the weight of a materialistic philosophy that denies any moral importance to human life. But religion needs humanism if it is to escape from the non-rational dogmatism that is apt to over-ride common human values in the name of some authoritarian dogma. To establish and sustain a truly humane religion is a task for our time, and in this series of talks I will be exploring how, in the light of our ancient religious
traditions and our new moral perplexities, that may be done.

Professor Keith Ward, Gresham College, 23 November 2006