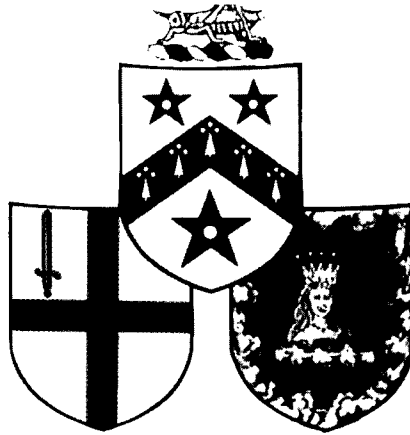


G R E S H A M
C O L L E G E



NEGOTIATING THE ETHICAL MINEFIELD

Lecture 1

ETHICAL JAZZ

by

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Negotiating The Ethical Minefield

I

Ethical Jazz

Some years ago the publisher Rupert Hart Davis wrote a short memoir of his mother called, "*The Arms of Time*". The title came from a poem by Charles Tennyson Turner about his return, as an adult, to the haunts of his childhood. This is how it ends:

*But I was warn'd. "Regrets which are not
thrust
Upon thee, seek not; for this sobbing
breeze
Will but unman thee; thou art bold to
trust
Thy woe-worn thoughts among these
roaring trees,
And gleams of by-gone playgrounds -- Is't
no crime
To rush by night into the arms of Time?"*

Rupert Hart-Davis' mother had led a colourful life and was far from being a conventional or satisfactory parent. Part of the motive behind his book was to find and become acquainted with the mother he had hardly known. In the event, an exercise in family archaeology turned into a love letter to his dead mother, a celebration of her turbulent life and a compassionate act of understanding. Contrary to the poem's warning, rushing into the arms of time became an act of healing for the author.

I was reminded of the Hart-Davis book recently when I read Gillian Slovo's biography of her parents, both remarkable people and martyrs in the long war against Apartheid in South Africa. They had lived in exile for years, organising armed resistance to the South African regime. Her mother was assassinated by a letter bomb in 1982 and her father died of cancer shortly after the inauguration of the new South Africa. Gillian Slovo was never able to lose a feeling of resentment that the cause of freedom in South Africa was more important to her parents than their own children. When Nelson Mandela comforted her after her father's death, he admitted that the children of those,

like him and Jo Slovo, who had given their lives to the cause had suffered a kind of orphaning from which they would never really recover. The Slovo book is more uncomfortable reading than the Hart-Davis one, mainly because the author is more prepared to let her own pain show, as well as guilt at feeling hurt by the neglect of heroic parents who helped to bring hope and, finally, freedom to millions. During her research Gillian Slovo unearthed information about various love-affairs her parents had, and she describes the conflict and confusion the discovery produced in her. Ultimately, however, the book conveyed a sense of absolution and healing. Finally to know was to forgive. For Gillian Slovo and Rupert Hart-Davis, rushing back into the arms of time brought understanding and understanding brought compassion and pride.

I have offered that prologue to you, because I believe it illustrates one of the major tensions in the study and practice of the moral life. Another text I could have used is the remarkable book on the Bulger murder case, "*As If*", by Blake Morrison. The trial of the two children who killed two year old Jamie Bulger was driven by media outrage. The Home Secretary of the time acted politically in his involvement with the verdict and the sentence that followed it. The whole horrible affair gave rise to one of those bouts of moral panic that frequently afflict us, making it almost impossible for the young killers to receive the sort of treatment that was appropriate to children of their age, no matter how terrible their crime. Morrison's book, by a painstaking investigation, accompanied by an intense amount of self-examination, showed us that the killers of Jamie Bulger were victims themselves. The difference between the Bulger book and the other two is that at the end, while we understand more about the whole affair, there is no sense of absolution or healing, though we hope that the boy killers might yet have a chance to do something with lives that started so inauspiciously and reached such a horrifying climax so soon. The point in all of this is the role of knowledge in understanding the predicaments that human beings find themselves in. It is always easier to rush to judgement about situations we know little or nothing about. Then we can judge the bare act that has outraged us and lynch the perpetrators, either physically or judicially. Once you start digging, once you start rushing into the arms of time, the whole business of morality becomes more complex in its particularities, even though we may still hold to our moral generalities. I'll come back later to the

generalities themselves, let me return, meanwhile, to the particularities, to the moral agents themselves, to people like us.

I would like to begin by offering you a paradox which I shall try to elucidate: It is only when we understand our lack of freedom that the path to relative freedom opens before us. Let me begin to develop that claim by starting with an aphorism from Nietzsche: *"The bad conscience is an illness, there is no doubt about that, but an illness as pregnancy is an illness"*. Nietzsche was convinced that the bad conscience was the result of humanity's sundering from its animal past. He said that all the instincts that do not discharge themselves outwardly *turn inwards*. They do not cease with the emergence of consciousness, but it is now hard and rarely possible to gratify them, so they look for new, subterranean satisfactions. He goes on: *"Enmity, cruelty, joy in persecuting, in attacking, in change, in destruction (and I'd want to add sexuality to that daunting list) - all this turned against the possessor of such instincts: that is the origin of the "bad conscience".... thus was inaugurated the worst and uncanniest illness, from which man has not to the present moment recovered, man's suffering from man, from himself: as the consequence of a forcible sundering from his animal past, as it were a leap and plunge into new circumstances and conditions of existence, a declaration of war against the old instincts in which his strength, joy and fearsomeness had previously reposed. From now on man awakens an interest, a tension, a hope, almost a certainty, as if with him something were announcing, preparing itself, as if man were not a goal but only a way, an episode, a bridge, a great promise."*¹ The bad conscience we are pregnant with is the possibility of a kind of self-understanding that can be the prelude to the comparative freedom I have already mentioned.

The point I am trying to establish is that we are all determined by forces that are largely beyond our control. We acknowledge how formative the first few years of life are for our social and psychic development; we rarely acknowledge the formative influence of the early millennia in the development of our species and the conflict and tension they built permanently into our natures. Add to all that the influence of the surrounding environment, itself the cumulative result of the other factors, and we have a picture of humanity as conditioned by a kind of ineluctable necessity that both

determines us and tortures us with remorse over the state we are in - *created sicke, commanded to be sound*, as Lord Greville put it.

But who is it that commands us? I believe it is ourselves, whether we express the imperative as the voice of God or the moral law, but I'd be as well to try to deal immediately with a particularly difficult element in this discussion for believers, the role of God in the creation of moral systems. One way of resolving the problem is to commit ourselves, by an act of will, to the belief that the particular moral system we espouse is the permanent expression of the mind of God, God's dictation, and that our role is one of simple surrender and obedience. To make this response effective, however, we need to protect ourselves from the results of the historical study of ancient texts, one of the major and most successful intellectual enterprises of the last two hundred years. Obviously, this kind of scientific study bases itself on the assumption of the human origin of the texts and traditions before it, and not upon any theory or conviction as to their divine origin. On this basis, we know that moral traditions always originate in a particular social and historical context in which they make direct sense, either as a response to what was perceived as a divine command or as a particular conception of human nature and its responsibilities. Alasdair MacIntyre gives an interesting example of how difficult it is to make sense of fragmented survivals from an older moral tradition, unless we see them through the eyes of anthropologists who are skilled at observing and interpreting other cultures. He quotes Captain Cook's surprise at what he took to be the lax sexual habits of the Polynesians and his astonishment at the sharp contrast between that and the rigid prohibition placed on men and women eating together. When he enquired why, he was told that it was *taboo* for men and women to eat together, though no *reason* was discovered behind the prohibition. MacIntyre suggests that this was because the Polynesians themselves no longer understood the word they were using, a suggestion reinforced by the fact that Kamehameha II abolished the taboos in Hawaii forty years later in 1819 without much protest.² An anthropologist examining the debate in the Christian community about the role of women and the possibility of ordaining them would encounter similar *taboos*, though in this case there is still a claimed explanation for the prohibition. On closer examination, however, while the explanation yields

some kind of theological justification, it is no longer one that commends itself to most people, which is probably why the ordination of women usually passes off with remarkably little fuss, in spite of the centuries in which it was held to be *taboo*. The Christian *taboo* against women holding sacred office, like the Polynesian *taboo* against men and women eating together, once made sense in a particular social and religious context that had a precise understanding of gender roles, supported by reference to sacred texts that were probably created as much to confirm the roles as to account for them; but when all that is left is the *taboo* separated from the environment which gave it power and meaning, it collapses, and appeals to the tradition, simply because it is tradition, no longer persuade.

Anthony Giddens thinks that appeal to tradition as an argument is always illegitimate. He says that fundamentalism is not a legitimate reference to the past, but a recasting of the past, a re-invention of the past, a fabrication designed to fill the yawning gulf left by the disappearance of tradition itself. Traditions work by unconscious acceptance. While they are effectively and unreflectively fulfilling their role, they continue to have one. Once they have to be appealed to as a clincher in an argument, you can be certain they've lost their role or are in the process of losing it.

Though the role of God in this is still not clear, the use of God by humans is. What seems to happen is that a practice becomes a tradition for quite specific reasons related to a particular context, and it is the context that makes sense of the practice. God is probably brought in to fortify the tradition. Time passes and with it the context that originally made sense of the practice. All that is now left, as with the Polynesian *taboo*, is the claim itself separated from its explanatory environment, but still bearing the divine authorisation. We either stick with the prohibition because of the alleged divine warrant, though it no longer makes sense, or we understand the warrant as a human use of God and not God's own word, and abandon it in favour of a practice that makes sense for our own day. Another approach is to invent new divine reasons for the old tradition, usually very different from the ones that made sense in the original context. This is close to what Giddens calls fundamentalism, this recasting of the past, because we cannot bear the void created by the end of a tradition. Believers are particularly prone to this, because they have been taught to associate God intimately

with their traditions, moral and otherwise, so challenging them is felt as a challenge to the authority of God. Those of us who cannot go down this route will have to offer an account of God's role that does not expose it to this constant critical erosion. We either opt for an understanding of God as a micromanager of human morality, dictating specific systems that constantly wear out and leave us with theological problems when we want to abandon them, or develop an understanding of God as a reality who accompanies creation in its evolving story like a pianist in a silent movie. We either opt for a series of fixed texts that wear out and have to be constantly changed or the rolling jazz session that constantly makes new music by listening to what's happening around it and applying the best of the tradition to the current context. The genius of improvisation is a better metaphor for actual human moral experience than struggling to apply a single text to every situation. God invites us to join in the music, to listen and adapt to one another, to keep the melody flowing, to create something beautiful.

So it is all right to ask how humanity creates its moral systems and traditions, how we arrive at them. It is obvious historically that this is done by a process of experimentation, by trial and error. At some point in the process, however, a halt is called by the leaders and thinkers in the community and a set of customs is solidified into a moral tradition. The danger now is that these moral traditions are at risk from further challenge. After all, experimentation is what led us to our present place, so why stop? The answer is that we need stability, need to get used to doing things a certain way, so we call a halt and say, "this is it, this is the way we'll do things from now on". And in order to prevent further challenge, the fixers of the tradition build a double wall round it. The first wall is revelation. They say that this way of doing things is decreed by God and they establish it in sacred texts. The second wall is to claim that this is how it has always been done, it is natural and obvious and we have no option except to obey it.³ We learn obedience by internalising the tradition, by offering it automatic acceptance. And by these means the tradition becomes fixed and powerful and those who challenge it are declared to be evil, opposed to the will of God and the fixed wisdom of the community. The internalising of the tradition into conscience, so that a complete automatism of instinct is achieved, establishes moral and social stability at the price of private subordination to external authority. We obey, not because it is

useful to us and our reason consents, but because we are commanded. But there is always an uneasy fit between the now authoritative tradition and our own turbulent humanity that is carrying not only the entail of our own immediate past, but the weight of humanity's cumulative past. Our anguish at our own moral delinquency and relational incompetence is created by the doctrine of our own freedom and responsibility. It is important to us to believe that we are the true agents of our choices. That is why many people are disturbed when they study scientific accounts of human nature, because they appear to replace human freedom with the bleak doctrine of natural determinism. The bugbear of determinism has always been that if our actions are predictable in some sense, then we are no longer true agents, we have lost our power to choose and manage the world according to our wishes or our visions.

A very difficult paradox is emerging here. On the one hand, we are value creating creatures, constructors of moral traditions. On the other hand, the traditions we develop by trial and error are creatures of their time and are in constant need of revision, and even when we give them the consent of our minds we do not always find it possible to follow them in our lives. St Paul caught the dilemma perfectly when he said that he did not understand his own actions, because the good that he wanted to do he did not do, while the evil that he did not want to do he practised. The obvious difficulty here is that, by their very nature, moral traditions are too general to adjudicate the microscopic complexities of each unique individual's life, which brings us back to our old friend determinism again. How free are we? How responsible are we for the confusions we create? One thing is certain: each of us has a unique and personal history, while moral standards and traditions are, by their very nature, generalisations. This is why the Russian philosopher Berdaev said that *"creative morality is that attitude which states that it is impossible to judge any matter ethically unless it is taken as being a unique case"*, but this perspective can only be achieved at the most intimate level, whether by priests or biographers. This was probably why Jesus told us not to judge one another, and why his most revolutionary teaching was about forgiveness. To know all was to forgive all, and since only God could know all, the rest of us should not judge.

What I am trying to suggest here is that much of our personal anguish is created by the assumption of our own guilt for situations beyond our control, but that a guided and sympathetic exploration of our own history modifies or even banishes that sense of self-judgement and leads to compassion, self-understanding and the possibility of personal growth. Let me develop that further by returning to philosophy. Walter Kaufmann, the great interpreter of Nietzsche, made the following observation: *"Nietzsche is, like Plato, not a system-thinker but a problem-thinker. Perhaps it is the most striking characteristic of "dialectical" thinking from Socrates to Hegel and Nietzsche that it is a search for hidden presuppositions rather than a quest for solutions. The starting point of such a "dialectical" inquiry is a problem situation...In the problem situation premises are involved, and some of these are made explicit in the course of the inquiry. The result is less a solution of the initial problem than a realisation of its limitations: typically, the problem is not solved but "outgrown". Jung has developed a strikingly similar notion on the basis of his psychoanalytical practice. He claims that the normal and healthy way of dealing with psychical problems is "overgrowing" them and thus achieving an elevation of the level of consciousness."* ⁴

In other words, the process of examination and exploration leads to greater comprehension about our own fractured lives and, while our "problems" may never be solved, our new self-understanding, paradoxically, gives us, maybe for the first time, a taste of the freedom we have been accusing ourselves of misusing. But we must not exaggerate even this slight edge of growing personal responsibility. We will continue to be largely determined by factors we can do little about, though now we may be able to play around with the determinants themselves and buy ourselves a bit of space. We will also become more aware of the social context in which we are formed and become more committed to shaping the surrounding culture that helps to shape us. We will also be committed to leading examined lives ourselves. Only when we know something about the forces that move and form us and understand the style and shape of our own character, will we be any use in assisting society in its search for a workable moral tradition for our own time.

The thing that characterises our own era is the end of tradition as an internalised, almost instinctive moral compass. We have already noted how approximate to human particularities moral traditions are, but they have an important role in creating social stability and cohesion. Like any powerful human reality, tradition only works for as long as it is largely unquestioned as the prevailing norm. The status of women is an obvious example of how effective traditions can be at reinforcing themselves; but it also illustrates the power of history and human development at eroding traditions that no longer retain the automatic consent of the people over whom they claim authority. The inescapable irony is that moral traditions are themselves the result of human experimentation and they invariably end as its victims. The anguish for us humans is that the traditions do their job too well and the very virtues of traditional societies become the main inhibitors of necessary social change. There seem to be periods in human history when the pace of social and moral change accelerates. Not surprisingly, these are usually periods of great anxiety and confusion. It is not yet obvious to anyone today what the basis for the new morality will be, nor whether it will emerge at all, though in subsequent lectures I will have a few suggestions to make that will, paradoxically, reach back to a tradition earlier than the one from which we are emerging. What seems to be obvious is the disintegration of the old standards, with little that we can confidently put in their place. We could illustrate this agonising theme in human history from almost any period, but it is probably true that our own time is characterised by an almost uniquely turbulent assault upon tradition. I think we can take comfort from several things.

First of all, we are learning that moral traditions are human creations, usually in response to particular circumstances and their challenges. We are also beginning to recognise that the process of their formation has always been more dynamic than we have sometimes been prepared to acknowledge and the solidifying of the tradition at any particular point is unavoidably arbitrary, but probably desirable for the sake of stability. It would seem to follow that what we have done before we can do again, though it may be that it will be done with more modesty and a greater sense of the revisability of all human systems.

We are also recognising that human freedom is frailer and more difficult to measure than we have sometimes been prepared to admit. This probably works several ways on moral traditions, but it is almost certainly the case that the strong and powerful will have a disproportionate role in the creating and policing of norms. Powerful groups always create a distorting effect on human arrangements. A moment's thought about the role of women in history and the place of gay people today will illustrate the claim. All of this should serve to make our moral explorations more open to critical analysis and self-examination.

But we will inevitably come back to Nietzsche's insight into humanity's bad conscience "as an illness as pregnancy is an illness". Unlike our animal ancestors, we can no longer live unconsciously; we have to live intentionally, in a way that orders what the Prayer Book calls our "unruly affections". We cannot just live; we ask ourselves how we are to live. I would like to suggest that this question is always answered in a way that is appropriate to our particular time and place. In authoritarian societies (and most societies have been authoritarian) the question will be answered in terms of command moralities, where everything is subjugated to those with power over us, and that includes the subjugation of our own reason. Most of the moral systems we have inherited come from these command systems, but they no longer work today, because authority without reason no longer has legitimacy. The test here is to think of a moral command from the old system and try to apply it today. We no longer say "Do or Don't Do This, Because Thus It Is Commanded". We may ask for the same thing, but today we will try to provide a reason, offer a justification. In command moralities that never happens.

What this suggests, therefore, is the responsible but exciting possibility of rethinking morality for our own day, acknowledging our own situation and its confusions and insights, while also recognising that we need order and balance in our lives. But today, perhaps for the first time, we will struggle to achieve a morality that is self imposed and consented to by our own reasons, though even that will not guarantee our obedience. Moral failure will continue to characterise us, but at least we will consent to the tradition we are breaking; we'll go on doing the wrong thing, but we'll now do it

for the right reason. And just to cheer us all up, I'd like to end with a quotation from Annie Dillard, a wise woman from North America who writes prose that most people think is poetry.

*"There is no one but us. There is no one to send, nor a clean hand, nor a pure heart on the face of the earth, nor in the earth, but only us, a generation comforting ourselves with the notion that we have come at an awkward time, that our innocent fathers are all dead - as if innocence had ever been - and our children busy and troubled, and we ourselves unfit, not yet ready, having each of us chosen wrongly, made a false start, failed, yielded to impulse and the tangled comfort of pleasures, and grown exhausted, unable to seek the thread, weak, and involved. But there is no one but us. There never has been. There have been generations which remembered, and generations which forgot; there has never been a generation of whole men and women who lived well for even one day. Yet some have imagined well, with honesty and art, the detail of such a life, and have described it with such grace, that we mistake vision for history, dream for description, and fancy that life has devolved. So. You learn this studying any history at all, especially the lives of artists and visionaries; you learn it from Emerson, who noticed that the meanness of our days is itself worth our thought; and you learn it, fitful in your pew, at Church."*⁵

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¹ Friedrich Nietzsche. *On the Genealogy of Morals*. Second Essay: section 16ff

² Alasdair MacIntyre. *After Virtue*. University of Notre Dame Press. 1981. pp.105ff.

³ Nietzsche. *The Anti-Christ*. Section 57.

⁴ Walter Kaufmann. *Nietzsche*. Princeton University Press. 1974. p. 82

⁵ Annie Dillard. *Holy the Firm*. Harper and Row. New York. 1988. pp.56ff

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