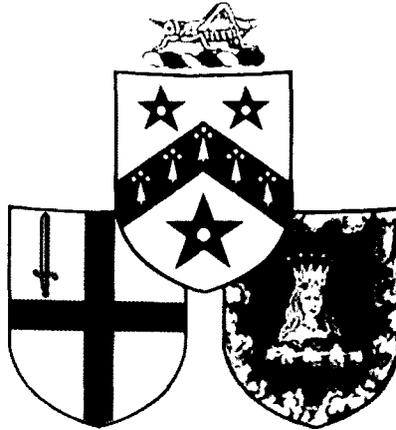


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**NEGOTIATING THE ETHICAL MINEFIELD**

Lecture 2

**UNHAPPY BEDFELLOWS**

by

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## Negotiating The Ethical Minefield

### II

#### Unhappy Bedfellows

This lecture will be mainly about sex, but I am not sure whether to start with philosophy or poetry, with Schopenhauer or Betjeman. Poets, after all, have written more about sex than philosophers. In fact, Schopenhauer is the only major philosopher to have addressed the subject, apart from Plato, who, as Schopenhauer dismissively observed, confined his discussion "to the sphere of myths, fables, and jokes, and for the most part concerns only the Greek love of boys".<sup>1</sup> Schopenhauer does not seem to have had a strong sense of humour, so I suspect he missed some of the point in Plato, and sex is such a baffling subject that "myths, fables and jokes" constitute as good an approach as any other. Nevertheless, it is probably true that Schopenhauer's section on The Metaphysics of Sexual Love in his master work, "The World as Will and Representation", is the first purely philosophical approach on offer. Even so, I am reluctant to start there, because it would be too earnest an introduction to a subject that is daunting enough. So I'll start with poetry, but not yet with Betjeman, though I'll come to him in a minute.

Shakespeare said just about everything that could be said on the subject. We get from him a compassionate view, a strong sense of the helplessness of humanity before this powerful force. It is true he chronicles the comic follies and delusions of love, as well as its tragic cost. But we have to remember that he was not only the great genius who observed with sorrow and love the antics of the poor human player thrust upon the stage of life, he was himself touched with our infirmities. He, too, was a lover, and I want to begin with that exasperated cry of his in sonnet 129.

*The expense of spirit in a waste of shame  
 Is lust in action; and till action, lust  
 Is perjur'd, murderous, bloody, full of blame,  
 Savage, extreme, rude, cruel, not to trust;  
 Enjoyed no sooner but despised straight;  
 Past reason hunted; and no sooner had,  
 Past reason hated, as a swallow'd bait,  
 On purpose laid to make the taker mad;  
 Mad in pursuit, and in possession so;  
 Had, having, and in quest to have, extreme;  
 A bliss in proof, - and prov'd, a very woe;  
 Before, a joy propos'd; behind, a dream.  
 All this the world well knows; yet none knows well:  
 To shun the heaven that leads men to this hell.*

Schopenhauer does not quote this sonnet, but he would have approved the sense of powerful irrationality it radiates, the sense that we are in the grip of a force we cannot control, that is indifferent to our happiness and is interested only in its own ends. We shall see what philosophy makes of it in a minute, but let us turn to Betjeman to capture a more wistful, less damning note. In a celebrated television interview at the end of his life, sitting in a wheel chair, wrapped up against a chill Cornish wind, Betjeman was asked what he regretted most about this life: "Not having more sex", he replied. One got a sense of someone who had denied himself the pleasures of sexual love for abstract, probably religious reasons, looking back and wondering what all the fuss had been about and whether the denial had been worth it. Certainly, he was brilliant at capturing the longings of innocent lust, those heart-stabbing moments of awareness when we are pierced with desires that come upon us like sorrow. Here's my favourite. It's called, wistfully, *Senex*.

*Oh would I could subdue the flesh  
 Which sadly troubles me!  
 And then perhaps could view the flesh*

*As though I never knew the flesh  
And merry misery.*

*To see the golden hiking girl  
With wind about her hair,  
The tennis-playing, biking girl,  
The wholly-to-my-liking girl,  
To see and not to care.*

*At sundown on my tricycle  
I tour the Borough's edge,  
And icy as an icicle  
See bicycle by bicycle  
Stacked waiting in the hedge.*

*Get down from me! I thunder there,  
You spaniels! Shut your jaws!  
Your teeth are stuffed with underwear,  
Suspenders torn asunder there  
And buttocks in your paws!*

*Oh whip the dogs away my Lord,  
They make me ill with lust.  
Bend bare knees down to pray, my Lord,  
Teach sulky lips to say, my Lord,  
That flaxen hair is dust.*

Betjeman was a kind man, so there is compassion in what he calls his "merry misery" over sex. He was struggling, but the struggle did not turn ugly; he did not, like many ascetics, become a hater, the kind of man who condemns in others what he struggles with in his own nature. That's the religious inversion, the root of the sexual pessimism that so disfigures the history of Christianity. Betjeman was in touch with

his desires, had pity for them, though he tried to make them go away, by resorting to the prayer of detachment: *Teach sulky lips to say, My Lord, That flaxen hair is dust.* Of course, he knew well that it is the very transience of the objects of our love that most moves and compels us, because we are reaching through them to what lies beyond. And that provides us with a convenient way of returning to Arthur Schopenhauer.

It is very easy to fault Schopenhauer on the detail of his analysis, to be irritated or amused by his fussier opinions, but he seems to me to have got to the heart of the problem with great clarity. What draws two individuals together is the will-to-live of the whole species. In order to do this, nature attains her aim by planting in individuals a certain delusion, so that what in truth is merely a good thing for the species seems to the lovers to be a good thing for themselves. They serve the species under the delusion that they are serving themselves. He writes: "*In this process a mere chimera, which vanishes immediately afterwards, floats before him, and, as motive, takes the place of a reality. This delusion is instinct. In the great majority of cases, instinct is to be regarded as the sense of the species which presents to the will what is useful to it*".<sup>2</sup> So sexual love is a necessary ruse practised upon individuals by the species in order to ensure the life of the whole. It is here that Schopenhauer comes closest to the Shakespeare of Sonnet 129. "*Everyone who is in love will experience an extraordinary disillusionment after the pleasure he finally attains; and he will be astonished that what was desired with such longing achieves nothing more than what every other sexual satisfaction achieves, so that he does not see himself very much benefited by it. That desire was related to all his other desires as the species is to the individual, hence as the infinite to something finite. On the other hand, the satisfaction is really for the benefit only of the species, and so does not enter into the consciousness of the individual, who, inspired by the will of the species, here served with every kind of sacrifice a purpose that was not his own at all. Therefore, after the consummation of the great work, everyone who is in love finds himself duped; for the delusion by means of which the individual was the dupe of the species has disappeared*".<sup>3</sup> If you are finding this unduly pessimistic, reflect for a moment on the intoxicating madness of being-in-love, that state of idealised projection when we do

not see the beloved as others see her, but only in the light of the magic delusion itself. That is why Schopenhauer believes that friendship rather than passion is a better basis for marriage, and we would probably all agree, but who would want to live completely without passion? Well, as we shall see, lots of people would, precisely because they do not like abandoning control, no matter what the will-to-live of the species might be. But passion needs no recruiting agent. It dominates the headlines, making fools of the great and the good, breaking hearts, damaging lives, distorting the judgement of good people, prompting them to irrational actions and reckless affairs that destroy their own peace, so that, in Paul's words, they no longer understand their own actions, for the good that they would they do not, while the folly they would avoid they fall headlong into. In a purple passage Schopenhauer offers us an insight that deconstructs the poetry of love, telling us that the longings of lovers *"are the sighs of the spirit of the species, which sees here, to be won or lost, an irreplaceable means to its ends, and therefore groans deeply. The species alone has infinite life, and is therefore capable of infinite desire, infinite satisfaction, and infinite sufferings. But these are here imprisoned in the narrow breast of a mortal; no wonder, therefore, when such a breast seems ready to burst, and can find no expression for the intimation of infinite rapture or infinite pain with which it is filled. This, then, affords the material for all erotic poetry of the sublime kind, which accordingly rises into transcendent metaphors that soar above all that is earthly"*.<sup>4</sup>

He tells us that the species wages war with individuals and their moralities. It knows no morality except its own will-to-live, so that it has no scruple about over-riding our happiness and well-being, because the species has a closer and prior right to us than has the individual.<sup>5</sup> This was why the ancients personified the genius of the species as Cupid, a malevolent, cruel, and ill-reputed god, in spite of his childish appearance, who is a capricious, despotic demon, yet lord of gods and men, whose attributes are a deadly dart, blindness and wings. Cupid's arrows strike us with desires that are blind not only to the actuality of the beloved, whom we observe through a haze of delight

and longing, but to the consequences for our own peace of mind and heart. Cupid cares for none of these things, cares nothing for us; he does his work and flies away.

This account of the power of our sexuality fits well with Nietzsche's understanding of the human predicament as a consequence of humanity's sundering from its animal past. If the species did its relentless work only through unconscious creatures, animals, there would be no moral anguish, no moral struggle, there would simply be the life force, the will-to-live of Schopenhauer, relentlessly expressing itself. In us, however, that process has become conscious, has started observing itself, has, in Nietzsche's words, given itself a bad conscience. And this is the origin of morality, this need to find some kind of balance between instinctive and intentional life, between the drive of the species and the consciousness of the individual. I suspect that our longing for some kind of contentment is at the root of the invention of sexual morality. We recognise that living unintentionally, letting old Cupid have his way with us without resistance, breeds tragedy as well as joy, pain as well as pleasure. This is why all cultures develop some kind of sexual ethic. The important thing to notice here, particularly when we come to think about the Christian angle on sexuality, is that in most cultures the sexual act is seen as morally neutral in itself, so the problem lies not with sex as such but with its tendency to excess and disorder. In Michel Foucault's unfinished history of sexuality much light is thrown upon the differences and similarities between classical Greek thought and Christian doctrine.<sup>6</sup> In the later Christian attitude to the flesh, sexual pleasure was itself the root of evil, because it derived its force from the Fall and was, according to some, the very means that transmitted original sin, the maculate conception. For some of the Fathers sex

would not have been a pleasure, and therefore not a problem, before the Fall. Adam and Eve would have conjugated without passion, if the serpent had not tempted the first woman to eat of the forbidden fruit. There are myths in other cultures that try to account for the force and variety of sexual attraction, but the developed Christian understanding of the myth of the Fall is distinctive, because it renders sex problematic in itself. It might be useful to compare it to the need to eat, for instance. It is obvious that eating can become a modality that expresses human pathology and need. Some people eat to excess; some people suffer from complex eating disorders; some people use eating as a kind of emotional compensation. Most of us would accept the need for some kind of ethic of eating that would balance the importance of eating for health and survival with the dangers of eating the wrong thing or eating to excess or not eating enough. Part of that ethic is an aesthetic of eating, witnessed to by the popularity of cookery books and television programmes. We do not see eating as problematic in itself, though we recognise that the human genius for pathologising nature applies here as well. The distinctive thing about the Christian ethic of sexuality is that, in one of its dominant forms, it sees the sex drive itself as uniquely expressive of human sinfulness, the very vehicle that transmits the virus of sin through history.

More fatefully, it has held woman to be the primary agent of the Fall and the continuing means through which its deadly consequences are transmitted. This is all made brutally explicit in the *Malleus Maleficarum*, or "Hammer of the Witches", a handbook for inquisitors written by two Dominican friars in 1486. In the first part of their book the authors explain why women are more prone to witchcraft than men. They quote the book of Ecclesiasticus, from the Apocrypha, chapter 25, on the

inherent wickedness of women. Then they quote the famous misogynistic rant of Chrysostom: *What else is woman but a foe to friendship, an inescapable punishment, a necessary evil, a natural temptation, a desirable calamity, a domestic danger, a delectable detriment, an evil of nature painted with fair colours!* They note that when they are talking about women in this way, they are really talking about sex, for which woman is a convenient metaphor. But after this momentary lapse into realism, they really get into their stride: *If the world would be rid of women, to say nothing of witchcraft, it would remain proof against innumerable dangers....I have found a woman more bitter than death...and as the sin of Eve would not have brought death to our souls and body unless the sin had afterward been passed to Adam, to which he was tempted by Eve, not by the devil, therefore is she more bitter than death. More bitter than death, again, because that is natural and destroys the body, but the sin which arose from woman destroys the soul by depriving it of grace, and delivers the body up to the punishment for sin. More bitter than death, again, because bodily death is an open and terrible enemy, but woman is a secret and wheedling enemy.* And in case we have missed the point, they add: *All witchcraft comes from carnal lust, which in woman is insatiable.”*<sup>7</sup>

This poisonous nonsense is in marked contrast to the comparative sanity of the classical Greek understanding of sexuality. It is well-known that Christianity derived its most formative and important theological vocabulary from Greek philosophy. It also derived many of its ascetical practices from classical culture, as well as its passion for discipline and restraint; fatally, it informed the practice with a different motive. According to Foucault, for classical Greek thought sexuality was potentially

excessive by nature, so the moral question was how to control it, how to regulate its economy in an appropriate way. The regulated sexual economy was not achieved by an universal legislation that permitted or forbade certain acts, but rather by the achievement of an art of living that involved the individual in a battle with the self to achieve dominion of the self over the self. This kind of self-overcoming was freely chosen for the sake of the self, just like any other discipline. It was not characterised by that particular anguish we find in the Christian struggle with sexuality, which loads it with such significance that it creates an ethic of anxiety and suspicion. The Greek regimen was not organised on a principle of what was permitted and what was forbidden. The sexual act was not considered as a licit or illicit practice that had to be validated by certain external criteria. It was viewed as an activity that could be more or less pernicious in its consequences and should therefore be controlled and ordered. It was a practice that demanded reflection and prudence, so it was not so much a question of right and wrong as one of more or less.<sup>8</sup> This strikes me as such an obviously sane approach that I wonder why Christianity, which took so much from Greek thought, did not follow its usual practice here and lift the best that was going from the surrounding culture. What happened back there that caused Christianity to make such a fateful turning and is it possible to rethink the whole subject?

To begin with, we have to exonerate the Bible. In my next lecture I shall make a plea for a more relaxed attitude to scripture and its authority for Christians, but it is only fair to point out that we probably read more into the Bible than we get out of it. There really is no single, discernible point of view to be found there, and what we do discover is often difficult to interpret because we are so far from its original context.

The Old Testament, like Homer and Shakespeare, mirrors its times and customs and does not seem to have any particular line on sex, as such, at all. Gradually a priestly editorial line takes over that retrojects into the text an official interpretation of the earlier narratives, but the original material still sits there with its own primitive integrity intact. There are moving love stories and horrifying rapes, detailed descriptions of incest and matter-of-fact accounts of prostitution, tales of seduction and sexual revenge. Many types of relationship are recorded with a detachment that suggests that sex was accepted as a powerful reality that could certainly destroy harmony, but was itself no more morally problematic than the weather.

When we turn to the New Testament there is not much material to work on and none of it is systematically expounded. We look in on an emerging tradition, but there is little that would suggest the fateful turn it would take in later centuries. Much of what Paul says seems to be governed by his expectation of the imminent return of Christ and the end of the world. There was little point in developing a detailed ethic for human institutions and relationships that would soon be brought to an end. We probably have to exonerate Paul of the charge of misogyny, though some of the things he wrote are certainly capable of being interpreted in a sexist way. "Stick it out where you are", was his message, "because the time is shorter than you think". There is even less about sex in the gospels and what we find there is capable of many interpretations. Unfortunately, since later generations of Christians loaded sexuality with such terrifying significance, it is almost impossible to read the few texts there are in the New Testament on the subject except through the prism of their suspicion and hatred. If you doubt that claim, meditate on the following paradox. If we are to treat

the Bible as a law book for all generations, an approach I would argue against, anyway, why are we so keen to apply its alleged strictures against sexuality with such severity, while largely ignoring its much fiercer strictures against wealth and the damaging consequences of its pursuit, not only on our soul's health but on the lives of others? Why do we strain at the gnat of sexuality while swallowing camels laden with riches? Why are Church synods not riven with debate and threatened with schism over the Church's possession of riches? Why do rigorist clergy not break off communion with their bishops, because they live in palaces and are comfortable parts of the power structure, rather than because of their attitude to the intricacies of human sexual relationships? There clearly is a hidden agenda here, but there also seems to be a fairly straightforward account of where it came from.

According to Laurence Osborne's book on sexual pessimism, *The Poisoned Embrace*, somewhere between the Old and New Testaments and the Early Fathers a strange anxiety entered Christianity's attitude to human sexuality. It came from the cult of Gnosticism, against which Catholic Christianity increasingly had to define itself. As is often the way in these titanic struggles, the Church absorbed as much as it rejected of its great opponent's ideas, very much in the way New Labour, in its struggle for power, adopted many of the policies of its Conservative enemy. According to Hans Jonas, Gnosticism was the result of the fusion of three traditions: Hellenism, the margins of Judaism, and Persian Zoroastrianism. *Hellenism provided the frame and much of the language. Judaism provided the mythological garb and the monotheism. And from the Persian root came Gnosticism's extreme dualism, its eschatological judgement and its pessimistic fatalism.*"<sup>9</sup> Though very different in outlook, New

Age spirituality provides us with a contemporary example of another eclectic quasi-religion that has had a profound effect on Christianity. In fact, we might argue that the fundamental optimism of New Age spirituality has provided an external corrective to the pessimism that was intruded into Christianity from dualistic Gnosticism. Certainly, books like Matthew Fox's *Original Blessing* are self-conscious attempts to counter the ancient tradition in Christianity that is against the body and heavily emphasises human sinfulness at the expense of the doctrine of Creation as gift and blessing. Central to Gnostic teaching was a hatred of the body and its needs. A Gnostic text from the second century tells us: *...he who has loved the body, which comes from the deceit of love, remains wandering in the darkness, suffering in his senses the things of death...it is because the source of the individual body is that abhorrent darkness from which the moist nature comes and from which the body is produced in the sensible world, and by which death is nourished...this bondage of corruption, this cloak of darkness, this living death, this sensate corpse, this tomb you carry around with you, this robber who lives in your house who by the things it loves hates you...Such is the hateful tunic with which you have clothed yourself; it holds you down in a stranglehold.*" <sup>10</sup>

Given this hysteria about the flesh, it is not surprising that the Gnostics persuaded themselves that they could be saved only by self-castration. Their excesses shocked even the most extreme Christian ascetics, but their own cult of virginity and distrust of the body had its origin, not in Scripture, but in the hypnotic fever of the very heresy they tried to oppose. It is impossible to account today for the success of Gnostic sexual pessimism in infiltrating early Christianity. Osborne wonders if the terror of

the venereal diseases which the Roman Empire spread through rapid urbanization had something to do with it. We might also surmise that the emergence of a new and virulent strain of homophobia in the Church in our own time has something to do with the panic associated with AIDS and HIV. However we account for it, the Church's struggle with Gnosticism had a poisonous effect on the Christian attitude to human sexuality, though we should not ignore the gains as well as the losses. There is some evidence that the Church's pre-occupation with sex made the male of the human species more gentle, so the very heresy that maligned the female also served to protect her in hard times. History is full of these consoling ironies. It also shows us how Christianity has always been profoundly influenced by external factors and ideas, sometimes for good, sometimes for ill. That being the case, it seems appropriate to ask ourselves how we might develop a new ethic that will help us respond to the peculiar challenges of our own time. In the next lecture I shall make a few modest proposals in that direction.

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<sup>1</sup> Arthur Schopenhauer. *The World as Will and as Representation*. Volume 2. Dover Publications. NY. 1966. page 532

<sup>2</sup> Schopenhauer. *ibid.* page 538.

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.* 540

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.* 551

<sup>5</sup> *ibid.* page 556

<sup>6</sup> Michel Foucault. *The Use of Pleasure*. Penguin Books. 1992. page 50ff

<sup>7</sup> Laurence Osborne. *The Poisoned Chalice*. Vintage. 1994. page 68ff

<sup>8</sup> Foucault. *ibid.* page 116

<sup>9</sup> Osborne. *ibid.* page 10

<sup>10</sup> Osborne. *ibid.* pp.13-14

# *GRESHAM COLLEGE*

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