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**Religion, Morality and Meaning**

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In the last lecture, I began to reflect on whether science can help us work out how we should behave. Now as I think we began to see, this is a complicated subject! My own view is that science can illuminate and inform questions of ethics, but I don’t think it can tell us what is right and what is wrong. I’ll be exploring this question in this lecture. But let me begin by trying to set this discussion in context.

Scientists are human beings. Because they are scientists, they are likely to have highly developed ideas about how the universe works. Because they are human beings, they also are likely to have views on such questions as, amongst many other things, the meaning of their own individual existences and how to live a good life. That is what human beings tend to do. So what happens if science can’t answer these questions? In the end, for entirely understandable reasons, most scientists end up believing some things that go beyond the scientific method. They’re things that really matter – not the shallow truths of reason, but the deep existential truths about who we are, and why we are here. Most scientists see that as unproblematic.

**Science and Morality?**

There are limits to what science can tell us. These are not limits imposed upon science by politicians, religious leaders, or cultural commentators. They are intrinsic to the scientific method itself. If science is science – and not something else – then there are certain domains of knowledge and opinion that lie beyond its scope. Science maintains both its integrity and its distinct identity by focussing on what it can investigate empirically, fully recognizing that this means that some larger questions of life will remain beyond its scope. Albert Einstein recognized the importance of this point, stressing that “science can only ascertain what is, not what should be, and outside of its domain value judgements of all kinds remain necessary.”

One of the most thoughtful exponents of this position is the Nobel Laureate Sir Peter Medawar (1915-87). Medawar achieved respect far beyond the scientific community on account of his willingness to engage creatively and constructively with the humanities, recognizing the respective strengths and weaknesses of every intellectual discipline – including his own. Yet Medawar had no hesitation in denouncing mystical nonsense wherever and whenever he found it – as in his celebrated dismissal of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin’s views of evolution, which he regarded as being credible only to those incapable of rational thought.

Yet Medawar was aware of the danger of exaggerating the reach of either science or reason. “Young scientists”, he once wrote, must never mistake “the necessity of reason for the sufficiency of reason.” Rationalism, he declared, “falls short of answering the many simple and childlike questions” that people ask about their origins and purposes. “It is not to rationalism that we look for answers to these simple questions because rationalism chides the endeavour to look at all.”

The philosopher Karl Popper argued that science is in no position to “make assertions about ultimate questions — about the riddles of existence, or about man’s task in this world.” Yet this truth, he declared, was open to being misunderstood and misrepresented – for example, in relation to ethics. “Some great scientists, and many lesser ones, have misunderstood the situation. The fact that science cannot make any pronouncement about ethical principles has been misinterpreted as indicating that there are no such principles.”

For Medawar, Karl Popper’s “ultimate questions” – such as “what are we all here for?” – are meaningful and important. These are questions that “science cannot answer and that no conceivable advance of science would enable it to answer”. Some – such as those that Medawar dismisses as “doctrinaire positivists” – would ridicule these questions, dismissing them as “nonquestions or pseudoquestions such as only simpletons ask and only charlatans of one kind or another profess to be able to answer.” Such a glib response, Medawar suggests, leaves people “empty and dissatisfied”. These questions are both real and important to those that ask them.

But not everyone agrees with Medawar. Some, such as the philosopher Bertrand Russell, argue that there are, as a matter of fact, no limits to the scope of the natural sciences. “Whatever knowledge is attainable, must be attained by scientific methods; and what science cannot discover, mankind cannot know.” Others use “the prestige of science for disguise and protection”, allowing them to smuggle in their own unevidenced moral and metaphysical ideas as if these were the secure outcome of the scientific method. The classic example of this is “scientific Marxism”, now widely abandoned as pseudoscientific, but once publicly advocated by some leading scientists, such as the crystallographer J. D. Bernal (1901-71).

In this lecture, we shall reflect on the question of whether science can tell us what is good. I think the best place to start this discussion lies in a question I raised briefly in the last lecture, when I touched on the theme of eugenics as one way of implementing a social programme based on Charles Darwin’s theory of evolution. Let me remind you the issues that we noted then. If Darwin allows us to understand the mechanism of evolution, might we be able to use that understanding to improve the quality of humanity? Or at least to prevent certain defective human beings from being born? Darwin noted that “with savages, the weak in body or mind are soon eliminated; and those that survive commonly exhibit a vigorous state of health.” Civilized societies, however, inhibit this “process of elimination” through medical and social care, thus enabling “the weak members of civilised societies” to “propagate their kind.” So might civilized societies improve their survival prospects through selective breeding?

To many of us, this sounds alarming. It rested on the assumption that certain undesirable social groups were to be prohibited from reproducing. Although this problem was especially pronounced in the case of Adolf Hitler’s racial policies of the 1930s, many progressive thinkers of that period – both in Great Britain and the United States – argued for the forcible sterilization of individuals or social groups deemed to have limited eugenic value. While these could arguably be given some scientific justification, the chief difficulty was that eugenic value was all too often defined in terms of class, race or creed. In effect, self-appointed social “in-groups” sought to prevent “out-groups” from reproducing.

But I think you can see the point I am making. Some might say this is scientifically desirable, as it improves the quality of the human gene pool and hence our capacity as a species to survive and flourish. Yet others would say that this benefit is achieved at a morally unacceptable price. Now I can’t resolve this debate, although I will gladly tell you that I am deeply uneasy about eugenics. But it raises this complicated issue about whether science can tell us what is good. Now I am sure that there are many views on this matter represented here today. I am going to try and address these issues, including considering whether religion can supplement a scientific account of things.

But let me open up this discussion by considering two atheist writers on this theme. As you will soon see, they take very different positions, which reminds us that atheism is a very diverse movement. My two choices are both philosophers: Alex Rosenberg and Iris Murdoch. Let us see what they have to say.

**Alex Rosenberg on Morality**

In his book *The Atheist’s Guide to Reality* (2011), the philosopher Alex Rosenberg sets out his understanding of what science can tell us about life’s greatest questions. Rosenberg makes it clear that the only reality is that which can be disclosed by the application of the scientific method.

Science provides all the significant truths about reality, and knowing such truths is what real understanding is all about. … Being scientistic just means treating science as our exclusive guide to reality, to nature – both our own nature and everything else’s.

Now maybe I need to pause here, and look at that word “scientistic”. It is not a misprint; it is a word that has been coined to designated the view that science is able to answer life’s biggest questions. Here is a description of “scientism” that seems to many to capture its core idea. The philosopher Massimo Pigliucci describes this as “a totalizing attitude that regards science as the ultimate standard and arbiter of all interesting questions; or alternatively that seeks to expand the very definition and scope of science to encompass all aspects of human knowledge and understanding.”

This is the view that we find in Rosenberg’s *Atheist’s Guide to Reality*, which argues that science is “our exclusive guide to reality.” At an early stage in the book, Rosenberg provides a neat synopsis of life’s big questions, along with what he considers to be scientifically reliable answers. Let me offer a few examples:

Is there a God? No.

What is the nature of reality? What physics says it is.

What is the purpose of the universe? There is none.

What is the meaning of life? Ditto.

What is the difference between right and wrong, good and bad? There is no moral difference between them.

Now each of these points is developed in much greater detail in the following chapters. Rosenberg provides a sophisticated and consistent exploration of an atheist worldview, based on the core assumption that reality is what the natural sciences – especially physics – is able to uncover. There is nothing beyond or behind the science. Therefore, if science cannot disclose purpose in life, there is none to disclose. Rosenberg tells us that this is a “nice nihilism”. To me, this amounts to a reductive physicalism which claims that everything is just bosons and fermions. And since physics tells us that these have no purpose or meaning, without any encoded propositional or intentional scripts, we can conclude that such things as “purpose” are illusions. So Rosenberg argues that “We have to be nihilists about the purpose of things in general, about the purpose of biological life in particular, and the purpose of life in general.”

Rosenberg’s philosophical rigour thus leads him to a moral nihilism, in that there are no “correct” answers to moral questions. His critics would respond by arguing that this is not proper science at all; this is scientism, understood as the rather narrow and doctrinaire view that reality is limited to what the scientific method can disclose. It is also deeply problematic. How on earth could physics itself demonstrate that reality consists of only the kinds of things that physics recognizes? All that Rosenberg is doing is proposing that physics must be the judge and jury of its own beliefs.

It is clearly the case that some scientists do believe that science is an “exclusive guide to reality”, and that some cultural commentators regard this as a default position within the scientific community. I have to tell you that my experience of discussing this with natural scientists of all persuasions is that most of them would reject any suggestion with amusement or bewilderment. And one of the reasons for this is that scientists are human beings, who are just as concerned with “ultimate questions” about meaning and goodness as everyone else.

Believing that science tells us that there is “no moral difference” between good and evil runs counter to the most fundamental instincts and values of humanity, above all the belief in the important of struggling against evil and injustice. Rosenberg’s analysis may lead him to the conclusion that we cannot make a meaningful distinction between good and evil. But I think most of us would have serious misgivings about this.

Yet curiously, Rosenberg seems perfectly willing to accept that it is “beyond reasonable doubt” that a “core morality” exists – that is to say, a set of behavioural rules observed by all or nearly all societies across time. As many of you will know, that is one of the core observations of C. S. Lewis’s *The Abolition of Man*, and Lewis interprets this in a strongly theistic manner. Rosenberg would doubtless object, but his concession opens the door to alternative visions of morality than those he himself appears to wish to adopt. Yet it also raises the question of whether this “core morality” is simply an historical “given”, which might require review and revision. Yet Rosenberg offers us no means by which science can offer an alternative moral vision, by which traditional ethical values might be corrected.

Rosenberg further argues that there is one more illusion that needs to be shattered by rigorous scientistic thinking. We’ve already see how Rosenberg suggests that attributing meaning to life is merely an introspective illusion arising from blind processes ultimately caused by bosons and fermions. But he has more to say on this matter. Rosenberg argues that we believe many things that are actually wrong, as a result of our biological hard-wiring. Our evolutionary past affects and distorts our ability to reason. “There is strong evidence that natural selection produces lots of false but useful beliefs.” Rosenberg’s critics might, I imagine, wonder if “science provides all the significant truths about reality” is one of them. But Rosenberg is quite happy to cut the ground from under his critics by undermining the credibility of “thought” in the first place. “Thinking about things”, he tells us, is an “overwhelmingly powerful illusion.”

Ultimately, science and scientism are going to make us give up as illusory the very thing conscious experience screams out at us loudest and longest: the notion that when we think, our thoughts are about anything at all, inside or outside of our minds.

This self-referentiality leaves me a little baffled. If we are naturally predisposed to have “lots of false but useful beliefs,” how can we identify and correct such false beliefs? After all, beliefs can only be true or false if they relate to something. Rosenberg sets out to liberate his readers from their illusions, but offers them no reliable criteria for identifying what is illusory and what is true.

**Iris Murdoch on Morality**

Let us look at another atheist writer. As promised, I want to look at what Iris Murdoch has to say on this. As you will soon realize, I take Iris Murdoch very seriously. One of Murdoch’s most enduring moral insights is that before we can act morally, we must see things as they really are. And while the road from morality to law is not quite as straightforward as we might like it to be, there is unquestionably a connection here. Although best known for her remarkable series of novels, Murdoch (1919-99) was also a moral philosopher of substance, passionately concerned about what needed to be done if humanity was to break free from its selfishness, and act out the good life. Her famous formulation of the moral problem sets the scene admirably for our analysis.

One of the main problems of moral philosophy might be formulated thus: are there any techniques for the purification and reorientation of an energy which is naturally selfish, in such a way that when moments of choice arrive we shall be sure of acting rightly?

Murdoch’s answer is complex, but it has a central theme that is easily grasped – namely, that there must be a transcendent ideal, capable of capturing our minds and imaginations, which captivates us with a vision of the good. Alluding to the *Book of Common Prayer* (1662), she sets out the connotations of the term “good”: “theproper seriousness of the term refers us to a perfection which is perhaps never exemplified in the world we know (‘There is no good in us’) and *which* carries with it the idea of transcendence.”

Murdoch does not believe in God, as traditionally conceived; yet her disinclination to accept such a conventional notion does not prevent her from insisting on the critical role of the transcendent – above all, of “the Good” – in affecting and guiding the human moral quest. It is as if something is intimating that this world is not of final significance, morally or metaphysically. We sense that our attempts to live the good life are ultimately judged by some standard that we have not ourselves created, but is somehow built into the fabric of the world. It is our task, as reflective moral agents, to encounter these deep structures, and adjust our thinking and our acting accordingly. Murdoch, writing from a Platonist perspective, sets out the issues in her characteristically robust manner:

“’Good is a transcendent reality’ means that virtue is the attempt to pierce the veil of selfish consciousness and join the world as it really is. It is an empirical fact about human nature that this attempt cannot be entirely successful.”

Despite her mild demythologization of the notion, the critical role of the notion of the “transcendent” in Murdoch’s vision of the moral quest will be clear.

Murdoch is aware that the notion of transcendence is not without its difficulties, and that it was regarded with some disdain by Oxford philosophers during the 1960s and 1970s. For many such writers, Murdoch suggested, any notion of “true transcendence” was simply a “consoling dream projected by human need on to an empty sky”. Yet Murdoch insisted that some such notion was required to make sense of human experience in general, and moral experience in particular. Human moral activity can be thought of as a pilgrimage towards “a distant moral goal, like a temple at the end of the pilgrimage”, something that is “glimpsed but never reached.”

One of Murdoch’s core insights is that we must act within an empirical reality which is in itself ultimately not capable of enabling or sustaining our moral vision. Murdoch’s approach is, of course, open to criticism; nevertheless, she constructs what she clearly regards as a navigable and defensible account of morality, grounded in a larger narrative than that offered by the natural sciences. Murdoch denies nothing about the natural sciences, save their moral finality. She saw her task as constructing a way of seeing things which allowed science and morality to inform each other, rather than reducing one to the other.

Now I think you can see there is a fundamental difference between Rosenberg and Murdoch – not just about the basis of morality, but also about the limits of science. For Rosenberg, morality is limited to what science can demonstrate to be right. For Murdoch, we need something beyond science if morality is to be stabilized and liberated from changing fashions and moods. My own sympathy, as I think you can tell, lies much more with Murdoch than with Rosenberg. In the remainder of this lecture, I am going to take Murdoch’s approach, and play around with it in a Christian way, and see where it takes us. And then at the end of the lecture, we’ll come back to this point about how science and morality interact, as I think this is a really interesting question in its own right.

As Murdoch pointed out, we need to believe that, “as moral beings, we are immersed in a reality which transcends us and that moral progress consists in awareness of this reality and submission to its purposes.” The question of how that reality is “seen” thus becomes of decisive importance. How can one give visible, tangible expression to this authorizing, transcending, enabling ideal? How may one gain access to the realm of the transcendent, in order to live the good life?

And it is here that we encounter perhaps the Achilles heel of Murdoch’s moral vision. Yet if there is a failure here, it is a profoundly enlightening failure, in that it points to the need to *know*, to *perceive* the Good before good can be done. For Murdoch, the ideal of “the Good” may lie beyond the limits of our volitional capacities; yet it possesses the capacity to inspire us to *want* to attain it, and directs our efforts to do so.

But how can we give substance to this ideal? It is one thing to be morally unattainable; but what if it is also conceptually elusive, lacking in precision precisely because it is not susceptible to capture and interrogation? If “the Good” is to give direction to our moral longings – as opposed to merely exciting our longing to do good, while failing to inform us what this “good” might be – it must be in a form that we can “see” (to use an idiom that is characteristic of Murdoch’s moral parlance). It needs to be *incarnated* – made known and made accessible under the limiting conditions of human circumstances and history.

If we were to use classic Platonic imagery, we would need to be able to speak about access to the ideal of the “good”; otherwise, how could we embody or reflect it in our thoughts and actions? Yet here we encounter an instructive weakness – a problem shared by both Plato and Murdoch – which is overcome if we concede the possibility of mediation between the transcendent and the everyday world. This theme is central to the Christian faith, which uses the categories of revelation and incarnation to articulate the idea that God – the transcendent – has chosen to become known under the limiting conditions of human existence. Truth, beauty and goodness may thus be seen in Christ, incarnated within the actualities of life.

If I had more time, I would wish to develop this point at length. For the moment, let me simply point out that the abstract notion of “justice” is therefore not left undefined and abstract, but is instantiated, illustrated, and embodied.

**Natural Law?**

Yet there is another reason why an appeal to the transcendent matters profoundly. In 1933, the Nazis seized power in Germany, and promptly set about using the law to impose totalitarian rule. The story of how this happened is of enormous interest, demonstrating how laws established for an essentially democratic purpose could be subverted to other ends, given the necessary political will. As the historian Ernst Wolf remarks in his study of German Protestant attitudes towards these developments, the traditional Protestant notion that law was somehow grounded in objective realities of the world or in social consensus was utterly incapable of responding to the arbitrary enforcement of power by the Third Reich. What could be done? What intellectual opposition could be offered to these developments? Those positivists who defined justice in terms of predicting the judgements of the courts found themselves unable to challenge their legality, precisely because they had lost interest in the moral foundations and goals of positive law.

In 1936, Heinrich Rommen (1897-1967) published a little book entitled *Die ewige Wiederkehr des Naturrechts* (“The eternal return of natural law”). Rommen, a professional lawyer who had been imprisoned briefly by the Nazis for his work with a Roman Catholic social action group, pointed out that Germany’s modern dictators were “masters of legality”, able to use the legal and judicial systems to pursue their own political agendas. Germany’s legal professionals, he argued, were so used to thinking about law in purely positivist terms that they were left intellectually defenseless in the face of the National Socialist threat. In this dire situation, one needed to appeal to a higher authority than the State. Natural law offered precisely the intellectual lifeline that was so badly needed.

It may, not unreasonably, be pointed out that Nazi Germany represents a somewhat extreme situation, which cannot be used to justify the renewal of what, to its critics, is an essentially outmoded theory of law. While there is merit in this observation, the situation in Germany at this time merely highlights an issue which cannot be ignored – namely, whether there are transcendent grounds for concepts of justice and due process, which are not merely the product of human convention. Nor is the relevance of the Nazi situation limited to legal developments of the 1930s; related issues emerged when the Allies sought retribution for those events in the post-war era. The desire to prosecute war criminals at Nuremberg for “crimes against humanity” gave rise to a new interest in natural law. As the philosopher Anthony Lisska points out, if the notion of “Crimes against Humanity” was to have a theoretical foundation, it required a “radically different account of the nature of law from that proposed by the then reigning theory, legal positivism.”

Yet the disturbing questions raised by the rise of the Third Reich and its aftermath have not gone away. They are raised again by a “pragmatic” approach to morality, such as that associated with the late philosopher Richard Rorty, as well as those who who regard science as the sole basis for morality. On this reading of things, humanity creates its own values and ideas, and is not accountable to any external objectivity (natural law) or internal subjectivity (conscience) for the outcome of this creative process. “We figure out what practices to adopt first, and then expect our philosophers to adjust the definition of ‘human’ or ‘rational’ to suit.” Rorty argues that a consequence of this communitarian or pragmatic approach to truth must be the recognition that

. . . there is nothing deep down inside us except what we have put there ourselves, no criterion that we have not created in the course of creating a practice, no standard of rationality that is not an appeal to such a criterion, no rigorous argumentation that is not obedience to our own conventions.

Truth and morality are thus matters of social convention, created by human communities. Yet if Rorty is right, what justification could be given for opposing Nazism? Rorty finds himself unable to offer a persuasive justification for the moral or political rejection of totalitarianism. This being the case, Rorty admits, then he has to acknowledge that:

When the secret police come, when the torturers violate the innocent, there is nothing to be said to them of the form “There is something within you which you are betraying. Though you embody the practices of a totalitarian society, which will endure forever, there is something beyond those practices which condemns you.”

For Rorty, the truth of moral values depends simply upon their existence and acceptance within society. This view has been severely criticised as adopting an uncritical approach concerning prevailing social conventions. As Richard Bernstein points out, Rorty appears to have done little more than reify social practices, and treat these as being synonymous with “truth”, “goodness” or “justice”.

Now the idea of natural law faces a host of intellectual difficulties, which at times seem overwhelming. Yet Rommen’s arguments suggest that it will never cease to appeal to the human imagination, above all in situations of manifest legal corruption, political violence, or cultural manipulation. The idea that there exist standards of justice and goodness which are above those determined, and often invented, by human beings and human institutions represents far more than “metaphysical comfort” (Nietzsche): it constitutes the basis for criticism and reform of otherwise potentially arbitrary or self-serving notions of “the good”.

So where does this clearing of the ground leave us? What relevance does it have to the theme of this lecture? Perhaps it helps us reflect on human nature – to see human nature as it actually is, rather than base our thought on utopian ideas of who we are, and what we are like. Law addresses a humanity which aspires to do right, yet often seems incapable of achieving it. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak. More than that: we end up doing far less than we expect.

**Making the connection with religion**

One of the most difficult and fundamental of all questions has to do with the ambiguities of human nature. For the optimists of the Enlightenment, we are the masters of our own souls, the determiners of our own destinies. In *The Sovereignty of God*, Murdoch pointed out how the belief that humanity was autonomous, capable of determining and achieving its own destiny was in many ways the defining image of the modern era. On this view of things, we merely need to identify what is good, and its pursuit and achievement will follow as a matter of course.

Or do they? Tennyson’s famous words in his great poem *In Memoriam* often seem hopelessly idealist: “We needs must love the highest when we see it.” Does this bear any relationship to the realities of human experience? The more cynical observa­tion of antiquity seems much closer to our experience: “we see the good, and approve of it, but we actually go and do something worse.”

In a letter of 1887, Lord Acton famously observed: “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. William Pitt, it will be remembered, had 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 at Durham, which offers a more disturbing way of considering the influence of power on human nature. A very literal translation of the proverb would be: “Man does as he is when he can do want 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. I think that those of you who have read William Golding’s *Lord of the Flies* will recognize the point immediately!

So are we fundamentally good and capable of learning and practicing what is good – in which case we merely need to be told what is good? Or is there something about human nature which prevents us from acting on its insights, so that we may know the good, but choose to do what is not good? Or, knowing what is not good, find that this possesses a heady perfume that proves to be irresistible?

The Christian perspective is this: we are part of God’s creation, and must learn and accept our place within that created order. This insight is deeply countercultural, and often provokes a ferocious reaction. Some argue that the world would be a better place if we got rid of God altogether, and put human beings in his place. Many of the more idealistic writers of the nineteenth century insisted that the only way to eliminate the ills of the world was to enthrone humanity as lord of the earth. After the horrors of the earlier twentieth century, which saw Nazism and Stalinism built on precisely this exalted view of humanity, a more realistic approach has returned to favour.

Yet as we saw in an earlier lecture, Christians believe that humanity is part of the created order, but not that we are *indistinguishable* from the remainder of creation. We have been set a little lower than the angels, and been “crowned with glory and honour” (Psalm 8:5). Men and women are created “in the image of God” (Genesis 1:27). This brief yet deeply significant phrase opens the way to a right understanding of human nature, and our overall place within the created order. Although humanity is not divine, it possesses a relationship with God which is different from that of other creatures. *Humanity bears the image of God*. For some, this is a statement of the privileged position of humanity within creation. Yet for most Christian theologians, it is above all an affirmation of *responsibility* and *accountability* towards the world in which we live. There is some kind of resonance between the good, and both the human longing for such goodness, and our actual concepts of what that good might be.

It is an important point, as it stresses the ambiguities of human nature. We feel ourselves raised upwards by our aspirations, yet at the same time dragged down by the reality of things. One and the same human being may experience a longing for justice, yet end up doing some things that are quite different. There is a tension between our longings and our achievements.

Humanity is thus to be seen as the height of God’s creation, bearing God’s image, yet at the same time as being a fallen creature. For Augustine of Hippo, one of the more thoughtful, humanity has defected from its true calling. Instead of using our God-given freedom to love God, we used it to advance our own agendas. We are now caught in a trap of our own making: Augustine argues that we are unable to break free from our entanglement with sin. As Paul points out, we are captivated by indwelling sin, unable to do the good that we would like to do, and instead doing the bad things we do not want to do (Romans 7:17-25). Augustine uses a series of images to illuminate how we have become trapped by sin in this way. It is like an illness which we have contracted, and are unable to cure. It is like having fallen into a deep pit, and being unable to get out. The essential point he wants to make is that once sin – which he conceives as an active force in our lives – has taken hold of us, we are unable to break free from its grasp. To use a modern analogy, it is like being addicted to heroin, and unable to break the habit.

Now this raises many interesting questions, which I cannot even begin to address this afternoon. But let me just note one interesting question. It arises from reading Richard Dawkins’s *Selfish Gene*, which I continue to regard as his best work. Many of you will know the core argument of this book, which concludes with a passionate defence of human dignity and freedom in the face of genetic determinism. We – that is, his (human) readers – can rebel against our selfish genes:

We have the power to defy the selfish genes of our birth and, if necessary, the selfish memes of our indoctrination. … We are built as gene machines and cultured as meme machines, but 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 evolutionary process that brought us here in the first place.

I like that thought. But I wonder if he is right. Does knowing how genes determine our behaviour enable us to change that behaviour? It might. Dawkins, for example, suggests that there is a parallel here with understanding how cancer works. Once we know its mechanisms, we can outwit it, and find ways of destroying it or preventing its spread. But that is only one analogy for understanding our predicament. Here is another analogy. We are imprisoned by our genetic heritage. And as you all know, knowing that you are in prison does not get you out of prison. Something else is needed. For Christianity, of course, this opens the way to thinking and speaking about grace and salvation.

But sadly, we have not time to explore that line of thought further. In next week’s lecture, I want to wrap up this series of lectures by reflecting further on some of the themes that we have touched on in our five lectures to date. Let me also say that I have been planning next year’s lectures, and think you may quite like what I have in mind – I’ll tell you more about that when we next meet. Ladies and gentlemen, thank you so much for listening!

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