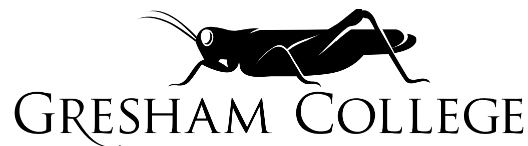

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If Humans Are So Great, Why is the World Such a Mess?

Professor Alister McGrath

If human beings are so wonderful, why is the world such a mess? Why do we use wonderful things for such nasty purposes? These are hardly new questions. They bubble up, time and time again – especially when events challenge our easy-going assumptions about the future of the world and ourselves. During the "Roaring Twenties", most Americans were happy to buy into the genial optimism of the age. Like the stock market, the world seemed to be heading upwards. Then the bubble burst. The Wall Street crash triggered a financial crisis in Germany, which gave Adolf Hitler the political impetus he needed to get elected. By 1934, Germany had turned Nazi. The unwelcome and unexpected rise of Fascism triggered unease in many quarters. Perhaps most importantly, it led to a re-examination of some complacent settled assumptions about human goodness and rationality.

That's the general question I want to consider in this lecture. Now perhaps some of you would worry about this preoccupation with our own situation and significance. Isn't this really a form of narcissism, which needs to be challenged and corrected? Surely we should be looking outward at the world and its many problems that need sorting out, rather than indulging in this kind of navel-gazing? I think that this is a fair point. But what if critical reflection led us to grasp and embrace some hard truths about ourselves, which force us to give up on any delusions of grandeur and face up to ourselves as we really are?

The great English essayist William Hazlitt (1778-1830) wrote some words that I find both witty and disturbing. "Man is the only animal that laughs and weeps; for he is the only animal that is struck with the difference between what things are and what they ought to be." It's a great quote, and one that I hope to explore with you this afternoon. We seem to have an inbuilt realization that things are not what they ought to be. We feel the pain of the tension between what we observe and that for which we hope. Why is there so much wrong with the world?

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

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

the temptations and privileges of power that it mostly proves incapable of resisting the shadowy side of this poisoned chalice.

Yet this idea of power corrupting innocent, well-meaning people is only one way of looking at this matter. There is an ancient Anglo-Saxon proverb, preserved in a collection in Durham Cathedral, which offers a more disturbing way of considering the influence of power on human nature. A very literal translation of this proverb would be: “Man does as he is when he can do 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. I see this point in a famous quote from Abraham Lincoln, which many of you will recognize:

> “If you want to test a man's character, give him power.”

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. We might long to be good; we often seem to end up, however, in a very different place.

This is why Hazlitt’s words, quoted at the beginning of this lecture, merit careful engagement. How can we make sense of the vast gulf between “what things are and what they ought to be?” Human history is littered with bright hopes and dismal failures; with technological inventions that could have ended war and suffering, yet which seem to end up being used to promote them; with dreams that turn to nightmares. How are we to make sense of this enigma? What is it about human nature that seems to destroy paradise? What ‘big picture’ of human nature helps us make sense of the worrying patterns of history?

Many of you will know the works of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, who rose to fame as one of the great dissidents of the Soviet Union, calling into question both its past and present. The Gulag Archipelago is perhaps one of his finest works, with its exposé of a system of forced labour, exile, and oppression. Now you might expect Solzhenitsyn to see the problem as lying in Marxist-Leninist ideology, or perhaps in the Soviet Communist Party. Yet while Solzhenitsyn doubtless saw these as contributing to the problem, he saw the real issue as lying in the hidden depth of human nature. Listen to these words, taken from a lecture which he later gave at Harvard University:

If only it were all so simple! If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being. And who is willing to destroy a piece of his own heart?

During their Grand Tour of Europe in 1765-6, the great English man of letters Samuel Johnson and his biographer James Boswell met the Italian playwright Giuseppe Baretti. During their conversations, Baretti rubbished the idea of the fundamental goodness of humanity with a well-judged one-liner: “l hate mankind, for I think myself one of the best of them, and I know how bad I am.”

It was a witty remark, spoken largely in jest, and it was greatly appreciated by Boswell – perhaps because it went against the prevailing platitudes of the “Age of Reason”, which took an elevated view of human rational and moral capacity. It was an age of boundless optimism, driven by a sense of the irresistible advance of rational creatures to ever greater heights and achievements. Yet it has all gone wrong. Perhaps western thinkers were lulled into a false sense of security by the virtual absence of global conflict during the period 1815 – 1914, and prematurely concluded that human violence and barbarity were a thing of the past, abolished by the rise of science and rational thinking. Yet as the global explosion of war and destruction in the twentieth century made

uncomfortably clear, the volcano of human violence had merely become temporarily dormant, not permanently extinct.

So how can we cope with this darker side of humanity? Now you may want to disagree with me here, but it seems to me that any idea of the universal intrinsic goodness of humanity is very difficult to defend. I think you can do this in five ways, none of which I find very persuasive.

1. By denying there is a problem at all. Any suggestion that there is a flaw or defect in humanity is dismissed as irrational gibberish. So we sanitize our language to persuade ourselves that our flaws and failings are actually virtues and strengths. It is a classic way of hiding from truth (and from ourselves) through the recalibration of words, designed to sustain an illusion rather than help us come to terms with reality.
2. By ignoring history, or presenting its narrative in such a selective way that disconfirming evidence is simply airbrushed out of the picture, in much the same way as disgraced Soviet leaders of the 1920s used to be replaced with potted plants in doctored photographs of this bizarre age.
3. By equating "being good" with "being human". This sleight of the mind means that human beings are good *by definition*, so that no refutation or contradiction of this unevidenced assertion is possible. This outrageous category violation simply locks us into a morally complacent self-congratulatory world, in which we are applauded for what we are, rather than challenged to become what we *ought* to be, or *might* become.
4. By declaring that "good" and "evil" are simply social constructions without any basis in an objective reality. Whether we are deemed to be good or bad thus depends on the prejudices and precommitments of those who are judging, not the qualities of those who are being judged. As a result, "good" and "evil" are seen as little more than the crystallized prejudices of those who seek to direct opinion, not valid statements about the real world with any diagnostic capacity.
5. By declaring that humanity can be separated into two categories: good and evil people. The latter are responsible for the evils of this world, whereas the former embody the fundamental goodness of humanity which is so conspicuously absent from the latter. This neat binary solution contains within itself an ethical imperative: since evil can be located within a specific group of human beings, any viable attempt to safeguard human goodness entails that those who are evil must be shunned, isolated, or destroyed.

It seems to me that history and our present experience alike point to human beings having a capacity for doing some good, even inspiring, things, matched by what appears to be an equally great capacity for messing things up and getting things wrong, which often – but happily not invariably – leads to evil and the infliction of pain.

The awkward truth about human beings is that they are perfectly capable of taking good things and doing some thoroughly nasty things with them. Science and religion can both go seriously wrong. It's easy for ideologues on every side to seize on their failures, unburdened by complicating facts, and depict these as disclosing universal truths. Yes, both science and religion can go wrong – *badly* wrong. But that doesn't mean that either of them is bad. It just shows that they are both thoroughly human undertakings.

Perhaps the problem goes even deeper than this. Many seem reluctant to recognize that human beings can *willingly* do evil. The charming but utterly naïve belief that we "needs must love the highest when we see it" (Tennyson) fails to do justice to the complexity and mixed motivations of human beings. We are all capable of doing – and being – good and evil. There may be some variation in the extent of this capacity; yet most of us are honest enough to recognize this tension within us, which pulls us in different directions.

Our problem is that we seem to lack a vocabulary adequate to describe this complexity within human nature. This is the disturbing enigma that any defensible and viable account of human nature must acknowledge and engage. Evil is not located in the "other" – in someone or something else. It is a living presence, whether dormant or active, within each of us. Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's experiences in the Soviet labour camps led him to realize that the "line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being". Evil is not something

that can be conveniently located in the "other" – someone or something else that contaminates us. Its roots lie deep within us.

Now clearly this is an important idea. It's so easy to argue that everyone else is the problem. Solzhenitsyn wants us to stop pointing our fingers at someone else, and realize that we might be part of the problem as well. I'm sure that many of you share my experience of being forced to read books at school, and as a result never really liking them very much! Well, I was forced to read "Lord of the Flies" by William Golding. Happily, I now appreciate it more! But those of you who have read it will know the point I am going to make. It focusses on a group of British schoolboys who are stranded on an isolated island in a remote region of the Pacific Ocean as a result of an aeroplane crash. Everything goes wrong. Civilization turns out only to be a superficial matter, quickly giving way to deeper and darker instincts. You'll need to read the book itself to get a better sense of Golding's ideas. It has become a classic exploration of how our darker sides, normally suppressed by social conventions and norms, can quickly re-emerge when these constraints are withdrawn.

Let me take to you one of the most interesting works of the Renaissance – Giovanni Pico della Mirandola's *Oration on the Dignity of Humanity* (1486), often lauded as a brilliant summary of the core vision of the Renaissance. Pico delivered this flamboyant oration at the age of 24. Often dubbed the "Manifesto of the Renaissance," it was written in a highly polished and elegant Latin style, affirming a traditional Christian doctrine of creation of humanity, yet accentuates one of its core elements – the creativity of humanity. Humanity's position within the created order is not fixed, but is determined by what individual human beings choose to enact.

Pico argues that God created the great "Chain of Being", in which every creature was allocated a specific place. Following Augustine of Hippo, Pico suggests that God, having created such a beautiful and complex universe, longed for someone who might take delight in its beauty, and be impressed by its grandeur of scale. God thus created humanity. Yet every place in the great "Chain of Being" – from angels to worms – was already allocated. There was no missing link, no gap into which humanity might be inserted. God therefore made the decision to allow human beings to *determine their own place within the created order.*

Humanity was thus created by God as a "creature of indeterminate image", with the capacity and permission to determine its own place in the greater order of things. For Pico, humanity has been endowed with the active capacity to determine its own identity, rather than being obliged to receive this passively in any given or predetermined fixed form. The oration emphasises the pre-eminence and unique potentialities of human beings, which mark out the human species as unique on earth. Pico expresses this idea in what I think you will agree is a somewhat free rewriting of the second creation account of the book of Genesis, in which he portrays God as addressing Adam in the following way:

> *We have given you, Adam, neither a fixed dwelling place, nor a form that is yours alone, nor any function that is peculiar to you alone. This is so that you may have and possess whatever dwelling place, form, and functions that you yourself may desire, according to your longing and judgment. The nature of all other beings is limited and constrained within the bounds of laws prescribed by us. You are constrained by no limits, and shall determine the limits of your nature for yourself, in accordance with your own free will, in whose hand we have placed you.*
>
> *It is thus the God-given privilege and responsibility of humanity to determine its own place and function within the "Great Chain of Being", through the proper exercise of its freedom and intelligence. Human beings can thus choose to act as an animal, by following their lower instincts; alternatively, they can function as angels, by acting according to their higher instincts.*

Why is Pico's approach so interesting? The stand-out point of his vision of humanity is that we have the capacity to determine what we are (or what we might become). But if he is right, there is a dark side to our humanity. What happens if someone else chooses that identity for us, imposing their decisions upon us? G. K. Chesterton put his finger on this point: "When once one begins to think of man as a shifting and alterable thing, it is always easy for the strong and crafty to twist him into new shapes for all kinds of unnatural purposes." If human nature

is malleable, the powerful will merely reshape it to serve their own interests – as in the "hatcheries and conditioning centres" of Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932).

Rowan Williams once remarked that there is "inbuilt into human beings a sort of dangerous taste for unreality." We prefer make-believe worlds in which everything is sweetness and light – apart, of course, from the worlds of those we dismiss as out-groups, who are invariably deluded, evil, and stupid, locked into primitive affective states that ought to be relegated to where they belong – an earlier stage in hominid evolution. We devise worldviews that are designed to reinforce our own importance, and denigrate that of those we despise. And so we find ourselves to be willing prisoners by our self-serving myths that do nothing to advance knowledge or understanding.

I think one of the most interesting reflections on these themes is to be found in the philosopher John Gray's *Straw Dogs* (2002) was an iconoclastic book, caustically debunking the pretensions of the kind of bland humanist philosophy you find circulating with the Zinfandel at metropolitan dinner parties. For Gray, "humans cannot live without illusion" – such as a blind faith in progress, or the goodness of human nature. Secular humanists may like to delude themselves that they have a rational view of the world; yet Gray argues that their core belief in moral progress is a "superstition", which is arguably further from the truth about the human animal than any of the world's religions. Progress in science and technology is subservient to selfish and corrupting human agendas, and does not inevitably lead to social and political progress. "Without the railways, telegraph and poison gas, there could have been no Holocaust." Where Richard Dawkins dismissed religion as *the* defining human delusion, Gray sees religion as one such delusion among many others.

In place of such illusions, Gray offered a ruthlessly Darwinian account of human nature, which discards such cherished notions as that of progress as a pre-Darwinian myth. "Humans can no more be masters of their destiny than any other animal". We have to realize that grandiose social experiments to remake our world are destined to fail, precisely because they are developed by human beings, and depend on delusion-prone humans to trust and implement them. We must learn to live without the consolation of religion, of scientific explanation, or any dream of a perfect society. After all, human beings didn't evolve so that they could find truth or meaning in life. They evolved to reproduce.

Many humanists will dismiss Gray's view that "humans are weapon-making animals with an unquenchable fondness for killing." Yet this is an evidenced claim that cannot be dismissed because we don't like it. It may be an overstatement. But I would rather have an overstatement of an uncomfortable truth than a blind refusal to engage with the substantial body of historical evidence that points to this inconvenient insight. Gray's suggestion that "death camps are as modern as laser surgery" may need some nuancing, but there is sufficient truth in his argument to challenge the delusions of even the most incorrigible rationalist. Gray has clearly taken to heart the historian R. G. Collingwood's famous remark of 1939: "The chief business of twentieth-century philosophy is to reckon with twentieth-century history."

So what might religion have to say about this? I've already looked at a range of approaches, raising lots of interesting questions. But I think it is time to ask what contribution a religious perspective might make. As you might expect, this means exploring the idea of sin.

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

Now if the word "sin" didn't exist, I think we would probably need to invent it. But it's already there, precisely because earlier generations recognized the problem, and knew that the first step in dealing with this problem was

to name it. In and through its concept of sin, Christian theology gives us a critical lens through which to view the complex motivations and mixed agendas of human beings. We bear God's image, yet we are sinful. We are capable of good, just as we are capable of evil. If the "image of God" affirms our need to reach upwards – to grasp and be grasped by the love of God – the notion of sin affirms a darker reality, namely our tendency to be drawn and dragged down.

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

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

And I am sure that you are all as disturbed and perplexed as I am about the scandal of Oxfam and other humanitarian agencies at work in disaster zones, such as Haiti. The idea of exploiting such vulnerable people sexually left me deeply troubled. Why did they do this sort of thing?

Yet as the theologian Reinhold Niebuhr so prophetically remarked, the flaws in human institutions ultimately arise from corresponding flaws in human nature itself. The "cancer" lay not only in the "system", but in its constituent human beings. This was one of the reasons why Niebuhr came to develop such a respect for the American constitutional system, with its checks and balances, and its genius for recognizing the inevitable conflicts that would arise within society, demanding workable means of preventing the excessive localization of power.

We cannot allow the delusion of a fundamental and incorrigible human goodness to shape such important issues as social policies or ethical thinking. The empirical realities of life demand that we realize that there is something wrong with us, and force us both to confront this awkward truth, and figure out how to minimize its impact. The Christian tradition offers what it regards as a totally realistic account of human nature, which is dismissed as "pessimistic" only by those who close their eyes to what is happening in the world.

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

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

Perhaps more importantly, the notion of the "image of God" expresses the notion that human beings are drawn upwards, avoiding collapsing into the material order from which they emerged. We thus find ourselves excited and inspired by the vision of God, which draws us upwards; at the same time, we find ourselves pulled down by the frailty and fallenness of human nature.

Let me turn to a writer who I think is very interesting – the philosopher Iris Murdoch. Murdoch was not religious, but clearly saw the importance of theological ideas such as sin in building up a trustworthy account of human nature. Murdoch argued that humanity is characterised by its tendency to deceive itself. We are imprisoned within a cocoon of our own making, which makes us blind to the way things really are – above all, the way we really are. Moral philosophy is called on to challenge our radical tendency towards self-deception. Murdoch argues that the reality of the world and our own moral reality lie hidden from us, until we are compelled to see it properly.

> "By opening our eyes, we do not necessarily see what confronts us. . . . Our minds are continually active, fabricating an anxious, usually self-preoccupied, often falsifying veil which partially conceals the world."

We do not naturally see ourselves as we really are. The ability to discern the truth about ourselves is an acquired habit, something that we need to develop over time. It is "a task to come to see the world as it is." Seeing things as they really are, penetrating beneath the surface of appearances, is thus both the goal and the outcome of the cultivation of perceptual attentiveness. Murdoch thus holds that "objectivity and unselfishness are not natural to human beings," and notes that the Christian notion of sin offers both a vocabulary and an intellectual framework for engaging this disturbing human trait.

So how is this human self-deception to be confronted? And how can it be overcome? Murdoch's core argument is that this enslaving spell of self-preoccupation and self-deception needs to be broken. So far, so good. But how? Murdoch's answer is that art and literature are the main ways through which this liberation may be achieved. Both literature and art appeal to a "liberated truth-seeking creative imagination," which sought to discern and embrace "what is true and deep." Art leads us towards "a juster, clearer, more detailed, more refined understanding of human nature, or of the natural world which crowds upon our senses."

Art thus shows us that there is a veil placed over our gaze on the natural world and ourselves, and helps us to remove it. For Murdoch, great art shows us "the world as we were never able so clearly to see it before," allowing us a heightened perception and clearer vision of reality, and thus enabling us to engage it more justly. "Virtue is the attempt to pierce the veil of selfish consciousness and join the world as it really is." Murdoch's assessment of the human situation is thus that it is characterised by a habit of self-deception, which can be broken by the imaginative or moral power of great art, which allows us to see ourselves from outside our self-created webs of meaning.

Murdoch raises important questions about human nature, especially our disturbing tendency to deceive ourselves – perhaps most obvious in the lazy and complacent contemporary cultural assumption of the fundamental goodness of humanity. There are obvious questions to be explored here. Can we really escape from a delusional view of reality by ourselves? Or do we need help? For example, the Christian doctrine of grace serves both as an affirmation of the goodness and kindness of God on the one hand, and the incapacity of humanity to detach itself from a self-created world of deceptions on the other.

So is Murdoch right about the capacity of art and literature to liberate us from ourselves? I'm not sure. Let me tell you why. Many of those who were responsible for establishing and operating the Nazi extermination camps were remarkably cultured people. This prompted George Steiner's famous observation that someone could read great poetry or play great music in the evening, and then take part in mass murder on an industrial scale the next day. "We know that a man can read Goethe or Rilke in the evening, that he can play Bach and Schubert, and go to his day's work at Auschwitz in the morning."

While I personally doubt if many of those running these death camps read Rilke or Goethe, or were even capable of playing Bach or Schubert, Steiner's point remains important. German poetry and music – emblematic of one of Europe's most sophisticated and humane cultures – ultimately failed to humanize. Or we might think of the infamous Wannsee Conference of January 1942, which did so much to prepare the way for the extermination of the Jews at camps like Auschwitz. The majority of those present at that meeting were highly educated, with doctorates or medical qualifications from German universities. Once more, education does not seem to have had its intended outcome – making us better people.

Yet here is one of the problems that Christianity addresses. Is realizing that we are in a mess enough to change us? It's a good start, I'm sure. Recognizing that we have a problem can be the start of a process of change, in which we try to make ourselves better people. I remember well reading lots of books published shortly after the end of the First World War. They didn't call it that, of course. For them, it was the "Great War". Those books I mentioned were full of reflections on the horror of that war. We must learn from this! We mustn't let this sort of thing happen again! Yet twenty years later, another Great War began, ushering in a new era of destruction and devastation.

It was all too much for the philosopher Bertrand Russell, who came to the view that human rationality was a noble aspiration that unfortunately lagged far behind the reality disclosed by the harsh realities of observation. Writing in the midst of the Second World War, Russell found himself overwhelmed with what seemed to be incorrigible evidence of human irrationality, which made him despair about the human future. Listen to these words:

> "Man is a rational animal – so at least I have been told. Throughout a long life, I have looked diligently for evidence in favour of this statement, but so far I have not had the good fortune to come across it."

The subsequent emergence of what we have come to call "Cold War rationality" in the late 1950s, based on algorithms of "mutually assured destruction," only seemed to confirm Russell's dark anxieties. Happily, that seems to be behind us now – at least for the time being.

Maybe it's not surprising that Christianity uses medical images to deal with the human problem. If you are told that you are on the wrong road to get from London to Oxford, you change roads. But what if you are told that you have sepsis, and might die from this infection? Knowing that we have this problem doesn't solve it. We need drugs to treat the condition. A doctor's diagnosis tells us what is wrong with us, but it many cases it needs to be supplemented with therapy. If we have sepsis, we need antibiotics. Christianity talks about "salvation", which it regards as analogous to healing. It's about the transformation of our condition.

I'm sure that many of you will know a passage in one of St Paul's letters in the New Testament, in which he reflects on his own difficulties. He knows what he ought to be doing; but he does something else. He knows what he shouldn't do – but ends up doing it. Listen to his words, rather than my rather dull summary of them: "I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do" (Romans 7:18-19). Somehow, we seem to fall short of what we know to be the good and the right.

It's a Christian insight, but one that is widely echoed. Many of you will know the famous line from Ovid's Metamorphoses: video meliora proboque deteriora sequor ("I see and approve of the better, but I follow the worse").[1]

This way of thinking allows us to frame the complex picture we see of human culture and history, characterised by aspirations to greatness and goodness on the one hand, and oppression and violence on the other. As a species, humanity may indeed have the capacity for good; this seems matched, however, by a capacity for evil. A recognition of this profound ambiguity is essential if we are to avoid political and social utopianism, based on naïve, ideologically driven, non-empirical value-judgements about human nature. As J. R. R. Tolkien wrote so

[1] Metamorphoses VII. 20–21

presciently in 1931, on the eve of the rise of Nazism, a naïve view of humanity leads to political utopianism, in which "progress" potentially leads to catastrophe.

> *I will not walk with your progressive ages,*
> *Erect and sapient. Before them gapes*
> *the dark abyss to which their progress tends.*

Nobody yet knew of the depths of depravity and cruelty that would be created by the rise of Nazism and Stalinism in the 1930s. Yet Tolkien rightly and perceptively saw something that most Enlightenment writers failed to see – that everything rests on the moral character of human beings. Technological developments can be used to cure or to kill. Sadly, the choice is made by human beings, and the choices we make can sometimes be disastrous. We need to be realistic about ourselves!

And part of that task of being realistic about ourselves is to try and figure out how we fit into this vast universe, of which we are such a small part. In my next lecture on 27 March, we will begin to think about this fascinating topic.

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