

What Does it Mean to be Human?

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[Are You Worth More than a Pig?](#)

Hello, everybody. Thank you once more for coming to this talk this afternoon. I've been given the topic, *What does it mean to be human?* and of course I thank the organisers of these sessions for setting me that particular topic.

I can't help feeling, though, that the proverbial man from Mars might be a little bit nonplussed if he were to come here and see us discussing such a subject. He might well say, 'But aren't you all human—surely you know what it means to be human? You don't need anybody to come and tell you what it means to be human; you know it yourself.'

I think therefore, in defence, we should have to say to our proverbial Martian man, 'Yes, we are all human, but nowadays human beings hold very different views about what it means to be human, and particularly about the fundamental question—*what is the intrinsic essential value of a human life?*'

Nowadays you can hear views at all kinds of extremes. There is the traditional view, held by Jews and Christians and, to some extent, by Muslims. For all I know, some of you may have been brought up under the traditional view that human beings are the creation of God Almighty and made in his image. It is, therefore, possible for us to have spiritual and moral fellowship with our Creator and, in some sense, to be his viceroy for the administration of earth. Therefore, it is an offence against almighty God to take the innocent life of one of God's creatures made in his image. That's one extreme.

At the other extreme, a professor of bioethics has recently said that a human baby, for at least five years, is worth no more than a pig, and perhaps not so much. Two extremes of evaluation.

In the discussion [later](#), I want to suggest to you that there are certain things we should ask when we consider what it means to be human. Now, in all fairness to you, I warn you that I myself am a Christian, so you must look out for all my prejudices and biases.

Four questions

1. Where do we come from?

None of us invented ourselves—we didn't make ourselves, we didn't create ourselves. To what ultimately then do we owe our existence—*who or what brought us here?*

2. What are we?

Are we a rather sophisticated form of matter, but nothing more than matter? Sophisticated machines, if you like, but only matter; or do we have a nonmaterial part to us? What does it mean to be human—*what are we exactly?*

3. Why are we here?

Was it blind chance working on mindless forces that brought us here and for no particular purpose at all? Are we just the products of blind chance that invented us and produced us? Is there any ultimate purpose in particular—*what or who brought us here, and what for?*

4. What is the meaning of human life?

Not just our individual lives, of course. We are part of the human race. What is the meaning, the significance, of the human race on our earth, and indeed in the universe at large? But it surely applies to our own individual lives: is there any ultimate meaning?

I know our studies and our careers can be meaningful, a round of golf could be meaningful, or even tiddlywinks—but is there any ultimate meaning to the whole phenomenon of my existence here on this planet? After all, life is a journey. That's an old adage, but it is true, isn't it? We grow up from babyhood to womanhood and manhood, with all its interesting experiences, then we get old and ask the ultimate question, what was the meaning of it all?

Is there an ultimate meaning, or does our individual life fizzle out in dust and ashes with no particular significance at all—*is it ultimately futile?*

Two worldviews

I suggest that our answers to those questions will depend a great deal on our worldview, and ultimately there are really just two worldviews. Many permutations between them of course, but ultimately two worldviews that we will discuss this afternoon.

1. *The atheistic worldview*, or, if you like, atheistic materialism. The worldview that there is no God and man is just so much matter and nothing more. He is but a temporary phenomenon in this temporary world.

2. *The theistic worldview*. That worldview says there is a God and a Creator. God is spirit and has given to men and women, his creatures, a *nonmaterial* element. Call it *soul* or *spirit*, as you will.

Two views then on what man is. As we shall now see, those different views have wide-ranging implications for the meaning of life and what it means to be human.

The atheistic worldview

Professor William B Provine says:

The implications of modern science, however, are clearly inconsistent with most religious traditions.

Now let's mark the next sentence: 'No purposive principles exist in nature.' This implies, of course, that there's *no purpose* behind our lives in this world.

Organic evolution has occurred by various combinations of random genetic drift, natural selection, Mendelian heredity.

Now notice, here comes the same adjective: 'and many other purposeless mechanisms.' There is no purpose behind us. He continues:

Humans are complex organic machines [they're not personal] that die completely with no survival of soul or psyche.

Then he adds:

No inherent moral or ethical laws exist, nor are there absolute guiding principles for human society. The universe cares nothing for us and we have no ultimate meaning in life.¹

I hasten to add that not all atheists hold to those implications of atheism, but I have to say they sound to me exceedingly pessimistic. We are the product of mindless forces working on non-rational matter that have produced us, and don't know they have produced us. They never had any purpose in mind anyway; we are but machines, and death ends everything.

In the first edition of *Professor Peter Singer's* book *Practical Ethics*, he told us that the life of a new born baby is of less value than the life of a pig, a dog or a chimpanzee. And from that he drew the conclusion that a period of twenty-eight days after birth should be allowed before an infant is accepted as having the same right to live as others. So that, for example, infants born with debilitating defects could rightly be killed.

That again would be regarded by many atheists as an extreme view, and Peter Singer himself seems to have revised his view a little bit in the second edition of *Practical Ethics*. There he says:

For on any fair comparison of morally relevant characteristics, like rationality, self-consciousness, awareness, autonomy, pleasure and pain, and so on, the calf, the pig and the much derided chicken come out well ahead of the foetus at any stage of pregnancy.²

Presumably that means even in the few hours before the baby is actually born. Now of course Peter Singer is an evolutionist and therefore he holds that human beings and animals are simply different buds on the same twig of the evolutionary tree. Therefore, you should measure the inherent value of a human being not by the fact that it is a human being made in the image of God (which Professor Singer doesn't believe anyway), but that you should assess its value and right to life by these considerations that he calls *moral considerations*. And, as far

¹ 'Scientists, Face it! Science and Religion are Incompatible' *The Scientist* (5 Sept. 1988), 10.

² p. 151.

as his moral considerations go, a human baby about to be born is of less significance, less value, than the calf, the pig and the much-derided chicken.

So let us now take a view from the past: *Sir Bertrand Russell*. His voice might seem to you to come from a distant age, but when I was a student he was very much alive. His view is,

That Man is the product of causes which had no prevision of the end they were achieving.³

Those forces are mindless, of course; they're not aware of anything. They had no prevision of what they were producing. They had no purpose in it and, when they produced it, they didn't even know they had.

His origin, his growth, his hopes and fears, his loves and his beliefs, are but the outcome of accidental collocations of atoms.⁴

Gatherings of atoms, if you like. Man's existence, but not only his existence — 'his hopes, his fears, his loves, and his beliefs, are but the outcome of accidental collocations of atoms.' One is tempted to pause and, if he were alive, to ask him, 'But, sir, if you are true, the sentiments you are now expressing are the result of accidental collocations of atoms, aren't they? So why should we take any notice of them?'

no fire, no heroism, no intensity of thought and feeling, can preserve an individual life beyond the grave; that all the labours of the ages, all the devotion, all the inspiration, all the noonday brightness of human genius, are destined to extinction in the vast death of the solar system, and that the whole temple of Man's achievement must inevitably be buried beneath the debris of a universe in ruins.⁵

It is true that the Bible itself has been saying for a long time that our world and the heavens around it will one day be destroyed; but more recently the cosmologists have told us that it must inevitably be so. If we are merely part of the universe, as Bertrand Russell is saying, then not only we individually but all the achievements of the human race will one day disappear in the debris of a universe in ruins, and the only comment will be, 'So, what was all that about?' Apparently, nothing in particular! He urges then at the end of his passage:

Only within the scaffolding of these truths [as he calls them], only on the firm foundation of unyielding despair, can the soul's habitation henceforth be safely built.⁶

I think it is fair to say, even given my prejudice as a Christian, that this is a woefully pessimistic view, both of humanity as a whole and of the individual.

³ 'A Free Man's Worship' (first published Dec. 1903). See Volume 12 of *The Collected Papers of Bertrand Russell*, entitled *Contemplation and Action, 1902-14* (London, 1985; now published by Routledge).

⁴ 'A Free Man's Worship'.

⁵ 'A Free Man's Worship'.

⁶ 'A Free Man's Worship'.

Much loved by the BBC, of course, *Professor Richard Dawkins's* view is that we humans are the product of *selfish genes* and nothing more than selfish genes. They are selfish, he tells us, because these genes that have made us are not interested in anything other than propagating themselves.

In his phrase 'selfish genes', we notice that the word selfish is a metaphor, because he holds that genes are just plain *matter* and nothing else. How can 'matter' be selfish? I don't know whether you distinguish in your garden between selfish matter and unselfish matter; the concept is a little difficult. Selfish genes, then, are not interested in producing you, madam, or you, sir. They are merely interested in propagating themselves as genes, and you happen to be a good factory for producing genes.

It's like saying that acorns are selfish acorns and the oak tree is merely a means that acorns employ for propagating acorns. Anybody who likes oak trees and admires them will find difficulty in that concept as well.

But then, Professor Dawkins has a sense of morality. So he tells us that, while our genes are selfish, we should, and can, rebel against our selfish genes. But that too is a very difficult concept. If we are nothing but genes, what is there in us that could rebel against the aforesaid genes?

Professor Steven Rose of the Open University, himself an atheistic evolutionist, gently criticised Dawkins on that very count. If we're nothing but genes, what is there left to rebel against the genes? And if the genes make us do very bad things, what grounds have we for protest if we are nothing but genes? The implications therefore of the atheistic view can be pessimistic in the extreme, proclaiming life to be an unpurposed accident of mindless matter and non-rational forces.

What can we know about ourselves?

You see, scientists can theorise about us. They can put us under their microscopes, analyse our chemistry, put us in the machines that go 'dot, dot, dot', examine our hearts, brains and all else, and tell us things that we didn't know about ourselves that are very valuable to know.

On the other hand, we do have a certain advantage over the theoretical scientist, because we are human. They talk about human life; we live it. As the philosophers would say, we are the subject of our lives and, because we are the subjects that do the living, we know certain things intuitively about ourselves. It's worth listening to that intuition and to what we know about ourselves.

I'm going to suggest some of the things that we know.

We are personal

We are persons and personal, as distinct from matter that is not personal. I suggest, if my experience matches yours at all, that you feel yourself superior to impersonal matter, because you are personal.

You see, it is not altogether swelled-headedness on my part that I think that I am more significant than the sun up in the sky. My little brain is very small, the sun is very large and very important to our survival, giving us warmth and heat. But, when all is said and done,

the sun is impersonal matter—it is so much gas. It doesn't know I'm here; I know it's there. It doesn't know how I work; with the help of the scientists, I have an idea how I work.

We know ourselves to be personal. Doesn't that hold implications, for a great deal of our universe around us is mere matter? That insight that, being persons, we are superior to mere matter is a thing we should hold on to. Attempts have been made to tell us that our brains are mere machines, made up of electrochemical reactions.

Let's look at what *Professor John Polkinghorne* says about what he calls *reductionism*. Our brains are made of matter, but the reductionist will say that they are *nothing more* than matter. Take a wedding ring. If I were to try to convince you that the wedding ring, being gold or platinum, is therefore just a bit of matter, you would say, 'You ignorant man! Of course, in one sense, it is just matter, but it has added significance because—' and you would perhaps go rapturous about its significance.

Reductionism says that our brains are matter; nothing more than matter. In the following passage Polkinghorne disputes it.

Thought is replaced by electrochemical neural events. Two such events cannot confront each other in rational discourse. They are neither right nor wrong. They simply happen. If our mental life is nothing but the humming activity of an immensely complexly-connected computer-like brain, who is to say whether the programme running on the intricate machine is correct or not? . . . The very assertions of the reductionist himself are nothing but blips in the neural network of his brain. The world of rational discourse dissolves into the absurd chatter of firing synapses. Quite frankly, that cannot be right and none of us believes it is.⁷

We are transcendent

That is, we can think not only about ourselves but we can think about other people; we can think about the world at large; we can think about the question, 'What happened before our world began?' We can transcend its past in our thoughts. We can transcend the future, of course: 'What's going to happen after we are dead? What will happen after the universe ceases to exist?' And because of that ability, we necessarily ask where we've come from and where we are going to.

Professor J. S. Medawar says:

Only human beings guide their behaviour by a knowledge of what happened before they were born and a preconception of what may happen after they are dead: thus only human beings find their way by a light that illuminates more than the patch of ground they stand on.⁸

It's not a weakness of our nervous system that, as life advances, we come to think about life's end and what lies beyond, and that gets wrapped up with the whole question of the meaning of life. Not the meaning of individual parts of life, but the life of mankind as a whole: our own

⁷ *One World: the interaction of science and theology* (London: SPCK, 1986), 92–3.

⁸ P. B. Medawar and J. S. Medawar, *The Life Science* (London: Wildwood House, 1977), 171, as quoted by Karl Popper and John C. Eccles in *The Self and Its Brain: An Argument for Interactionism*, 1977; repr., Springer Berlin Heidelberg, 2012, vi.

individual lives and the life of the planet on which we live. Is it in the end, as Bertrand Russell thought, nothing but the ashes in the midst of the debris of a universe?

We are rational

We are aware that we have a certain amount of rationality anyway. The significance in being rational, and not just personal, is that we can penetrate the laws of the universe in which we are living and understand how it works. The vast advances made by our scientists in recent decades is a magnificent thing. It is a marvellous display and use of human rationality. What is its significance, if anything?

Professor Paul Davies is not a Christian, of course. I say 'of course' simply because of what he says constantly about himself. He is an atheist; he doesn't believe in God. He says in some places that he doesn't like the idea of God, but he holds that the universe is rational all the way down to the point of metaphysics. In everyday language this means that Professor Davies, in thinking about the universe and how it began, is not prepared to accept the idea that somehow there was a mindless big bang. He says that won't do. Even before the universe began, there was a rationality there that invented its laws. The universe is rational all the way down.

Let me read what he says in his book, *The Mind of God*.⁹ As he doesn't believe in God, it was meant to be a provocative title.

The central theme that I have explored in this book is that through science, we human beings are able to grasp at least some of nature's secrets. We have cracked part of the cosmic code. Why this should be, just why *Homo sapiens* should carry the spark of rationality that provides the key to the universe, is a deep enigma. We, who are children of the universe, animated stardust, can nevertheless reflect on the nature of that same universe even to the extent of glimpsing the rules on which it runs. What does it mean? What is man that we might be a party to such privilege? I cannot believe that our existence in this universe is a mere quirk of fate, an accident of history, an incidental blip in the great cosmic drama. Our involvement is too intimate. Through conscious beings the universe has generated self-awareness. This can be no trivial detail, no minor by-product of mindless, purposeless forces. We are truly meant to be here.

That's Paul Davies, the atheist. When asked what he thinks has brought our universe about, he doesn't like the idea of God; he says that it must have been some very clever mathematical formulae.

Some days I wish that were true, because then I could write down a mathematical formula on a piece of paper: $£2,000 \times 100 = £200,000$. Then I could go down to the bank and say, 'According to this mathematical formula there should be £200,000 in my account.'

The manager says, 'Well, did you put it there?'

'No.'

'What put it there then?'

⁹ *The Mind of God: The Scientific Basis for a Rational World* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1993), 232.

'This mathematical formula put it there.'

I don't think I should manage to convince my bank manager!

'We are truly meant to be here,' says Paul Davies.

We are moral

We have a moral sense; even the growing infant has it. The infant will protest at something, 'That's not fair.' Why the infant should expect the universe to be fair, who knows.

The Bible says that God has put moral laws into our very hearts. There are some things that we know, and some we cannot now know. Moral principles, such as it is wrong to torture and kill innocent human life, for instance, and a good many other things.

What happens in the end, we finally ask, if mindless forces obliterate us, leaving all the moral questions hanging? Would we want the sad moral state of our world to continue forever? What sane person would? But where does this sense of morality come from? As a Christian I would say again that it is not the product of mindless material forces; it is the product of our Creator.

We are *personal* and it would be illogical to think that what produced us is less personal than we are. We oughtn't to think that the Godhead is impersonal, like stone or wood, when we, the product, are personal.

We are *rational* and surely it is unlikely that reason has been produced by mindless forces accidentally.

We are *moral*, which suggests that our Creator too is moral. What hope then is there for this world? Would you want morality to be a thing that concerns us, but is not of any permanent value?

The theistic worldview

I can give you the Christian answer now, as I cease. There's going to be a final judgment, says the Christian gospel. Earth's wrongs shall be judged and put right, because our moral sense, our rationality and our personhood come from our Creator, who is just and rational and personal.

How can we be sure that life will not end in morally meaningless debris? The answer the Christian gospel will give is the one that Paul, the great Christian apostle, gave to the stoic philosophers and epicureans in Athens centuries ago.

Being then God's offspring, we ought not to think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of man. The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead. (Acts 17:29–31)

This is the heart of the Christian gospel, the value of human life and the significance of the world we live in. It will not end in a whimper. The resurrection of Christ doesn't say that after death we go off into some *insubstantial* world beyond—we go into a *spiritual* world beyond.

As well as being God incarnate, Christ was human, with a human body like ours. His resurrection, therefore, was the beginning of the restoration of all things.

It casts its light back into life. Listen to Paul talking to his converts in Corinth, 'Your labour, your work, is not in vain' (1 Cor 15:58). Why not? Because Christ has been raised from the dead, giving this life eternal significance.

Perhaps you are saying, 'What evidence is there for it? If you're going to be a Christian, do you have to accept it by sheer faith, like a leap in the dark?'

No, indeed not. The New Testament talks at great length about the historical and moral evidence for the resurrection. Time forbids me to detail it to you, but if we would know the meaning of human life, then the resurrection of Jesus Christ is one big, very relevant fact to be put into the pool of our thinking.

As I stand here, remembering my past in this university, and now at my age with life's end coming nearer, I would urge you all to seriously consider the evidence for the resurrection of Jesus Christ. It is the clue, according to the Christian gospel, to the understanding of *what it means to be human*.

Is Anything Wrong?

Well hello everybody. Thank you for coming again. The organisers of these talks have told me that I may be as provocative as I care to be! That is a relief, because it allows me to make arbitrary statements that you may wish to question. Rightly so, and later there will be a question time.

The topic today is, *Is anything wrong?* So, being provocative, I'm going to start with an unproven assumption: every one of us has a deep-seated moral awareness by which we know that certain things are wrong. We know it without it having to be proved to us by philosophical discourse. We know, for instance, that it would be wrong to take a little child and cut it to pieces for fun. There is a gruesome such episode mentioned in the Dostoyevsky novel *The Brothers Karamazov* is there not?

We know more elaborate things. We know that it would be wrong to bribe a judge to get him to pervert the course of justice and acquit the guilty and condemn the innocent. It goes on in many places of course. I'm merely saying that, according to our deep-seated moral sense, we know such a practice to be wrong.

Ethics

Given those presuppositions, I want to ask today, *what is the basis and authority of our moral sense of right and wrong?* After all, in this topic we are setting out on the question of ethics, and ethics has to do, not with telling us how people normally behave, but rather how they should behave.

Ethics is not just descriptive; it is prescriptive. It says, 'You shall jolly well do this, and you oughtn't to do that.'

But if I were to say to you, 'Look here, old fellow, you should do this. You should not be behaving in the way you are behaving,' you might well enquire, 'And who says so?'

In other words, 'What authority have you to tell me how I ought to behave?'

And if you said, 'Now look here, I have certain rights and you have a duty to respect my rights,' I should smile and say, 'Oh, yes, I'm glad to hear you have some rights—where did you get them from? And, incidentally, please tell me why I should respect your rights.'

You'd need to give me some reasons, wouldn't you, if you are imposing a duty on me? So I'd ask about the authority of our moral sense.

Are there are some things that are objectively wrong? They are not merely wrong in our subjective opinion, but they are objectively wrong. Whether we think they are or not, whether we like it or not, are any things objectively wrong?

As I confessed last week, I approach these topics as a Christian and I shall yet argue that the authority behind our moral sense is none other than God, our Creator. But you may well reply to me, 'But I don't believe in God anyway, so what am I supposed to do?'

This brings to my mind a funny little story about a university invigilator of an exam. Before the students sat down he said, 'Ladies and gentlemen, you ought to leave a space between each student, so that, as the good book says, we shall "avoid all appearance of evil".' One student put up his hand, and said, 'But I don't believe in the good book, as you call it. What shall I do?' The invigilator replied, 'You'd better put two spaces between, just in case you should be tempted!'

Various systems of ethics

The first group of ethical theories will claim that you can deduce ethics from the sheer facts of the physical universe.

That isn't a very promising suggestion, it seems to me. Let's just remind ourselves of what *Professor Richard Dawkins* says. He is very much à la mode in the present time, isn't he? In a universe of, he says,

electrons and selfish genes, . . . blind physical forces and genetic replication, some people are going to get hurt, other people are going to get lucky, and you won't find any rhyme or reason in it, nor any justice. The universe that we observe has precisely the properties we should expect if there is, at bottom, no design, no purpose, no evil, no good, nothing but pitiless indifference . . . DNA neither knows nor cares. DNA just is. And we dance to its music.¹⁰

Surely this is not a very encouraging basis for ethics—dancing according to our DNA? Were the lads in Germany and in America, who recently entered their schools and shot teachers and students dead, just dancing to their DNA? Is there no more to it than that?

Let's remind ourselves of what *Charles Darwin* said on one occasion.

The more civilised so-called Caucasian races have beaten the Turkish hollow in the struggle for existence. Looking to the world at no very distant date, what an endless number of the lower races will have been eliminated by the higher civilised races throughout the world.¹¹

Not very encouraging, I think, for the view that ethics can be deduced from nature. Hitler himself got that idea into his head. He had no doubt who was the superior race—the Aryans, and proceeded to eliminate millions who were not of his race and whom he regarded as subspecies.

But there are more serious thinkers who suggest we can deduce ethics from the facts of nature.

¹⁰ *River Out of Eden: A Darwinian View of Life* (New York: Basic Books, 1995), 132–3.

¹¹ Francis Darwin, *Life and Letters of Charles Darwin* (London: John Murray, 1887), Letter to W. Graham, 3 July 1881, 1:316.

James Rachels says it's a question of reasoning, and if we reason, then protecting ourselves is according to nature. Reasoning about what to do, therefore, is at bottom reasoning about how to satisfy our interests. He gives an example:

If you are in a room, and I come in and tell you that you ought to get out, that will seem a very arbitrary command to you. But then if I explain that the house is on fire that will give you a good enough reason to get out.

The reasoning is based on nature, so to speak, and that is sufficient reason for your action. Therefore, ethics and reasoning is about how to satisfy our interests.

Well yes, there are some things that we can deduce from nature, are there not? At least here the Bible would agree. It says that some sins that some people do are against nature: they are a perverse use of the members of a human body. Therefore, they are by definition wrong. But just to say that, if we consider our own interests, we can deduce a whole range of ethics by nature, sounds to me very superficial.

Here is a man and a wife and they have a half-a-dozen children and they're very hard up. It's in their interests to get some money somehow. Along comes a drug pusher and invites them to join in pushing drugs. That's a great temptation. He will make a lot of money; it's in the interests of his wife and children to have the money and food to feed them with. Is that sufficient reason for his pushing drugs and thereby blighting the minds of his victims? We are to consider our reasons.

Socrates held the view that you should not do wrong. Why not? Because if you do wrong to others, it hurts you yourself more than it hurts others. But that last bit he didn't get from nature; he got that from his ethical theory.

The second group of ethical theories will tell us that ethics is ultimately a matter of taste.

That sounds very odd, because taste is a somewhat arbitrary thing. If John likes beetroot and Mary likes asparagus, you can't say one is right and the other is wrong, can you?

It's no good saying, 'John, you oughtn't to like beetroot.' What reason would you give? And, 'You ought to like asparagus like Mary.' Well there's no question of ought or ought not. No question of right or wrong involved.

How could you suppose that ethics is simply a matter of taste? And yet there are a number of postmodern theories of ethics that seem to me to say the very same thing.

Jean-François Lyotard told us there are no criteria of justice and *Professor Stanley Fish* says,

It's no good raising a question of what is just or not, because people have very different ideas of what justice is anyway, so it's no good asking.

Well they tell me that values—all values, and hence ethics dependent on the values—are decided and determined by social practice. Each social group decides its own values and hence the ethics that depend upon them. They add, of course, that one social group may decide that 'this and this and this' is right, and so the social group is happy with the decision of the group. But they add that, because there are no criteria of justice, no absolutes, if you come across another society that holds absolutely different values, diametrically opposed to

yours, you mustn't say that they are wrong and you are right, or that you are wrong and they are right. Why not? Well, ultimately it's a matter of your choice.

A young gentleman came to see me not so long ago and informed me that he had been converted to this kind of postmodern philosophy, where it is your society that determines your values and your ethics and you mustn't say any other society that disagrees with you is wrong. You must be tolerant.

I said, 'But what about cannibalism?'

He said, 'Yes, by all means if that's their—I nearly said—taste,' but no, I'd better not say that!

'If that's their decision, you mustn't say it's wrong.'

Because on this assumption Hitler might say to you, 'You don't like gassing Jews? Well don't gas them then. I like gassing Jews, so why shouldn't I?'

The difficulty is of course that the view contradicts itself. It says we must be tolerant; we mustn't say other people's view are wrong. Tolerance is presumably the one absolute virtue, according to them.

Okay, but then let me mention Pol Pot of Cambodia. He had unusual tastes. He didn't like intellectuals and people who wore spectacles were liable to be intellectuals and therefore had to be eliminated. He eliminated hundreds of thousands. Would the postmodernists say he was all right—that was his taste and these things are socially determined? Will their version of tolerance say that you mustn't even condemn Pol Pot?

But if you say that, you are saying that his intolerance is okay. That is a muddle, isn't it? There are some things that are right, ladies and gentlemen, and other things that are wrong and it is not merely a matter of taste.

The third group of ethical theories is a much more serious group. It likens an ethical system to a game.

For instance, if we're going to play a game of soccer, we come together and agree on the rules. While the game is in play we all have to keep the rules, even if we think some of the rules are silly. For the sake of the game we must forgo a little bit of our own personal freedom and keep the rules.

But, of course, we can come to the conclusion that some of the rules are wrong. We can change the rules; they're not set in concrete. And we should recognise that there are other games. In soccer you mustn't handle the ball—unless you're Maradona! In rugby, of course it's okay to handle the ball. They're just two different games, that's all. If you sign up to play football you'll keep the rules, and everybody else will keep them too.

In this sense then, people argue as follows. Originally mankind was crude, lived in the forest, and fought the apes or something. Life was nasty and brutish, and then, as humans emerged out of the forest, they began to come together and sought the benefits of living together in a society. Of course, that meant agreeing on the rules, so to speak, and once they were agreed everyone had to keep them.

Now, in practice that is an exceedingly good principle, isn't it? Most democracies are founded upon that rule. Socrates praised it. He said that he had lived all his life in Athens, accepted the rules of the state and benefited from its provisions and protections. So, when that

same state condemned him to death, he forbade his followers to bribe the jailers to let him out of prison. He said, 'No, I have signed the contract—I've agreed with my fellow citizens to keep the rules and if now they go against me, I will submit to them.'

Socrates was a good social contractarian, but the theory has its weakness, doesn't it? Suppose I have the power, authority and money and I refuse to join your contract, can you give me any good reason why I should? And then there comes a whole range of reformers and martyrs that have stood up and had the courage to say that the rules of the contract are defective in this and that, and, for truth's sake, they cannot submit. So, even moral contractarianism has its weaknesses.

What Christianity teaches

So I come now to what my Christianity teaches me, and two questions that I have been asked.

1. What is the basis and authority for our moral sense?

Christianity proclaims that it is God, our Creator: he made our moral sense and he wrote his laws deep in our hearts. So that we all know in our heart of hearts there is a Creator, whatever we say to the contrary, and we know that certain laws are true, whatever our practice might be. That is the biblical position as I understand it and, therefore, because these things are determined by the Creator, there are some things that are objectively wrong.

Of course, if I say that, I shall be immediately accosted with a number of objections.

'Are you not propounding a very dangerous idea? Hasn't history shown us that when people get it into their heads that their moral system is authorised by almighty God then they can do some terrible things?'

Well, that is perfectly true. I can only speak as a Christian of course, but it is the fact that Christendom, imagining on times that it was doing the will of God, was guilty of atrocious massacres, like the Crusades against the Turks. My response to that is to say that, while those who did it professed to be Christian, they were acting in downright disobedience to the explicit commandment and prohibition of Christ, who prohibited his disciples from using violence or the sword either to promote his kingdom, or to protect it.

2. How can you say our morals come from God?

Don't we learn them from our parents and teachers? Well, let me take an analogy. What about arithmetic? Johnny learnt that two and two make four from his dear mum. When he grew up a bit and went to school he was told, by the authority of the mathematics teacher no less, that the square root of nine is not four and a half, but three.

Johnny learnt it on authority, but if you asked him today, 'Why do you believe that the square root of nine is not four and a half, but three?' he won't reply, 'My teacher says so.' He now sees it for himself. The teacher didn't invent the laws of mathematics, she just passed them on.

Sir Roger Penrose, the great and famous professor holds that the laws of mathematics are not invented by the scientists or anybody else. They are discovered — *they are there*, so to speak. And the moral authority that God has put into our hearts and subsequently expounded in the

Ten Commandments, in the Sermon on the Mount and in the Christian apostles' teaching does not come to us as something taught to us merely by our immediate family members, though they help to point us in that direction. These laws are God's laws — *they exist*. We discover them; we see they are true.

You say, 'But that can't be right, because if these moral laws in our hearts come from God they would be universal, and they're not. People hold all sorts of different views.'

But that's not altogether exact, is it? C. S. Lewis writes at length in one of his books¹² upon this topic and, among other things, he quotes the Egyptian *Book of the Dead*, which comes from two-three thousand years ago in Egypt, a non-Christian country of course. They believed that when people died they eventually had to face a final judgment. Thinking that whether they passed the judgment or not depended on their good behaviour, they wrote out a statement, as if it was by the dead person, of all the wicked things that he had not done, how he had kept the moral law. This is a typical list and, as I read it, I ask you to think whether it is still valid.

I have not committed evil.

I have not stolen.

I have not been covetous.

I have not robbed.

I have not killed a man.

I have not damaged the grain measure.

I have not caused crookedness.

I have not told lies.

I have not been contentious.

I have not practised usury.

I have not committed adultery.

This is not a Christian speaker, nor a Jewish speaker, nor for that matter an Islamic speaker; this is ancient Egyptian, showing the same moral awareness.

In fact, I've never heard of any nation who would hold that it is a good thing, and not to be questioned, that you should bribe a judge to acquit the guilty and condemn the innocent. I don't know of any. Many practise it of course, but whether you could ever meet a nation that believed it was a very good thing to do and openly said it, that's another thing, isn't it? We can exaggerate the differences in these matters.

The humanist tradition

Finally, I am aware of other criticisms of the Christian position that come from the humanist tradition. By humanist, I mean secular humanist, and they object to the laws of Christianity, so to speak, because *Christianity inhibits human freedom*. Let me quote one of them to you.

¹² C. S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed*, 1961; repr. London: Faber, 2012.

Blanche Sanders says:

A humanist has cast off the ancient yoke of supernaturalism with its burden of fear and servitude and he moves on earth, a free man, a child of nature and not of any man made gods.¹³

Reading that as a Christian, at least the first bit, I want to applaud Blanche Sanders and say, 'Very well said. It is marvellous that people should have cast off man-made gods. The Bible is all against man-made gods—read the ancient prophets and the New Testament combined. A tendency man has, is to invent gods of one kind and another.'

But when she includes the God of the Bible, our Creator, in her rejection of supernaturalism on the grounds that following him will make us free, it seems to me distinctly odd.

If you bought a new car, be it a Rolls-Royce or whatever, and it said in the maker's handbook, 'You shall put petrol in this car and not diesel,' would you say, 'I'm not going to be held down by that kind of restriction on my liberty?' 'I've bought the car, haven't I? I will put in diesel if I want to. Who's he to restrict my freedom?' So you put the diesel in, with inevitable results.

Why should we think that the laws of our maker are against us? Christ will say, 'If you follow me, you will know the truth and the truth will make you free' (see John 8:31–32). Paul will urge us, 'For freedom Christ has set us free' (Gal 5:1). This is the claim that the Bible makes for daring to trust God and obey him.

Of course, another thing comes from the humanists. *They don't like the idea of a final judgment*, because it hangs over our heads, breathes down our necks, telling us that there could be divine sanctions. On the other hand, if you read their mature thought, they will tell you that merely setting people free is not enough, we do need some sanctions. 'Every club and society, if it's going to work, has to have its sanctions,' they say, 'and therefore it is right that there should be some sanctions.'

Isn't it a trifle illogical to say that we do need sanctions in life, and then to deny that there shall be a final judgment when all sins shall be dealt with fairly? Dr Will Durant says:

We shall find it no easy task to mould a natural ethic strong enough to maintain moral restraint and social order without the support of supernatural consolation, hopes and fears.

The humanists' final objection is that *embracing this kind of Christianity is psychologically unhealthy*. Professor Wendell W. Watters says:

A true Christian must always be in a state of torment, since he or she can never really be certain that God has forgiven him or her for deeply-felt negative feelings. The Christian is brainwashed to believe that he or she was born wicked, should suffer as Christ suffered, and should aspire to a humanly impossible level of perfection nonetheless.

¹³ *The Humanist* 5 (1945), 226.

My reaction to that is to confess I'm breathless. What is this good professor talking about? 'A true Christian must always be in a state of torment, since he or she can never really be certain that God has forgiven him or her.' Really? It seems to me that the good professor hasn't read his New Testament recently. Let me quote you two verses.

The Holy Spirit is witnessing to us who trust Christ of God's absolute guaranteed promise: 'For I will be merciful towards their iniquities, and I will remember their sins no more' (Heb 8:12). God can say it because he has not swept sin under the carpet, but has provided a Saviour whose sacrifice paid the penalty of our sin so that we can be forgiven and accepted by God — and know it here and now. 'While we were still sinners,' the Bible says, 'God shows his love for us in that Christ died for us' (Rom 5:8).

My final appeal

If we have been inclined to use such superficial arguments against Christianity, then it would be a wise idea, before we continued with our criticisms, actually to read what the New Testament says.

I end my case. I don't have a bulletproof vest, but I am to invite you, if need be, to ask questions.

Questions

Question 1

QUESTIONER: If we can establish that there's an objective case for objective right and wrong (in our case coming from a Christian perspective), is it therefore logical or reasonable to argue that Christian religions—churches within Christianity, rather—need a consensus on moral issues within Christianity?

DWG: An interesting question. If one argues on the basis of our moral sense that God has put it in our hearts, and on the explanations and additions to it in the Ten Commandments and so forth—can we then say that we must get a Christian consensus on what is right and wrong in practical living—have I got you right?

I've argued that God has put his laws on our hearts (Heb 8:10). He's further expounded those laws in the Ten Commandments and in the New Testament. There is to be observed a moral growth in this respect. Just as you would teach a little child certain practices, but then when he grows up you will teach him a rather more advanced system of ethics, yes there is growth. So that, when it comes to life in society or amongst ourselves, we should not suppose that we as individuals have the last word on interpretation of the rules as given to us.

Therefore, we need to seek in all humility the help of all fellow Christians from the inside to help us understand God's rules; and not only understand his rules but how they are to be applied in actual circumstances. And we ought to listen to the critics from the outside as well, for they sometimes can point us to our inconsistencies and our irrationalities. Does that make sense to you? Good.

Question 2

QUESTIONER: Can I ask you if you would believe that we inherit fallen nature—inhabit a universe which is fallen? And if so, perhaps we shouldn't be surprised if our DNA is indifferent, and any other explanation that a loving God would create a world with death inherent surely is incomprehensible to a moral human being?

DWG: Ah well, to the first part of your question—do I believe that we inherit a fallen nature, my personal answer is, yes, I do. I believe what the New Testament says: 'By one man's disobedience, sin entered into the world and death by sin.' I think we are in some sense damaged goods, if you don't mind the expression.

I myself think that that is a very kindly doctrine. It tells us straight that we are not personally responsible for our weaknesses. It also tells us that, if we have been damaged through what our forefather did, then we can be saved. Not by our own effort, but by what

somebody else did. That somebody is Jesus Christ our Lord. To quote the New Testament verse:

For as by the one man's [Adam's] disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience [Christ's] the many will be made righteous. (Rom 5:19)

So that is what I hold. And I've no doubt that, when man sinned against God, his state of reference to the universe around him was changed.

One thing I would question with you, perhaps—and that is for a bigger discussion at another time, which I would certainly welcome: when God created the universe he said it was good, all of it 'very good' (Gen 1:31). Does that necessarily mean that everything was safe?

For instance, we all now enjoy the benefits of electricity, but electricity isn't safe. Since its discovery it has caused a large number of deaths, has it not? And if it's not used properly it can still cause death. It wouldn't be electricity if it didn't. And therefore, when God says he made everything good, I don't think that that necessarily means that everything was safe. That is my provisional answer to you, but the rest would require another half an hour.

Question 3

QUESTIONER: I understand that Social Darwinists relate everything back to evolution, so our minds and our choices have been conditioned by that up to this point where we are intellectually free to make different choices, perhaps. Is that view sustainable?

DWG: Let me make sure I've understood you right. Social Darwinism says that we've come at our present minds by evolution, and therefore, by definition, since evolution is a chance process and not purposeful—it is purposeless—then our moral sense is broken. It's wounded; it's injured?

QUESTIONER: Our morals and our ethics have evolved up to the point where we've recognised now that it was because of evolution, and we can now make choices because we're intellectually superior.

DWG: Oh, yes, I see what you mean.

Theodosius Dobzhansky, the great Russian-born scientist and ethicist, would not accept Social Darwinism at any cost. He held that, as we evolved, mankind eventually evolved language. And being able to talk to one another, we were able to reason together in what I have called *social contractarianism* and make our own rules, and that's how it should be. Ethics in that sense has evolved.

I should not want to question the fact that mankind has gone through its childhood stage—the New Testament says so—and has come to adulthood, but I think the basic principles remain the same. They are not things that *we evolved to*, as far as I understand it. 'You shall not lie—you shall not give false witness' (Exod 20:16): how could that have been the result of chance progress?

In thinking it through, I want to ask myself, is it an invention that this or that philosopher invented? If that is so, why should I accept it? I would need another reason for accepting it, unless you say, 'My position is so rational that you couldn't possibly disagree if you wanted

to be rational.' But then I look around all the rational people I know and have read of in this world, and the rationalists disagree among themselves on ethical things.

Therefore, it seems to me that our reasoning on ethical things is based on something far more fundamental, and not the result of evolution. It is the result of God the Creator's law being written on our hearts. At least that is how I would understand it, sir.

May I just add that I start, as I said, from a biblical position and, as I understand it, God early on told his people that his rules were an expression of his character. Being a personal God, he summed up the rules like this:

And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength . . . and your neighbour as yourself. (Mark 12:30-31)

Ethics, according to Bible, is ultimately a question of a love relationship with a personal God, in the full sense of the term 'love'. You might say, 'I love this landscape,' meaning you like it very much; but in that sense you can't love impersonal things. This, as I understand it, is the heart of ethics: a personal relationship with a personal God, whose rules and whose laws are an expression of his character. 'If you love me,' said Jesus Christ, 'you will keep my commandments' (John 14:15).

I don't think that merely thinking about these things ethically would necessarily have brought us to the view that we should be kind to one another. But I think the Bible's scheme of ethics is on a higher plane.

Question 4

QUESTIONER: Can I just pick up on two things that you said?

Firstly, that the crusaders were acting in disobedience to God. Do you mean that they actually knew that what they were doing was wrong, but chose to do it anyway?

Secondly, do you believe that everybody knows there's a God and some people choose to ignore that? *Does God believe in Atheists?* —to quote the book title.¹⁴

DWG: Just to restate your question to make sure I've understood, you're asking: When they went to slaughter the Turks, did all the crusaders know they were doing wrong?

Well, this is not meant to be a 'get-out' or cynical, but I can't tell you what was in their minds when they did it! I think a lot of them had been persuaded by people that should have known better that, somehow or other, the use of the sword to promote Christianity was justifiable.

You got that kind of thing with Constantine, when he had the sign of the cross put on his military banners and said, 'In this sign, I conquer.'

Whether the knights and the footmen who went on the Crusades knew it was wrong or not, I don't know. Some of their leaders should have known, if they had read Scripture. Our Lord forbade his apostles to use the sword, either to protect or to promote his kingdom (Matt 26:52). And so it remains today.

¹⁴ John Blanchard, Darlington: Evangelical Press, 2000.

QUESTIONER: So is the Bible the absolute reference then? If we all know what's right and wrong, what's the role of the Bible?

DWG: I think the Bible reveals to us the mind of God. When it comes to this and that particular in actual practical life, then of course we have to think that through in the light of our basic biblical principles.

Let me use an analogy. Until recently doctors were required to swear the old Hippocratic Oath in order to practise their profession. It goes back to pre-Christian times, of course. Its first provision was the basic one: a would-be doctor had to swear an oath by the gods that he would never do anything to harm his patient. That was the basic thing.

Secondly, he should do everything positively for the benefit of his patient to preserve life. He must never do anything to end life.

Thirdly, he must never reveal the secrets of his patient's illness to anybody else.

Now that appealed to the gods as the basis and the authority behind their medical ethics. They had a general principle, then, to positively do everything to promote the life of their patient and, negatively, not to harm or end his or her life.

But of course there are many practical situations beyond that, as every doctor will know. Given the actual practicalities of a situation, you have to discuss with your colleagues what is the best way now to apply those general principles in a particular case.

I would hold that the same thing is true of Christianity. The authority behind our ethics is God. The general principle is that we are to love the Lord our God with all heart, mind, soul and strength and our neighbour as ourselves. That leads to specific rules and prohibitions: honour your parents; don't tell lies in court; adultery is wrong, and so forth and so on.

Then there's a whole lot of things in life, in practical situations, where the Bible doesn't lay down any particular rule, so we have to make up our minds. The Bible's answer to that is, by all means make up your mind, and if the Bible itself doesn't say anything explicit on this—whether it be right or wrong—then be easy on the conscience of your fellow Christian who might disagree with you in this particular thing.

But do remember that you and he must one day appear before the judgment seat of Christ, when we shall be asked to give account of ourselves. 'Why did you do that? Why did you do the other?' It would be good at that stage if we were able to answer Christ, 'I did it because, thinking about it carefully, I thought it was the thing that would please you. Sorry if I did it wrong.'

Does that make any sense to you? Perhaps a little?

QUESTIONER: The second half of the question was, Do you believe that everyone believes or knows there is a God and some just choose to reject that knowledge?

DWG: Yes, I believe that deep down in the human heart there is the knowledge that there is a God. The Bible says that the invisible things of God from the creation of the world are visible—knowable, from the things that are seen. Namely, these two qualities: his eternal power and Godhead (Rom 1:20). There is an almighty God who is all powerful: his divinity and his power are both beyond humankind. But God has made it known in the creation around us. And what is more, he has made it known to us and in us (v. 19). Even though many deny it, deep within the human heart there is a knowledge that there is a God.

The German philosopher, Immanuel Kant said,

Two things fill my mind with ever-increasing wonder and awe, the more often and the more intensely the reflection dwells on them: the starry heavens above me and the moral law within me.¹⁵

So yes, I would hold that, in that sense, everybody knows there is a Creator.

The problem of pain and suffering

But I want to add another very big thing. There are many people in life who have suffered such pain and disaster and disappointment that they find it very difficult to believe that, if there is a God, he is all-loving, all-powerful and all-wise. If there is such a God, why would he allow so much suffering; and why such an unequal distribution of suffering throughout this world?

That is a serious question, but I cannot discuss it now, of course. If you have any influence with the organisers of this series, you could suggest that one day they have a lecture on this problem. It is a very, very real problem that has to be met at two levels—at the emotional level and then at the intellectual. I would welcome the opportunity to deal with the question.¹⁶

I will merely state one thing. I was in Moscow once, having dinner with a certain professor who was the head of the psychiatric institution in Moscow. Things came up about the question of belief in God and, leaning over the table, he said, with a generous smile on his face, not being aggressive at all, ‘How can you believe in God when there is so much suffering?’ He had seen a lot in his lifetime, of course.

It was a long reply, but in first principle my reply was this, ‘Yes, sir, I too have a problem. How can I believe in a God that is all-loving, all-powerful, all-wise, when he allows such suffering?’ So there is a problem.

I then said to him, ‘You can get rid of that intellectual problem very easily.’

‘How?’ he said.

‘By giving up all faith in the existence of God. So now you won’t have a problem, will you?’

Like Richard Dawkins says: pain, evil, disaster, they just are; and if there’s no God, there’s no problem.

But then I added, ‘You can get rid of the problem but you don’t thereby get rid of the pain, for you now take away all hope. If there is a God there is a hope, isn’t there? Somehow, in ways that often go beyond what we can understand, there is hope that our pain is not just sheer meaninglessness, but it can be turned by God to eternal benefit. There is hope.’

Of course I went on to say a lot of other things. But, in my personal experience, when I have suffered pain—and I’ve suffered my share of it—hope has kept me going. Hope in God: in his love expressed to us in Jesus Christ and in his character as a faithful God.

¹⁵ *Critique of Practical Reason* (1788), Conclusion (161). These words were inscribed on his tombstone.

¹⁶ See David Gooding and John Lennox, *Christianity: Opium or Truth?*, Belfast: Myrtlefield House, 2014, ch. 6, ‘The Problem of Pain’.

About the Author

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