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**Moral thinking: foundations, approaches  
and applications**

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**Introduction: free thinking**

Good morning. It is a great privilege to be invited to speak here, in the Conway Hall, home of the South Place Ethical Society, with its fine tradition of promoting moral discourse and free thinking. To me, as a Christian, the Christian faith makes an excellent starting point for free thinking – for the scientific, philosophical and intellectual exploration of the universe and, specifically, of the human personality. The dictionaries tell me that that ‘free-thinker’ is commonly used to refer to those who reject religious teaching, but I hope that for today you will permit me to liberate the term from these atheistic moorings, cast out into the open water, and, as a Christian, indulge in a bit of free thinking.

My subject today is moral thinking. Although for many people moral thinking is associated with religious belief, the two are not identical – indeed, they are sometimes in conflict. The moral mind is something that believers and non-believers have in common, and there are many opportunities for agreement – and for fruitful discussions – on moral issues.

## **Reason and rationality**

It is sometimes said that one approach to morality and the general question of how to live is based on reason or rationality, and I would like first to look at what this might mean. Let us start by looking at a contrast.

### **Reason as a foundation for moral thinking**

#### **1. Reason v the authority of religion**

A morality based on reason may be contrasted with one that is based on religion and religious teaching. This is a useful distinction, and can be compared with the old theological distinction between natural and revealed theology: natural theology is what we can learn about God from studying his creation and from human reason; revealed theology is what we can learn from scripture and spiritual experience. A great deal of modern Christian moral thinking is either based on reason, in this sense, or at least is checked against reason. The difference between believers and non-believers is not primarily about ethics. We differ in our understanding of the world and of our place in it, not about moral thinking. Religious believers in parliament or on Radio 4's 'Thought for the Day', for example, tend to base their argument more on reason than on revelation, using arguments that non-believers can engage with. It is true that there are sometimes moral issues over which believers may differ from non-believers on moral grounds: for example, many philosophers from Aristotle to the present day would disagree with Christian teaching that humility is a virtue. But there are many controversial issues in which we can find believers and non-believers on both sides.

Reason, then, means 'not from divine revelation' or not from the authority of religion. That is rather negative. Does it mean anything positive?

In practice, most of us base our moral thinking on our own consciences – and this is true of Christians as well as humanists. This leads to another way in which reason can be contrasted with something else.

### **Reason as a foundation for moral thinking**

#### **1. Reason v the authority of religion**

#### **2. Reason v emotion, instinct or intuition**

A morality based on reason can be contrasted with one based on emotion, instinct or intuition. These are rather broad and ill-defined terms, and I rather prefer the short and ill-defined word 'gut' for these feelings, sentiments and convictions. Many of our moral sentiments are gut feelings, or derived from gut feelings.

**'Morality is more properly felt than judg'd of.'**

**David Hume, 1740**

**'Reason is, and ought only to be the slave of the passions, and can never pretend to any other office than to serve and obey them.'**

**David Hume, 1740**

These two famous quotations from the philosopher David Hume make the point well.

The psychologist Jonathan Haidt says the same thing.

**'Morality is driven by emotions and intuitions, not reasoning.'**

**Jonathan Haidt, moral psychologist, 2010**

Reason has a role in moral thinking, but it is the passions, emotions, intuitions or gut feelings, that take the lead.

Modern psychology tells us that it is commonly the emotional part of our nature that makes decisions; reasons follow later. I am one of those people who like to make decisions – life's little decisions as well as the bigger ones – on a rational basis. As a consequence, I am hopelessly indecisive. I can always see both sides. The people who can make up their minds are the ones who just *know* what is the right thing to do. They may wish to clothe their decisions with reasons, but that comes afterwards. Benjamin Franklin understood this well.

**'So convenient a thing it is to be a reasonable creature, since it enables one to find or make a reason for everything one has a mind to do.'**

**Benjamin Franklin, 1791**

If reason is a tool for justifying whatever we have a mind to do, it cannot be a secure foundation for moral thinking. It can, of course, be a valuable tool for working out moral behaviour once we have established the foundations.

A third understanding of reason is through the term 'reasonable'. We know what we mean by a reasonable person – a sensible, level-headed, right-thinking sort of person, someone whose moral sentiments and thinking we can understand.

### **Reason as a foundation for moral thinking**

#### **1. Reason v the authority of religion**

#### **2. Reason v emotion, instinct or intuition**

#### **3. A reasonable person is someone who agrees with me**

In other words, someone who agrees with me. Agreement about moral issues is important. A community is held together by shared moral values. It is generally right that we should fit in with the moral conventions and values of the society in which we live. Laws should command general consent, and it is generally right that we should obey them. This agreement is important, but it is far from being all there is to morality. There are three important riders. The first is that morality should take account of minorities, who may have different moral values. The second is that, in our globalised world, we are more aware of societies with different moral conventions, and we interact with these societies. Most of us know people whose values differ from our own. We have to face up to the fact that we do not all agree about moral issues.

The third rider is that if we all just followed convention, if we all just kept agreeing with each other, we would still be owning slaves and hanging people for stealing sheep, and we would be entertained by watching bear-baiting, cock-fighting and public executions. Moral thinking has an important role in challenging prevailing, accepted values. The role of the reasonable person here is pithily expressed by George Bernard Shaw.

**'The reasonable man adapts himself to the world; the unreasonable one persists in trying to adapt the world to himself. Therefore, all progress depends on the unreasonable man.'**

**George Bernard Shaw, *Maxims for Revolutionists*, 1903**

So the idea of basing morality on reason or being reasonable doesn't seem to have much going for it, does it?

### **You can't explain it**

This brings us to perhaps the most frustrating, but also intriguing and fascinating, thing about moral thinking. It is elusive. You can't pin it down. You can't explain it in terms of anything else. Equally, you can't explain it away in terms of anything else. It's not all a matter of upbringing. It's not all a matter of culture and convention. It's not all a matter of evolution. As we have seen, it is not just a question of being reasonable or rational. All of these can help us to understand particular aspects of our moral thinking, but none of them explain why morality exists as one of the dimensions of reality and none of them, on their own, offer a secure foundation to enable us to build a moral code.

Faced with this dilemma and with the inability to treat statements of moral value in the same way as statements of scientific fact, philosophers of the first half of the twentieth century reacted by saying that such statements were meaningless, or that they were so subjective as to be of little account. Led by thinkers like A J Ayer, people came to fear that statements of moral value were not intellectually defensible, that they were all relative, all just a matter

of personal opinion, and one person's opinion is as good as anyone else's.

It is certainly true that each of us has our own moral sentiments and convictions, so morality is, to that extent, subjective... and yet... and yet... there must be more to it than that. We cannot be comfortable with a world view that has no place for the moral dimension. There is a fundamental dilemma here, which was summed up so well by Bertrand Russell.

**'I cannot see how to refute arguments for the subjectivity of moral values, but I find myself incapable of believing that all that is wrong with wanton cruelty is that I don't like it.'**  
**Bertrand Russell, 1960**

He found that the evidence of his own inner convictions was at odds with the theoretical 'arguments' that moral values are entirely subjective. Russell, of course, was a philosopher: I am a scientist, and when a scientist finds that evidence or observations conflict with theory he is inclined to ditch the theory. Konrad Lorenz wrote, 'It is a good morning exercise for a research scientist to discard a pet hypothesis every day before breakfast.'

As a scientist, therefore, I would be inclined to set aside Russell's 'arguments for the subjectivity of moral values' and take seriously the inner conviction that not just Russell but nearly all of us have, that wanton cruelty is wrong.

### **A scientific approach**

How can a scientific approach help us to understand our moral thinking? For many people, a scientist is someone who conducts

experiments in a laboratory, and it is an important part of the scientific method that the experiments should be repeatable. Not all science is like that, though. I used to be a geologist. My experiments were too large to fit into a laboratory, and they took millions of years to complete. For scientists like me, the scientific method is not a matter of carrying out repeatable experiments; it consists of making observations, trying to systematise them, and trying to understand them.

What is our evidence? What evidence can we use for a scientific study of moral thinking? Where is our starting point? The only evidence available to us is the human experience. People do have moral sentiments. We do hold moral opinions. We do make statements about moral values. There is no other evidence. Leaving aside the question of divine revelation, there is no evidence apart from human experience. There is no observable external yardstick against which we can check or measure our moral convictions. This is how Mary Warnock puts it.

**Moral conviction is no more subject to proof than the convictions of faith.**

**Mary Warnock, *Dishonest to God*, 2010**

As I said a few moments ago, any moral opinion that I hold is my own, and in that sense, at least, it is subjective. But we do not think that that is the end of the story. When we make a statement about our moral convictions or values, we are reaching out, we are trying to engage with something outside ourselves. Like Russell, we simply cannot believe that the only thing that's wrong with wanton cruelty is that we don't like it.

If we are to believe the evidence of the human experience (and why shouldn't we believe it?), the moral dimension is real, statements of moral value are real statements about something that matters, something that is more than a subjective personal opinion. Like all our attempts to speak the truth, we may not be spot on every time, but we feel that, somewhere out of reach, there is a truth that we are striving to express.

It becomes even more difficult when we look for the objective, or rational, basis for any particular statement of moral value. In very many cases it may seem quite easy. Generosity is universally admired, for example, and stinginess disapproved of. Kindness and courage are admired; cruelty and cowardice are not. But there are also many issues on which we disagree. To take just one example, if someone has done me harm, I may say that I should pay him back, or that he should be punished; but you may tell me that I should forgive him, or that I should give him another chance. These are starkly different reactions to the initial act of wrongdoing, but they are both moral reactions.

How far have we got, then, in our attempt to understand the foundations for moral thinking? Not very far, really. There is little, if anything, that can be proved, in a way that science would find acceptable. All we have is the facts of different people's moral sentiments, convictions and values.

- **The moral dimension is real**
- **Humans have the ability to engage with the moral dimension**

To me, it seems reasonable to conclude from the evidence that the moral dimension is real. We inhabit a moral universe, as Desmond

Tutu has put it. Secondly, humans, unlike other species, have the mental capacity to recognise this moral dimension, to engage with it, to make moral judgements, and to seek to understand what is good behaviour and what is bad. This moral sense is part of the human personality.

One of the things about this moral dimension is that we think it is important; we think it matters. There is an intensity in the voice when we make moral assertions that we feel deeply about. We are engaging with some of our deepest feelings. Our moral convictions and values define the kind of people that we are.

Furthermore, these are the emotions that make us human. Charles Darwin.

**'I fully subscribe to the judgement of those writers who maintain that of all the differences between man and the lower animals, the moral sense or conscience is by far the most important.'**

**Charles Darwin, *The Descent of Man*, 1874**

One of the paradoxes of morality is that humans are the only species to have a moral sense, but it doesn't actually seem to do us any good. We don't behave any better than other animals. It is an important part of our psychological make-up, but it is not a particularly important driver of our behaviour. For my part, I agree with Darwin, but there are many writers who don't. There are books written today about the human personality, and about what it is that makes us human, in which the moral sense or conscience scarcely receives a mention.

If we stand back and compare human behaviour with the way other animals behave, it doesn't actually seem to make a lot of difference. It is hard to maintain that humans as a whole live in a way that is morally superior to the way other animals live.

- **The moral dimension is real**
- **Humans have the ability to engage with the moral dimension**
- **It does not make us behave better than other animals**

Bertrand Russell again. 'Man is a rational animal [He says rational, when he means moral – but we don't need to go into that again]. Man is a rational animal', he writes, ' – at least so I have been told. Throughout a long life, I have looked diligently in favour of evidence of this statement, but so far I have not had the good fortune to come across it, though I have searched in many countries spread over three continents. On the contrary, I have seen the world plunging continually further into madness ... I have seen cruelty, persecution, and superstition increasing by leaps and bounds ...' and so he goes on.

I have tried to probe the foundations for our moral thinking, and I have got as far as I can. From one perspective, that of the human personality, it is supremely important; from another, an objective assessment of the way humans live and behave, it seems to be almost irrelevant. What is more, it continues to defy our attempts to understand it and pin it down. Even what little I have been able to put on this slide may be regarded as controversial.

### **The three approaches to moral decision-making**

Let us move on, now, and look at the three main approaches to moral decision-making.

### **The three approaches to moral decision-making**

- 1. Moral principle**
- 2. Consequentialist ethics**
- 3. Virtue ethics**

The first is moral principle. It is wrong to steal or murder, for example. Kindness and generosity are good. The second is to judge an action by its consequences. What are the benefits? What are the losses?

The third approach is virtue ethics. Virtue ethics focuses on the character of the person, rather than on the deed itself or its consequences. It is a question of self-image, the kind of person I want to be; it's about my own integrity. The website of the South Place Ethical Society carries the Shakespeare quotation 'To thine own self be true.' This could be understood as a call to virtue ethics.

All three of these approaches can involve both gut and reasoning. Gut starts us off, and reasoning can help us to apply our gut feelings to real-life situations.

For people who are unhappy about the subjectivity that is implicit in moral principle and virtue ethics, it may seem attractive to put the greatest emphasis on consequentialist ethics, believing that it is more objective than the others. This attempt to be objective can be partly, but not wholly, successful. Not entirely successful, because consequentialist ethics has to rest on the premise that some consequences are better than others – that pleasure is better than hurt, for example. Consequentialist ethics, therefore, must be founded on moral principle. It does not offer an escape from moral principle. However, it does enable us to build a moral argument

based on simple moral principles about which we can all agree: that pleasure is better than hurt, for example. We can then ignore other moral sentiments that might be awkward or controversial. This can lead to conclusions which conflict with those based on moral principle. We shall see an example in a moment, when we come to consider recreational drugs.

One of the things about virtue ethics is that it makes the point particularly well that there is more to morality than altruism. There is a school of thought that says that if you can explain altruism you have explained morality. The argument runs that altruistic behaviour can be explained by evolution by natural selection; therefore morality can be explained by natural selection; therefore there is no need of God. This argument is full of holes, but the only point I want to make now is that there is more to moral thinking than just altruism.

Imagine you are a golfer in a tournament. Your ball falls in the rough and you accidentally cause a slight movement of the ball before taking your shot. Nobody else has seen. Do you acknowledge this and accept the penalty, or do you keep quiet, and play on as if nothing had happened? This is what happened once to the great golfer Bobby Jones, when he was a young man. What did he do? He reported what had happened, and a penalty was duly imposed. When he was praised for his honesty, he replied, 'You may as well praise a man for not robbing a bank.' The comparison with robbery makes it clear that Jones regarded this as a moral issue – but it is nothing to do with altruism, or compassion. It was to do with his image of the kind of person he wanted to be. Morality is more than altruism; it is bigger than altruism.

## **Personal morality, social morality and the law**

Here's another threesome.

- **Personal morality**
- **Social morality**
- **Political morality (the law)**

We may distinguish three areas of life in which moral thinking may be applied: first, our personal lives, with the decisions we make as individuals about how we should live; secondly, the values that we share with other members of our community, the kinds of behaviour that we generally approve of or disapprove of; and, thirdly, the law.

Our personal morality is strongly controlled by our gut feelings, by moral principle and virtue ethics. It may also be influenced by religious belief. Consequentialist thinking then has an important place in working out the applications. We develop our own personal moral codes and values, accepting or rejecting other people's values as we see fit. Problems may arise when obedience to our own code brings us into conflict with the code of our social group or with the law, as when conscientious objectors come up against the law in times of war.

Social morality is more complex. Society contains a great diversity of moral opinions and values. Sometimes, a sort of consensus can be found on the sort of behaviour that we approve of or disapprove of. On other issues, two or more different opinions may coexist alongside each other. Because of this diversity, we have come to attach greater importance to tolerance as a moral virtue. We then have to decide how far we can extend our tolerance of other people's values. Most of us here today, I suspect, would not

condone execution as a punishment for people who have infringed the sexual code of their society.

Next, the Law. Much legislation is based on moral values.

**There is a sense in which morality is prior to, lies behind and is the foundation of the law.**

**Mary Warnock, *Dishonest to God*, 2010**

Baroness Warnock is a moral philosopher as well as being a member of the legislature – a rare combination.

The moral values underlying some laws are obvious and non-controversial: the laws against murder and theft, for example. Other laws represent a choice between – or a compromise between – opposing moral principles. I am thinking of abortion or assisted dying, for example.

Legislation on these issues is based on moral principle, and moral principle may be one of the driving forces behind such legislation, but consequentialist thinking is essential in drafting and debating the details of new laws.

Mary Warnock again.

**This is always how legislators have to make their moral decisions, in terms of the consequences that they foresee flowing from the act.**

**Mary Warnock, *Theos* interview, 2010**

An interesting political issue with strong moral overtones is that of recreational drugs. There is general agreement that the misuse of these drugs can have devastating effects for the individual and for society. It is also well established that some illegal drugs cause less harm than alcohol or tobacco, both of which are legal. These are the facts.

Consequentialist arguments, based simply on benefit and harm, lead us to two conclusions. The first is that some drugs, such as cannabis and ecstasy are less harmful than their present classification would suggest; they are wrongly classified. The second is that the criminalisation of recreational drugs has not had the desired effect. Decriminalising them would put the drug dealers and drug pushers out of business. It would also vastly reduce the incidence of theft, mugging and burglary, much of which is done to feed a drug habit. And it would make it easier for addicts to make contact with the people who could help them to overcome their addiction.

Against these consequentialist arguments are arguments from moral principle, that the misuse of these drugs is wrong and to reduce their classification or to decriminalise them altogether is to send the wrong message. There is strong and widespread support for these moral principles.

It is important to note, however, that the moral values held by society are not necessarily enshrined in law. The law does not try to cover everything that people disapprove of, and it cannot be a substitute for personal responsibility. Too much regulation can inhibit people from taking responsibility, and from making their own professional and moral decisions. In the last few days we have heard how social work is so beset by written instructions that the

real needs of the real child takes second place. Similar situations arise in many other areas of work: healthcare, police, teaching – and business.

Included with *The Times* recently was a supplement on business ethics. Here is a quotation from it.

**'Business ethics goes beyond compliance. Compliance can all too easily be about "ticking the boxes" so only the bare minimum is achieved, whereas business ethics is about striving to uphold the highest standards, above and beyond those that comply with the law, and doing the right thing even if no one is watching.'**

**Philippa Foster Back, director of the Institute of Business Ethics, 2010**

And here is another.

**'Where rules create loopholes and limits on behaviour, values do not. If those in leadership roles want to shape behaviour, they must pay more attention to instilling values.'**  
**David Greenberg, executive vice president, LRN, 2010**

These two quotations bring us back to virtue ethics: it is personal values that count. You can't legislate for virtue. The best hope is that we should become a society that can see the value of values; one where virtue is instilled, by example as well as by teaching, by parents, by teachers, by leaders in every walk of life – and by the media.

## **The media**

That leads us to the morality of the media. The media sit in judgement on the nation's morals. They take delight in exposing any supposed wrongdoing, especially by people in the public eye. And yet they themselves operate by moral standards that are quite different from those that the rest of us would recognise.

The best journalists operate in accordance with high moral standards, of course. A few years ago I came across the Code of Conduct of the National Union of Journalists.

### **NUJ Code of Conduct**

- 1. A journalist has a duty to maintain the highest professional and ethical standards.**
  - 2. A journalist shall at all times defend the principle of the freedom of the Press and other media in relation to the collection of information and the expression of comment and criticism. He/she shall strive to eliminate distortion, news suppression and censorship.**
- etc**

Look at that. First and foremost, before the principle of press freedom, journalists have a duty to maintain the highest professional and ethical standards. Or they did once. They now have a different Code of Conduct.

**NUJ Code of Conduct****A journalist:**

**1. At all times upholds and defends the principle of media freedom, the right of freedom of expression and the right of the public to be informed.**

**etc**

The bit about ethical standards has disappeared, and the second bit, somewhat altered, has taken its place. Now, a journalist 'At all times upholds and defends the principle of media freedom, the right of freedom of expression and the right of the public to be informed.'

We have seen how consequentialist thinking has an important part to play in moral thinking, particularly in public issues. If we apply such thinking to the media, that would mean asking questions like 'What benefit might come if this information is placed in the public domain? What harm?'

Most of us, if we are thinking ethically, would think it right to refrain from giving lots of people information that was likely to cause hurt, with no compensating benefit. Journalists are not like that. For them, the right to freedom of speech is top of their code. If people get hurt, or there is some damage to the public interest, that doesn't matter. What matters is their freedom of expression.

Consequently, we find that time and time again we see some story in the public domain where the hurt or harm from putting it there far exceeds the benefit. Time and again we see news items that just should not be there. Often they concern people who are in no way public figures. Often they concern people who are. A few examples.

During the course of a police investigation for murder, sometimes suspicion temporarily falls on someone who happened to be near the scene of the crime. Such people can be given the full media treatment, even though the police later conclude that the person was in no way implicated in the crime.

Another example. Within the last year, it was the media who made sure that the new government lost one its most promising ministers, David Laws. It was the media who were clearly going to make it impossible for David Miliband to remain a prominent figure in the Labour party when his brother was party leader. It was the media who, it was thought, would make it impossible for Lord Young to continue as a government advisor. Three men who had something to give to public life, removed by the whim of the media. The nation loses; who benefits?

More recently, a national newspaper tricked a few government ministers into being indiscreet. Great fun for the journalists, of course, and their newspaper, but no benefit to the nation.

### **NUJ Code of Conduct**

#### **A journalist:**

**5. Obtains material by honest, straightforward and open means, with the exception of investigations that are both overwhelmingly in the public interest and which involve evidence that cannot be obtained by straightforward means.  
etc**

There's another point here. For most of us, such deceit would be contrary to moral principle, but, whatever their Code of Conduct

might say, the media don't seem to live by the same standards as the rest of us.

Quite a different example, now. One of the threats that face us today is the conflict between Muslims and the West, between the values of Islam and those of Western societies.

The media delight in reporting inflammatory statements by Muslim hotheads. They don't report the moderate statements made week after week by moderate, mainstream, peace-loving Muslims. On the Christian side, when a small-town pastor in Florida, with no previous reputation as a respected theologian or public servant, announces his intention to burn the Qur'an, he gets worldwide publicity. Why? What good does it do?

The media don't report the excellent work done by interfaith groups in our towns and cities, building up understanding and real friendship between people of different faiths. They don't remind us of all the British Muslims who have a love for their country as well as a love for their religion. They don't remind us of all the Muslims who share with most other people in this country a high regard for our liberal, democratic traditions. They don't remind us that where many Muslims reject Western values – and I am thinking of our self-indulgent, consumerist values – many other people in this country might actually agree with them.

By choosing what to report, the media can promote understanding, trust and friendship between Muslims and other sections of British society, or they can promote distrust, fear and hostility, leading to civil unrest, racial strife and sympathy for extremist, even terrorist, views. The media have that choice, and it seems that they choose the latter.

The media don't have to report everything they know. It is possible to decide not to report. I seem to remember, years ago, the press voluntarily keeping silence at the request of the police during kidnap incidents. More recently, they kept quiet about Paul and Rachel Chandler during their captivity, in obedience to repeated court injunctions. I find it rather sad that they will only do the decent thing if ordered to by the court.

### **Environmental ethics**

#### **The three approaches to moral decision-making**

- 1. Moral principle**
- 2. Consequentialist ethics**
- 3. Virtue ethics**

I'd like to turn now to the question of environmental ethics: how we treat the Earth, whether we care about the future. Can we apply these three approaches to environmental ethics?

We are surrounded today, in our towns and cities, in our villages and in the countryside, by reminders of the work and achievements of past generations. Buildings of great beauty, both small and large – the whole pattern of our townscapes and landscapes – for so much of this we are indebted to our ancestors. We have so much to thank them for.

We may then ask what contribution we, in our generation, are making to the future. Not many buildings, or anything else, that will delight the eye in a hundred years' time. Worse than that, we are using up the Earth's supply of non-renewable resources, particularly hydrocarbons, at an alarming rate, we are destroying peat lands in

this country, rainforests abroad and other natural habitats, and we are polluting soil, groundwater, rivers, oceans and atmosphere with man-made substances and waste.

In 2011 we have immense power over the future of this planet and the human species. The planet we live on is life-giving and life-enhancing – but also very fragile.

Those are the facts. Some people think that this raises an important moral issue; others are not persuaded.

Much of the argument is to do with consequences, but, as I said earlier, consequentialist ethics rests on a foundation of moral principle. We have to ask ourselves, is it a moral principle to care about the future, to care about what happens after we are dead? Or are we right to leave the future to look after itself?

Jane Goodall reminds us that our simpler ancestors were able to plan with the future in mind: 'It's awfully sad', she said, 'that with our clever brains ... we seem to have lost wisdom; and that's the wisdom of the indigenous people who would make a major decision based on how that decision would affect people seven generations ahead. We're making decisions based on the bottom line. How will this affect me now? Me and my family, now? So although we think we're caring about our children and grandchildren, we're actually stealing their future.'

Then, let us look at buildings. All over the world, people have constructed buildings to last well beyond their own lifetimes. In this country, think of our great medieval cathedrals, some of them taking many years to build. Long-term projects, with the future in mind.

On an everyday level, when we make a will we are thinking of the future, after we have died. This doesn't represent a sacrifice on our part, of course. For sacrifice, we can look at the armed forces, people who risk their lives and often sacrifice them for the future of their country and their families – for the sake of the future.

**'When you go home, tell them of us and say "For your tomorrows these gave their today."'**

**J M Edmonds, 1918**

What a contrast between the sacrifice evoked in this epitaph and our me-first attitude when we insist on satisfying our wants today, with little thought for all the tomorrows of future generations.

Putting all this together, I think there is enough evidence to show that it is, or can be, part of the human personality to live our lives in such a way that the future will benefit. I think we can call this a moral principle.

### **Environmental ethics**

- 1. Moral principle: to care for the Earth**
- 2. Consequentialist ethics: identify the impact of our actions on the Earth, and reduce harmful actions**
- 3. Virtue ethics: everyone has a contribution to make**

Having established the principle, there is a lot of work for consequentialist ethics, in working out the applications. If we look at every aspect of our lifestyles, we can ask to what extent they

damage or enhance the environment. Green issues are much discussed these days, and there are plenty of good ideas around.

Not infrequently, one moral principle comes into conflict with another. Environmental ethics throws up many such conflicts. Almost all powered transport is environmentally harmful, but frequently we have sound moral reasons for travelling. We see dedicated campaigning climatologists, for example, flying all over the place to deliver lectures on climate change, telling us how harmful flying is. It is up to each of us to find our own balance between conflicting moral principles.

Then, it is easy to point to the scale of the problem and say that my own contribution is so tiny that there is no point in me doing anything. I can't make a difference. Even the contribution of the United Kingdom is small, when we look at the global picture.

How can we answer this? Can we realistically expect people to do their bit, when their bit is so insignificant? The first point to make is that there are other situations where we act in the public interest, even when we know that our personal contribution makes little difference to the global picture and that it might be in our interests to act differently. We have already noted the sacrifices made by the armed forces. Another classic example is voting. One vote makes no difference, and you'd rather be doing something else. But lots of people still turn out to vote, and many regard the right to vote as so important that they have campaigned to win that right. Another example, highly relevant to the environment, is recycling. We see a lot of people taking trouble with recycling their waste. They think it is worth while, even when they know that there are other people who can't be bothered.

This is where virtue ethics comes in. Virtue ethics means that we try to do the right thing even when other people do not, even when the consequences seem insignificant in the grand scheme of things, because that is the kind of person that we want to be. Virtue ethics has a very important part to play in caring for the Earth.

There is an important role for governments. At home, they can encourage environmentally friendly behaviour. On the world stage, they can negotiate international agreements. Industry also has an important role, in developing environmentally friendly technologies. But even here, the role of individual people is decisive. Government can only lead where the people are willing to follow; and there is no point industry developing new technologies and new products if people will not buy them. And, as I have said before, you can't legislate for virtue.

### **Conclusions**

That almost completes my free thinking for this morning. I hope that one thing that has emerged is that on ethical matters there is a huge amount of common ground between humanists and religious believers. This applies particularly on social and political issues, questions of public morality. Believers and non-believers can share an understanding of moral principle, consequentialist ethics and virtue ethics and can discuss ethical matters based on these concepts.

One important thing we share is the conviction that ethics matters. Humanists and religious believers can join forces to remind people that we are moral creatures, capable of change, and capable of moral thinking and living. Humanists can tell the world boldly that moral thinking is not just for religious people: it is for everyone.

There is another thing on which there is very wide agreement. Moralists and reprobates alike all seem to think that a sinful life is so much more fun, so much more satisfying, than a virtuous one. Morality is irksome. Goodness is boring. Perhaps it is time that we questioned these assumptions.

So, ladies and gentlemen, it is time to hand over to you, and I look forward to hearing your comments, ideas and questions. Thank you.