

16+ Ethics

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Introduction

Welcome to our Post 16 Ethics section. The articles here have been written by Bob Bowie, Senior Lecturer in Religious Education Post Graduate Initial Teacher Education at Canterbury Christ Church University.

Theory

Exploring Ethical Theories 1

When examining ethical theories, we have a number of options. We could simply describe the theory and identify the weak points (what it doesn't seem to cater for) and the strengths (what it seems good at doing). So, for example, we might think that utilitarianism is particularly bad at defining the rights of a minority group because it tends towards the majority's interests, but is good in public service management where tax spending should benefit as many people as possible, or as many of the more needy people as possible (through health, education and social care, for instance). A theory such as natural law seems very good at providing clear guidance for knowing what is right and wrong and guidance on how to build a strong community, but it seems to have quite a narrow view of what human nature is so doesn't seem to be helpful for those who seem quite different from what is commonly believed to be the norm.

A second way to judge an ethical theory is by testing it on issues. This is popular in some AS/A2 level examination papers which might ask you to apply Kant to the question of a right to abortion on demand. In this kind of examination we see what bits of the ethical theory tell us about how we might decide what is right in the example dilemma, and then look to see what the ethical theory does well in that process, and what it falls short on.

Here is a third option which comes from Steven Tipton (*Getting saved from the sixties. Moral Meaning in Conversion and Cultural Change* (Los Angeles and London: University of California, 1984). Tipton provides an analysis of the exercise of authority and judgement. In other words, a basis on which we might pick apart two of the really important parts of moral decision making – what the source of authority is, and how we decide, or judge what to do, or what is right.

Tipton's system is based around 5 basic questions which you can ask of a theory:

- 1) How is the theory oriented towards moral knowledge?
- 2) How does the theory pose the question "what should I do"?
- 3) How can an action be determined to be right by the theory?
- 4) What sort of character trait does the theory uphold?
- 5) How does the theory resolve disagreement?
- 6) To what extent does the theory offer specific moral guidance on given acts?

You can ask these questions of any ethical system to try and pick apart the elements and workings of the theory in very specific and applied ways. This should throw up far more useful pieces of information about areas of strength and weakness in the workings of the theory and its presuppositions.

Tipton also proposes four styles in his 'taxonomy' (a kind of classification system) into which he groups ethical theories. Now you can consider an ethical theory under Tipton's taxonomy and how well it holds up. He distinguishes between four ideal styles of ethical evaluation which ethical theories tend to fit into

- a. Authoritative
- b. Regular
- c. Consequential (or utilitarian)
- d. And expressive

These four styles constitute a taxonomy, a pattern of classification with a number of dimensions based on giving answers to questions. Ethical theories tend to fit into one or other category.

In each answer to a question, apart from the last, the order of answers reflect the kind of ideal style listed above (a-d).

What is the general orientation and kind of knowledge in the moral theory? Is it inspired by a truth revealed through faith, reason the consequences or intuition?

In posing the moral question 'What should I do?' is it really asking:

- 'What does God command me to do?'
- 'What is the relevant rule or principle?'
- 'What do I want? What act will most satisfy it?', or
- 'What's happening here and now and what is a fitting response?'

What are the 'right making' characteristics of a moral action from the view of this theory? Is it:

- right because the authority commands it
- right because it conforms to the relevant rules and principles
- right because it produces the most good consequences, or
- right because it constitutes the most fitting response to the situation?

Are there any cardinal virtues about a moral person, from the view of this theory?

Is it about...

- obedience to authority
- rationality in working out moral principles and acting on them
- efficiency in maximizing the satisfaction of all desires, or
- the sensitivity of feeling to the situation and response to the person?

How does the theory resolve disagreement? By:

- better understanding of the faith
- better reasoning
- better interpretation of the evidence, or
- better intuition in the social situation

How specific is the theory in prescribing guidance?

- does it contain clear commandments
- does it simply rule out actions which clash with reason
- does it prescribe less as you should follow your intuition and feeling, or
- does it give few prescriptions beyond looking at the results.

In this last case the answers given do not match the order of a-d above.

With Tipton's system we can do a number of things:

1. We can ask an ethical theory the six questions Tipton outlines and consider how effectively the theory answers each. Does this suggest where areas of weakness or strength might lie? Tipton's taxonomy offers language for criticising ethical theories.
2. We can see the extent to which the ethical theories fit into Tipton's four groupings.
3. We can see if we can improve on both Tipton's taxonomy and his groups.

Exploring Ethical Theories 2

Ethical theories can be viewed in different ways and ethical thinkers sometimes have writings which suggest different kinds of ethical thinking.

Situation ethics is quite often called relativist. In fact it is classified as an example of a relativist theory by exam boards and some books. This is not surprising. Situation ethics does not propose definite instructions on right and wrong actions. It is not deontological. Situationism prefers to decide the right and wrong thing according to what is believed to be the most loving thing to do in the particular situation. So the right thing to do is relative to the situation, hence the idea that Situationism is relativistic. This point was made by Joseph Fletcher's critics. And yet there is an aspect of Situationism which is not flexible and that is the principle of doing the thing that will bring about the most loving end. The principle is not flexible in the same way the principle in utilitarianism is not flexible. That principle suggests the right thing to do is that which brings about the greatest good for the greatest number. So the principle can be a fixed principle – an absolute, while the actions classified as right or wrong vary depending upon what is indicated in the principle and the Situation that the principle is being applied.

Sometimes our tendency to want to put things into tidy categories can also distort how we see a Philosopher. Thomas Aquinas, for instance, is usually associated with natural law and 'categorised' as a deontological thinker. Natural law is based on an idea of what it means to be human and the main ways of living that are good for a human. These ways must be followed and so indicate that some actions are good and others bad, depending on whether they support the idea of what it means to be human. However, that is not the only thing that Aquinas thought about moral decision making. When considering war he did not follow this approach precisely. He could have applied natural law to war and concluded that the taking of life is wrong because it opposed the life of human beings. Aquinas notes this but goes on to write about the just war theory which involves a degree of proportionality. Aquinas supports the idea that war can be just if it is by the command of the authority of the sovereign by whose command the war is to be waged, if it is being fought for a just cause and if the intention behind the war is for the advancement of good, or the avoidance of evil. So those who wage war justly aim at peace. Here, Aquinas is taking account of certain external factors, other than the action of killing itself. So he is not being strictly deontological in every action in this case, because he recognizes that there are greater interests in wars which better protect human nature. It is because of this that Aquinas may be interpreted as being a bit more flexible than otherwise thought. Particular situations may require different actions at different times. There is also his writing on conscience and how that might relate to natural law and just war theory. It is not surprising that one of the most brilliant thinkers and writers in Western philosophy and theology should make so many contributions to ethical thinking.

These two examples serve as a warning to be careful about how we categorise theories and thinkers and explain partly why there are so many different views of the people and their ideas.

Four Questions to ask of Ethical Theories

Here are four questions which we can ask of an ethical theory to try and decide what its strengths and limitations might be.

1) *Are the fundamental assumptions made by the ethical theory correct?*

Most ethical theories rest on a set of fundamental assumptions about the world. For instance, utilitarianism, in its hedonistic form, rests on an assumption that human beings pursue pleasure and avoid pain. Natural moral law rests on an assumption that there are clearly observable purposes to human life. We can ask a few questions about this. Firstly is the assertion backed up?

Is there a reasonable argument to show where this claim about 'how things are' comes from? Is it observable or can it be proven in some other way? Is it a very convincing assumption or one that throws up a few problems? Perhaps there is evidence that counters the claim which needs to be dealt with if the assumption is to stand. Perhaps we can agree on what the purpose is of human life, or perhaps there are different views on the question. It might be that an assumption includes something which actually throws up more questions. So the hedonistic utilitarian needs to explain why it is that things that some people avoid because they give pain, others pursue as if it were pleasure. In short, there is some diversity on what gives pleasure and pain. Whether there is a lot of diversity or a little diversity influences how much of a problem it is for the theory. It might be we can find some exceptions but that in the main the assumption holds water. But if there are strong convincing alternatives then we might have a good reason for challenging the theory.

2) *Does the moral theory encourage the kind of abilities or skills needed to do good (by its own definition)?*

This is a more complex question but it really relates to the practicality of the theory. Is it something that could actually operate or is it just a theoretical system to judge moral actions afterwards? Some moral theories seem to require the person to have an extremely detailed 'God's eye view' of the situation. This is true of some forms of utilitarianism but also situation ethics which requires you to have a really sound picture of everything that is going on in the dilemma and what the consequences will be of each option. Some seem to offer an interesting theory about ethics, which doesn't actually encourage good action. So Plato's theory of forms may be true but knowledge of the theory is not likely to help in actual moral decision making. On the other hand virtue theory is focused on developing character traits which will help a person be moral. A theory may not be practical but still could be true. Sometimes the rightness or wrongness of an action can only be established from a historical perspective which sees a whole picture unavailable to the people who actually had to decide what to do at the time. A particular theory may provide what we need to judge whether something was right or wrong, but does not actually encourage people to make the right decision – it doesn't include the mechanisms within to help people make decisions. So this question can be asked of moral theories but we need to decide whether the answer is a blow against the moral theory, or if it just reveals what the theory is good for.

3) *To what extent does the theory take account of human nature?*

Of course we could have a big discussion about what human nature actually is (assuming it exists), but if we are faced with an ethical theory seems to go very much against what is reasonable for a human being to do then we might begin to question whether it is a good theory. One of the problems many people have with Kantian ethics is the fact that he sets human emotion or sentimentality aside. Yet many ethical thinkers and philosophical and religious systems today think that love is a key ingredient in moral decision making and realizing that we have some kind of emotional connection with another person, as a fellow human being for instance, matters. An example of this is revealed when an SS officer, clearing a ghetto and shooting Jewish civilians sees a small girl who is running with her teddy. She dropped the teddy and the SS officer, remembering his mothers teaching on helping children, bent over and picked up the teddy. He then couldn't shoot her. In acting on his upbringing, and the sentimentality which surrounded that, he had affirmed that she was a person, and not some worthless creature. Emotion saved the girl. So encouraging people to push emotions to one side, in a Mr Spock Vulcan sort of way, may not actually be good for us. Some would argue that human beings cannot act dispassionately, that emotions are bound up with knowledge and experience so we cannot detach ourselves from them. Most ethical theories make some assumptions about human nature so exploring what this is can help in evaluating the theory.

4) *Does the theory lend itself to certain kinds of moral dilemmas but not others?*

#I sometimes feel that perhaps Kant would make a very fair judge, I would not put him in charge of a field-hospital in a war zone where he would have to make difficult decisions about limited supplies of medicines and other resources. Some moral theories seem to assume a world in which things are very much black and white and there will be an evaluation of the situation and there will be a good option and a bad option making the choice simple. But what about decisions where there are only two bad options? For instance an example I sometimes give (which is sadly based on a true event) is of the decision of a Damage Control Officer in a naval frigate which has a fire in one section that could spread to another section and destroy the ship. Ships are able to seal sections off and some vessels have powerful fire extinguishers which will put the fire out, but kill anyone in the area. Faced with this sort of decision, perhaps more common in war time, does the theory provide help in guiding the decision or does it object to both options. If it doesn't help then we may question whether it is real-world proof. It's a bit like the driver who is lost and asks for directions to his destination and the person says 'well I wouldn't start from here'. Here is where we are at when faced with a moral decision. Does the theory help or hinder.

So in evaluating moral theories, we need to ask theories questions, digging around inside them for answers. It might be that we end up with some questions about the theory but nothing seems to deliver a killer blow as none of the criticisms seem strong enough to really justify a rejection. We should be cautious about coming to a flippant conclusion and give disproportionate importance to the weakness we have identified. Most theories have critics and criticisms that can be made against them but they still can tell us important and interesting things about morality. But it may be we open up a big problem which must be fixed if the theory is to be used.

The Charter of Compassion

The Charter is 'A call to bring the world together...'. It was launched in 2009 by a multi-faith, multi-national group of religious thinkers and leaders called the Council of Conscience. They reviewed and sorted through the world's contributions and crafted the final Charter. On the website these figures express their commitment to the venture from their own religious perspectives. For example Tariq Ramadan, Professor of Islamic Studies at Oxford University states:

"Everything partakes in the same drive, in the same inspiration: eating, breathing, taking care of one's body, of one's being and of one's inner life are mystical, sacred acts, enabling one to reach an absolute by overcoming the self through Love-Compassion."

Rabbi Awraham Soetendorp, Rabbi of the Reform Jewish Community of The Hague, writes:

"Compassion is not hereditary. It can and therefore must be taught. The teaching of compassion, the exercise of the soul, will open the heart. And then nothing will be impossible."

Sadhvi Chaitanya, Spiritual Director, Arsha Vijan Mandiram writes:

"[The goal of becoming a compassionate person] is achieved through acts of compassion. First those acts are deliberate because nobody wants to be compassionate. It is a religious discipline to practice, and after the practice, it becomes natural, it becomes part of one's nature."

The Charter of Compassion states that the compassion principle is found at the heart of all religious, ethical and spiritual traditions. This principle calls us always to treat all others as we wish to be treated ourselves. This golden rule is a moral requirement to work to end the suffering of others and replace egoism with altruism. This is a leap of the moral imagination. Egoism is an attitude to life centred on self-gratification. Altruism is an other-centred approach. We must shift from thinking in terms of the former, to the latter. The charter continues arguing that we must:

"...honour the inviolable sanctity of every single human being, treating everybody, without exception, with absolute justice, equity and respect."

We must live a life where we refrain in public and private from inflicting pain through word and action, refrain from denigrating others, and refrain from the exploitation of others. These deny the common humanity of others. The Charter calls on everyone to put compassion back into the heart of religion and morality. It acknowledges that this has been lost in some cases. It urges a sympathetic teaching of religions and cultures:

"...to cultivate an informed empathy with the suffering of all human beings — even those regarded as enemies."

The Charter continues to express a compassion centred view of the path to salvation and enlightenment and a world of peace:

"Rooted in a principled determination to transcend selfishness, compassion can break down political, dogmatic, ideological and religious boundaries. Born of our deep interdependence, compassion is essential to human relationships and to a fulfilled humanity. It is the path to enlightenment, and indispensable to the creation of a just economy and a peaceful global community."

The emphasis of the charter is not on thinking, but doing. It is not simply a set of principles but a practical proposal. The organization seek to promote the idea throughout the world, encouraging groups and organizations to take it up.

Read the full text of the Charter and consider what implications it has for your own personal situation and your school or place of work. (charterforcompassion.org) If you had been involved in writing the Charter what would you have included? You could form groups to write your own Charter. Is there another principle that you would put at the centre, or is compassion right?

Choosing Between Unpalatable Options

Science fiction frequently presents ethical dilemmas in ultimate terms. While we should be cautious to recognise the dilemmas are often simplistically rendered in drama they are nevertheless a stark way of focusing on a conflict in principles. Take two examples: one from the *Watchmen* movie and comic book and the other from the BBC's *Torchwood*. Both deal with the political reality of sacrificing human lives for a greater good in utilitarian terms

Example 1: *Watchmen*

The *Watchmen*, a curious dystopian vision of a future of US history in which strange costumed Super Heroes emerged in the 1940s and 50s and helped America to win the Vietnam war. Nixon is still President and the Super Heroes are now retired or working for the government. One, a brilliant scientist, has created the technology to destroy a number of the world's capital cities. He does this, disguising it as coming from another hero (in the movie) as tensions have escalated towards nuclear war between the USSR and USA. Moments before the launch of a nuclear strike the destruction of so many major world capitals causes the USSR and USA to ally their forces against the common enemy and a new era of peacetime begins. The hero scientist with the brilliant mind worked out that the only way to prevent massive thermonuclear war was to tactically present a third common enemy to unite the world. He succeeds, at least for the present, but at the cost of tens of millions of lives. The other heroes are horrified at what the brilliant scientist has done.

Example 2: *Torchwood*

Torchwood presents a similar dilemma but this time the threat is from an over powering enemy which wants live children so they can feed off chemicals released in the children's bodies. It is a horrific vision. The enemy has a virus which it could release to the world if the children are not handed over. There seems no way to challenge the aliens. The British Cabinet are left to work out how to choose children. They use school league tables to work out which children are likely to be least productive. But how to get the schools and families to agree? They tell a lie that there is an inoculation that these children need urgently and they get the help of the army by telling soldiers the truth and guaranteeing the safety of their own children if the soldiers help to round up the others. Faced with annihilation or the sacrifice of many children, they choose the sacrifice as the only responsible thing to do. In the end this disaster is averted by Captain Jack Harkness who uses his own grandson to destroy the aliens. In doing so the child must die. His team are horrified by what he has to do.

In both nightmarish visions a few, or the one, are sacrificed to avert the catastrophic alternative. In both dramas there are those who voice an alternative moral sentiment. It is better that humanity falls, than such a terrible price is paid for survival. Both programmes challenge what is meant by heroism. In both we are left wondering whether the real hero is the person who acted to save humanity by a brutal act. Perhaps this is an example of the difference between good acts and right acts. There is nothing intrinsically good about the murder of innocents but what if that was the only way of reducing the overall death toll? Is it better to do a 'right' but bad thing, or better to allow a 'wrong' and terrible thing to occur?

Then there is the question of what happens to the people after their terrible right but bad acts. Do they become monsters? Captain Jack leaves Earth, never wanting to return. The Brilliant Hero Scientist stays. Is there a price that is paid by the civilizations themselves? What kind of world is it that allows the few to die in the interests of the many?

Of course it is comfortable to treat such moral decision making as a sci-fi drama. But military commanders of soldiers will face terrible moments where they must send men to certain or near certain death, to insure that the battle plan is ultimately won. Politicians have to make calculations about how to allocate a limited budget among an overwhelming need. For instance, there is an increasing pressure for some local authorities to merge homes for the elderly as the larger homes are cheaper to run and budgets are very tight. But to close a home can lead to the elderly residents suffering from the loss of their familiar surroundings and can bring on a death earlier than necessary. One solicitor has made a name for herself by fighting the closures because it is clearly in the interests of residents not to go through the trauma of a move. But if there is no money to pay for it, what then?

This is the conflict between a pragmatic utilitarian ethic and an altruistic and idealist one. How would you act? I for one am glad I do not have to make the decision. There is a saying that when faced with two unpalatable options, the choice should follow your imperative – that which is essential above all else. Perhaps this means sacrificing the few for the many. For some all ethics boils down to a pragmatic realism. Underneath is a view that things cannot be changed – there is no truly just society. The reality is that it is a jungle out there and the fittest and perhaps most vicious, or wealthy, survive.

But against this gloomy presentation of ethics we must pay attention to how human civilization has sought out to alleviate suffering – the anti-slavery movement, the women’s rights movement, the development of liberal democracies where there is more participation in power. The individual people who did extraordinary things to save the lives of other people, such as those who saved Jews and others persecuted by the Nazis.

We could argue that progress is being made towards a better world and that a belief that it is possible to make the world better is essential to keep that progress going.

To Intervene or not to Intervene

The cyclone that struck Burma in May caused terrible devastation, killing many thousands, destroying roads, house, bridges and leaving many in immediate danger of sickness and death. The Disasters Emergency Committee (www.dec.org.uk/item/200), an umbrella organization of overseas aid agencies, has reported that, “On 2 May 2008 at 16.00 local time, Cyclone Nargis ripped across the coast of Myanmar (also known as Burma), bringing misery and devastation to tens of thousands of people.” The Committee make appeals only in cases of serious emergency on a vast scale. The cyclone victims in Burma are (at the time of writing) in desperate need of emergency aid. No single country can manage such a disaster. The international community has responded immediately. However the Burmese government is dragging its heels. The military dictatorship which controls the country does not want foreigners pouring in. They control a closed society and are not prepared to open up, even if doing so will save a significant portion of the civilian population.

So the ethical question for the international community is: At what stage should direct action be taken to try to save the civilian population? Aid agencies confirm that they must work with the agreement of the government and must try all in their power to persuade them to let the help in, but can there come a point when the international community must act?

Writing at this time, the pressure is building. UK Prime Minister Gordon Brown has called what the Burmese government are doing as inhuman action. So when does inhuman action become a crime against humanity? Typically a crime against humanity is a large scale attack or persecution of a people, undermining human dignity. It is an action driven by a government policy.

UN Security Council Resolution 1674 which was adopted by the UN Security Council on 28th April 2006, “reaffirms the provisions of paragraphs 138 and 139 of the 2005 World Summit Outcome Document regarding the responsibility to protect populations from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity” (for links go to en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Crime_against_humanity). Currently the Burmese government are not actively persecuting, but by their active prevention of aid on a suitably large scale, they are certainly indirectly causing the death of civilians on a large scale. First the children, elderly and sick will die. Then the others.

According to the BBC (news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/7406023.stm) France’s UN Envoy, Jean-Maurice Ripert warned that the military’s refusal to allow aid to be delivered “could lead to a true crime against humanity”. Given that the aid is ready and on the borders, if the government was not present the aid would arrive. The only thing stopping the aid is the Burmese military dictatorship. So it could be argued they are directly causing a man made humanitarian crisis.

If the Burmese government do not change their mind then aid drops could take place but the effectiveness will be limited. Should a more direct response be considered? Using just war theory the process for such action can be considered. The action itself could involve ignoring the wishes of the government to stay out. Under normal circumstances a country’s borders are respected.

Firstly a just authority would need to approve such a direct decision. In this case it is the international community in the shape of the UN to decide to act against a member state, through the Security Council, and the role of the International Criminal Court to punish perpetrators of crimes against humanity. These are the competent authorities. It must be the international community’s decision.

The cause must be just. There must be a real and certain danger, and there is to the civilian population in the affected region. There must be a just intention. However much countries may not like the Burmese Dictatorship, it is the danger to civilians that must motivate action.

The action taken by the community must be proportionate. It should be focussed on the alleviation of suffering of the people in the affected area and can only be done if it could not lead to worse things taking place. There must not be any excessive violence, death and damage should be avoided. This is more difficult to judge, especially if the Burmese government activity tried to prevent aid drops or a military action to force aid in.

All possible alternatives must be exhausted first and this is perhaps why, presently, diplomatic efforts are being pursued. There must be a reasonable chance of success. This is difficult to measure, air drops are not that effective but might be better than nothing. A militarily backed intervention could be much more difficult and might lead to worse instability for the whole country.

There is an ethical case for direct military backed emergency aid. But agreement at a diplomatic level is much more likely to succeed quickly, if the agreement can be reached. If not then the ethical thinker is stuck in an unenviable place. Stand by and watch a human caused horror unfolding, or intervene and risk harm.

An Ethical Code for Science

Recently there have been moves to develop an ethical code to help regulate science by The Council for Science and Technology (CST) is the UK government's top-level advisory Body on Science and technology policy issues. The proposed code is based around a number of values:

Rigour, honesty and integrity

- act with skill and care in all scientific work. Maintain up-to-date skills and assist their development in others?
- take steps to prevent corrupt practices and professional misconduct. Declare conflicts of interest
- be alert to the ways in which research derives from and affects the work of other people, and respect the rights and reputations of others.

Respect for life, the law and the public good

- ensure that your work is lawful and justified
- minimise and justify any adverse effect your work may have on people, animals and the natural environment

Responsible communication: listening and informing

- seek to discuss the issues that science raises for society. Listen to the aspirations and concerns of others?
- do not knowingly mislead, or allow others to be misled, about scientific matters. Present and review scientific evidence, theory or interpretation honestly and accurately.

Public concern about science is considerable and not unjustified. People worry about genetic engineering, euthanasia and abortion. To what extent are scientists held to broadly agreed values? Believers with specific ethical systems might feel that science sometimes appears like a runaway train or a slippery slope. There is always something new coming around the corner, some new Frankensteinian creation or development.

This new ethical code might help to reduce that alarm. The values it refers to seem to connect with the ethical concerns that people have with the environment, seem to acknowledge animal rights issues, and includes basic ideas of justice, honesty, clarity and openness. It draws attention to the possible repercussions to others of the work and their rights, and adopts the minimum harm approach.

But perhaps there should also be an ethical code for the public, or at least an agreed rational code. To be prepared to listen and to try to understand what science is offering and how dependent we are on good scientific development, to be cautious about reacting emotively before considering the facts and be willing to accept that privately held moral views have to be argued for in a democratic society. The fact that I hold something to be sacred does not mean everyone must agree with me. Others who don't

agree should show some respect for my views but if they have good reason to reject them they have a responsibility to the greater good their work is in search of, to do so.

Professional Ethics, Crimes and Misdemeanors

There is something reassuring about a person in a white coat with a clipboard and probably glasses. Trust the expert. They know what they are talking about. We trust scientists and researchers believing them to be honest reasonable people. Three recent media stories raise questions about the trusting of those in positions of scientific responsibility and the importance of ethics in science.

Firstly there are the climate scientists who seem to suggest they were interested in keeping out of journals research that did not fit the bigger picture of climate change they believed in. The shock of this seems to have caused an increase in people who are skeptical that climate change is real ([Seenews.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/sci/tech/8500443.stm](http://www.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/sci/tech/8500443.stm)). The process of publishing research is complex but to get an article into a journal the article is anonymously judged, usually by two reviewers who are also specialists in the field. Research that supports previously supported views might be easier to get published than that which proposes contrary views. A new argument that overturns other arguments needs to be convincing enough to be taken seriously. We have to hope that professional reputations and egos do not cloud the judgement of academic reviewers and journal editors. Mistakes can be made. The article which suggested a link between the MMR vaccine and autism got into an important medical journal but the research was later found to be flawed and ethically compromised. This led to many children suffering unnecessary conditions they would otherwise have been protected from as concerned mothers withdrew their children from vaccination programmes. The article has now been retracted as false.

(See [news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/health/8493753.stm](http://www.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/health/8493753.stm) and [news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/health/8483865.stm](http://www.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/health/8483865.stm) for information about how the research rules were broken.)

A third case is the recent report into the activity of two 18th century pioneers in medical research into the care of women in childbirth. William Hunter and William Smellie, it is now claimed in a research report, had pregnant women murdered so they could carry out their autopsies. They wanted to be the greatest authorities of the time and had a great rivalry between them and so needed dozens of women to conduct their research (www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2010/feb/07/british-obstetrics-founders-murders-claim).

These three cases illustrate different examples of ethical and unethical dimensions of science. I may make discoveries but only through immoral actions. I may not allow articles which undermine my career to be published, even if they are good pieces of research. I may seek to publish research that I know is compromised, in the pursuit of my career, and at the expense of public knowledge and in some cases health. Professional ethics are at the heart of these actions but so is a duty on the public to treat media accounts of research carefully. A dramatic story sells more papers than a non-dramatic one. There is a political dimension here too. An unpleasant reality that inconveniently requires us to change our lives is not a pill a politician wants to give the people. A politician must get elected; newspapers must sell stories that appeal to the interests of the readers. This is murky ethical territory and it is the duty of an ethically literate person to dig much deeper than casual reading.

Displaying Is Relativism Unethical?

Relativism could be defined as follows: when we decide that a course of action is moral, it is not objectively true but related to some background situation, a local cultural preference or a particular situation. With relativism, what counts as truth is what we regard as true or rational by our local standards. Relativism challenges the possibility of an absolute conception of truth and the possibility of reaching any absolute conception of truth. In other words it could be that certain things are true but that we can never actually reach that truth. The Sophist Protagoras reportedly said that man is the measure of all things. Now it seems reasonable that my particular view of a piece of music or whether a wind is hot or cold, depends on my outlook – what I am used to and what I like. The Greeks took this idea and moved it on into the moral domain.

There is a great deal of negativity towards relativism. People seem to be rather reluctant to accept the idea that right and wrong are not things which we can use to label certain actions or behaviours or attitudes. Adults in particular seem to want schools to teach pupils the difference between right and wrong. Our laws indicate a view of what should be permitted and what should be restricted. In other words, it is one thing to hold an individual preference or view but as soon as we are talking about groups of people, relativism starts to look quite suspect. In an age of human rights when we are used to seeing things on TV from far off

places that seem wrong, we can feel very strongly about that. It seems to be wrong. We call on human rights as something that should be for all, or perhaps just an idea of a basic natural sense of justice and injustice.

The problem is that cultures are different and it is not always straightforward whether we have a good position to judge others. A society which has great freedom for men and women, and correspondingly few social obligations to control for instance the way in which relationships can be made and broken, might look down on a society which has limitations on those freedoms and quite a lot of social control, on the role of women and the prescription of heterosexuality as a norm. On the other hand the more controlling society might have stronger family cohesion and might look at the family and social breakdown found in the more liberal society as the source of problems. Each perspective is conditioned. Where is the position of objectivity, or neutrality? Perhaps the strength of relativism is that it can consider both perspectives and actually discern more than a position locked to one truth would be able. This a possible virtue of relativism.

Perhaps we need to be much more suspicious of what certain groups or authorities say truth is at all. Perhaps we need to take responsibility for finding truth for ourselves. Truth might be much more difficult to tie down and should be much more highly valued than some of the previous narratives or stories from religious, political or philosophical traditions. This kind of relativism means that we do judge others, and we do make decisions about moral conduct, but that we see ourselves as having a very important responsibility in discerning those things, rather than relying on ready made answers. However there is a tendency to slip from this to 'Anything goes' which seems much more frightening. There are no controls, no truth, no limits. It is not clear how relativism can avoid this slip except that it suggests someone who has not taken serious responsibility for conduct and judgement. For this reason, relativism is unlikely to become popular for parents who worry about their children, for politicians who have responsibility for the protection of the people who elect them, and for religious people who have a sincere conviction that their religion offers the truth.

Thinkers

Aristotle and happiness – Nicomachean Ethics

Aristotle believed that happiness was the supreme good, but that this was no platitude. By happiness he means grasping the function of man. This human good is "activity of soul in conformity with excellence". Of course our experience of what makes us happy, what gives us pleasure, may be of things which are in conflict with other things – perhaps alcohol and drugs might be examples of such pleasures. These are in conflict with other things such as health because they are not natural pleasures. Natural pleasures and naturally pleasant. Excellent actions must be in themselves pleasant and they must be good and noble.

Aristotle goes on to argue that moral virtue comes as a result of habit. Morality does not rise up out of nature. Nature gives us the capacity to receive moral virtue. Someone who has well formed habits will delight in his or her ability to abstain from bodily pleasures. It is not enough to abstain and feel annoyed by the abstention – that is self-indulgent. The one who faces danger without pain is brave.

Excellence is a state concerned with choice, our choice, lying in the mean along a plane which has two vices, one at each end. At one end there is excess and at the other defect. We can have not enough, and we can have too much. We have the power to choose to practice at being better, at reaching the mean point in a number of virtues which Aristotle defines. By practice we improve. By being virtuous we become more virtuous.

Interestingly Aristotle notes that the point of mean, the perfect position, is relative to us. He is different from the absolutist Plato, who had a universal definition of good beyond the material world. Aristotle is a relativist of a sort. Perfect societies might not all look the same – there could be different ways different societies could live well. There are different expectations that can be placed on people in terms of how they may develop their virtues. The old, young and sick must have differentiated expectations. The possibility of this kind of plurality of excellent societies is one that we might reflect upon in an age where there seems again to be a conflict in cultures.

Thomas Aquinas

A brilliant theologian and philosopher, Aquinas was a monk and a scholar and his writings have contributed to thinking on philosophy and ethics, as well as theology. This profile will concern his principle contributions to ethics in natural law, conscience, virtue theory and proportionalism (as found in his Just War Theory).

One of Aquinas' legacies is in his development of the natural moral law theory, through which he tried to construct an idea of what it was to be human. In this he was building on earlier ideas which dated back to Greek times which reflected an idea of a divine law over and above any human law which had to be respected. Aquinas' understanding was that there was a concrete idea of what it was to be human and that this manifested itself in how people should live. He concluded that the governing principles of human law were to preserve your life (which had principle status), procreate, educate children, worship God and live in society. Moral actions (for Aquinas was a deontologist, believing that actions were intrinsically good or bad) were determined to be good depending on whether they were in accordance with one of these precepts. Critically, Aquinas felt this Natural Law did not depend on knowledge of Holy Scripture but could be deduced through reason. This ethical thinking has largely informed Catholic Moral thought today, but it is not Aquinas' only ethical contribution.

Aquinas' thinking on conscience is also important. Aquinas argued that conscience is the power of reason. It is a device or faculty for distinguishing right from wrong rather than an inner knowledge of the kind suggested by other early Christian thinkers. He thought people tended towards goodness and away from evil (he called this the 'synderesis rule'). Aquinas identified conscience as the power of reason for working out what was good and what was evil. At times people do bad things because they make an error in the process of discriminating good from ill. They pursue something which is apparently good but in fact is not truly good – their conscience has made a mistake. Consequently, a wrong done due to a faulty conscience is not morally blameworthy. He illustrates this with the curious example; if a man sleeps with another man's wife thinking she was his wife, then he is not morally blameworthy because he was not free to do good.

Conscience is 'reason making right decisions' and not a voice giving us commands as suggested by the later Bishop Butler. Conscience deliberates between good and bad. Aquinas notes two dimensions of moral decision making, "Man's reasoning is a kind of movement which begins with the understanding of certain things that are naturally known as immutable principles without investigation. It ends in the intellectual activity by which we make judgments on the basis of those principles..." (Summa Theologica, 1-1, Qu.79) synderesis is right reason, the awareness of the moral principle to do good and avoid evil. Conscientia distinguishes between right and wrong and also makes moral decisions.

Aquinas' thinking on conscience provides an interesting background in which to place his natural moral law theory for it sheds more light on the process of moral decision making and the responsibility and the authority people have for their moral actions, properly deliberated upon, even if ultimately wrong. This sensitivity is expressed even more acutely in his thinking on the just war, in which he departed from absolute notions and cultivated a more proportionate understanding of the application of moral rules to a situation. In his thinking about war he drew on some of St Augustine's statements and developed them further. He identified three necessary conditions for a just war: It had to be approved by an authorized authority which acts for the common good, as opposed to an illegitimate power acting for partial interests; for a just cause, rather than simple personal or national gain, "that those who are attacked, should be attacked because they deserve it on account of some fault"; and rightful intention uncorrupted by hidden motives. It must be for the furthering of some good or an avoidance of some evil.

Aquinas shows an acute sensitivity to politics which demonstrates, still in the current age, an ability to give explanations for war at the time which cloud true motivations. His moral thinking about war, like that of conscience, is concerned with inner motivations as well as outward actions. What is interesting is that it brings into the moral framework conditionality. If the criteria for justice are fulfilled the war is justified. The presence of these conditions or qualifications in both his thinking on war and conscience show the sensitivity that Aquinas knew was involved in moral decision making, which is sometimes lost when appeals are made to his teaching on natural law alone. Aquinas was also aware that moral behaviour was linked to character and he recalled in his writings the work of Aristotle on the virtues and vices. So in representing Aquinas' ethical thinking it is important to take account of all his ethical work, rather than simply one component of it.

Profile: John Stuart Mill

Mill's contribution to ethical thinking is as extraordinarily significant as his contributions across the board. As a child he read ancient Greek and Latin texts and as an adult made significant contributions to thinking about liberty, women's rights and utilitarianism.

Mill's writing and thinking *On Liberty* is a founding text for modern British and American politics on the relationship between the individual and society and the limitations that society has to exercise over individuals. The text *On Liberty* is an outspoken defense of free speech. Mill's thinking was decidedly weighted towards the individual. An individual thinker and individuality is an asset to society, "Whatever crushes individuality is despotism, by whatever name it may be called and whether it professes to be enforcing the will of God or the injunctions of men." Mill said, "In this age, the man who dares to think for himself and to act independently does a service to his race" and, "If all mankind minus one were of one opinion, mankind would be no more justified in silencing that one person than he, if he had the power, would be justified in silencing mankind." He was suspicious of the power of the state unduly restricting a person's liberty. He wrote "The worth of the state, in the long run, is the worth of the individuals composing it" and he put it another way, "The individual is not accountable to society for his actions in so far as these concern the interests of no person but himself."

The argument that people should be allowed to do whatever they want as long as they do not harm another stresses the freedom of the individual to be as free as they can without limiting the freedom of another. He wrote, "The only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilized community against his will is to prevent harm to others." and, "The liberty of the individual must be thus far limited; he must not make himself a nuisance to other people."

This idea finds its way into all sorts of modern politics and ethical thinking. For instance, in a recent debate about Muslim women wearing the veil, politicians expressed the concern that people should be free to do what they want, allowing that the rights of others be preserved. Human rights legislation embraces this idea and it can be seen in discussions about the importance of having a small state, rather than a 'nanny state'.

The absolute value of the individual that Mill expressed is apparent in his radical thinking about women. He argues that, "the legal subordination of one sex to the other – is wrong in itself, and now one of the chief hindrances to human improvement; and that it ought to be replaced by a principle of perfect equality, admitting no power or privilege on the one side, nor disability on the other." Inequality has no place in the modern world. He argued for the right to vote for women, both in his writings and also in Parliament in his role as an MP and all this in the nineteenth century.

Thomas Hobbes

Thomas Hobbes was one of England's most radical political thinkers and well known for his comment that life was solitary, poor, nasty, short and brutish. The most important point that Hobbes makes is that it is always rational to give up all your rights to a sovereign. This is a completely rational decision because the alternative to this is war. People are all very selfish and only pursue the things which are in their own interest. This brings them into conflict with others. We must assume that everyone else has murderous intentions. We are driven by the desire for pleasure and the attempt to avoid pain much as Bentham was later to repeat. The solution is to vest authority in an absolute sovereign. People have freedom in the state of nature. We have a liberty to act at will but our will is not the power to choose between passions but it is the passion. Acting at will is acting on the last passion to bear upon us. This state of nature is a state of freedom but that actually means lawlessness because people simply pursue their desires and interests. To give up all freedoms means all people are brought into unity and in unity you can get something back. The sovereign can allow you to have enough freedom to act so as to ensure the freedoms of others are protected. Hobbes' absolutist ideas were such that he felt democracies are very bad at making decisions. They get things wrong and they keep changing their minds. He felt the sovereign should have absolute power and that the subject had no rights. Hobbes presents us with an interesting challenge today. Today we have the strong notion of individual rights as protections from the state and we would see the giving up of those rights as irrational. Hobbes lived at a time of great strife in England. The Civil War ravaged communities. Tearing apart families, destroying the security that order provided and leaving people exposed to the elements and the viciousness of each other. Rich secure countries find it hard to think about giving up freedoms as a bad thing but poor countries may rarely experience those freedoms. Democracy without security comes at an expensive cost and is unstable, as illustrated by Iraq. Even rich countries today are thinking seriously about restricting rights and individual freedoms for the protection of all. Under new laws, protesters within a kilometer of the Houses of Parliament or close to number 10 can be

moved on for security reasons, even though they have theoretical democratic rights to protest. A woman was arrested and convicted of an offence for reading a list of the names of killed British troops within earshot of number 10. The extent to which we might agree with the decision to arrest the protester might be linked to the extent to which we agree with Hobbes about the dangers of individuals acting freely and the need for a powerful government to keep us all safe.

Zygmund Bauman: ethics for postmodernity

Zygmund Bauman may not be a name many students or teachers of AS/A2 level ethics are familiar with. He is, after all, an eminent sociologist, rather than a traditional philosopher. More than that, his concern is with the world of postmodernity, the world which he believes we now inhabit which is characterised by ambiguity and uncertainty. It is not a world which easily falls into a clear and concrete philosophical or theological order. It is through this concern that he has written a heavy critique of traditional ethics of most kinds and traditional sources of moral authority. He is a lightning rod for ethics which is why it is important that his ideas are explored. The kind of criticism which he makes of ethics, which is sociological, philosophical and political, is important in the evaluation of the classic ethical theories, from Aquinas to Bentham, Kant to Ayer, and MacIntyre to boot. His arguments offer us a toolkit for investigating these classical ethical ways of thinking.

In his classic work, *Post Modern Ethics* and partner volume, *Life in Fragments*, he developed his attack. On page 10 of *Post Modern Ethics* he lays into the idea of granting authority to the moral wise, "If philosophers, educators, and preachers make ethics their concern, this is precisely because none of them would entrust judgement of right and wrong to the people themselves or would recognize, without further investigation, the authority of their beliefs on the matter". He is profoundly suspicious of the very practice of high ethics as he sees it as a tool for undermining the status and responsibility of the people.

"Only ethics can say what really ought to be done so that the good be served. Ideally, ethics is a code of law that prescribes correct behaviour 'universally' "that is, for all people at all times; one that sets apart good from evil once for all and everybody. This is precisely why the spelling out of ethical prescriptions needs to be a job of special people like philosophers, educators and preachers."

These special people have a position of authority over ordinary people. We are left to carry on applying rules of thumb that we cling to, given us by the moral authority which has legal and judicial weight. In other words the kind of moral behaviour which ethical experts tend to offer is one governed by law. Those experts also govern how good the people are at following these moral laws. Their authority comes from having special access to knowledge not available to ordinary people. They gain it by communing with the spirits of the ancestors, studying the holy scriptures, or unraveling the dictates of Reason.

Bauman feels this approach embraces a derogatory view of the 'ethical competence' of ordinary people in ordinary circumstances. We are impotent in the face of these experts who we depend upon and must go to for guidance. What is more the kinds of ethics the "experts" come up with are distanced from the hurly burly of real life. It is developed in the rarefied environment of university philosophy or theology departments. We live in the muddy, ambiguous world of real life where applying these sorts of rules seems much more difficult than in the carefully worked out calculations the experts made. What is more, simply following laws laid down doesn't help us learn to take responsibility for making moral decisions ourselves. Quite the reverse is true. We are inducted into becoming dependent on the wise, but when we are alone in the world, having to act, we do not have our experts at hand to help.

One last aspect of his criticism is the role of community in expressing and organising morality. Moral rules are seen as the ways in which society organises and orders itself. We see religions encouraging their believers to live by their moral systems, politicians asking for people to uphold the common good, live by the agreed values of society. However, Bauman reminds us that being good sometimes means opposing the moral standards of the community, not least in Nazi Germany. So for society to be morally fit, it needs to encourage a willingness to stand against the common accepted view.

Bauman's contribution is to challenge the nature of ethics itself and the power relationships which seem to be implied in the kinds of systems which ethics has classically looked to. In any ethical theory, we can ask, does the theory encourage moral responsibility, does the theory encourage the idea that must take moral responsibility for our actions and judgements, or does it encourage us to defer to others, or do what we are told.

Profile: Peter Singer

Peter Singer is an Australian philosopher who is famous in philosophical circles for his preference utilitarian theory, and more generally for some of the radical implications of this theory, such as his views on animal liberation and abortion.

Who is deserving of moral consideration?

His book, *Animal Liberation* (1975) began by moving from women's rights to animal rights. He comments on a criticism made of Mary Wollenscraft's case for women's rights, that were one to follow this argument one would give rights to brutes. Singer widens the circle of moral consideration from women to animals. Essentially he developed an argument that they should have equal consideration. Failure to do so was an example of speciesism, discrimination on the basis of species. He also stressed that the reason for giving animals equal consideration was that they could feel pain, not that they had a level of intelligence, though he notes some of the great apes have shown considerable intelligence through specially developed communication systems.

"All the arguments to prove man's superiority cannot shatter this hard fact: in suffering the animals are our equals." (Singer, 1975)

We should not show mentally 'retarded' human beings less consideration than others. So we cannot give moral significance only to those creatures who have high intelligence or mental capability. In fact we tend to give even more consideration to humans that have not yet developed high levels of intelligence or ability such as newborn babies. However there is still a degree of calculation going on and some have pointed out that under Singer's equal consideration system an animal suffering great pain is more deserving of action than a human suffering a little pain. Many animals lives together may in fact be worth a human life. In short there is no intrinsic or inviolable aspect of Singer's theory. He does not give human beings a unique moral status and there might always be a greater good that justifies neglecting a human.

"Animal Liberation will require greater altruism on the part of human beings than any other liberation movement. The animals themselves are incapable of demanding their own liberation, or of protesting against their condition with votes, demonstrations, or bombs. Human beings have the power to continue to oppress other species forever, or until we make this planet unsuitable for living beings." (Singer, 1975)

How do we apply equal consideration?

Equal consideration of interests does not mean equal treatment of all those with interests. Different interests warrant different treatment. Everyone has an interest in avoiding pain while few have an interest in developing their abilities. A starving person and a hungry person both have a interest in food but the starving person's interest demands more urgent treatment.

Which interests are more important?

Singer suggests a number:

Avoiding pain

Developing one's abilities

Basic needs for food and shelter

Enjoying personal relationships

Being free to pursue projects

Above all else, a capacity for suffering or the enjoyment of happiness is the thing that qualifies a being for equal consideration. Trivial interests and pleasures do not have any priority.

Singer does think that ethics have a degree of universality. Ethical conduct is justifiable if it addresses a larger audience. One must love thy neighbour as thyself, by giving others equal interest to oneself.

Singer and Abortion

For Singer, one's right to life is intrinsically bound with one's ability to hold preferences, which means it is linked to the extent to which a being can feel pain or pleasure. Singer thinks that the human being develops gradually, that it becomes more human

and alive at some point after conception making it almost impossible to identify the precise moment. However, he is more controversial than some opponents of abortion because he rejects the claim that it is wrong to take innocent life:

“[The argument that a fetus is not alive] is a resort to a convenient fiction that turns an evidently living being into one that legally is not alive. Instead of accepting such fictions, we should recognise that the fact that a being is human, and alive, does not in itself tell us whether it is wrong to take that being’s life.”

It is the weight of the preference of the mother against the preference of the fetus that should be weighed. As a capacity to experience suffering increases with growth the grown and born mother will have a much greater capacity than the fetus, whose preferences are only potential at this stage. Abortion is morally permissible, therefore. More radically, Singer applies this to newborns who he determines lack essential characteristics of personhood including rationality, autonomy and self-consciousness. Killing a newborn, he thinks, is not the same as killing a born being.

Singer’s most recent book, *The Life You Can Save*, makes the argument that it is a clear-cut moral imperative for citizens of developed countries to give more to charitable causes that help the poor. While Singer acknowledges the problems inherent in aid and charity of ensuring that money goes where it is most needed and used effectively, his original premise (that people should give more) is not reconciled with these problems in mind

Singer and Poverty

Singer applies his theory brutally to the rich. If you can save the life of a poor person on the other side of the world by not going to restaurants or buying fancy clothes then you should. If you don’t do this you are a bad person. The inequalities between rich and poor in the world are obscene. You should give at the very least, 5% of you income to charity. The use of our money in this way would change lives radically. It is possible to eradicate poverty and we have to do it.

Singer is consistently unwaveringly radical in the application of his ethics to moral issues that face people.

Short Bibliography

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The best website on Singer is: www.utilitarian.net/singer/

It includes lectures and articles.

Common Ground: Singer and Christian ethics

A meeting between Christian ethicists and Peter Singer has resulted in some common ground, as reported by Mark Vernon in the Tablet Newspaper (28th May 2011 www.thetablet.co.uk; www.markvernon.com/friendshiponline/dotclear/index.php?post/2011/05/27/Preferential-treatment).

Peter Singer, the controversial advocate of Preference Utilitarianism, is not a figure one would think to have much common ground with Christians when it comes to matters of ethics. He has specifically rejected and opposed many aspects of Christian thinking on ethics and has ideas about abortion, infanticide and euthanasia that many Christians would find abhorrent.

Singer thinks “Once we admit that Darwin was right when he argued that human ethics evolved from the social instincts that we inherited from our non-human ancestors, we can put aside the hypothesis of a divine origin for ethics.”

He views Christianity as a system of making people do things because of a fear of punishment and out of a desire for salvation. He sees within the New Testament examples of evil done to animals such as when Jesus cast out demons and sent them into a herd of pigs.

Though a utilitarian, Singer’s precise form of utilitarianism is different from traditional forms such as those of Jeremy Bentham and J S Mill. Traditional forms say that the choice that brings the greatest pleasure to the greatest number is the good one.

Singer's version, which is called Preference Utilitarianism, is a variation of this. It is not focussed on pleasure, something that is often quite difficult to define, but people's preferences. Preference utilitarianism seeks to find out how such preferences should be weighed against those of other people. One person's preferences should not count for more than another's. This requires some empathy. We have to put ourselves in the shoes of others. We have to take account of their interests, their preferences. This act of empathy is required also in Christian ethics, in the commandment to love one's neighbour and do unto them what you would wish they do unto you. Singer gives away a third of his income to charity and encourages others to do the same, something that Christians would approve of.

Singer is also well known for his views on animal ethics and his concern, in particular, for the industrial slaughter of huge numbers of sentient animals for food and other products. Singer has argued that we must live more simply and consume less. These themes are also shared by many Christian ethicists who argue that humans should be just stewards of creation and should avoid over consumption.

So Singer advocates compassionate empathy in his ethical system and self-sacrifice and charity; virtues and principles that Christians would support. However there are differences. Singer's view about animals extends further to give them moral significance especially when they show signs of personhood. He believes that humans are not the only persons. Christian ethicists tend to give moral importance to human beings over other living things because humans are made in the image and likeness of God and also because God became man. These two doctrines elevate human standing to a level above the other creatures. Human beings are identified as uniquely special in the moral economy.

The divide increases when it comes to questions of euthanasia, abortion and infanticide. Singer holds controversial views on these because he does not believe humans always have personhood. It arrives in later stages of development than conception and so the preferences of others, such as the mother, override those of the unborn or even the newly-born. Christian ethics have revealed absolutes such as those about the sanctity of life and the prohibition of certain specific actions such as murder. Here, Preference utilitarianism is different. It has no revealed absolutes and this leads to the essential conflicts between Singer and Christian ethics, over those things which are strongly prohibited by sacred texts and beliefs.

You can watch recordings from the conference here: mcdonaldcentre.org.uk/resources/peter-singer-conference/

It is important to be able to identify features of ethical theories and systems which are common, even when the theories are characterized as opposing. This shows a deeper understanding of the processes involved in ethical systems and precisely where the differences and similarities are.

Philippa Foot, Virtue & Trolley Bus Thought Experiment

Philippa Foot was responsible for starting a new ethical movement: virtue which influenced Elizabeth Anscombe and Alasdair MacIntyre. She was reacting against A J Ayer and R M Hare (emotivism and prescriptivism respectively). Ayer and Hare both thought that morality was really about prescribing ways of acting that were approved in some way. For example for Ayer the moral prescriptions merely expressed feelings for, or against, a moral behaviour and therefore was subjective. She also opposed deontology, ethics focused on actions, and utilitarianism, ethics focused on calculating the best end. She was also critical of determinist thinking, but the focus here is on her virtue theory.

Foot thought no one would follow moral prescriptions unless it was thought they were in some way related to human well-being or human harm. She opposed subjectivist accounts of moral philosophy. She proposed a no-nonsense approach thinking that moral philosophy had lost touch with real life. She worked with Elisabeth Anscombe. Together they believed that morals were not a matter of etiquette or personal opinion. Morality is about how to live virtuously, which for Foot meant in a well rounded and human way. Wisdom and temperance were important human virtues but often we follow those people who have neither. Ethics should not be focused on particular actions or particular rules but on the whole person and therefore being moral was not about instances but a lifelong process. Foot also took a modest approach to her ethics. She did not think an ethical theory could fully capture the whole moral picture and nor could deeply obscure penetrating theorization.

Philippa Foot is also well known for her trolley bus thought experiment, an example she used to express moral permissibility.

A trolley is running out of control down a track. In its path are five people who have been tied to the track by a mad philosopher. Fortunately, you could flip a switch, which will lead the trolley down a different track to safety. Unfortunately, there is a single person tied to that track. Should you flip the switch or do nothing? (Philippa Foot, *The Problem of Abortion and the Doctrine of the Double Effect in VIRTUES and Vices* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1978).)

In the example a breakless trolley-bus, the driver can swap some points over and change the course of the out of control vehicle. If he leaves it on the present course five people will be hit. By swapping the points only one person will be hit. This thought experiment was later developed with the introduction of a 'fat person'. In the new version you switch the points onto a siding which runs back onto the main track and would hit the five people, however, a fat person is on the other line and because they are fat they will stop the train.

Mary Warnock and the Right to Abortion

Mary Warnock has long defended a woman's right to abortion. As a leading moral philosopher she has consistently engaged in debates about moral issues. While much moral philosophy became focused on the linguistics of morality, the meta-ethical questions of the meaning of moral terms, early in her career she tended towards a different approach. In her book *Ethics Since 1900* (1960, Oxford University Press, Oxford) she made this clear. She wrote in her conclusion of the survey of the meta-ethics of the 20th century:

"One of the consequences of treating ethics as the analysis of ethical language is... that it leads to the increasing triviality of the subject. This is not a general criticism of linguistic analysis but only of this method applied to ethics. In ethics, alone among the branches of philosophical study, the subject matter is not so much the categories we use to describe or to learn about the world, as our own impact upon the world, our relation to other people and our attitude to our situation and our life." (pp.202-203)

Her engagement in ethics is apparent from her recent contribution to the current abortion debate. The Human Fertilisation and Embryology Bill is passing through Parliament and there is an effort to modify the bill in a way that will restrict abortion by lowering the legal limit to abortion from 24 weeks to 22 weeks, on the basis that babies over 22 weeks may survive birth. Warnock is opposed to any change in the law. She argues, in an article in the *Observer* newspaper (Sunday May 18th) that this should not happen for a number of reasons. It is likely that babies born will be brain damaged. It is also likely that women who want an abortion at that stage will simply do what they did before abortion was legal, and find other, probably unsafe backstreet solutions. She also argues that a law cannot be based on what is largely a religious belief.

If the argument is about vulnerable members of society then perhaps some justification can be found. If we think that abortion at 22 weeks is infanticide then, as a civilised society, we must prohibit it. There is something natural about trying to save the most vulnerable and surely 22 week old babies fall into this category. However, Warnock says we must consider the women:

"Many of them will be young and a significant number still of school age. Many will have refused to acknowledge that they were pregnant for as long as it was possible to deny it to themselves. Some may not have known they were pregnant. A combination of ignorance and fear, shame and hopelessness may have prevented their seeking either an abortion or support from their parents as the weeks went by. Some of them will, in any case, have left home and be living on the streets. Few will have any contact with the father of their baby; some may not even know who he is. ... Whatever their precise circumstances, these mothers are in a desperate position. Most women deplore the need for even an early abortion, whether they regret it later or not. Few take the decision lightly. But this particular group of mothers is, most of all, to be pitied. They are the vulnerable ones." (To read the full article go to: www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2008/may/18/health.health, 'Women, not the unborn, deserve our protection', *The Observer*, Sunday, May 18 2008.)

Warnock argues that the quality of life of the living is the priority. Warnock's argument comes from within a powerful argument about the place of women in society. It is part of the wider tradition that argues that without reproductive rights, women cannot have basic rights. It is in part an extension of the observation that women still do not have equality, that many institutions (including the law and religion) are patriarchal.

However, it would be a mistake to try and generalise about Warnock. She is not a situationist, or a strong advocate of rights based ethics. In her book, *Making babies: Is there a right to have children*, (2002, Oxford University Press, Oxford) she writes:

“We must beware of the danger of confusing what is passionately and deeply wanted with what is right. It is good if possible, and if no harm to others ensues, to try to get people what they very much want. But if they fail to get what they want they may be disappointed, but they have not, so far, been wronged.” (p.113)

She goes on to voice another concern that obsessions about rights might mean that we move our attention, from the thing that has wronged us, to the idea that have not got what we want. This would be deplorable, she writes.

Joseph Fletcher 1905 – 1991

The inventor of the ethical theory, situation ethics, or situationism or situational ethics in the 1960s, his classic work was the book of the theory, *Situation Ethics: The New Morality* (1966, Philadelphia: Westminster Press). His theory was a radical alternative Christian ethic to the more absolutist ethical theories of conservative Christians.

Traditional Christian ethics expresses a firm morality, based on fixed principles and also fixed ideas of right and wrong. These tend to be drawn, either from the biblical norms found in the Commandments and other teachings, or based on them, or (in the case of Catholic ethical thinking) in a Natural law ethic. In both traditions, the emphasis is on a deontological ethic, one focussed on judging acts as intrinsically right or wrong depending on whether they go against the norms in the bible or human nature.

Fletcher began his work with an ethical analysis which concluded that legalistic ethics, ethics based on fixed laws, was not in the character of Jesus. Jesus seemed to have ethics which were prepared to go beyond laws. In many cases he broke laws and flew in the face of conventions associating with undesirables. He was very unpopular with the Pharisees because of this. Fletcher argued that Jesus seemed to be motivated by the situation. It wasn't that he was lawless, but his guiding moral principle, unconditional or agape love, worked its way out taking account of the moral situation. It was not bound by what the law said, but what love dictated to achieve the most loving outcome. In this he drew on Paul Tillich who wrote “Love is the ultimate law”.

In contrast with traditional Christian deontological ethics, situationism is teleological. It looks to the end, the most loving end rather than being locked into laws about acts. Fletcher's thinking was accused of being individualistic and relativistic. In a sense it is both, as it is the individual who decides what to do, and what they do is relative to the situation, motivated by a desire to achieve the most loving outcome. But Fletcher argued it was not relativism because love is not relative. Love is absolute, the absolute that has the power to go into situations and change the moral possibilities.

Fletcher took radical approaches to many medical ethical issues such as euthanasia opting for a more considerate moral approach which took account of individuals in difficult dilemmas. He gave moral authority to the individual, just as Kant did. It is the human person that decides on morality. However, while Kant argued that any moral rules had to work in all moral situations, had to be universalisable, Fletcher instead said that the only moral principle that mattered was love. One had to pursue what was required to bring it about in the particular situation. So if it is more loving to help a terminally ill patient in intolerable pain to die than anything else then that is what you should do. You should not stick to a moral law when in front of you someone suffers for the sake of that law. If the concentration camp prisoner is able to prostitute herself to the guards to save herself and her child, and so avoid death, then perhaps that is the most loving thing to do.

Fletcher's ethics were attacked by conventional Christian thinkers and ethical traditions as being individualistic and relativistic. It certainly gives great power to the person and they take responsibility for the moral decisions they make. There is no binding rule to stop actions which some will see as immoral.

'The Lucifer Effect': Professor Philip Zimbardo

What happens when you put good people in a bad place?

Does the inherent goodness of people win out or the badness of the place?

These questions are explored in a new book called *The Lucifer Effect: Understanding How Good People Turn Evil* (Random House, 2007), by Professor Philip Zimbardo. Zimbardo summarizes recent research on the essential factors that lead good

people to engage in evil actions. What he calls a perfect storm of factors. He calls this transformation of human character the 'Lucifer Effect', named after God's favorite angel, Lucifer, who fell from grace.

Zimbardo conducted the infamous study, the Stanford Prison Experiment in 1971. Stanford University turned the basement of the psychology department into a prison. 75 students from all over America were chosen and put through psychological tests. Two dozen of the most normal healthy men were chosen. These people were ordinary good people. They were told they would be participating in a study of prison life. Some were given the role of guards. Others were told to wait in their dormitories and then the city police were used to do very realistic arrests. The prison guards were then left to run the prison. At the end of the first day everything was fine, but by the second day dehumanization had begun. Half way through the experiment homophobia reared its head. By the fifth day, the guards were ordering the prisoners to simulate sodomy and the experiment was abandoned.

The study is not philosophical or religious but psychological. Zimbardo offers a psychological reason for why ordinary people sometimes turn evil and commit acts of unspeakable evil. He is now a key witness for one of the guards at Abu Ghraib accused of atrocities done against the prisoners in Iraq. He argues that when this sort of thing comes up the system tends to blame bad apples. In reality ordinary people put into a bad system will do atrocious things quite predictably. This reflects the power of the situation to dominate individuals. Zimbardo is not excusing good people for doing bad things, moral responsibility remains with the individual. He is much more interested in trying to understand how to change things. If you want to change things you need to know how to avoid situations which create evil circumstances.

In his book Zimbardo also explores the occasional heroic characters. There is always a minority who resist, but heroes go further by challenging the system. Heroes are ordinary people who do extraordinary deeds. You can be perpetrator of evil, you can do nothing, or you can act but on behalf of others rather than yourself. He goes on to ask the question, how do we instill a heroic imagination in everyone to reduce the likelihood of future situations where basically good people end up doing horrific things?

Zimbardo has produced a 'Program to Build Resistance and Resilience' (The Lucifer Effect, Chapter 16) against some of the social and psychological pressures that foster evil. He writes, "The key to resistance lies in development of the three S's – Self-Awareness, Situational Sensitivity, and Street Smarts#. Here are five of them:

- 1) "I made a mistake!" Being able to admit an error and accept it is part of being human and he suggests six magic words: "I'm sorry"; "I apologize"; "Forgive me". Beyond that it is crucial to learn from your mistakes.
- 2) "I am responsible." If I am allowed to avoid my own responsibility then I do not need to worry so much when things start going badly wrong. I am not a back seat driver.
- 3) "I am Me, the best I can be." Anonymity is dangerous. If I put myself into a category – part of a collective or group, rather than an individual, then I begin to hide my individuality behind a corporate facade. Perhaps I feel unable to let the side down, or step out of line. This 'deindividuates' me. It is essential to restate the human connection and individual dignity of all people.
- 4) "I respect Just Authority, but Rebel against Unjust Authority." It is important to critically differentiate between the two. Authority on its own is not enough. It must be just and justified. No mindless obedience. This is challenging especially in organisations such as the military or church, where obedience is a virtue.
- 5) "I want group acceptance, but value my independence." Remember that the pressure to be a 'team player' can lead to an abandonment of personal morality. Sometimes the norm must be rejected.

Zimbardo provides a psychological investigation for the concern thinker Hannah Arendt raised a generation ago, and his observations about the distancing and dehumanization that allows human beings to do horrible things to each other reflects Jonathan Glover's work *Humanity: The Moral History of the Twentieth Century*. Philosophers and moral historians have come to these sorts of conclusions from their own disciplinary standpoints and psychologists do as well. Zimbardo's work is a reminder of the role of psychology in analyzing moral situations. His observations are a challenge to the ability of moral philosophy to provide a complete analysis of ethics. Moral decisions may not come down to Platonic ideas of the good, or Kantian beliefs about the dignity of the individual person, but rather an analysis of human behaviours and the impact institutions and organisations have on that behaviour. The late Pope John Paul II used to talk about something called structural sin an idea which seems at odds with traditions of personal individual moral responsibility. Zimbardo's analysis seems to provide good evidence for the existence of structural sin, and perhaps does indeed show the face of Satan himself in twenty first century understanding.

You can watch, hear and read more about the book at the following website – www.lucifereffect.com

Beyond Freedom and Dignity: B F Skinner

B F Skinner was a professor of psychology at Harvard. Time magazine called him “the most influential of living American psychologists...” (September 20, 1971). He conducted pioneering work on experimental psychology and argued for behaviorism, a view that free will is an illusion. His provocative book, *Beyond Freedom and Dignity*, published in 1971, put forward his controversial case for behaviorism. It was a controversial attack on libertarian thinkers, advocates of autonomy and the idea of autonomous man. He argued that ideas such as individual autonomy, free will, volition, and consciousness act as barriers for advances in technology for controlling human behaviour. This seems a shocking idea. We have come to understand free will as absolutely central to our notion of dignity. When we are controlled and restricted, we lose an essential quality of our humanity. Skinner was looking onto a world threatened by, “Overpopulation, the depletion of resources, the pollution of the environment, and the possibility of a nuclear holocaust – these are the not-so-remote consequences of present courses of action.” (p. 138.) He was trying to conceive of a way to change the behaviours that led to such threats.

Autonomous man is a problem. The traditional view of human beings is that they are free and so they can be held responsible for their actions. Skinner argued that scientific analysis reveals unsuspected controlling relations between behaviour and environment. The evidence for human predictability is becoming more and more convincing. We can predict how many people will go to the seashore when the temperature reaches a certain point, how many will commit suicide and so on. All human behaviour is the product of “operant conditioning”. The functions associated with the idea of “Autonomous Man” are in fact performed by a “reinforcer”. “When a bit of behaviour is followed by a certain kind of consequence, it is more likely to occur again, and a consequence having this effect is called a reinforcer. Food, for example, is a reinforcer to a hungry organism; anything the organism does that is followed by the receipt of food is more, likely to be done again whenever the organism is hungry... . Negative reinforcers are called aversive in the sense that they are the things organisms ‘turn away from.’” (p. 27.) Reinforcers are not the same as actions determined by pain or pleasure. There are positive and negative “reinforcers” in that the latter provokes “counterattack” or rebellion, while the former does not. Both are means of controlling man’s behavior. And he gives the example of labour. “Productive labor, for example, was once the result of punishment: the slave worked to avoid the consequences of not working. Wages exemplify a different principle: a person is paid when he behaves in a given way so that he will continue to behave in that way.” (p. 32.) All human relationships are tools of control.

This shifts responsibility from the individual to those who control the environment which induces such behaviour. After all, if my actions are principally the result of things external to myself, I can hardly be blamed for them. It also raises the question of who is or should be in control of the environment that causes the behaviour and what sort of environment they should construct. Skinner says that we cannot be praised for our virtues nor punished for our failings. The behaviour of a creative genius is determined by “contingencies of reinforcement”. Dignity, which Skinner calls the admiration of others, can be dispensed with as there is no cause to admire people for their behaviour. It is simply vanity.

Morality is exclusively social. Moral principles are inculcated through socially designed contingencies of reinforcement “under which a person is induced to behave for the good of others”. (p. 112.) This is an undiscussed absolute as we can question why people should behave for the good of others. He argues for a simple dualism between man’s two conditioners: social environment and genetic endowment. “The controlling self (the conscience or superego) is of social origin, but the controlled self is more likely to be the product of genetic susceptibilities to reinforcement (the id, or the Old Adam). The controlling self generally represents the interests of others, the controlled self the interests of the individual.” (p. 199.)

Skinner looks over the “the literature of freedom”, the canon of important writings on freedom throughout the ages, such as John Stuart Mill’s essay “On Liberty”. These writings typically come from situations where people are oppressed and while they are important pieces of literature. They all contribute to the redundant idea of moral autonomy, or dignity. Skinner argues that we need to get beyond these ideas as they hinder the prospect of building a better, happier and more organized society by using science to modify human behaviour.

For Skinner, the “Autonomous Man” refers to aspects of consciousness which distinguish it from the instant sensory level of an animal’s consciousness. Specifically this includes reason, mind, values, concepts, thought, judgment, volition, purpose, memory, independence, self-esteem. These ideas are prescientific superstition. In truth, we are completely controllable by control of the environment. “Behavioral technologists” could and should control men inside out effectively creating a new and better species, with a new and better culture. As things are at the moment control is not found where you might expect. “The relation between the controller and the controlled is reciprocal ... The classroom practices of the teacher are shaped and

maintained by the effects on his students. In a very real sense, then, the slave controls the slave driver, the child the parent, the patient the therapist, the citizen the government, the communicant the priest, the employee the employer, and the student the teacher.” (p. 169.)

Skinner is completely deterministic. Human beings are not acting as a result of complex aspects of thought, purpose, values, etc.. Any kind of ethics which does not account for this is useless. Ayn Rand, an advocate of human dignity and autonomy, was highly critical of the book. Skinner does not provide the scientific evidence for his claims in the book itself, and asks the readers to trust in his interpretation of the science. His idea of culture is simplistic – a collection of behaviours, rather than something to do with an idea or people.

Rand argues that the book’s purpose is to clear the way for a dictatorship by eliminating its enemies and to see how much he can get away with. It’s motive power is hatred of man’s mind and virtue (with everything they entail: reason, achievement, independence, enjoyment, moral pride, self-esteem). She responds with a quote from *Les Misérables*, describing the development of an independent young man. Victor Hugo wrote: “... and he blesses God for having given him these two riches which many of the rich are lacking: work, which gives him freedom, and thought, which gives him dignity.”

However, beyond the kind of criticism made by Ayn Rand is a frightening shadow. If the science underpinning Skinner’s argument is correct, a big ‘if’, though one which gains support from the enormous praise he received and standing he had at the time, two questions follow; What on earth are we to make of a value system and justice system which gives great esteem to human dignity, on which human rights are founded and personal moral responsibility an assumption central to most ethical and legal systems? If Skinner is right, is the only ethical response to ensure that the right kind of control is exercised?

Reformed Muslim Ethics: Tariq Ramadan

Tariq Ramadan has been described as a Muslim Martin Luther. He is leading and inspiring a Muslim reformation which might have important implications for Muslim ethics.

Tariq Ramadan does not abandon the Qur’an adopting a liberal view of everything, quite the opposite. Like Luther he looks back to investigate the texts and tries to understand the context of the time in which the Qur’an was given by God. He says he is interested in how we work out the relationship between the text of the Qur’an and the context in which Western Muslims live. In other words, individual Muslims have an important job to do in learning about the Qur’an and understanding how to live out their faith in the modern world. He is critical of some interpretations of the Holy Book which in his eyes incorporate cultural ideas found beyond the Qur’an. For instance, in the case of the Islamic prescription for women to cover their hair. He is critical of the practice in most Islamic-majority countries that take this interpretation and extend it to seclude and segregate women. It is one thing to protect modesty, quite another to conclude that women do not have the right to work. He considers this wrong and against women’s rights. Here there is a lack of understanding of the historical understanding of text and also a failure to realise that the Qur’an is often read through cultural perspectives.

Equally he disputes the view that Muslims should be intolerant of Muslims who change religion. He does not believe they should be killed and agrees with Sufyan Al-Thawri, an 8th-century scholar of Islam. Sufyan Al-Thawri argued that the Qur’an does not prescribe death for someone because he or she is changing religion. The prophet never did such a thing and many people around the prophet changed religions. He never did anything against them.

Tariq Ramadan is also interesting in the topic of homosexuality. When asked about whether someone could be Muslim and gay, he answered by noting that, homosexuality is not perceived by Islam as part of the divine project for men and women and that it is regarded as bad and wrong. However, being Muslim is between the individual and God. In some Christian traditions, the priest or Church mediates that relationship but this is not so in Islam. Being a Muslim is about declaring the shahada – “ I believe there is no god but God and Muhammad is His Messenger”. That makes a person a Muslim and no one has the right to put you outside the realm of Islam.

The Islamic principles that govern human actions rest on the dignity of the human being and that emphasis on dignity is much closer to many other religious ethical systems and secular ones, such as those to do with human rights, than we might at first think.

Issues

Theology and Ethics in Catholic Morality

In the week that the Archdiocese of Los Angeles settled 508 lawsuits brought by victims for £323 million, a pay-out for abuse cases against Priests and Religious, which shatters every known record for Church liability, Rocco Palmo wrote in *The Tablet* 21 July 2007. In the same paper Catholic commentator Clifford Longley takes issues with the Catholic way of doing morality which, he says, makes the victims invisible. What Longley is talking about here is the way sinful actions are responded to theologically. The main concern is saving the sinner who has an immortal soul endangered by their actions, hence the need for confession through which the sinner may repent and find forgiveness. But, Longley argues, where is the victim in this process? Where is the justice? There was a crime done against those children who were abused, as well as against God. It is not just the soul that is in danger but the victims dignity and wellbeing. Yet they do not feature in the process.

Longley argues that there is a lack of rights and justice morality which is concerned for the dignity of the human person, rather than the sinner. Ironically this is something the Church did express during the Vatican II council, which re-clarified Church doctrine. On the first page of the Declaration of Religious Freedom, the Church says the following, "A sense of the dignity of the human person has been impressing itself more and more deeply on the consciousness of contemporary man." (Paul VI, 1965). The Dignity of the human person, the rights of people not to suffer injustice or abuse, is central to catholic thinking on social justice. This concern for dignity and the rights of all people is present in those Vatican II Declarations but Longley can be forgiven for not really noticing them, when it comes to the abuse scandals, many of which took place after this time.

An area where the Church shows very active concern for the dignity of the human person is in matters of abortion and euthanasia where the idea of the sanctity of life and the dignity of the human person are bound together with the Church prohibiting both in the name of human dignity. It is not that the Catholic Church has ignored the issue of dignity and human rights, but according to Longley, it has not trickled into the issue of abuse against children by Priests and Religious.

Catholic morality would do well to look back over its shoulder at some of the things it said during the 1960s. Systems of morality must be applied throughout in an organisation like the Church, especially when it comes to issues within an organisation, otherwise the claim of double standards will be made. Very many Christians throughout the centuries were moved to defend those who were downtrodden and oppressed.

In the same week that the settlement was made, a TV documentary was shown following the politician David Steel returning to Kenya where his father was a minister during the troubles that led to independence. Through his research he uncovered a mass of evidence showing how his father had petitioned the British authorities to stop the illegal detaining and beating of thousands of Kenyans, often indiscriminately, at a time when Britain was not prepared to let go of the last of the colonies. David Steel's father had a profound sense of the injustice being done against the people he ministered and as a matter of Christian conscience he acted. Christian morality is a powerful tool for the defence of the most vulnerable and it was with the most vulnerable of his time that Jesus spent much of his time. Church authorities would do well to reflect on these values and the prophets of Christian history who were prepared to stand against any injustice, even that of the Church or individuals within the Church. This challenge for the Catholic Church, illustrates the need to engage both theology and ethics when making sense of Christian morality.

Against Human Rights!

Mary Warnock is not a fan of human rights. In fact she would rather we did not talk in terms of rights. In her book, *Making Babies: Is there a right to have children?* (Oxford: Oxford Paperbacks, 2003) she puts forward her case that she would rather people didn't talk in terms of rights at all. The advances in reproductive technology are one thing but there are side effects. People seem to demand medical and remedial treatment as if it were a right and now they are demanding children as if a child was a right, rather than something they dearly wanted.

Warnock argues that rights only make sense if someone has a duty to meet those rights. It is meaningless to talk in terms of a right to a child because that is not always possible. Even talking in terms of rights spoils the relationship between doctor and patient. There are limits to what a doctor can give us. There are things which we once saw as something which we were lucky to get which we now see as something we have a right to. Take education. We used to be grateful for the education we got. Now we have an idea that we should be supplied with an education and that someone has a legal duty to provide it. People say they have a right to be told the truth in their relationships. The language of human rights is aggressive and self-centred and can undermine other ethical concepts such as agape love – unconditional love which is freely given, rather than demanded by right.

While this seems rather conservative, on the matter of homosexuals' access to reproductive technologies, Warnock is surprisingly libertarian. She argues that there is clear evidence that children brought up in care are much more likely to be damaged. In principle, there is no reason to presume that children brought up in a loving homosexual family will be as likely to be damaged. If children can flourish in that situation they should be allowed to do so.

Warnock's contribution is important, both in particular reproductive issues and wider questions of ethical theory. She provides a clear warning against the commodification of children, which the idea of a right to a child has a tendency to do, and also against the application of a very individualistic idea of rights ethics which fails to think sensibly about the relationship between rights and duties.

Rights Talk

Human rights are constantly in the news in one way or another. It has become the main way of talking about ethics in public. People frequently refer to rights as the absolute moral norm, the universal moral truth. Human rights offer something which no religion can. They have been signed up to by almost all countries, crossing boundaries of culture and religion, and they are frequently backed up by laws in countries themselves, such as the Human Rights Act in the UK. They seem to represent a universal morality, a common agreed code. However, there are problems with this approach. Firstly, some say rights are culturally conditioned, that they represent a European or Western perspective on human dignity which clashes with ideas of human dignity from other parts of the world. In other words, human rights are tainted with a kind of moral imperialism. Rights are used to measure and judge the activities of other cultures, but if they represent a certain cultural perspective, is this indeed imperialistic? Secondly, how about the fact that the existence of human rights doesn't seem to stop very large numbers of people have nasty things done to them. Rights are given to people by countries but they are taken away whenever a country decides it wants to. Religious laws are perhaps more difficult to change. They don't depend upon the government giving you your dignity, but more often than not it is God that gives people their dignity. Thirdly there is the question of all the other aspects of morality which seem important but don't seem to be covered by rights. What about acting according to conscience – taking responsibility and going on regardless of what some power or authority thinks. Many of the good people in history showed their greatness by being prepared to go against what most others and sometimes the government thought was right. Socrates, Jesus, Gandhi, Martin Luther King to name but a few, can all be seen as standing up to a kind of 'accepted normal morality' and challenging it. If Morality is all about following rights, and that means following the Law then what happens when the Law is wrong? Aquinas said a bad law is no law at all and Joseph Fletcher was very concerned about legalistic Ethics choosing a much more situational and personal approach. If all our moral talk is of rights, then perhaps we are adopting a legalistic way of talking and limiting our moral scope. Perhaps we need to expand our moral language beyond discussions of rights.

Religion Opposing or Engaging Human Rights?

When religion and human rights are mentioned together the main narrative, or story, in Europe and America is that of opposition between the two. Religion is opposed to human rights. Religious ethics are based on divine sources and their authority is found in those sources, while human rights are man-made secular or humanistic ideas. Religion tended to support the ruler of society while human rights have encouraged democracy and multiple participation. Religious ethics place God or some other divine force at the centre of the ethical system and good and bad are calculated in terms of obedience or alignment with the will or rule of this divine force. Human rights, on the other hand, place human beings at the centre of moral concern, human interests, human needs and so on. Human rights are seen as a liberal force that is permissive. It allows people freedoms which religion in the past prohibited. This is seen in the restrictions placed on women by patriarchal religious authorities, and in general social order is conservative. So religious sexual ethics are restrictive, limiting sexual activity to ideas of marriage or

parenthood determined by sacred texts and religious traditions, while human rights sexual ethics are permissive because they encourage freedoms through access to contraception, abortion services, recognition of same-sex relationships and so on.

This way of seeing the religion human rights relationship supports a view which says that basically religion is an undesirable feature of history that is best kept out of modern political debate. Religion is quite conservative and backward-thinking and relies on unchallenging sources such as revelation, the voice of God and so on. Religion empowers the forces of community order against the freedoms of the individual.

However there is a quite different way of telling a story about religion and human rights. In this story, religion engages human rights. This story acknowledges religious exclusivism and intolerance but sees human rights struggles as struggles within religions as well as other features of life. So the struggles for individual freedoms, women's liberation and democratic participation, are not forces opposed to religion but forces both within and across religions. The battles around human rights are between particular ideologies, extremist views and reformers. It is not about a battle between secular rationality, a non-religious logical and justifiable way of thinking, and an irrational, traditional, narrow-minded and superstitious system. Thomas Banchoff and Robert Wuthnow, in their book *Religion and the Global Politics of Human Rights* (Oxford, OUP, 2011) argue instead that it is:

“rather the outcome of deliberation among like-minded thinkers and activists from both religious and secular back-grounds, each drawing on the elements within their traditions that emphasize universal human dignity – religious traditions provide vital resources – most centrally the belief in the transcendent equality and dignity of all human beings – for reflection on the foundations of rights and how to secure them.”

This view gives legitimacy to the involvement of religious views in political life. Religious rights then have this wider sense of religion being allowed to have a voice in decisions about public life. The other view sees religious rights as limited exclusively to freedoms to believe and worship.

There are many examples of a much more positive role of aspects of religion in human rights. There are many examples of religiously motivated human rights campaigners in the anti-slave movement throughout the last five centuries, and in the present era, religiously sustained pro-democracy human rights movements, such as in Burma. Pope John Paul II wrote extensively on human rights and worked to support anti-Soviet movements in Eastern Europe, following in the footsteps of Pope Leo XII who at the end of the nineteenth century wrote powerfully in favour of worker's rights in industrialized and industrializing countries.

The view also reveals an essential element of human rights thinking – the role of belief in the worth of every human being irrespective of any action or attribute that they have. Without this belief it is difficult to provide an argument for human rights. It is for this reason that some view the role of religion as essential for human rights, though Banchoff and Wuthnow hold back from such a step.

Rights and Religious Tolerance

The BBC has reported that Lillian Ladele, a Christian registrar who was disciplined because she refused to conduct same-sex civil partnerships has lost an appeal against the ruling. Ms Ladele argued that she could not carry out such ceremonies as a matter of religious conscience. The QC representing Ms Ladele explained that she had no wishes to undermine the human rights of people from the lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender communities, but she felt that laws must protect those people who have committed views about marriage. However Corinna Ferguson, from Liberty argues that, “Freedom of conscience is incredibly precious but other people have rights and freedoms too” and in the final case Lord Neuberger said: “The legislature has decided that the requirements of a modern liberal democracy, such as the United Kingdom, include outlawing discrimination in the provision of goods, facilities and services on grounds of sexual orientation, subject only to very limited exceptions.”

Read the whole story on BBC News:

news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/england/london/8413196.stm

For more discussion see:

ekkleisia.co.uk/node/10842

Virtue School

It has been reported in the news that a policeman has transformed his town, reducing antisocial behaviour by half, by setting up a night school to teach children about medieval notions of respect and chivalry. More than a hundred children have taken the course which he says instils, "a sense of personal pride, of mannerly and compassionate behaviour and of respect for others." This teaching of virtues is something Elizabeth Anscombe and Alasdair MacIntyre might be proud of.

Anscombe wrote in 1958 that it had been a mistake to focus on good actions rather than good people. MacIntyre felt that we need to go back to the traditional virtues in history and recover an idea of the things which a good person should have. For people to be morally better they need to cultivate certain patterns of behaviour informed by certain characteristics, virtues. If we want good people, we need to help people learn to be good. Aristotle thought that people should practice at certain characteristics and they should have them in just the right amount. Virtue theory then is different from traditional teleological ethics which is interested in the end or result, when deciding what is right, or deontological ethics, which thinks certain actions are just plain right or wrong. Virtue history is a person centred approach and interested in human moral development. Sgt Gary Brown seems to capture something of that in his course for children in Spilsby, Lincs. Nevertheless, there are some problems with this approach. We may be interested in developing good people but our moral abilities are challenged by actual situations, actual options from which we must choose courses of action and others will judge them right or wrong. How will those actions be judged? Traditional virtues are often expressed or passed down by communities but sometimes people stand out for being moral by going against the norm, by resisting peer pressure. How can we be sure the community virtues are the right ones to have? Perhaps virtue theory adds an opportunity to think about the moral person as well as actions or ends or other aspects of moral thinking, rather than replacing them.

Challenges to Ethical Thinking about Abortion

Ethical debates about abortion tend to circle around questions of the rights of women and the status of the embryo and foetus. Debates are also marked by powerfully divergent views on these issues, with strong religious arguments against abortion and strong libertarian arguments for a woman's right to choose. Both positions tend to be focussed not simply on the specific act of abortion, but also by a view of the world that should be. For libertarians, the world should be a place in which women are not discriminated against and not denied access to family planning clinics and the full range of possible services. A world which criminalises abortion necessarily leads to women being unfairly treated by being forced to bear the children of rape, being forced out of careers and so on. For religious conservatives who object to abortion on absolute moral grounds, they also argue for a world in which women who have children out of wedlock are supported and not discriminated against in conservative societies, where unwanted babies can be easily adopted, and where back street and dangerous abortions would not need to happen.

Both sides have a vision of the world that is not a mirror of the world as it is, but rather a world they want to work towards. When the ethical question is translated into a question of public policy, in other words what laws we should have and how people will respond to the situation, the rather unpredictable dimensions of politics and human psychology come into play. This seems to be the case in recent research published in *The Lancet* which found that there was a link between higher abortion rates and more restrictive legislation. Abortion rates were lowest in Western Europe, at 12 per 1,000, and highest in Eastern Europe, at 43 per 1,000. Western Europe is more liberal and secularised and Eastern Europe more socially conservative and religious. The research does not explain why these differences are there but it presents a challenge for those who want to reduce the number of abortions. Is it better to argue for more restrictive legislation that better reflects your moral position, if that in turn leads to higher actual rates of abortion, through the back street illegal abortion market? Additionally it is these kinds of abortions that are more likely to lead to the death of the mother. In 2008, 47,000 women died from unsafe abortions and 8.5 million had serious medical complications.

Of course religious conservatives do not want women to die of unsafe abortions and of course they want lower rates of abortion. If the research is accurate it leaves us with a challenging question. What is the best public policy – the best set of laws? Is it the one that leads to the least number of actual abortions or the one that best reflects the moral view that abortion is wrong? Of course it might be that the long term moral battle is to take steps towards the better world and so short term statistics are not helpful, but long term trends more important. It might be that in going for the more conservative moral legal situation, there may be higher abortion rates in the short term but in the long term there is a better chance of society becoming the kind of place that does not require those rates.

Questions to consider

- 1) Should moral conservatives who oppose abortion, support liberal and permissive laws if it can be shown these in fact reduce the number of abortions?
- 2) Should ethicists focus on the current picture of human behaviour or plan to build towards the kind of world they want in the future, even if in the short term there are serious negative consequences?

Further reading online

www.independent.co.uk/life-style/health-and-families/health-news/rate-of-abortion-is-highest-in-countries-where-practice-is-banned-6292070.html

[www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736\(11\)61786-8/fulltext](http://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(11)61786-8/fulltext)

[www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736\(12\)60038-5/fulltext](http://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(12)60038-5/fulltext)

Marriage, Freedom and Diversity

Some issues present particular challenges for ethicists because they appeal to diverging ethical principles. Forced marriage is a case in point. A forced marriage takes place when one or both participants are coerced against their will into a marriage. That coercion may involve psychological, emotional, or physical threats and / or abuse. A forced marriage can be contrasted with an arranged marriage in which both participants agree for the marriage to be set up with family relatives.

A forced marriage is ethically unacceptable because it involves unreasonable violence, threat of violence, or other form of force, and leaves the woman in particular, profoundly disadvantaged. She has little control over something that has a profound impact on her life. It violates human rights which state that marriage should be freely and consensually entered into, and undermines a woman's right to choose her spouse. This is something central to her life, dignity and equality as a human being. Forced marriage contradicts the ideas of freedom, equality and dignity that underpin human rights. It causes great harm. This account comes from the website TheSite.org:

"I'm from a Pakistani background where forced marriages are common... In Pakistan, when one of my sisters refused to marry, I saw my Dad put an axe to my sister's throat. They had to go through with the marriages and today none of them has worked out... When I was 15, my Mum said: 'We're going to Pakistan and I want you to get married.' I tried to get them to change their minds but they told me I had to go. My Dad threatened me by saying 'If you run away, we're going to kill you.' I was so confused and angry about why my parents would want to do this. The most important decision you'll ever make in your life is to marry someone and I was going to get married to someone I had never met. All I knew about this man was that he was 21."

www.thesite.org/community/reallife/truestories/escapefromaforcedmarriage

Forced marriage is a particular blight on the lives of women which comes about because of patriarchal power found in some cultural traditions. Patriarchy gives particular power to men over women and can be found expressed in ideas that place men at the head of a household, or make some roles and responsibilities only accessible to men. It can also be expressed through beliefs that women's roles are completely defined by motherhood and domesticity. In other words children, care of the family and care of the husband fully define what it is to be a woman. Patriarchy is the force which ensured for many centuries that women had no ability to take leadership roles in public life. Forced marriage remains a problem in Britain with over 1,000 cases reported in Britain each year (www.bbc.co.uk/ethics/forcedmarriage/introduction_1.shtml).

Patriarchy is the kind of thing that the campaign for women's rights, exemplified in the suffragette movement and the writings of Mary Wollstonecraft and John Stuart Mill's essay *On the subjugation of women*. This movement is one of the social and philosophical and political movements that underpinned the twentieth century development of universal human rights. An issue like forced marriage is a straightforward ethical one.

However, human rights ethics become rather more complex in matters of cultural diversity. Charles Taylor, argues that cultural groups have rights of recognition. In other words there should be some cultural tolerance to diverse ways of living. This is justified by the claim that cultural groups explore different ways of working out the best way to live and that the human 'experiment' (the human forms of civilization that we have discovered) are test case ways of living. If some diversity of difference is not allowed then we may never find the best way to live. Human rights are a case in point. They have changed over time as new forms of suffering have been discovered and they sought to eliminate these forms. If no diversity is tolerated then systems of living and ways of life will no longer be tested and we may settle for a second best civilizational ethic.

We are left with an ethic that argues for the rights of recognition and an ethic that argues for universal human rights. How do we reconcile these two different principles in the case of forced marriages? Taylor is unlikely to ever want to defend forced

marriages or, no doubt, a number of other practices that are immoral but persists because they are culturally embedded. While the rights of recognition allows for some tolerance of diversity it is not unlimited tolerance. There are some boundaries to what is acceptable. How can these boundaries be determined? Perhaps the boundaries can be established by thinking about the values that underpin human rights, rather than the rights themselves. In this case we have been thinking about the ideas of freedom, equality, and dignity. There are different arguments within culture and religion about degrees of personal freedom and equality of roles in life, but dignity, the idea that a human being has some degree of intrinsic worth because of what they are, not because of what they do or could do, is a powerful idea in many traditions. Within Christianity and Judaism it can be seen in the idea that human beings are made in the image of God and within Christianity it is also seen in the doctrines that human beings have within them a Divine spirit, an image of Christ. In Islam there is the idea that a human person is the vice regent of God, a being who acts for God on earth. There are other religious traditions that see in human beings a divine spirit or force. There are also philosophers who give human beings inherent worth, such as Kant who argues that human beings should never be treated only as a means to an end, but always as an end in itself because it has an inherent worth or dignity. This is quite different to ideas of dignity which suggest dignity is merely something that means we are doing the 'proper' or 'socially acceptable' thing. The kind of dignity we are talking about is more profound and fundamental.

An idea such as dignity, found across religions and philosophies, might provide a way of resolving the tension between the rights of recognition and universal human rights. It seems to be at the base of these two ethical ideas, a foundational value. Forced marriage seems to directly deny the dignity of the human person, because of what happens to them in the process. They seem to no longer be able to flourish, and their integrity as a human being with spiritual significance, seems not to be recognized in forced marriage. In this case, the boundary of morally acceptable diversity is transgressed by forced marriage because human dignity is undermined. Human beings, especially women, are humiliated, and humiliation cannot be allowed under the terms of the rights of recognition.

Are there theoretical or practical weaknesses in this argument? If you are convinced by this argument, test the theory against other issues which are defined in terms of cultural difference vs universal human rights. Are the conclusions in these other cases equally convincing?

The Ethics of Love and Finding a Life Long Partner

On average a marriage lasts 11 years. Over a hundred years ago this was also the case. Then the reason for the short life of a marriage was mortality rates. Women were much more likely to die during or after childbirth. Men were much more likely to die at a younger age at work. The fact that people live much longer now, means that a greater proportion of couples than ever before have to learn how to live together for much longer. Today the short marriage span is due to separation and divorce.

Lori Gottlieb, author of *Settling for Mr Good Enough*, believes women who refuse to marry unless they can find someone whom they feel a deep romantic love for, are consigning themselves to an unhappy and lonely future. She now wishes she settled for a good enough husband. The idea that we are all going to find the partner of our dreams is a myth propagated by Hollywood. We are conditioned to believe it will happen, we idealize marriage and then we walk away from relationships which are not quite inspiring enough to match the dream. She argues that marrying Mr Good Enough is a viable option, especially if you are looking for a reliable life companion. A good marriage is not just about the romantic side of things.

Anouchka Grose, in her book *No More Silly Love Songs*, makes a similar sort of argument. She argues that the idea of everlasting love and never-ending desire is a menace. We need to lower our expectations where loved ones are concerned. Affairs should not be treated as the end of a marriage. She says "sexual fidelity has acquired a sanctimonious moral importance". At the same time she is in favour of monogamy saying that, given the challenge of it, monogamists "may find themselves at the cutting edge of experimental romance".

In his book *To Raise Happy Kids, Put your marriage First*, David Code argues that pushy parents should focus their attentions on each other rather than their children. Families that are centred on children create anxious and exhausted parents and demanding children. Self-fulfillment and the marriage relationship go out the window. The emphasis on children makes them the focus of our emotional needs not the spouse or partner.

Consider these three approaches to relationships and family life. How would you respond to each of these authors? What insights might different philosophical and religious traditions offer to the issues discussed in these three books?

So What is Wrong with Plural Marriage / Polyamory?

Polyamory is a modern word (1992) to describe a loving sexual relationship involving more than two people. Plural marriage is where a spouse, usually a husband, takes more than one wife. Religion is often linked to views that marriage should be a committed relationship between two people, usually of the opposite sex but there are some notable deviations from this. In the Hebrew scriptures, Abraham and Sarah think they are too old to have the children that the Lord God says they will have and they think Sarah is barren, in any case. So the younger servant girl Hagar is the surrogate wife and Abraham sires Ishmael with her. But Hagar is not Abraham's wife and when Sarah miraculously falls pregnant with the son who is to be Isaac, the result is that Hagar leaves the household, though the Lord looks after her. The story does not suggest that this situation is God's will and in fact the insecure status of Hagar may well have been the experience of many serving girls who found themselves pregnant with their master's children.

Islam has within it a tradition that more than one wife may be taken but that each wife must be treated equally by the husband. This is a significant improvement for the women, compared with Hagar's experience and it is interesting to note that traditionally the people of Ishmael are thought to be the forefathers of the first people of Islam. Such a precondition is not an easy one to fulfill as the full implications of equality mean different bedrooms, sometimes different houses, an equal sharing of time and absolutely no preferences on the part of the husband. While Muslims are not compelled to take more than one wife, and many Muslims would feel that it is only an exceptional possibility, it is permitted in some Muslim countries and takes place even in countries which outlaw the practice. An ethical argument in favour of the historical use of this practice is that in ancient Arabia many women were widowed and therefore were vulnerable if they did not marry again and so such plural marriages enabled them to be cared for in a socially accepted way that secured them. Muslim feminists oppose such practices today.

Taking more than one wife has continued in some other modern religious traditions. In the 19th century Mormonism approved of polygamy, and while contemporary Mormonism rejects this, some sects continue its practice. A number of ethical issues arise about the continued practice. The religious traditions that practice this form of marriage come under criticism from feminists who point to the male-dominated patriarchal nature of most religious traditions and the inequality of allowing a man to take more than one wife while not allowing a wife, more than one husband. One response to this is that such marriages should not be forced or arranged but entered into freely. If they are freely entered into, then surely that consent should make such arrangements morally acceptable. The consent ethic is a powerful one in sexual ethics. Sexual crimes involve a lack of consent, and in a more permissive modern liberal age, consent is often identified as the key ethical principle in any sexual relationship. So if two or three people consent to such a relationship, and assuming no-one else is harmed, what is the problem? However, this calculation gives no account for the prevailing social and political climate and needs to scrutinize the idea of a free choice. How can we be sure that the power relationship, which often benefits the man in religious and cultural traditions, will enable a woman to choose freely? If a husband asks his first wife about wanting to take an additional wife, will she not feel pressured to allow it if their religion permits it. She may fear losing her husband if she says no, or indeed fear that he will commit adultery. So in what sense is she truly free to choose? The risk of this occurring is enough for many feminists to oppose it on principle in any setting, religious or secular.

There is also a question of the ethics of equality and the fact that religious traditions that practice plural marriage tend to allow the man to take many wives but not the other way round. Perhaps the practice of women taking many husbands is uncommon because only the woman can give birth and possibly, somewhere in the religious traditions of plural marriage, having large families is a key social or indeed economic advantage. Of course it also smacks of double standards and a world in which men are happy to have many wives but not happy to share their wives with other men.

However, if two people genuinely felt they loved the same third person, if that person loved the other two and all agreed to live in such a relationship, setting aside religious arguments, is there a non-religious ethical argument against? One possible objection could be made if it was shown that human beings are pairing creatures, from the perspective of human evolution and psychology. It could be argued that in the case of a life-long pairing, the relationship works in part because of the complete trust and total commitment that each party gives the other. This total commitment is often expressed for better and worse for richer and poorer, acknowledging that life may be difficult at times and one may come to depend utterly on the other, for example if faced with serious illness. It is a trust allowing long term plans, including the raising of children, the development of a working life and the building of a home. It can be argued that this kind of total giving is simply not possible in a polygamous relationship, where space must be made for a third person. In the Hebrew scriptures, Genesis presents a picture of the relationship in terms of the two becoming one. It uses the phrase 'cleaving together' to describe the union that is established in the committed, loving relationship. There is a powerful sense of that union in the physical life of the couple. This includes not simply the sexual life but

also the wider life of physical affection and the experience of drawing together two life-lines so that they intertwine with each other with the associated friendship, intimacy and partnership that this brings. Perhaps Genesis offers a wise reflection on the human condition and the nature of human love and life.

en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Polygyny_in_Islam

www.womeninthebible.net/1.2.Hagar.htm

en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mormonism_and_polygamy

Putting Ethics Back into Business

In their book *Making Good: How Young People Cope with Moral Dilemmas at Work*, Fischman, Solomon and Gardener (HUP, 2004), writing before the current financial collapse said:

“It would be comforting to think that the acts of corporate malfeasance which had come to light in the United States at the start of the twenty first century are isolated events, and that the world of work is generally of an unacceptable behaviour across professions and in a variety of workplaces.” (p.1)

Before the financial collapse they were able to list scandals at Enron, Arthur Anderson, WorldCom and other corporations. We now know that considerable failings have become endemic in the systems of global capitalism. What has changed is just how far human beings can pursue their greed:

“It is not that humans have become any more greedy than in generations past. It is that the avenues to express greed had grown so enormously” (Federal Reserve Board chairman Alan Greenspan quoted by Fischman, Solomon and Gardener on p1)

Stephen Green, of HSBC, has written a book entitled *Good Value: Reflections on Money, Morality and an Uncertain World* (Allen Lane, 2009). The author is chairman of HSBC and has been an ordained priest in the Church of England since 1988.

The word value is commonly found in two areas. On the one hand there is the ethical world of values; principles or moral rules for living by, perhaps informed by profound beliefs about life or God. They influence what people believe to be good and bad and how they act. On the other hand ‘Value’ is used to define a range of food stuffs in a popular supermarket chain that are cheap. These food stuffs tend not to have Fairtrade labels, or free Range labels. It is curious that the word value has become synonymous with lowest price or best deal. Perhaps this is a symptom of the moral crisis that some think have driven the global economic system into meltdown.

The recent collapse in global capitalism and the resulting recession has left many people reflecting on truths of business. There was a view that the market system should be left free to do whatever is necessary for business and that by bringing in other factors, such as morals or regulation is simply bad for business. However, the actions of a very small people have left millions of others facing economic hardship. What some did has caused long lasting economic harm for others, the destruction of business, the loss of retirement savings and the by-products: stress, unemployment and family difficulties.

The view expressed by some people, that business is just business and any talk of right and wrong is a luxury, has come back on itself. It would appear that selfishness and greed bring about economic catastrophe, not just erosion of goodness or the soul.

Stephen Green as a banker, may not appear to be the first person of choice when it comes to getting advice on what to do now. But he is both a banker and he is a priest which explains some of his thinking. His book sets out a series of relevant questions

How should we create wealth in societies, and why is it necessary to do so?

What improves the lives of the largest number of people?

And how do we, living in a globalised world caught in an age of financial and ecological turbulence, respond to the differing needs of individuals and institutions?

He still believes that capitalism is the best system by which to improve human wealth, but that the drives for exploration and exchange must be aligned with spiritual and psychological needs. He argues that businesses – and especially banks – have a duty to society that goes beyond the creation of profit.

He notes that for some people the only factors in business are:

Is there a product?

Is there a market in which to sell it?

Is there a profit to be made?

Answer yes to each question and that is all you need to justify the business. But he adds a further question.

Does the business contribute to the common good?

If the answer to this is no then the business should not go ahead. The idea of the common good is found in a number of philosophical and religious traditions. Here it is being used to describe the moral concern that we might normally apply in our personal relationships, applied to public life. Green thinks we must not compartmentalize our morality – reserving it for our private sphere but not business:

“Compartmentalization – ‘dividing up life into different realms with different ends and subject to different rules’ – is a besetting sin of human beings. [It] is a refuge from ambiguity. One of the most obvious and commonplace manifestations of the tendency to compartmentalize is seeing our life work as being a neutral realm in which questions of value (other than shareholder value) or of rightness (other than what is lawful) or of wisdom (other than what is practical) need not arise.”

Seeing work as morally neutral is damaging and corrodes society. He notes:

“The discovery in late 2006 that in modern Britain 70% of three year olds recognize the McDonald’s symbol but only half of them know their own surname, or that the average 10-year-old is familiar with between 300 and 400 consumer brands but would be unable to name 15 wild birds, was poignant evidence for our fears. What sort of people were we becoming?”

Ultimately work, money and wealth is not enough for the common good:

“We cannot fulfil ourselves in business through power or work or wealth.”

While this approach seems laudable in the light of the financial collapse and the actions which brought it about, there are strong cultural factors which need to be overcome to bring about any kind of change. Firstly, the idea of the common good is one which will need to be strongly embedded in social and cultural life. The individual ‘me-me-me culture’ is not going to lie down easily. Individualism has bred an attitude of self-interest which dominates every aspect of our life with personal mobile phones, personal computers, personalised approaches to life choices and an attitude that your individual feelings are all that matters.

Secondly, the competitiveness that drives companies to compete in the market place, is also what drives workers in those companies to do whatever it takes to beat the others. If I take a moral approach to my business, how can I be sure you will take such an approach to your business? If I fail to make my financial target because I am worried about moral consequences, will I miss the bonus payment or lose my job? Will my virtue lead me to business failure?

An additional sort of challenge is even harder to address ‘exactly what do you mean by the common good’? What precisely does that mean? A sense of the common good is likely to be based on some kind of view about what makes for a good life and on this issue people seem divided. Religious and philosophical opinions differ on what a good life would look like. Therefore some process of discussion needs to take place before we can really apply the idea of the common good to our moral decision making business.

Green may be right, but putting the plan into action presents enormous challenges.

Media, Government, Banking & Trust

In May 2006 a poll for the BBC, Reuters and the Media Center found that 41% of British adults trusted the media (www.globescan.com/news_archives/bbcreut.html). By July 2011 that had fallen to 20%

(www.pressgazette.co.uk/story.asp?storycode=47480). The *News of the World* phone-tapping scandal opened a new fissure in the trust crisis that is inflicting many professions in Britain. The media joins bankers, and their actions, which contributed or caused the financial crisis now ravaging world economics, with MPs and the expenses scandal. Trust, it would

appear, is an endangered commodity. Yet it is crucial. Sissela Bok wrote "Whatever matters to human beings, trust is the atmosphere in which it thrives." (in *Lying*, New York: Pantheon Books, 1978, p.31n). Without trust the things that really matter become unsafe. This seems to be the lesson of the last five years with the economy, the political system and now the thing which we rely upon to keep a check of government and business, all being holed below the water line. British western society seems to be lacking in trust.

Onora O'Neill began her 2002 Reith Lectures with the following:

"Confucius told his disciple Tsze-kung that three things are needed for government: weapons, food and trust. If a ruler can't hold on to all three, he should give up the weapons first and the food next. Trust should be guarded to the end: "without trust we cannot stand".

What can we understand by trust? Annette Baier (1986) comments that while Plato states, in his *Republic*, that the majority of citizens should trust their philosopher king to rule wisely over them, he does not list trust as a virtue, and neither does Aristotle. Christian philosophers extol the virtue of faith as something like trust in God, and in the Judaeo-Christian scriptures, the covenant is linked to the trust between God and his people. Baier observes that for us to put trust in others we need good grounds to do so. It is a matter in part of how vulnerable we feel and whether we have good grounds to believe that others will not take advantage of our situation. This is why we find abuses by parents, nurses, doctors, teachers and ministers of religion so objectionable. If a person in a position of care for another abuses their trust, then this shows the most vulnerable abused by those who should be most trusted.

Trusting, according to Baier is allowing for someone else to care about the thing I care about. We trust them to use their choice and power in our interest. In trusting we hand over to another.

Is there a contract in trust? Are we equally trustees to be trusted as well as trusters to trust? This seems not to be the case. While trust in God is absolute trust in another person may only ever be conditional. On the other hand the trust of a child is over-complete which is why the betrayal of such trust can have such devastating consequences, as with betrayal in a committed relationship, be it sexual or of a close friendship. Yet we also trust people we never or hardly think about – the tube train driver to take care of the signals, the postman not to pry. Hobbes would warn us about relying on such a virtue and instead points to the need for a powerful overseer to enforce moral behaviour. The more we think about trust the more it becomes apparent that it is interconnected with all the relationships and all the contacts we have with others.

Onora O'Neil suggests that we need to encourage good governance and we need to limit deception. In the fifth of her Reith Lectures she turns to Kant and his classical notion of autonomy. She notes:

"Kantian autonomy is a matter of acting on principles that can be principles for all of us, of ensuring that we do not treat others as lesser mortals – indeed victims – whose abilities to share our principles we are at liberty to undercut. If we deceive we make others our victims, and undermine or distort their possibilities for acting and communicating... the most common wrong done in communicating is deception, which undermines and damages others' capacities to judge and communicate, to act and to place trust with good judgement. Duties to reject deception are duties for everyone: for individuals and for government and for institutions and professions – including the media and journalists."

In 2002 O'Neil seems to have predicted the issue which was to become the defining moral concern of our countries state, a decade later. The issues of deception, good governance and the centrality of trust must surely be at the heart of any road back from our present troubles.

To consider:

1. Compare John Stuart Mill's notion of individual autonomy, and its connection with the harm principle, with Kant's concept of classical autonomy, and its role in the categorical imperative. Which do you find more helpful in making sense of trust and why?
2. What might the Situationist thought of Fletcher add to a conception of trust? Consider his notion of love as Justice and unconditionality.
3. To go further read the 2002 Reith

Lectures: www.bbc.co.uk/radio4/reith2002/lectures.shtml

Markets Need Morals

According to Gordon Brown (reported in *The Guardian*, www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/belief/2009/sep/30/labour-conference-morals-markets) markets need morals. The financial crisis has taught us that we need values. The kind of values Gordon Brown talks about are hard work, fair play, a responsible approach to risk, loving your neighbour as yourself. He describes these as common values found in all religions and therefore a global ethics is possible for the world to live by. Earlier this year he gave a speech in which he suggested that on a whole range of global issues, agreed global rules were needed: "what all these challenges have in common is that none of them can be addressed by one country or one continent acting alone. None of them can be met and mastered without the world coming together. And none of them can be solved without agreed global rules informed by shared global values." (Gordon Brown, Speech and Q&A at St Paul's Cathedral, www.number10.gov.uk/Page18858)

A values free, rules free market has brought us to disaster. He used the word values 44 times in that speech but values are slippery things. Values can be principles which we agree to for different reasons or they can be things we believe in at a foundation level. They can be shared principles or common moral beliefs. I may believe that a human life is sacred and that may motivate my moral choices much more powerfully than a general rule which has to be interpreted and applied. According to the Tony Blair Foundation, the solutions of the global recession could be found in the teachings of faith traditions (www.tonyblairfaithfoundation.org). A series of seminars on this topic have been hosted by *The Guardian* (www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/series/faith-and-development). Ken Costa at the first of those seminars wrote:

"But what about the values of our workplace? More specifically, what are the values that guide the relationships in our workplaces? My question is not just "is faith compatible with globalisation?", for it obviously is. My question is the deeper one: "can the global economy do without faith?" Our wealth creation, important as it is, must be trammelled and, indeed, upheld by values that arise in the context of relationship to other humans. These values arise as obligations that are due to other humans qua human beings. They have the character of law, if you like. But it is the Spirit, that gives life, that enables us actually to live these values, day to day and to work in co-operative interdependence with each other. Thus a culture of trust in the workplace is generated, and sustained.

Rights in Conflict over Religion and Homosexuality

A Pentecostal Christian couple have lost the right to be able to be foster parents because of their beliefs which meant that they could not tell a child they might foster, that homosexuality was an acceptable lifestyle.

Lord justice Munby and Mr justice Beatson at the High Court have ruled that the laws that protect people from discrimination because of their sexual orientation "should take precedence" over the right not to be discriminated against on religious grounds.

They have ruled that if children are placed with carers who object to homosexuality and same-sex relationships, "there may well be a conflict with the local authority's duty to 'safeguard and promote the welfare' of looked-after children".

The couple, who consider themselves to be moral people, had wanted to offer a loving home for a child in need of care. According to the BBC they said:

"We have been excluded because we have moral opinions based on our faith and we feel sidelined because we are Christians with normal, mainstream, Christian views on sexual ethics. We are prepared to love and accept any child. All we were not willing to do was to tell a small child that the practice of homosexuality was a good thing."

For some, this is an important victory for gay, lesbian, bisexual and transsexual rights to equality. For others this is discrimination against Christians with a common Christian moral belief. Should gay rights trump religious rights?

BBC Report: www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-derbyshire-12598896

Editorial in the *Church Times*: www.churchtimes.co.uk/content.asp?id=108996

Related stories in the *Telegraph*: www.telegraph.co.uk/news/religion/8353496/Foster-parent-ban-no-place-in-the-law-for-Christianity-High-Court-rules.html

Read the full ruling here: archive.equal-jus.eu/679/

The Morality of Military Intervention

When a people rise up against a dictator but the dictator fights back with superior forces, what is the moral case for other countries to intervene? Is there a right to humanitarian intervention? Should the West intervene in Libya?

One argument says that if a dictator commits crimes against humanity then there is an argument that other countries should intervene. 900,000 people were killed in Rwanda and in that example the international community did not act and genocide took place. In Kosovo, NATO bombed to stop mass killings and it worked. The threat of mass killings of innocents is surely an argument to carry out military intervention.

Geoffrey Robertson, QC, is a member of the UN's Justice Council and author of *Crimes Against Humanity*. He argues there is a moral case:

"As Colonel Gaddafi, with his army and air force, his tribal supporters and his propaganda machine, begins to counter-attack, only one thing is certain. He is a man utterly without mercy. The history of his regime demonstrates how he deals with opponents: hanging them from lamp-posts, sending death squads to assassinate them as 'stray dogs', killing them in their jail cells... # Will the world stand idly by once he starts to deliver on his threat to 'fight to the last man and woman'?"

He asks, is there a right or a duty to use force to relieve a humanitarian nightmare? The UN charter bans "the use of force against territorial integrity or political independence of any state" but in the event of a breach of the peace the Council may "take such action – by air, sea or land – as may be necessary to maintain or restore international peace or security". He argues that for such intervention to be lawful there must be a request of potential victims, for the purpose of stopping crimes against humanity. There must be no question of ulterior motives, such as gaining oil or land. It must be proportionate so no greater force should be used than necessary to achieve a reasonably obtainable objective.

His full argument can be read here: www.theage.com.au/opinion/politics/how-the-west-can-end-gaddafis-slaughter-20110306-1bjqs.html

Two other views may be considered:

www.opendemocracy.net/dan-smith/intervention-in-libya-case-of-shooting-from-hip-slowly

and:

www.opendemocracy.net/ourkingdom/rupert-read/british-should-heed-free-libya's-call-for-no-fly-zone

Which is more convincing?

The Ethics of Torture

An investigation is underway by the UK Intelligence Services Commissioner into whether or not the British government was complicit with the torture of insurgents in Guantanamo Bay and elsewhere. Article 3 of the European convention on human rights states "No one shall be subjected to torture or to inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment". The organisation Liberty, which campaigns for human rights, believes that the British government has tried to sidestep, ignore or undermine its legal and moral obligations to prevent torture. The convention was written with the atrocities of World War Two in mind, and the terrible acts of barbarism and inhumanity that marked the treatment of many prisoners. Britain signed this convention and therefore is bound by it. It is International Law.

It is claimed that insurgents, people arrested or captured on suspicion of being involved in preparing for, or carrying out, terrorist acts, were moved to locations where CIA operatives in Guantanamo Bay or in third countries such as Pakistan, Afghanistan and Morocco, carried out interrogations in which the conditions of the convention were broken, and British secret agents were in some cases present or in other cases complicit with acts of torture to retrieve information.

British involvement in this was reported in the *Guardian* newspaper on 6 December and 12 September, 2005. Airports at Biggin Hill, Birmingham, Bournemouth, Brize Norton, Farnborough, Gatwick, Heathrow, Luton, RAF Mildenhall, Northolt, and Stansted allowed CIA or CIA-chartered jets to land temporarily since 2001.

Former detainees of Guantanamo Bay who have now been released have alleged that they were tortured. Military trainers at Guantanamo Bay since December 2002 ran classes which used resources produced from a 1957 Air Force study of Chinese Communist torture techniques used during the Korean War. This study detailed methods of obtaining confessions. A chart showed the effects of “coercive management techniques” including “sleep deprivation”, “prolonged constraint”, and “exposure”.

Three British Muslim prisoners were released from Guantanamo Bay in 2004 without charge. Known as the ‘Tipton Three’ they alleged torture including acts of sexual degradation, forced drugging and religious persecution by US forces.

Setting aside the human rights legal framework, and the question of whether Britain has broken any international laws, and the political implications of breaking agreements we have made with other countries, there remain a number of ethical questions.

- Is a brutal act against one person justified if it saves many lives?
- Should ethical principles about the treatment of prisoners ever be sacrificed for pragmatic needs?
- In a just war or conflict, are there limits on what can be done to win?
- If brutal processes are adopted by just states, will those processes corrupt the state and undermined the principles it holds dear?

Utilitarians may offer a justification for torture, for a justification may be made that in certain individual cases, the benefits of the information found out through torture could save lives. Think of the disrupted terrorist attack where many innocents are saved. The pain and suffering of one, could surely be justified by the good of the many. If the person being tortured is innocent then this is unfortunate but perhaps that individual can be sacrificed for the many.

Utilitarians might think there is a principle that is greater than the good of the potential lives gained, however. They may argue that the onset of torture brings about a world in which authorities use torture systematically, and that the greater good of a just society for all is lost. Rule utilitarians may be particularly concerned that permission to do these sorts of things will ultimately bring into being a worse world.

The key features of a Kantian approach must seek to apply the categorical imperative. It must treat the person never only as a means to an end but also as a end in his or herself. It must apply norms universally. It must base moral decisions within a view of the hypothetical kingdom of ends. When considering torture, there are distinct ethical elements including both the question of the acts of torture, and any complicity in them, and also the possible justifications for those acts. The acts of torture affect both the tortured and torturer. One can imagine a world in which people routinely torture and it is a terrible vision.

Torture based on some greater consequence would run into difficulties with Kant’s approach to human persons. The detainees must be treated as ends in themselves as well as means. Kant thought the human person was incredibly important, of a worth beyond price. Torturing a human being seems to be a specific example of treating a person as only a means to an end – the end being the information that might stop a terrorist attack. One might try to argue that it is for the detainees own good that he or she is tortured – perhaps we could imagine that if the atrocity is not prevented the detainee will then feel remorse and may than realise the wrong they have done.

However the universalizability test throws up its own difficulties. Torture is something that is justified by particular extreme circumstances. If one was to universalize the possibility of torture, it would become routine and the very world that is trying to be avoided through the use of torture, would in fact come about. Ethical theories based on deontological rules, such as natural Law, might find it difficult to ever break these rules, though exceptions may be made if a ‘self defence’ argument can be made. Perhaps the torture of a person can be thought of as a proactive self-defensive act. If a terrorist is captured and he or she has knowledge of a forthcoming atrocity, perhaps torturing him / her is an act of self defence. However, in the case of torture there is a special danger. If torture is self defence, then what are the limits of what a government can do to an individual? Many philosophers were very concerned about precisely this problem and the danger that individuals would be treated badly by those who have power. The question of torture becomes a question about how much the state can be trusted. The outcome of the investigation will give some indication of this for Britain at least.

Does Religion Cause Violence?

For many this question hardly needs asking. Of course it does – it is obvious isn't it? All those different religions fuel beliefs that they are right and the others are all wrong. This topples over into violence when the 'stupid' non-believers just don't get it. William Cavanaugh, Associate Professor of philosophy at the University of St Thomas, suggests that there is some sloppy thinking going on here.

First he sets aside a couple of common criticisms of the view. There are those that suggest behind religion are political or economic factors that get dressed in religion. Also there are those who suggest the people being violent are not properly religious – they are being un-Islamic or un-Christian. This is not the argument he is going to make.

Conventional wisdom suggests that religion is prone to violence, rather more than ideologies that are non-religious or secular. In fact these sorts of distinctions are much more difficult to make. He suggests that in the West progress is thought of in more secular terms and that we have a blind spot when it comes to seeing secular states as the cause of violence. So Western liberal countries are peace bringers while cruel Muslim countries are violent war makers. Of course, arguably the reality is often the opposite. It was the liberal secular democracies who launched the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and the vast majority of people killed were Muslim. He writes,

“Their violence is religious, and therefore irrational and divisive. Our violence, on the other hand, is rational, peacemaking, and necessary.”

Since 11 September 2001 there have been a flotilla of English language books about the violence and evil of religions by many different writers. These books link religion with a sort of primitive way of thinking, an irrational, an illogical approach to life.

However, Cavanaugh wants to make a more subtle point. He suggests that what people think about as being religious and secular is much more blurred. For example, how could 'religion' be removed from Roman or Aztec culture and society? All the different subtle elements of ritual and life would need unpicking in a very difficult way. How would one decide when a cultural and religious practice was interwoven, which side it should go? This blurring is more apparent on issues of patriarchy and feminism where there are bitter disputes between theologians, bishops and scholars about which element is religious, and which is cultural.

Cavanaugh acknowledges that some will say that there is enough about what we could see as a religion to be able to say, well the corners are fuzzy but there is an essential core which means you can spot Islam, Christianity and so on. Those who hold this view will point to examples of divisiveness caused by religion. In a book by Martin Marty, *Politics, Religion, and the Common Good*, Marty cites cases of Jehovah's Witnesses who were attacked, beaten, tarred, castrated, and imprisoned in the USA in the 1940s because of their belief that followers of Jesus Christ should not salute a flag. Cavanaugh criticizes Marty for not drawing the obvious conclusion that zealous nationalism can cause violence. Instead of this Marty concludes: “it became obvious that religion, which can pose 'us' versus 'them'... carries risks and can be perceived by others as dangerous. Religion can cause all kinds of trouble in the public arena.” In short religion here means Jehovah's Witnesses refusal to the ritual vowing of allegiance to a flag. Cavanaugh sees the danger in the secular ideology and its rituals, rather than the beliefs of Jehovah's Witnesses.

Some have tried to get round this argument by expanding their definition to include secular ideologies and practices. Here the problem is a kind of religiousness which tends towards absolutism. But perhaps one could dispense with any reference to religion altogether – maybe it's just absolutists who are the problem.

Cavanaugh thinks that these double standards are at play throughout.

“Sam Harris' book about the violence of religion, *The End of Faith*, dramatically illustrates this double standard. Harris condemns the irrational religious torture of witches, but provides his own argument for torturing terrorists.”

Cavanaugh concludes:

“[T]here is no coherent way to isolate 'religious' ideologies with a peculiar tendency toward violence from their tamer 'secular' counterparts. So-called secular ideologies and institutions like nationalism and liberalism can be just as absolutist, divisive, and irrational as so-called religion. People kill for all sorts of things. An adequate approach to the problem would be resolutely

empirical: under what conditions do certain beliefs and practices — jihad, the ‘invisible hand’ of the market, the sacrificial atonement of Christ, the role of the United States as worldwide liberator — turn violent? The point is not simply that ‘secular’ violence should be given equal attention to ‘religious’ violence. The point is that the distinction between ‘secular’ and ‘religious’ violence is unhelpful, misleading, and mystifying, and should be avoided altogether.”

To read the whole argument go here:

www.catholicanarchy.org/cavanaugh/Cavanaugh%20-%20Does%20Religion%20Cause%20Violence.pdf

Are Religious People More Likely to be Moral?

Now atheists might immediately get rather irritated at this suggestion but before tearing it down with all sorts of references to examples of immoral religion or religious, consider a different argument which does not come from any theology. In his Guardian Blog Andrew Brown (www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/andrewbrown/2009/oct/02/religion-ethics) presents a different argument for this. He suggest that there is a lot of research that suggests people behave better when they are being watched. This should not come as a shocking surprise. If you have been tempted to commit a minor indiscretion and then notice you are being watched perhaps you suddenly felt societal breaks on your freedom and found the strength to resist temptation. Maybe those speed cameras which display your speed, instead of photographing you, work because other drivers can see how fast you are going so you slam on the breaks and slow down. Brown gives an illustration of a free world where some are shackled to objective morality and others feel free to do as they please

“Some will be as upright and thoughtful as Mary Warnock, and others will have the morals of the unregenerate Jonathan Aitken. When a Warnock does business with a Warnock (or marries one), their levels of trust are preserved. Similarly, when an Aitken transacts with an Aitken neither feels they must revise their estimate of human nature upwards. But after transactions between a Warnock and an Aitken, the level of trust in society generally must diminish. The Warnock must either withdraw from the group or retaliate in kind. Either way, the norm for the group will become worse; and, since most people in the middle follow the norm, a vicious circle is set up.” (Brown, 2nd October 2009, *The Guardian Comment is Free*)

Questions to consider:

1. How convincing do you find Brown’s argument?
2. Can you think of any opposing arguments?
3. Is it better, morally speaking, to have people who believe in an objective morality than people who believe morality is subjective?
4. Are there any alternatives to religion as a basis for objective morality?

Conspicuous Signs of Religion

PC Gurmeal Singh, a Sikh Greater Manchester policemen, has been awarded £10,000 compensation by an industrial tribunal for being required to remove his turban while on a riot training course. The tribunal found the police force guilty of indirect racial and religious discrimination and harassment when a trainer said “Can you not take that thing off... this is what you signed up for,” *The Guardian* reported.

www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2009/oct/02/sikh-police-turban-tribunal

In the UK, the law permits Sikhs to wear turbans on motorbikes and they are excused from standard police helmets. In France the situation is very different. In 2004 France prohibited the wearing of conspicuous signs of religion at school and children are not allowed to wear them. Sikhs must also remove their turbans for passport photos. In Belgium schools have banned the Muslim headscarf and Sikhs are worried the rule will apply to them.

The universal declaration of human rights states:

“Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.” (Article 18)

European countries apply this right in quite different ways when it comes to conspicuous signs of religion.

Religion and Gender: Religion and Women

Religions really don't seem to do very well when it comes to women and equality. Equality is usually understood to mean both equality of value and equality of opportunity. So we say that a human boy is of the same value as a human girl. Gender does not make one greater or lesser. In modern thinking, the belief that we all share an equal human value should lead to everyone having the same opportunities, especially when it comes to questions of power and authority.

An astonishingly brief history of gender

Of course in "past times" men were in charge, women had few rights, little legal recognition and tended to be seen largely as property to be passed from father to husband to son. Men dominated positions of public authority while women might be given authority over the home. Usually this idea was bound up with their role as mother and came laden with expectations of production of heirs (most importantly boys of course). Of course women were lifted up to positions of great importance in these contexts (defined by their reproductive capacity) and there is no doubt that the role of the 'mother' is highly valued in all religious traditions. So women were given a 'not equal but extra special' status (in fact this argument is still common today). In the past, women had less access to, or status in political decision-making or legal processes and society at large – this much is difficult to deny.

religion and women

So when religions suggest that women are equal but different and special, and this then is used to justify limiting their ability to be priests, bishops, popes, imams, rabbis, lamas, etc. (there are exceptions in some denominations but this is largely the case) we might ask a few questions of religion. This sounds as if religion has not moved on with the rest of society. Is it acceptable to move from 'equal but different' to 'equal but cannot be in charge'? We can accuse religion of seeming to be adrift from the values of society, but should it? Religions may consider themselves to be counterpoints to commonly accepted values. They may seek to challenge accepted ideas which have come about in this world, with reference to another contact point such as God.

Then there are some dubious specific religious practices which religions have to work very hard to explain away. For instance we might ask Buddhism why a woman should be first reincarnated as a man, before reaching enlightenment? (this is a widely held belief). We might ask why so many Churches do not allow women to hold positions of authority. We might ask why Muslim women seem to have so many special rules for which there are no male equivalents, such as dress codes.

Religions can respond to these sorts of problems in one of three ways:

- 1) Yes it is true, women are not as valued as men (on the whole this argument is not used!)
- 2) The practice is misunderstood, needs to be seen in context, and in fact there are other teachings which show how important women are and balance out the fact that these practices seem a bit unequal. This is common among more conservative wings of traditions who want to stay true to the traditional interpretation of the teaching. So, for instance, Christians may argue that the New Testament presents a revolutionary idea of the role of women, has women at the centre of some of the most powerful stories (for instance the Nativity, the woman at the well, the empty tomb). St Paul may have suggested women should not speak up during services, but he also said that we are all united in Christ.
- 3) These practices are wrong, are inherited from times past, social or cultural practices, which are not part of the received truth of the religion and can be dropped. This tends to be the case in liberal wings of religions. For instance, Tariq Ramadan argues that many of the restrictions placed on women in Muslim societies are cultural but directly contrary to Islamic teaching. For instance, he argues that women should have as much access to education as men, should have as much of a right to go to work as men and that this is clearly Islamic.

Assuming that we can discard '1' when considering '2' and '3' we have to look at the repercussions for religious authority in doctrine and dogma.

Conservative approaches to religion are going to find it more difficult to change because they tend to place a great deal of importance on the teachings and practices of religion as they have been. On the other hand liberal interpretations which adapt

religious teaching and practices for modern times appear to rewrite sacred truths. Obedience to authority is important and truth is important – these are values which should not be pushed to one side.

Liberals find it easier to adapt to modern values and reinterpret sacred texts and traditions, or discover truths previously hidden. Some religious groups allow for women leaders (priests or rabbis for instance). However, as one Evangelical Christian friend once said to me – once you start down that path, how do you decide which doctrine you can change and which you can't? Are they all up for grabs, in which case, is your religion just a reflection of the current age, rather than a reflection of some ultimate truth?

The website *Religious Tolerance* has some useful articles on this topic. The site strives to be representative of different perspectives within different religious traditions.

For perspectives on the role of women in society see: www.religioustolerance.org/fem_bibl.htm

For the question of the role of women in positions of leadership in religion see:

www.religioustolerance.org/femclrgy.htm

It also has a news feed on women's issues:

www.religioustolerance.org/fem_newf.htm

The Right to Die

The Times, May 10th 2006, reported a survey which showed that three quarters of the medical profession opposed a change in the laws affecting euthanasia, even for the small number of patients who are terminally ill and in considerable suffering. Among doctors who specialise in giving palliative care, care designed to relieve suffering, 9 out of 10 are opposed to the proposed change that the UK Government is making. The Government wants to give the right for someone who is terminally ill and in considerable distress to ask for and be given a lethal injection. British citizens who want physician assisted suicide must travel to countries such as Switzerland, without the assistance of a friend or a doctor in this country as such helpers could be prosecuted.

Cardinal Cormac Murphy-O'Connor of the Roman Catholic Church for England and Wales, the Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr Rowan Williams and the Chief Rabbi Dr Jonathan Sacks, wrote a joint letter to *The Times* expressing their concern about the proposal. In this letter and in public broadcasts they argued that physician assisted suicide is not simply a matter of personal autonomy because it has implications for others. The law should not be determined by a few extreme cases as it influences culture and social attitudes that affect the many, not just the few extreme examples. Many disability groups have also been opposed to the change. Supporters of the Bill have argued that it gives people the possibility to die with dignity and argue that the extreme suffering of the few should not be ignored because of some greater common good.

This debate crystallises an important difference in the idea of dignity. Those arguing in favour of assisted suicide build their case on the idea that freedom is right at the heart of dignity. Our right to choose is the key consideration in what makes us human. Church groups and others have a different perspective on dignity. Dignity for them is related to the wider community in which the individual is situated and the rights that an individual has, has corresponding duties for others which also bare on dignity. For many Christians, human dignity comes from the fact that humans are created by God with a specific purpose. Autonomy is important, but it is not the core determining feature of dignity. This can be expressed in a more secular way if, at the humanitarian, core, there is something sacred by virtue to the fundamental nature of what it means to be human, apart from free action.

Human rights are based on the dignity of human beings (see the Universal declaration of human rights) but where people have different views on what dignity itself is based on, differences emerge in how human rights are applied. The right to die illustrates this ambiguity.

Human-Animal Embryo

The Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority (www.hfea.gov.uk) has the responsibility for regulating treatment and research for initiatives related to human reproduction. They are a committee of medical specialists, interested members of the public and others with specific concerns and experience of the field. They issued a statement on the 5th September, 2007

(www.hfea.gov.uk/en/1581.html) about the question of the licensing of human-animal hybrids and chimera research. This is a sensitive area, a taboo for some, and so they undertook a public consultation. They have concluded that:

“there is no fundamental reason to prevent cytoplasm hybrid research. However, public opinion is very finely divided with people generally opposed to this research unless it is tightly regulated and it is likely to lead to scientific or medical advancements.”

They go on:

“This is not a total green light for cytoplasmic hybrid research, but recognition that this area of research can, with caution and careful scrutiny, be permitted. Individual research teams should be able to undertake research projects involving the creation of cytoplasmic hybrid embryos if they can demonstrate, to the satisfaction of an HFEA licence committee, that their planned research project is both necessary and desirable.”

While the Authority has not made any decision on broader hybrid and chimera research because evidence of benefit is lacking, this is the first step along a possible line of medical developments. The moral question can be phrased in different ways.

Is there something about the human embryo which means it is not a quantity of material to be used for other purposes but of unique worth? Is a potential unique human person more than some flesh to be used to advance science? That argument has already been lost in as much as embryo research already takes place. But more is implied here.

Is there something about combining animal and human embryos which undermines human dignity? Theologians and philosophers frequently make reference to the fact that humans are distinct from other creatures of the animal world. For instance they have capacity for rational thought and moral decision making, and are separate and uniquely special because of this. Does the use of human 'embryonic material' with animal diminish the dignity and status of humanity? On the other hand, are we just reacting to a 'yuk' factor of the idea of mixing human and animal? Of course these embryos will never be placed in the womb, but what could come next?

There is of course the tantalising possibility of fantastic benefits in the alleviation of terrible suffering brought about through the use of human and animal embryos in this way. Is medical advance more important than concerns about ideas of dignity or sanctity? Who decides when to allow changes in law to permit new procedures? What is the role of religion in that consultation process? To what extent should the experts represent the medical community, political groups or special interest groups such as religions?

Doctors and scientists may argue that the potential benefits for the good of humankind far outweigh misplaced taboo beliefs, while religions will be extremely nervous to let go of the normative and deontological beliefs about human life.

Animal Experimentation

In recent years there have been a series of direct action campaigns by animal rights activists aimed at intimidating investors and backers of pharmaceutical companies involved in developing medicines requiring animal testing. Farms involved in breeding animals for experimentation, share holders and universities seeking to develop facilities in conjunction with companies have all been the target of different sorts of demonstration and in some cases intimidation.

Ethically there are a number of factors at play. There is the question of the law, which allows these experiments to take place. There is the question of the beliefs of activists which are powerfully at odds with the law. There is the benefit of developing medicines which help to alleviate suffering. This aspect is much debated by activists who claim, against established scientific wisdom, that experimentation is not necessary or safe. There is the status of animals and human responsibility towards them, and there are the actions themselves, the experiments and tests. This issue involves justice, belief, ends, means and the nature of animal life. Let us briefly consider the challenges each element of the moral dilemma presents.

Animal testing and experimentation is legal under certain circumstances and is required by law in the production of medicines. However, being permitted by law does not make something moral. Aquinas wrote that an unjust law is no law at all. This is not a justification to overrule laws we disagree with, even if we have strong beliefs that the law is wrong. To act on our beliefs is a sign of integrity, but to use those beliefs to act against the law is a step further in a liberal democracy. In liberal democracy people are involved in the selection of legislators by a majority process and an independent judiciary assures the fair application of

those laws. If our beliefs lead us to oppose a law, the civic response is to generate political support for a change, not take law into our own hands. Most people with strong views on animal rights stay within the law though they may use quite uncomfortable methods to make their point. Part of a free democracy is living with people who will sometimes demonstrate against the things we think are lawful. However, breaking the law, threatening and causing anxiety cannot be justified in a liberal democracy because it represents the exercise of power over the will of others, rather than the exercise of reason and persuasion.

It is difficult for non scientists to understand or argue convincingly against the case for the necessity of animal testing and its usefulness in science. But it is difficult to argue against the development of drugs which save lives and alleviate suffering. Animal life is sacrificed for the benefit of human life. It is commonly felt that the end (the alleviation of human suffering) is justified by the means (the sacrifice of animals). If your house was on fire and you had to choose between saving your pet or your baby brother, you would not hesitate. That is the fundamental difference in the value we place on human life. Of course many would find it difficult to stomach the reality of the sorts of things that are actually done to animals, but the argument from squeamishness is always weak. There are many necessary unpleasant things that take place in life and it is only our sheltered modern existence which distances us from some of the brutal aspects of life.

Ultimately, it must be through the democratic process that laws are changed and the moral view of the nation expressed. There will always be areas where someone's individual beliefs fall outside the majority view and sometimes that will affect things of great importance, even human life, as in the dilemmas surrounding abortion and euthanasia. Even in these cases it cannot be right to abandon the democratic process and adopt violence, fear and anxiety as tools for establishing right.

God Goes Green

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC, www.ipcc.ch) was established in 1988 to assess information relevant to the understanding of climate change. They survey research, scientific and economic data to make projections on what is likely to happen. They recently produced a report and it is damning. It would appear that James Lovelock was right. We are in trouble. Human activity is causing Global climate change. Temperatures will probably rise by between 1.8 and 40°C by the end of the century, sea levels by up to 43cm and heat waves will increase in number. There will be more intense tropical storms. The situation is bad.

Politicians seem unable, or unwilling, to show leadership to make unpopular changes. The recent protest against the introduction of road pricing with almost 2 million people signing a petition illustrates the difficult political situation for democracies. If the people living now are unwilling to suffer then the future generations will suffer much more. Any government taking action might be voted out. Politicians and the public seem to be unable to do the moral thing and put the interests of the future ahead of those of the present. Short-termist moral thinking is threatening the planet.

However religions are not democratic. They do not need to worry about the votes. They have a position of authority that transcends the popular. They are in a position of moral leadership and could act and yet, according to Mark Dowd in recent articles (www.christian-ecology.org.uk/vatican-climate.htm), they are not. The world's major religions have said almost nothing about our duty to protect Earth and the life that depends on it.

Some Christians understand the biblical creation story as giving them dominion over the world, which means a duty to exploit it as much as possible. Few Muslims espouse green ideas. The Catholic Church is not responding. The Vatican, according to Dowd, is studying the problem, using low energy bulbs but sending officials thousands of miles around the world by air. While Hinduism teaches that the divine spirit is present in every molecule many Hindus are fatalistic and interpret disasters as nature's way of keeping the population under control and in balance with other life on earth.

There are individual believers who want a change in the tone of the voice from the leadership. Mark Dowd interviewed Father Sean McDonagh, a Columban father who is desperate for leadership from Rome. The Church isn't like Tony Blair, worried about losing votes because of some backlash over introducing carbon taxes. It must have a prophetic voice and take risks.

Religions might be the only global organizations not under the influence of economic immediate self interest, or the whim of a shallow electorate. Their moral responsibility is, as a result of this position, much greater, and likewise their moral culpability if they fail to act.

There are signs of change. Evangelical Christians in America have moved from a position dominated by “dominion theology” (lord over it and use it) to a split with a growing concern for respecting God’s creation. In America Christians have political strength and have formed the Evangelical Climate Initiative. Climate change is becoming an issue of moral importance for Christians in the same way abortion is. Environmental ethics are fast becoming the overriding religious ethic.

Mark Dowd argues that we need a human species wide call to self-limitation. If our politicians won’t lead, then people of faith and faith leaders must step into the vacuum. There is considerable voice over issues of sexual ethics or reproductive ethics. Will religion demonstrate the moral authority to recognize the whole picture?

The Planet is Angry

The planet is sick, and Humanity is to blame – James Lovelock and the Gaia hypothesis
(*The revenge of Gaia* – Penguin: Allen Lane, London 2006)

Gaia represents the combination of geosphere and biosphere. The biosphere represents the living material of all kinds which exists on the surface of the planet. The geosphere is the non-living material that makes up all the rest of the material on and beneath the surface – the hard material of the planet. James Lovelock uses Gaia as a metaphor for these two spheres and considers them as a single entity, almost alive, building on historic classical associations coming from ancient ideas about the earth as a god, to more geological associations made by James Hutton and T H Huxley in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

It is important to note that Lovelock’s theory does not require a belief that earth is some sort of mystical being. He argues that the only way in which Human beings are likely to pay attention to the ethical obligations thrown up by the bio-geosphere, is by thinking of it in terms of and treating it as if it were such a being. Much ethical debate is either person centred or God centred, so thinking about planet earth in its totality as a quasi god-person is a tool more likely to bring about the kind of moral responses necessary.

The principle message of his latest book is that the earth has reached a tipping point. It is as if humankind was on a boat near the edge of a waterfall and the motor is about to fail. The actions of humankind have degraded the survival system upon which we depend. We need to live sympathetically with our surrounds but we have grown and polluted far beyond the stage which the planet can sustain us and itself and we are reaching a point where catastrophic change is inevitable. That is the grim message of Lovelock’s new book, *The revenge of Gaia* (Penguin: Allen Lane, London 2006). Lovelock writes as a planetary physician. Gaia’s health is declining and our lives depend upon an improvement in Gaia’s health. Lovelock argues that we need to think about the planet as a person because it is only then that we really appreciate the extent to which our activity harms the planet. Lovelock is critical of two common positions. On the one hand is sustainable development, the idea that we can continue more or less as we are if we change the way we develop and the way in which we develop. Lovelock argues that this does not account for the real fundamental nature of the crises we face and that continuing development is simply not possible. Sustainable development might have been an option a century or two back but not now – managed, sustained retreat is more realistic. On the other hand there is the view that global warming claims are a fiction and that morality should be focussed on people not the environment. Traditionally Christian ethics has been focussed on people, rather than the natural world, and this remains prominent in some Christian thinking though there has been a considerable shift in recent years.

Humanity has become so obsessed with the idea of progress and betterment of society that it rarely looks beyond human beings to consider anything else. The love affair with the city must end and the love affair with nature must be rekindled. While there are one or two sceptics, the vast majority of all scientists are now convinced. There is virtual unanimity. The extent of change required will demand a massive investment. Windfarms and using clean forms of transport are only tinkering at the edges. The degree of change is far more fundamental and will require going nuclear, at least temporarily, while other methods of a controlled reduction in our rate of development is found.

This makes a powerful claim for the centrality of environmental ethics as the centre of all ethics, if not the only ethic that really matters; it is the totality of all ethics. If Gaia is not allowed to recover, and sustain the human civilisation, there may be no more ethics of any kind because human civilisation as we know it may no longer exist. It is as if any ethical system or issue which does not account for Gaia is no ethical system at all.

This environmental ethic then situates itself on a scientific and historic premise. The human species is dependent on planet earth. Unchecked, humanity will bring about events which will lead to the diminishment or destruction of human civilization, if not the species itself. The Gaia ethic is the ultimate ethical trump card that displaces all other considerations. The possibility of goodness and rightness cannot exist without sentient moral creatures. The revenge of Gaia and the destruction of a habitat that humanity can survive in, destroys those moral creatures, excepting the possibility of intelligent moral life elsewhere within or beyond the confines of our universe, and excepting the possible existence of angels or human beings beyond this world.

Of course some religions may interpret the cataclysmic disaster as punishment for the unrighteous, a second flood to wipe the slate clean, or a method of allowing only a select few to survive. There are possible religious ethics which can offer an alternative priority list. However non-religious ethical systems or values systems will not have this option and mainstream religions seem to be tending towards embracing the environmental ethic, rather than rejecting it. In Roman Catholic Christianity, for example, there has been the development of a notion of the value of creation in its own right because of its sacred status as made by God, rather than the more traditional notion of humanity having dominion over all. There is also a backlash in the American evangelical association with a fast growing group among the leadership of the Evangelical Churches being influenced by the notion that the destruction of the environment directly harms the young and the generations to come so conflicts with the ethic of love of others.

Case Studies

John Stuart Mill, Liberty and the London Bombings

The summer months have been dominated by discussions about the London bombings, their causes and appropriate responses to that. Debates in the media frequently refer to the tension between the civil liberties that citizens ought to enjoy and the need to have tighter security in order to prevent further attacks, as much as possible. This touches on an important ethical tradition, Libertarianism. John Stuart Mill famously wrote in his text *On Liberty* (1859), that there is one very simple principle underpinning the governance of people and the extent to which individual liberties should be restricted. He said that the only principle was self-protection. Power can only be exercised over another member of the community to prevent harm to others. In a time when there are direct attacks on the civilian population, fear and anxiety is heightened and there is a sense of feeling that freedom must be restricted. So we consider things previously placed out of bounds such as the use of lethal force against suspected suicide bombers. This is in keeping with the rule of self-protection that Mill underlined. But Mill warns us of other dangers to our freedom. He is concerned about our protection from the government. Will Muslims carrying backpacks on the tube be identified as suspect suicide bombers? Will the measures put in place at a time of anxiety move the country away from its liberal democratic credentials?

Mill is also concerned that we are protected from the majority opinion, a serious weakness which he identified in Jeremy Bentham's form of Utilitarianism. Simply doing the greatest Good for the greatest numbers might lead to injustices being done to a minority. There is a backlash against British Muslims with a very significant rise in threats and attacks on mosques and Muslims. The hostility shown doesn't represent the majority opinion in the British public but what if further attacks take place and the prevailing climate in the country should change to one of hostility towards a group perceived to be the source of the threat? The shadow of the holocaust should remind us of what is possible when a government identifies a minority group as the cause of the country's problems. Mill is just as concerned that the liberties of such a minority are protected from popular hatred. In this time there is an increase in the dialogue of 'them and us'. This distancing of a minority community from the perceived majority community is dangerous to the principles of liberal democracy in which diversity and difference have important roles to play, and can lead to the alienation and exclusion of a group. Mill felt that "while mankind are imperfect there should be different opinions; so it is that there should be different experiments of living." (*On Liberty* p.260). Mill advocates that there will be diversity in the world and difference approaches to life and this feature of Mill's thinking has become embedded in the idea of liberal democracy found in the modern world. John Rawls, the important contemporary libertarian notes that in a democratic society, a plurality of ideas about how to live is inevitable and any system of Government must work with that inevitability. Mill's work can teach us a lot about how to respond to the current situation and from a reading of *On Liberty* it is clear that freedom and plurality and diversity in liberal democracy must not be the casualties of the war on terror.

France, the Burqa and the Politics of Recognition

Recently a French parliamentary committee has recommended a partial ban on women wearing Islamic face veils in hospitals, schools, government offices and on public transport ([news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/8480161.stm](https://www.bbc.com/news/health-16184801)). Anyone showing visible signs of “radical religious practice” should be refused residence cards and citizenship it said. According to the French interior ministry 1,900 women in France wear the full veils. The French government has refused to grant citizenship to a foreign man who forces his wife to wear the full Islamic veil. The French prime minister said the man, “has no place in our country ... The civil code has for a very long time provided that naturalisation could be refused to someone who does not respect the values of the (French) republic... This case is about a religious radical: he imposes the burqa, he imposes the separation of men and women in his own home, and he refuses to shake the hands of women”. France has taken increasingly strict steps to enforce a sense of the values of the republic by prohibiting outward signs of religious belief which, it argues, confer values incompatible with the republic.

This raises the question of whether it is right to impose a cultural identity on others with a different identity. One argument goes: If you move into my patch and I am in the majority you should follow my way of life. In other words my way of life is better than yours and if you want to come here you have to change.

However, a very different approach is taken in Canada, in Quebec, where the French identity is protected and preserved. Charles Taylor has written about this in his work *Multiculturalism: Examining The Politics of Recognition*. He notes that societies are becoming increasingly multicultural with more migration. The idea that one culture should impose itself on others suggests that one culture is superior. This means minority cultures will diminish and perhaps even vanish. Whether or not a culture is recognized or not recognized influences a person’s identity. The failure to recognize a culture causes damage to an individual or group. For example the failure to recognize women or black people in society led to great injustices and great suffering for women and black people in the past. Human beings need some kind of recognition. There needs to be equal recognition.

In the past there was an idea that society was structured by the old concept of honour. Thus those who had more power and wealth had greater importance than those with less power and wealth. In the modern age we have a new idea – dignity. This is a kind of universal and egalitarian idea of worth. There is a sense that every individual has an original identity. People are carriers of culture so each individual carries a culture forward. Charles Taylor writes:

“Equal recognition is not just the appropriate mode for a healthy democratic society. Its refusal can inflict damage on those who are denied it... The projection of an inferior or demeaning image on another can actually distort and oppress, to the extent that the image is internalized.” (1994: 36)

Equal recognition can mean one of two things. It can mean universalism – the sense that everyone has equal worth, equal rights and entitlements and equal citizenship. It can also relate to difference, building on the idea of individual identity. Every person should be recognised for his or her particular identity. An individual should not be assimilated as this leads to a loss of distinctiveness and peculiarities. In the sci-fi series *Star Trek* the Borg are a race of creatures that absorb every race they encounter. All of the particularities of the species are lost in the greater Borg but what you have left is Borg. The politics of difference “...asks that we give acknowledgement and status to something that is not universally shared. Or, otherwise put, we give due acknowledgement only to what is universally present – everyone has an identity – through recognizing what is peculiar to each. The universal demand powers an acknowledgement of specificity.” (Charles Taylor 1994: 39)

By applying universal dignity we are blind to the differences of people – everyone deserves equal respect. If we apply the politics of difference we do not discriminate by acknowledging the differences and treating people in a differentiated way. Cultures and identities deserve equal recognition, but not necessarily equal treatment. In France the Government sees republican values as a universalism. In French Quebec, however, the politics of recognition allow for special laws that preserve French identity in a majority English speaking Canada.

The question is how recognition of difference is balanced against a universalism of dignity in responding to issues of religious diversity. One way of considering this dilemma is to think about national identity, patriotism and a sense of civic homogeneity. An alternative approach is to encourage a more diverse and cosmopolitan vision. If we think we have discovered the best possible way of living already perhaps a universalism is the way forward. If we think we have not yet discovered the best possible way to living, perhaps there might be something in different cultures to learn from. Otherwise, in an effort to universalize, we might eliminate a way of life which has something to contribute to the best possible way of living. One could

draw a parallel with the biodiversity argument and the preservation of the rainforest. If we destroy life forms we know nothing about, we might lose future scientific cures. Perhaps the same is true for cultures.

Dumb Plastic that Keeps Coming Back

Just about every plastic bottle that has ever been made still exists, according to David de Rothschild, an environmental campaigner and sailor of the *Plastiki*, a catamaran made of pressured plastic bottles. In crossing the Pacific Ocean de Rothschild entered the vast area filled with millions and millions of tiny microscopic fragments of plastic, stretching across a huge arc of sea. Currents bring the plastic from across the oceans to this point. The dumping ground, which contributes to the death of a million sea birds and 100,000 sea mammals every year, is very hard to see. You cannot photograph it, because the flecks are too tiny, but their presence is part of the reason for the global collapse in fish stocks which some estimate to have dropped by up to 80%. It is difficult to imagine that when we throw away a plastic bag in the bin of our kitchen, thousands of miles away fragments of that bag choke the life out of the Pacific Ocean. Ironically, these flecks are consumed by the sea animals and then end up on our kitchen tables in the fish and chips we buy. There is no away. We then find ourselves eating our own garbage. De Rothschild calls this plastic, dumb plastic. Stuff that is used to wrap up other stuff – a disease that will one day choke the life out of the oceans, unless we change.

To find out more about the *Plastiki* expedition visit:

www.theplastiki.com.

There you can also read about other projects for reusing discarded plastic.

Is the UK Headed Towards Legalised Euthanasia?

Professor David Albert Jones thinks we may be and warns against it. In an article in *The Tablet* Catholic newspaper available online he comments on the decision by UK Law Lords in favour of Debbie Purdy, granting her the right to information about how the Director of Public Prosecutions decides whether to prosecute in cases of assisted suicide. This in no way legalizes euthanasia. What she wants to know is whether the DPP will prosecute someone who accompanies her to a country where euthanasia is legal (such as the Dignitas clinic in Switzerland). This is an example, Professor Jones suggests, of the slippery slope in action. This may effectively encourage people to go to other countries seeking assisted suicide. Professor Jones expresses serious reservations about the possibility that people may feel pressured into ending their lives. It may lead to people who feel they are a burden to be encouraged to take their own life when with different kinds of treatment they may actually have felt differently. The ruling gives encouragement to the euthanasia movement so may be a thin edge of the wedge.

For more information about the ruling, search for Debbie Purdy in any news website or search engine. To read the article in full: www.thetablet.co.uk/pdf/3264.pdf

The British Humanist Association is in favour of a change in the law and criticizes the slippery slope argument and some of the elements which Professor David Albert Jones uses in his piece, such as references to Nazis in the argument. For more information see: [www.humanismforschools.org.uk/pdfs/Euthanasia%20\(final\).pdf](http://www.humanismforschools.org.uk/pdfs/Euthanasia%20(final).pdf)

Human-Animal Cybrid Embryo

Human Animal Cybrid Embryos is a new phrase for students of genetic ethics to get to grips with. The Bill going through parliament will allow for the insertion of a nucleus of a human cell into a hollowed out cow's egg. Permission has already been given for such experiments to take place. Scientists are very interested in understanding the development of embryos at the molecular level finding and believing that treatments for degenerative diseases such as Parkinson's, Alzheimer's and motor neurone disease will come from such research.

What are the religious objections? Some religious traditions, such as the Roman Catholic Church, are traditionally opposed to the destruction of an existing human embryo and this will come about as the human-animal embryo will not be allowed to live past 14 days, and indeed in most cases will not be allowed to live past 5 days. In addition religious opponents argue that there are alternative ways of producing adult stem cells for such experimentation. This ultimately comes from the belief that the point of conception marks the start of the human person. While it does not look like a human being, at the point of conception all the necessary genetic ingredients are there and a unique human being can emerge. The Catholic Church has decided that it is at that point that the dignity of the human person is to be recognised. The person begins when the embryo begins.

The counter argument then is that at 14 days the Cybrid has very little that is recognisably human. At 14 days the cells have flattened out to a disc. It has human chromosomes but arguably it is not a human person. If it is not a human person then it is not a moral person that should be taken into account. Some argue that rationality and the emergence of other features such as the possibility of having relationships need to be present in a human person. The early embryo has no consciousness and no nervous system.

Some religious traditions have a less strict and absolute view seeing the emergence of a human life as developmental. For instance Muslim traditions see 120 days or 40 days as the point at which the soul is present in the embryo. It is then that the dignity of the human person is recognized.

It is arguable that taking the absolutist position of conception at the start of the person is incoherent. If an embryo is equal to a born human being, then how should we view the 30% of all conceptions that do not succeed? Should there be funerals for these unsuccessful pregnancies?

An additional argument is that taking the absolutist position places the interest of a potential person over the interest of a suffering human being who needs help now.

A counter argument to this is that early life is fragile and should be protected and that we protect many things that are not human beings, such as animals, and the environment. Arguably the Christian ethics is not based on recognising what a human being has achieved, but protecting the vulnerable. While there is little in the bible to support the view that the human person begins from conception, there is clearly a powerful ethic of protecting the weak, from the writings of the prophets, through to the actions and teachings of Jesus who associated with the marginalised, healed the sick and had a concern for the poor.

Further reading:

Catholic Culture – Looking at ‘Cybrids’, Human-Animal Hybrids:

www.catholicculture.org/library/view.cfm?recnum=7940

New Scientist – Scientists hit back at Catholic church over ‘cybrids’:

www.newscientist.com/article/dn13227-scientists-hit-back-at-catholic-church-over-cybrids.html

Should the Utilitarians Run the Hospitals?

It has been reported that obese people are to be denied some surgical procedures in an attempt to cut costs in the NHS. Three Suffolk primary care trusts have decided that patients clinically determined to be obese will not get operations like hip and knee replacements. The reason given is that the risk of complications after treatment for obese patients are higher than other groups, but it is also said that financial limits are forcing hospitals to make difficult decisions. There are a number of responses, the ethical thinker might make to this. On the one hand it might seem to go against the idea that everyone should receive treatment on the basis of equality. We might say that, in our welfare medical system, everyone should receive treatment free at the point of need. But should we treat people the same? Should people who have chosen activities which harm then be treated at great expense to the greater number of people? What about criminals? All treatment must be paid for by someone, and with the NHS it is the tax payer. Hospitals have limited funds because the government takes a limited amount of money through tax. Medical treatments cost more and more because as every new treatment appears, more money is needed to pay for it. How should we decide who gets treatment, and what treatments are to be given? What sort of ethical thinker might we want to run our hospitals? Kant might find it very difficult to ever say no to a treatment. If we are going to treat one person this way, we should treat all who need it this way. There might be a tendency to universalize the decision – costs could run out of control. Joseph Fletcher might want to treat each case on its individual merits but is that really practical in the busy business of health care and would people accept it? There is already considerable public upset about the idea that in some parts of the country, some treatments are available but that they are not in others. So perhaps we do need utilitarians to run our hospitals, to make calculations in the interests of the greater number even if some minority groups lose out. Consider the other philosophers you have studied. How would they manage a hospital with the limited budget? How would they decide between patients and would they have objections to certain treatments, or to treating certain patients?

After Dolly What Next for Cloning?

Ten years ago, there was an extraordinary birth at the Roslin Institute near Edinburgh on 5th July. Dolly the sheep, was the first mammal to be cloned from adult cells. Ian Wilmut and Roger Highfield in their new book, *After Dolly: the uses and misuses of human cloning* (Little Brown: London, 2006) explore some of the difficult questions their work and all that has followed throws up.

In particular, they address the question of cloning babies. Back in 1978 the first test-tube baby, Louise was born. This has led to a radical change for those couples unable to give birth naturally with greater possibilities for having their own children. It has also led to concerns about the morality of in vitro fertilisation. For instance, the Roman Catholic Church deems such procedures as immoral and its attitude to cloning technologies is similar. However, for the wider public IVF is accepted, but will this be the case for reproductive cloning?

Some say that infertile adults will want to use nuclear transfer, the process by which babies might be cloned, but Wilmut and Highfield think this unlikely. There are great risks attached to nuclear transfer and many alternatives from IVF to adoption. To be sure of success you would need 300 eggs, and twenty-nine willing women prepared to have an embryo. Most of these women would face the emotional trauma of a failed pregnancy. Wilmut and Highfield feel such suffering is far too much to justify but there is more to come. Four in ten cloned lambs died within weeks and there are all sorts of abnormalities that vary between species. Ultimately it seems that reproductive cloning is unreliable and unsafe, a bit like tossing five coins and getting five heads or tails.

Much more important is the research evidence that can come from the early stages of cloning as this will help in developing therapeutic cloning. Wilmut and Highfield are more positive about the benefits offered by therapeutic cloning, which can offer the chance to heal people of existing medical problems. The ability to grow replacement cells and organs and modify genetic structures offers more promise though even gene therapy has risks. Some of the human trials of experimental treatments have not gone well.

Wilmut and Highfield make a last point in the book which Wilmut has reinforced in interviews. He believes that the public must take responsibility for making decisions about which technologies are developed and which are not. It is not for scientists to make the moral decisions. We have to take responsibility for understanding the science so we can fully appreciate the moral issues at stake.

Homosexual Rights and Catholic Adoption Agencies

There has been considerable discussion about the new laws (April 2007) which will mean that homosexual people will have their right to not be discriminated against by those offering services to the public upheld. For instance, from April a B&B could not refuse a homosexual couple without facing possible prosecution. While this extension of equality is largely expected when we talk about race or gender, the law has not included sexual orientation up till now.

The Catholic Church in England and Wales has complained that their adoption agencies should be excluded from the legislation on the grounds of conscience and fundamental belief. Catholic adoption agencies (funded by the Government) currently would not consider gay or lesbian couples as appropriate for adoption. After April they will not be able to continue with this approach, unless the law changes.

What we are witnessing here is a clash of ethics based on conflicting absolutist principles. In the red corner is the Catholic Church. The Catholic Church draws heavily on natural moral law theory, a deontological ethic, which holds that certain actions are right or wrong in and of themselves according to whether they fit certain purposes of human nature, which include worshipping God (and by extension honouring his teachings such as biblical references taken to prohibit homosexual acts) and procreation. As a result, the Church does not support or encourage homosexual acts and believes homosexual couples should not be sexually active.

In the blue corner are human rights. Human rights are also absolutist and deontological. Human rights have a fundamental idea that human dignity must be maintained. Actions that deny human dignity by removing rights from a person are in contravention with the purpose and detail of human rights law and ethics. These actions are wrong because they are orientated against

human dignity (as understood by human rights thinking). Long lists of individual rights detail their extent in international and national agreements.

This dispute then is a clash between two understandings of absolute ethics. In asking for an exemption from the law on grounds of conscience and fundamental religious beliefs, the Church is asking for something rather surprising – a form of plural relativism whereby specific groups are allowed to live according to differing moral codes, respected because of their tradition. This is surprising because the Catholic Church is opposed to relativism. It is also surprising because the Church has become a great defender of rights with a long history of commitment to workers' rights and the rights of the oppressed, the unborn and the discriminated against.

In the case of religions these divergences are coming under more and more scrutiny at a time when people are more and more concerned about what morals people all hold as basic and common. Women's dress and Islam, and wearing crosses in the workplace are examples of this tension. However, sexual orientation is a much greater step as it involves a more basic and fundamental discrimination on a type of person. This will prove a very difficult tension to resolve and it may lead to the withdrawal of some religious institutions from the public sphere, such as the Catholic Adoption Agencies. That step is a step towards segregation.

This illustrates one of absolutisms weaknesses. It is not flexible and yet reaches a long way touching people's individual lives and personal beliefs. Perhaps it is not ambiguous enough for modern living, or perhaps one kind of absolutism is simply right and we need to work out which it is and relegate all the others to the bin of bad ideas. It would appear that the clash of absolutisms will be resolved with homosexual rights trumping Catholic conceptions of natural law. Inevitably, when absolutisms clash, there can be only one winner.