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THESIS TITLE: "SOME CONTEMPORARY ATHEIST AND CHRISTIAN RESPONSES TO MORAL NIHILISM AND AMORALISM"

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CONTENTS

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Finally, in relation to my general education in matters of religion, as I acknowledge in a footnote, my greatest debt is not to what I have learnt in lecture halls, in seminar rooms or from material to be found in libraries: it is to what I have learnt sitting in many different places of worship listening to the preaching and counsel of wise, loving and largely unsung ministers of religion who have devoted their lives to the cure of souls.

BIBLIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

The principal works referred to in the main text are abbreviated, following their first mention, as indicated in footnotes and occasionally in the text. Where appropriate page or chapter numbers follow. For books read on Kindle, the location number (loc) is given instead of a page number, since some such books have no page numbers.
Abbreviations are used for the principal works discussed chapters 2-10 as follows:

SA = Charles Taylor: *A Secular Age*.
P = Machiavelli: *The Prince*
D = Machiavelli: *The Discourses*
PSM = Isaiah Berlin: *The Proper Study of Mankind* (Ed Henry Hardy) This collection of many of Berlin's most important essays is used as a source of primary references for convenience of the reader. Where necessary or helpful the original collection in which a particular essay appeared is also given.
DDI = Daniel Dennett: *Darwin's Dangerous Idea*
FE =Daniel Dennett: *Freedom Evolves*
BS = Daniel Dennett: *Breaking the Spell*
OWM = Derek Parfit On What Matters, vols. 1, 2, 3 and 4.
EC = Keith Ward: *Ethics and Christianity*
MAG = Keith Ward: *Morality, Autonomy and God*
RTC = Keith Ward: Re-thinking Christianity
EKW = The Essential Keith Ward.
Except where indicated, all translations are my own.
All other references are given in full within footnotes, and full details appear in the bibliography.

SHORT SYNOPSIS

Some Contemporary Atheist and Christian Responses to Moral Nihilism and Amoralism

The study explores some responses by atheist and Christian ethicists to the view that nothing really matters (moral nihilism), including how we live our own lives and how we treat others (amoralism).
It does so in the context of two hypotheses:
1) that those atheist and Christian ethicists, who broadly endorse Enlightenment values, share, and should propagate universally many substantial ethical prescriptions which require that, sometimes, we should make substantial and uncompensated sacrifices of our own legitimate interests to secure those of others
2) that atheists cannot convincingly argue for this without recourse to analogues for Christian accounts of teleology and eschatology which include an ethic of individual vocations.

I identify three challenges to non-nihilist ethics that confront both atheist and Christian ethicists:

1) the perennial challenges from the facts of suffering, failure and death (Russell et al)
2) the contemporary challenges from the pluralism of secular societies as identified by Charles Taylor
3) the Machiavellian challenge to the rationality of behaving in accordance with either Christian or exclusive humanist morality in pursuing ambitions for worldly success in zero-sum competitive activities like politics, war and now other careers.

After setting out the three challenges in the three chapters of Part One, I explore, in the three chapters of Part Two, the different responses to them of three exceptionally impressive atheist philosophers: Isaiah Berlin's pluralism, Daniel Dennett's Naturalism and Derek Parfit's Rationalism. I conclude that their accounts of the nature and justification of moral conduct provide some confirmation for my two hypotheses.

In three chapters of Part Three, I mainly discuss some of the work of Keith Ward as a clear adherent and exponent, amongst many distinguished others, of pro-Enlightenment Christian ethics. I argue that his version of liberal Christian humanism can be elaborated so as to address fully the three challenges from moral nihilism and amoralism. I focus on his accounts of:

1) the Christian theological virtues
2) the Christian version of liberal humanism, and
3) the Christian ethic of vocations

In this way and others, I argue that Christian responses to the three challenges to ethics from of moral nihilism and amoralism provide more credible rebuttals of the challenges of moral nihilism and amoralism than are available to atheist ethicists.

LONGER SYNOPSIS

Some Contemporary Atheist and Christian Responses to Moral Nihilism and Amoralism

This study seeks to make a contribution to debates between contemporary atheists and Christians about rebutting moral nihilism – the view that nothing really matters – and the amoralism which it entails – the view that it doesn't matter how people live or how they treat others. This is important for all ethicists because rebuttals of moral nihilism and amoralism implicitly or explicitly underpin all non-nihilist ethical judgments, but are also doctrines which seem to be strongly supported from three sources:

1. Perennial metaphysical claims about the realities of apparently pointless suffering, irremediable failures in our efforts to do good and avoid evil, and the allegedly permanent annihilation of ourselves in death. (Russell, 1903; Benatar 2017).
2. The prevalence of atheism in contemporary secular and highly plural societies and globally, which makes it difficult for both religious and religionless ethicists to furnish compelling reasons for accepting any universal moral truths, and to avoid both repugnant monist dogmatism and extreme anarchic permissivism. (Taylor, 2007)
3. The fact that what many people today think is essential to a life well lived is achieving a substantial measure of worldly success in their work, where this means securing esteem and prosperity through succeeding in zero-sum competitive activities, such as, notably, in business. Here people will allegedly often ignore – and think it rational to ignore - moral demands for honesty, justice and kindness and to resort to ruthless dishonesty, injustice and cruelty. (Machiavelli, 1513).

Taylor explicitly identifies three, and implicitly, a fourth type of response by ethicists to these three challenges to non-nihilist ethics all of which offer different answers to the Enlightenment assertions of the sovereignty of reason in epistemology, of equal individual liberty in politics, and of disinterested beneficence in ethics. Responses to moral nihilism can thus be divided into four categories: pro-Enlightenment Christian ethics (+ECE); pro-Enlightenment "exclusive humanism" (+EEH); anti-Enlightenment, fundamentalist or fideist Christian ethics (-ECE); anti-Enlightenment (Nietzschean) exclusive humanism (-EEH). I focus mainly

on comparing the two pro-Enlightenment types of ethics, except in treating Machiavelli as a proto-Nietzschean –EEH.

My general project is to try to ascertain what contemporary Christian and atheist ethicists can learn from one another and where they must agree to differ. The whole study may be conceived as an exploration of some atheist and Christian responses to what Henry Sidgwick identified as the "profoundest problem" in ethics, understood as the problem of what it is rational to do when duty conflicts with interest.

The discussion is framed within an exploration of two hypotheses. First, if atheist and Christian ethicists both broadly endorse the moral convictions of the Enlightenment, they are, in Charles Taylor's phrase, "brothers under the skin" – progeny of the same developments in Christian ethics. As such, they should collaborate to defend and propagate a universal morality of liberal humanism which provides a rational rebuttal of moral nihilism and amoralism in both secular societies and globally. Second, if atheism is to provide a rationally credible and powerfully inspiring rebuttal of moral nihilism, it requires analogues for faith in Christian teleology and eschatology as well as for the vocational ethics which these convictions entail.

I define humanism as the belief that it is always good to reduce pointless suffering and to enhance harmless enjoyment in life before death. I claim that this moral conviction is central to all religious world-views as well as to pro-Enlightenment atheist ethics. I qualify humanism as "liberal" to the extent that it makes no claims to moral knowledge which is complete and unrevisable. For liberals, in ethics as in science, claims to knowledge must be based on reasoning about experience but are always open to the possibility that these claims usually need supplementing and refining in the light of new experience and the discoveries of others. They also sometimes need to be substantially revised or abandoned altogether. Consequently, no set of moral beliefs can claim sufficient authority to proscribe dissenting views and to compel conformity to its prescriptions, save for good cause shown in relation to wrongful (inhumane or anti-humanist) harmfulness. On the contrary, like scientific knowledge, moral knowledge grows through constructive interactions amongst those who may disagree with one another or acknowledge shared uncertainties, and so seek to confirm or disconfirm particular views.

I proceed by explicating, in Part One, three types of challenge to non-nihilist ethics. After attending in chapter 1 to some key preliminary questions, I then (chapter 2) explicate the perennial grounds, given by

Bertrand Russell and others, based on the facts of pointless suffering, ultimate failure and the finality of death, for thinking that moral nihilism and amoralism may be both true and profoundly alarming. I then explore (chapter three), using Charles Taylor's *A Secular Age*, the particular contemporary challenges which ethics faces from secularity. These relate, for both atheists and Christians, to the problems of identifying what, if anything, really matters, given:

i) the extreme pluralism of the modern world which seems to render moral disagreements "interminable" and irresoluble
ii) the widespread belief that all facts are natural facts of the sort which science investigates, and this excludes facts about values and about what really matters and how much
iii) the abiding and profound unease which arises from the thought that "if this is all there is" then nothing really matters.

In chapter four, I explicate Machiavelli's case for amoralism in contexts where people are ambitious for worldly success in zero-sum competitive activities, especially the pursuit of esteem (glory), its conditions (power) and its accoutrements (wealth). I claim that these challenges are especially relevant to morality in the world of contemporary work and that Machiavelli's case for amoralism has been regrettably ignored by students of business ethics and never satisfactorily rebutted.

In chapters 5-7 of Part Two, I consider some of the (mainly later) work of Isaiah Berlin, Daniel Dennett and Derek Parfit in defending atheist ethics against these challenges on the basis, respectively, of pluralism, naturalism and rationalism.

In chapters 8-10 of Part Three, I consider, mainly by building on the work of Keith Ward, a specifically Christian set of responses to the three challenges from moral nihilism and amoralism, which relies on the theological virtues, on a liberal version of Christian humanism and on an ethic of vocations. In a short concluding chapter (11) I suggest that that the whole discussion has provided some quite persuasive confirmation for both of the hypotheses set out above.

I seek to make the case for the two hypotheses first by evaluating what I take to be the best possible case for +EEH by considering the later work of three philosophers whom I have greatly admired personally as well as professionally and who are recognised as major exponents of versions of atheist ethics.

After considering their general (and uniformly non-dismissive) attitude to religion, I examine how each fares in relation to the challenges of Part One and conclude by identifying what I take to be their analogues for the roles played by the will of God, teleology and eschatology in Christian ethics. In each case, I try to do justice to what they can teach (or reinforce in) Christian ethics: Berlin's anti-totalitarianism; Dennett's humanising of scientific rationality; and Parfit's sensitivity to the real problems of moral nihilism, his meticulous refutation of subjectivist and naturalist answers to it and his heroic moral ambitions for humanity.

However, I point out that in the end they each have to rely on something akin to faith to ground their ethics. For Berlin it is near universally accepted values and "what everybody knows" about morality, e,g, what decency is. For Dennett it is values which he calls "sacred" and which he thinks form a mutually complementing moral unity. For Parfit it is "irreducible moral norms," accessed by applying his "triple theory" of metaethics.

I argue, however, that Berlin's pluralism cannot avoid sliding into subjectivism and relativism. Dennett's naturally sacred values turn out to be vulnerable to cogent criticism, as illustrated by his example of a sacred belief in democracy. Parfit, like Marx, recognises the need for an optimistic eschatology to give point to the sacrifices which his idealism demands but, again like Marx's, his eschatology suffers not only from empirical implausibility, but also from the fact that those called upon to make sacrifices here and now will not be around to enjoy the future utopia they (hopefully) make possible. I also stress that none of the +EEHs have a satisfactory ethic of ambition and so are unable to meet the crucial challenge from Machiavellianism.

In Part Three I use the work of Keith Ward to suggest how +ECE out-narrates both +EEH and Machiavellian –EEH. I do not agree with Ward on all issues. I disagree that egoism is always immoral; that beauty and truth are intrinsic goods coeval with moral goodness; that some vocations are still to be regarded as more Christ-like than others, that being a mercenary or a prostitute is always immoral and some other issues.

I also do not understand how his life-long belief in philosophical idealism relates to Christian teachings about the resurrection of the body. However, I regard these disagreements as unimportant compared with the many very important claims Ward makes with which I do agree and which I seek both to explicate and build on in elaborating a Christian rebuttal of moral nihilism and Machiavellian amoralism.

First, I maintain with Ward that postulating the existence of a God of love is the most plausible way of denying that all existence is pointless and ends for ever in death. This requires faith that the universe is benignly purposive and hope that all will finally be well. Further, since the purpose for which the universe exists is so that divine love should flourish perfectly within it, it would be irrational not to make the pursuit of perfectly requited love our *summum bonum* and to accord sovereignty among the virtues to the practices of loving well. In this way +ECE rebuts the perennial challenge to non-nihilistic ethics.

To the challenge which comes from the extreme pluralism of Taylor's secular age Ward responds with a pro-Enlightenment ethic of liberal humanism which can reasonably aspire to become a globally accepted ethic. Such a humanism endorses a universal right of all individuals to equality of concern for their happiness and respect for their dignity as moral agents (Dworkin). In promoting and protecting these values against religious authoritarianism and totalitarian tyranny, +ECEs and +EEHs can and should make common cause, given the many ways in which such an ethic is currently threatened with subversion or repression.

They are able to make common cause in respect of a monist humanism in a pluralist world because their monist insistence on tolerance of all but the perniciously intolerant is not based on any claim to authoritative moral knowledge – only God could make such a claim - but rather on a recognition that, in ethics as in science, all our understandings are imperfect, revisable, and improvable. They are, however, based on the best available evidence we are currently able to adduce and the most cogent conclusions we can draw from it on the basis of rigorous argument.

The final challenge to non-nihilist ethics comes from the Machiavellian claim that the pursuit of fame and fortune through engaging in competitive activities to secure worldly success requires us to be willing to do evil, if not doing so will impede or undermine the successful realisation of our worldly ambitions. Though Machiavelli was mainly concerned with exceptional people whose ambitions focussed on success in politics and war, the people who are now most likely to heed Machiavelli's amoralist advice are much more numerous and include pubic officials, both elected and appointed, and those engaged in commerce and other lines of work. I argue that if people measure the success of their lives exclusively in terms of how far they advance in their careers the result is likely to be one of frustration rather than fulfilment. I contrast a life where Taylorian "fullness" derives from exclusively pursuing advancement in a career accompanied by increases of status and wealth, with one which is devoted

to following vocations (which may also involve, but subordinately, prosecuting a career). I note that vocations, unlike successful careers

- always issue from calls to make the world a better place in future
- require the creative transformation of a unique individual's raw psychological and material resources to bring about that betterment
- can only lead to a sense of real achievement and fulfilment if approached with honesty and other virtuous attitudes and not carried out fraudulently or otherwise viciously
- are vulnerable to many kinds of failure, other than that of failure to please paymasters, which have to be endured and remedied if possible
- need to be accurately discerned, honestly motivated and greatly empowered by the practices of piety
- do not constrain agents to operate only in specific times and places.

Encouraging and educating people to see their working lives in terms of vocations offers decisive reasons why they should not heed Machiavelli's advice in a world where for more and more people a life well-lived consists in what Taylor calls "practising a vocation which we find fulfilling and which constitutes an obvious contribution to human welfare." (*SA*, p.7).

I conclude that, while the widespread dismissal of Christian ethics is probably mainly due to failures by Christians, Christian ethics still has much to contribute to enriching and ennobling human conduct in a pluralist world, even if its core metaphysical assumptions are found incredible. In particular, the very difficult Christian injunction to "let all that ye do be done in love" ought to be universally inspiring. In fact, I think that, without something akin to core Christian metaphysical beliefs, there is no rational alternative to a despairing moral nihilism. What seems certain is that the world will be a better place if Christians and atheists talk to each other constructively about ethical issues than if they simply ignore one another's views or dismiss them with varying degrees of self-righteousness, anger and contempt.

PART ONE

THE CHALLENGESS FROM MORAL NIHILISM AND AMORALISM

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION: PURPOSES, CONCEPTS AND PROTAGONISTS

Introduction

This study aspires to contribute to debate between atheist and Christian ethicists about moral nihilism and the amoralism it entails. Most recent debate between atheists and Christians has focussed, not on ethical issues, but on either metaphysical ones, notably the reasonableness of belief in God, or empirical ones about the effects – malignant or benign – of religious commitment. My general project, therefore, is to try to ascertain what contemporary Christian and atheist ethicists can learn from one another and where they must agree to differ. The whole study may be conceived as an exploration of some atheist and Christian responses to what Henry Sidgwick identified as the "profoundest problem" in ethics, and which preliminarily may be understood as the problem of what it is rational to do when duty conflicts with interest.[1]

The discussion is framed within an exploration of two hypotheses. First, if atheist and Christian ethicists both broadly endorse the moral convictions of the Enlightenment, they are in, Charles Taylor's phrase, "brothers under the skin" and should collaborate to defend and propagate a universal morality that can ground personal and political decision-making both in secular societies and globally. Second, if atheism is to provide a rationally credible and powerfully inspiring rebuttal of moral nihilism, it requires substitutes for faith in Christian teleology and eschatology in respect of the realities of the human condition, as well as for the ethics of vocations which they entail.

I proceed by explicating in Part One three types of challenge to non-nihilist ethics. In the remainder of this introductory chapter, I attend to some key conceptual issues, I then (chapter 2) explicate the perennial grounds, given by Bertrand Russell and others, for thinking that moral nihilism and amoralism may be both true and profoundly alarming. I then explore (chapter three), using Charles Taylor's *A Secular Age*, the

[1] Henry Sidgwick (1874) *Methods of Ethics* (First Edition). London. Macmillan and Hackett, pp,471-2, quoted in Parfit, (2011): *On What Matters,* vol. 1 (Oxford, OUP), p.143 and, in a fuller version, p. 499.

particular challenges which ethics faces in contemporary secular societies. In chapter four, I explicate the continuing challenge from Machiavellianism to the ethics of ambition in pursuit of worldly success. In chapters 5-7 of Part Two, I consider some of the work of Isaiah Berlin, Daniel Dennett and Derek Parfit in defending atheist ethics against these challenges on the basis, respectively, of pluralism, naturalism and rationalism. In chapters 8-10 of Part Three, I consider, mainly through the work of Keith Ward, a specifically Christian set of responses to the three challenges from moral nihilism and amoralism, which rely, respectively, on the theological virtues, on a liberal version of Christian humanism and on an ethic of vocations. In a short concluding chapter (11) I suggest that that the whole discussion has provided quite persuasive confirmation of both of the hypotheses set out above.

Moral Nihilism, Amoralism and Egoism

Moral nihilism is the belief that nothing really matters. I follow Parfit in defining this as the belief that we can have no decisive reasons for caring about, and wanting, some things rather than others.[2] The view that nothing really matters is not necessarily itself alarming. In some circumstances, it may even be consoling. However, moral nihilism *is* alarming because it entails a second set of ethical beliefs which I term "amoralism." I take it that moral issues arise when we make decisions about which, amongst alternative short-term, medium-term and long-term futures, we *ought* to try to bring about in respect of our own lives and those of others.[3] Amoralism is the view that such questions have no rational answers. I therefore understand amoralism as the view that there is really no such thing as morally right and wrong choices or morally good and bad conduct.

Amoralism is entailed by moral nihilism because if nothing really matters, it doesn't really matter how we live our lives or how we treat others. Amoralists reach this conclusion because they think that we can have no good reasons to be influenced in our decision-making by any account of what morality is said to require since all such accounts are rationally indefensible. It is important to note that amoralism does not strictly entail *egoism*, understood as the doctrine that what always matters most – what we always have most reason to care about - is what will be best for

[2] Derek Parfit, (2010) *On What Matters*, vols I and 2 (Oxford, OUP) especially Vol. One, chapter one, but also *passim* throughout all four volumes - Vol. 3 published in 2017and Vol 4 to be published posthumously, Parfit having died in January, 2017.

[3] This way of putting the matter is derived from Daniel Dennett's account of "the only kind of freedom worth wanting" in *Elbow Room* (1984) Cambridge, Mass. MIT Press, and *Freedom Evolves* (1995). Penguin Books.

ourselves. Alternatively expressed, egoism claims that I can only be rationally motivated to promote the interests of others to the extent that it is in my own interests to do so.

There are four main, interrelated reasons why amoralsim does not entail egoism. First, in a trivial sense, it is true that everything I deliberately do involves an attempt to bring about something I want to happen in consequence of things I care about. In that sense, my actions are always self-interested. If they were not, they wouldn't be *my* actions and proceed from something that *I* want. If I get up from a deep sleep to feed my baby, or hurl myself on to a live grenade to save my comrades, or expose myself to distress, discomfort and danger to work with an organisation seeking to rehabilitate the survivors of a civil war, these are things that, in one misleading and tautologous sense, I want to do. In a much more obvious and important sense they are things I do not want to do. It is vacuous to tell me my actions are self-interested, and absurd - or worse - to call these actions selfish.[4]

Secondly, it is true that I may refrain from what I and everyone else would understand as purely selfish behaviours in order to benefit others while believing that my choices will have consequences for me in the future such as feeling good or bad about myself. Here, I am certainly seeking - but again only in a trivial and misleading sense - to act prudently to secure my own best interests but I am also *ex hypothesi* acting unselfishly.

Thirdly, egoism does not entail amoralism because it can be construed as itself an ethical doctrine about what a rational morality prescribes: viz. that everyone ought to be exclusively concerned with accurately identifying and acting upon either their own, or perhaps simply *my* own best interests. Amoralism prescribes nothing.

Consequently and fourthly, if amoralism is true I have no more reason for living selfishly, caring only about questions of the form: "What's in it for me?" than I do for devoting my life to reducing the sufferings and enhancing the enjoyments of others.[5]Indeed, if nothing much matters it

[4] This point was very influentially made by Bishop Joseph Butler in his criticism of what he took to be Hobbes's view. Essentially, he claimed that because the consequences of an action are welcome to me this does not show that my motive for engaging in it was in order to secure these consequences. See Joseph Butler (1729): *Fifteen Sermons Preached at Rolls Chapel*, London: J. and J. Knapton, 2nd ed. Esp. Sermon XIII

[5] This is precisely what the eponymous hero does in André Schwarz-Bart's novel, *The Last of the Just*. After coming to reject the theistic faith of his Jewish forebears, he devotes himself to doing what he can to make life better for his fellow inmates in the Concentration Camp where he will be killed. This is also the conclusion of Camus' Dr Rieux in his novel, *The Plague*. Rieux engages selflessly in the fight

doesn't matter whether my decisions about how to live my life and to treat others are rational or irrational, let alone whether they are moral or immoral.

Nevertheless, almost all ethicists, whether religious or religionless (Parfit's phrase), think it would be disastrous if reason compelled people to believe that amoralism is true and there is really no such thing as morality. They think this primarily because, although amoralism does not logically entail egoism, it does threaten to undermine fatally any ethic which prescribes that people should sometimes make substantial sacrifices of their own interests in order to secure those of others. Almost all contemporary ethicists, religionless as well as religious, claim that a rationally defensible morality will prescribe that we ought, at least sometimes, to sacrifice our own substantial interests, including our entirely legitimate interests, in order to secure the interests of others.

Eudaimonism

All moralities about how we should live our lives and treat others need to be grounded in a credible account of what really matters, how much and why.[6] They need this because an account of what matters and how much identifies the states of affairs which we have reason to try to bring about. These are the truly worthy objects of our desires, in the sense that realising these desires will cause our overall condition, in particular circumstances or more generally, to be as good as it can be. Thus understood, all ethics is eudaimonistic. This includes deontological ethics because according to deontological ethics the best condition human beings can attain to is one in which they have done what is right because it is right and, in the Kantian version, thereby attained to the best condition of which rational beings are capable, namely sublime *Würde* (worthiness, dignity, or nobleness). Christian and other religious ethics are also clearly eudaimonistic in that living in accordance with their prescriptions will result in our psychological condition being as good as it can be, although, as we have seen, this need not be our motive for conforming to what Christian ethics prescribes. Indeed, if this is our motive, it may well be counter- productive and actually prevent us from feeling good about ourselves because we may

against evil even though he knows that the universe is "absurd" so that there is no objective reason for doing so. He is also in no doubt that the battle against evil will never finally be won.

[6] This way of conceiving ethics is given in the title of Robert Adams (1999) book, *Finite and Infinite Goods.* The whole book, subtitled "A Framework for Ethics," is in fact, as it seems to me, a highly convincing philosophical explication and defence of theistic ethics seen through the prism of Christianity.

feel bad about ourselves for having done the right thing for the wrong reason.[7]

Eudaimonistic ethics identifies the supreme goal of a life well lived and the foundation of all morality as human happiness or well-being or human flourishing - the currently preferred translation of *eudaimonia*. Originally, *eudaimonia* had religious connotations and meant something like spiritual blessedness[8] and in Greek ethics it was identified with the kind of life which any rational human being would seek to live and would account a good life or a life well lived.[9] The questions for ethics then become: "What does *eudaimonia* consist in?" and "What *aretai* (virtues or forms of human excellence) is it necessary to cultivate and practise in order to achieve *eudaimonia*?"

Christian eudaimonism identifies the *summum bonum* as enjoyment of the love of God – friendship with God, as Aquinas puts it - which, however, for many contemporary Christian ethicists including Taylor, also includes the enjoyment of many kinds of creaturely flourishing. This is because human flourishing is what God wills for human beings, and stressing this in Christian ethics is part of the celebration and sanctification of ordinary life which is a key component of Taylor's "Reform Master Narrative" as discussed in the next chapter.

For many non-religious or not very religious people, both ancient and modern, what matters most – the *summum bonum* for human beings - is the enjoyment of pleasure and the avoidance of pain here and now. This is hedonism and, as popularly understood, identifies pleasure and pain primarily in sensuous terms. Often, it is the view that since nothing matters very much or for very long, the rational way for us to live is by seeking to

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[7] This point is important, as we shall see in discussing Keith Ward, as well as those naïve atheists who think that Christians, for example, are mainly motivated be hopes of heavenly rewards or fears of infernal punishment. This is not only empirically false: it is also a monstrous slandering of many genuinely saintly people whose self-sacrifices are, indeed, religiously motivated but only by their love of God or their desire to imitate Jesus. It would similarly be a monstrous slander to denigrate the selfless heroism of many atheists by claiming that they only do good because they want to be admired or to feel virtuous.

[8] For a fierce but persuasive account of what *eudaimonia* meant to the Greeks see, the essay, "Eudaimonia" by J.L. Austin *Collected Papers* (1947)

[9]. On the key concepts of Greek eudaimonistic ethics generally, and the way these were incorporated into Christianity, via the concept of the *summum bonum*, see Alasdair MacIntyre: *A Short History of Ethics* (1966), esp. chapter 8. MacIntyre translates "*eudaimonia*" as "human flourishing" and he makes human flourishing the central concern of his neo-Aristotelian ethics most explicitly in *After Virtue* (1992). He also consistently endorses Aristotelian metaethics, while rejecting the elitism of Aristotle's substantial moral views. This endorsement also informs all his work, after his rejection of his own earlier fideistic Christianity, from *Marxism and Christianity* (1968), through his writings on contemporary ideologies in *Against the Self-Images of the Age* (1978), to his later, quasi-trilogy, *After Virtue* (1984), *Whose Justice, Whose Rationality*(1988) and *Dependent Rational Animals* (1999) as well as his later writings as a Thomist and, as he declares in the Introduction to the third edition of the *Short History* (2007) still about "70% Marxist."

gather such rosebuds as may be available to us while we yet may. This is sometimes thought, e.g. by John Stuart Mill[10], to be a shallow or ignoble position if it prescribes little more than the satisfaction of animal appetites. It is also most commonly thought by both Christian and atheist ethicists to be morally unworthy if it not only advocates immoderate self-indulgence but also attaches great importance to the accumulation of material possessions and/or social status. Instead, without necessarily despising physical pleasure, the things money can buy and the admiration of others, most ethicists agree with Mill that the good life here and now must include the enjoyment of profound aesthetic experiences, of accomplishments in the world of action and/or of the pursuit of truth in many contexts.[11]

Certainly, the pursuit of ordinary human happiness is quite unlikely to be narrowly egoistic since it typically includes many relationships of friendship, comradeship and love, which cannot be sustained if each party to the relationship is exclusively concerned with the satisfaction of their own desires. The pursuit of happiness also commonly includes engagement with personally satisfying work which is, in part, satisfying to the people who are engaged in it precisely because it gives them a sense of self-respect, especially if they believe themselves to be contributing, in however modest a way, to making life more pleasant or less painful for others rather than themselves.

This enriched conception of the pursuit of happiness – a kind of higher hedonism - plays a central role, according to Charles Taylor, in the ethics of contemporary atheists whom he calls "exclusive humanists." By this term he identifies the growing number of people in the societies which have emerged from Latin Christendom ("the West") who seek to answer ethical questions without reference to any alleged transcendental realities, notably the existence of God, life after death and the superhuman goodness of divine love (*agape*). He thus distinguishes them, both from Christian humanists and from atheists, such as Buddhists, who nevertheless believe in the transcendent realities of life after death and the possibility of attaining to beatitude, as well as the fundamental goodness of the universe.

For exclusive humanists it is enough for living a thoroughly worthwhile life, i.e. for achieving what he calls "fullness," to engage in warm personal relationships and fulfilling and useful work, while not eschewing many

[10] J.S. Mill (1861) Utilitarianism, esp. chapter 2

[11] Michael Oakeshott, who was a Christian, nevertheless, in his subtle, original but elusive writings about ethics great placed great emphasis on treating life as a series of "adventures" of many different kinds – intellectual, aesthetic, economic, political and amorous. See the essays in *Rationalism in Politics* (1956) on each of these topics except the last.

kinds of ordinary human enjoyment. For Christians these things may be enough to enable us to live good lives but they are not enough to enable us to live the best kind of life available to the kind of persons that we actually are.

Qualified Moral Nihilism

It should be noted, at once, as Thomas Nagel[12] points out, that *jusq'auboutiste* nihilism is presumably, like extreme relativism, self-refuting since, if nothing matters at all, then it doesn't matter that nothing matters at all. I also concede that religionless ethics can and has generated powerful, albeit still fragile and on occasion inadequate, resources for grounding moral conduct in the domain of interpersonal, i.e. non-anonymous, relationships of mutual dependence and even for promoting the creation and cherishing of what Berlin calls a "decent" society on the basis of collective self-interest. There is, however, a qualified version of moral nihilism or near-nihilism that was apparently first articulated by the statesman, A.J. Balfour who said: "[F]ew things matter and what does matter doesn't matter very much."[13]

Exclusive humanists clearly need to rebut this attenuated form of moral nihilism as well as the extreme form. On the one hand, Balfour's (slightly) attenuated moral nihilism remains sufficiently subversive of the substantial moral and political commitments that exclusive humanists actually make. For example, does it really matter much if life on earth is going to be obliterated three hundred years from now, especially if the cause of global death is sudden and painless? On the other hand, exclusive humanists fail to rebut the challenge of Machiavelli to the possibility or rationality of living according to exclusive humanist moral principles in the public worlds of politics and business. Is it really possible to achieve worldly success, even if nobly defined, if you are not prepared to engage, as necessary, in various forms of duplicity, callousness and hypocrisy and to ignore questions about what is "just" in some supposedly absolute sense? Indeed, is it not the case that large numbers of people engaged in careers in politics and business and other professions actually do behave with the unscrupulousness and ruthlessness which Machiavelli recommends? The situation may even be morally worse than Machiavelli thought in that ambitious people do not even question the morality of their conduct, describing their behaviour, as, say, exhibiting firmness of purpose or ingenuity rather than cruelty or dishonesty?

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[12] Thomas Nagel (1979), *Mortal questions.* Cambridge University. Press, p. 23

[13] To be fair to Balfour he apparently said this in response to being disappointed in love and found the thought consoling. He did not say it when contemplating the slaughter of the First World War during which he had been a senior Cabinet Minister, nor in relation to his famous declaration about Palestine.

It is also true, of course, that, in an obvious but somewhat shallow sense, moral nihilism must be false since all sorts of things matter, and very properly so, to all sorts of people, with varying degrees of intensity and for different periods of time. The pursuit of these things, therefore, supplies answers, which are seldom morally obnoxious and are often morally attractive and inspiring, to questions about how we should live here and now and how we should behave towards one another.

The problem arises when we ask whether any of these things, which matter to people subjectively and transiently, matter *enough* to support moral demands that we should sometimes make very substantial sacrifices of our own well-being and legitimate interests to secure the well-being of others. Such sacrifices might involve, for example, permanently abandoning our most intense hopes for happiness and the happiness of our families, and perhaps even the laying down of our lives.

Sidgwick's "Profoundest Problem"

This is what Sidgwick understood as the "profoundest problem" in ethics. He explained it as the problem of what people should do in the event of conflict between what they have most reason to do from a "partial" (i.e. personally self-interested) perspective and what they have most reason to do from an impartial, impersonal and universal point of view. This problem is more commonly and less precisely glossed as the problem of how to resolve conflicts of duty and self-interest.

All moral judgments presuppose an answer to this question and, if we cannot resolve potential conflicts between duty and self-interest, Sidgwick thinks the result will be that:

> [t]he whole system of our beliefs as to the intrinsic reasonableness of conduct must fall…the Cosmos of Duty is thus really reduced to a chaos, and the prolonged effort of the human intellect to frame a perfect ideal of rational conduct is seen to have been foredoomed to inevitable failure.[14]

This study consists in a consideration of how some contemporary atheist and Christian ethicists have sought to defend a non-nihilist ethics in the face of three challenges which moral nihilism and amoralism pose to any

[14] Henry Sidgwick loc.cit.

non-nihilist morality in the contemporary world and, particularly, to any ethics of disinterested beneficence. This, I take it, is what Sidgwick's account of the profoundest problem in ethics articulates.

Three Challenges to Non-nihilst Ethics and Morality

To rebut moral nihilism, both atheist and Christian ethicists need to show that we do sometimes have cogent reasons for making substantial sacrifices of our own interests here and now to secure the interests of others, i.e. for letting duty trump interest. I identify three categories of reason for thinking that we never have such reasons, that nothing matters enough to give us such reasons and, consequently, that all putative moral claims which purport to give us such reasons can be ignored.

First, there are the perennial challenges to all non-nihilist morality. These derive mainly from three alleged facts about the universal human condition: the immensity of horrifying and pointless sufferings; the inescapability for all of us, both individually and collectively, of a great deal of moral failure; and the apparent certainty, at least for ourselves and for all those we care about, of final annihilation in death.

Second, there are more narrowly focussed contemporary challenges which emerge wherever there is a multiplicity of conflicting answers offered to moral questions, i.e. wherever ethicists have to confront the challenges of pluralism. This problem is especially acute amongst Charles Taylor's contemporary secular societies as well as in consequence of globalisation. The challenge is especially acute in the modern world, Taylor thinks, because atheism has now, for the first time in the history of the West, become an option amongst the multiple world-views and value systems available to people. This option, he says, is now consciously adopted or simply taken for granted by many and has become "hegemonic" in some milieux,[15] notably in academia.

The facts of pluralism support moral nihilism and amoralism by suggesting that there are no objective and rationally ascertainable moral truths. There are only the beliefs about what is good and bad or right and wrong, which are prevalent in different cultures or which are adopted by individuals according to their diverse perceptions, preferences and conceptions of what is "right for them". The only universalisable moral prescription becomes: "Be authentic." This renders moral arguments fundamentally unsettlable and invites either an irrational dogmatism about

[15] *SA*, p.3

the unique rightness of one's own views, sometimes imposed by force on others, or an "anything-goes" moral anarchism.

The third challenge is still more narrowly focussed. It consists in the claim, made most notably by Machiavelli, that there are large and important areas of human decision-making where it is rational only to consider what is likely to further one's own ambitions and to ignore all supposed obligations to others. These are the areas where what we are seeking to achieve is worldly success, understood in terms of fame or glory and its accoutrements, by engaging in zero-sum competitive activities against rivals. For Machiavelli these activities were paradigmatically pursuing victory in war and power in politics. Nowadays, the question arises of whether rationality requires us to be Machiavellian amoralists in seeking to realise our ambitions in the conduct of business and in other lines of work.

Four Types of Response to Moral Nihilism

In seeking to compare how atheist and Christian ethicists seek to rebut moral nihilism I elaborate Charles Taylor's triadic distinction between two types of atheist – pro- and anti-Enlightenment - and one type of Christian ethicist into a fourfold account which also distinguishes two types of Christian ethicist on the basis of their (on balance) endorsement or rejection of the Enlightenment.

Taylor calls atheists in the contemporary secular West "exclusive humanists." What such humanists exclude is what Taylor calls the triple transcendence of belief in God, in an afterlife and in a form of goodness which he identifies with *agape* (divine love), and which goes beyond and is higher than the pursuit of ordinary human flourishing.[16] He divides exclusive humanists into those who broadly endorse the ideals of the Enlightenment and those who follow the Romantics and Nietzsche in rejecting Enlightenment ethics. I characterise these respectively as "pro-Enlightenment" and "anti-Enlightenment" exclusive humanists (+EEHs and –EEHs, for short). I discuss this distinction further in relation to the challenges of secularism, as understood by Taylor, in chapter two. I also discuss there, why I think Taylor's threefold categorisation needs to be expanded into a fourfold one, to include anti-Enlightenment Christian ethicists so that Christian ethicists can also be characterised by the extent to which they are pro- or anti-Enlightenment (+ECEs and –ECE).

[16] *SA*, p.20.

At the heart of the exclusive humanism of modern atheists is an acceptance of the metaphysical claims that the universe and we ourselves exist for no purpose and that death is the end of everything forever. Thus, they believe (unlike Buddhist atheists) that the universe furnishes us with a habitat in which it is impossible to realise our deepest desires, crucial amongst which are that no suffering should finally prove pointless and no evil should be irremediable or irredeemable. Equally crucial is the desire that everything we value and account as good, and everyone we love should not be destined to eternal annihilation. This, too, atheists regard as an impossible hope. Nevertheless, despite their bleak metaphysical convictions, exclusive humanists also hold strong ethical convictions about what makes life worth living and about the moral ideals and principles we should strive to live by. To those who broadly endorse the values of the Enlightenment I ascribe an egalitarian ethic of humaneness which invariably involves obligations sometimes to make substantial sacrifices of our own interests in order to secure happiness of others. By contrast, I ascribe to anti-Enlightenment exclusive humanists, an exceptionalist[17] ethic of human heroism. What they have in common is their metaphysical rejection of both the existence of God and of the notion that this entails moral nihilism.

All Christian ethicists assert the existence of a God of love and take this to warrant denying the pessimistic conclusion that our deepest desires are unrealisable. On the Christian account no suffering will finally turn out to have been pointless; moral failures can and will be remedied; and death is not the end. The universe is thus hospitable to the realisation of our deepest desires.

Minimally, contemporary Pro-Enlightenment Christian ethicists (+ECEs) are distinctive because they share with +EEHs, Enlightenment commitments in epistemology to rationalism and empiricism; in ethics, to the welfare of all sentient beings; and in politics to maximum equal freedom for all. They are the heirs, *inter alia*, of Locke, Leibniz, Butler and Kant. They believe that rational reflection on the evidence of experience (including personal experience) is the only way in which we can aspire to secure and increase our understanding of the nature of the world in which we find ourselves. Rational reflection on experience is also necessary if we are to ascertain what we should do in order to live the best possible lives available to us, individually and communally. Consequently, +ECEs accept - provisionally but as fully as any

[17] I use this somewhat unsatisfactory term instead of the more literally accurate “aristocratic” because of this latter’s association with social superiority rather than simply with “the best.” Essentially the view being considered is that what is most morally admirable in human experience are the heroic achievements of exceptional people who exhibit outstanding qualities of greatness or genius.

scientifically well-educated person accepts them - the principal findings of the natural and human sciences as the best source of knowledge available to us about the way things are, the way they could be and what we can do about them. They also accept that reasoning as best we can about human experience is the only way in which we can justify moral conclusions about how it is best for us to live and what we should do. They accept that this kind of knowledge, whether about the way things are or the way they could and should be, is always incomplete, provisional, revisable and susceptible of being expanded and deepened. Consequently, they regard freedom of thought and the tolerance it entails as a personal and political virtue, rather than as betokening a lack of faith or of proper zeal, or as constituting a threat to public safety.

+ECEs are however, rightly accounted Christians because they acknowledge the New Testament as being, at least for themselves, the most important source of knowledge about the nature and will of God. They also typically regard it as offering immensely - perhaps uniquely - rich, profound, persuasive and deeply moving accounts of the human condition, human nature, human potential and human obligations. They do not, however, regard it or any other source of allegedly divine revelation as infallible or inerrant. Consequently, when they study the New Testament and other canonical works, they seek not only to discover why what is said in them is morally inspiring, but also whether it is credible in the light of a rational interpretation of experience. The essence of their view, which distinguishes them from –ECEs, is that faith and reason are allies.

By contrast, –ECEs defer, in matters of morals and doctrine, to what they take to be the divine authority of Scripture, as interpreted by succeeding generations of ecclesiastical leaders.

-ECEs are often called “fundamentalists” and, as such, thought to be impervious to rational arguments based on empirical evidence. This is a caricature. What -ECEs stress is the sovereignty of faith and religious experience over reason in understanding the ultimate truths about the universe and about how we should conduct ourselves in relation to these truths. Such faith-based understanding can only be “infused” in us – to use Augustine’s term - by God, who has in a gratuitous act of supreme charity made this knowledge available to some of us, once and for all, through what has been revealed in the life, works, teachings, death and afterlife of Jesus of Nazareth. -ECEs do, however, differ from +ECEs in thinking that where conflicts occur, often about sexual morality and public policy, between what are taken to be the theologically well-considered deliverances of Scripture and the apparent conclusions of unaided human

reasoning about experience, the former trumps the latter[18]. For +ECEs the deliverances of faith can only be recognised as such to the extent that they are consonant with cogent reasoning about relevant evidence. For this reason, "Fideism" of the sort expounded by Pascal[19], Kierkegaard[20] and arguably Wittgenstein[21], seems to me to be a better description for -EECs than "fundamentalism".

I accept that dividing contemporary atheist and Christian ethicists into those who are "pro-Enlightenment" and "anti-Enlightenment" risks crudeness and over-simplification. Nevertheless, I believe it is helpful in categorising four different ways in which the inhabitants of Taylor's secular age seek to rebut moral nihilism and amoralism.

It needs two qualifications, however. First, individuals are likely to occupy different points on the continua within each category ranging from mild to extreme conviction about the different metaphysical and moral positions. They also offer philosophically more and less nuanced and persuasive accounts of their position and the grounds for it. Secondly, the categories may overlap for some people. In particular, *pace* Nietzsche, for most atheist and Christian humanists, the people who attract the greatest moral admiration are those who are both humane and heroic, as is very obviously the case with Jesus of Nazareth, as recorded in the Gospels. More mundanely, this is also true of the central atheist character of Camus' novel, *La Peste*, Dr Rieux, and perhaps with members of organisations such as "Doctors without borders". Indeed, the heroism of all these people consists in their extreme and very courageous devotion to humanity and humaneness.

In any case, I am here focussing on possible debate between +EEHs and +ECEs. I am here only incidentally concerned with anti-Enlightenment versions of both atheist and Christian ethics. This is partly for reasons of space. I also suspect there is far less prospect of finding ethical issues

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[18] A good exposition of this –EEC position is to be found in Richard Hays's monumental (1996):*The Moral Vision of the New Testament: Community, Cross, New Creation*. San Francisco, Harper. In general, Hays firmly asserts the authority of Scripture over reason and experience, especially in considering homosexuality and pacifism. However, he is not consistent in this since he thinks in the case of anti-Judaism we must defer to the deliverances of reason and experience over the teachings of especially John's gospel on this issue.

[19] Cp. Pascal's claim that "The heart has its reasons of which reason knows nothing." (*Pensées* 423. Ed. Lafuma).

[20] Cp. Kierkegaard's discussion in *Fear and Trembling* (1843) of Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his only son – something Kant had deplored..

[21] Cp..Wittgenstein, Ludwig (!966) "Lectures on Religious Beliefs", in *Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology and Religious Belief* as compiled from notes taken by Yorick Smythies, Rush Rhees, and James Taylor and edited by Cyril Barrett, (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1966), especially the discussion of those who assert and those who deny predictions of a last judgment at pp. 53 - 72.

about which –ECEs, unlike +ECEs, can make common cause with any kind of atheist metaethics. Equally, it seems likely to be unprofitable to ask what -ECEs and EHs, of either sort, might learn from one another about substantial issues relating, for example, to sexual morality or religious education. Similarly, I largely ignore Nietzschean versions of humanism, except in as far as they are anticipated by Machiavelli. This is because I suppose that mercifully few people consciously try to live as Nietzsche prescribed – a handful of would-be tycoons, perhaps, or people convinced of their own rare genius – and such people are likely to be dismissive of anything either kind of Christian or any kind of defender of Enlightenment values might want to argue about with them.

It may finally be worth mentioning here something which is central to Taylor's account of contemporary moral and spiritual *expérience vécue* and which I shall only note in passing in reference, for example to Isaiah Berlin and Keith Ward. This is that for all religious believers their metaphysical assumptions, to the extent that they are not simply taken for granted, are grounded in what are experienced as self-authenticating encounters with divinity. The beliefs of unbelievers, again when not just absorbed unthinkingly from the prevailing culture in which their convictions have been formed, are typically grounded in the absence of such experiences.[22]

The Protagonists

I have selected five protagonists – two Christians, three atheists – in order to prosecute this general project of seeing how contemporary religious believers and unbelievers attempt to rebut moral nihilism and amoralism. These are Charles Taylor, Isaiah Berlin, Daniel Dennett, Derek Parfit and Keith Ward. They have in common that I take them to be exceptionally impressive exponents of the particular ethical positions which I explore through relevant parts of their work. I also take them to have lived morally admirable lives (so far in some cases). This is not irrelevant to the extent that it is thought that moral philosophers, no less that ministers of religion, should practise what they preach.

These thinkers also all adopt what I take to be a broad view of ethics, although nurtured in an academic culture in which a narrower view prevailed. They have all expressed dissatisfaction with the narrow view, precisely because of its narrowness, but they all retain, from their early

[22] See for example the debate between Sigmund Freud and Romain Rolland about religion as discussed below in reference to the opening pages of Freud's (1928) *Civilisation and Its Discontents* which I discuss further below at pp. 86 and 366-37

exposure to it, a respect for careful attention to definitions, for logical rigour in argument and for clarity in philosophical thought and utterance. The narrower view of ethics or moral philosophy was dominant in Philosophy Departments in the Anglosphere, after 1945 in the generation of philosophers who flourished - especially in Oxford and especially in ethics under the influence of R. M. Hare. This view restricted the philosophical study of ethics largely to conceptual analysis of the meaning, logic and justification of the ethical terms we use in articulating our moral judgments about right and wrong conduct. I by no means underestimate the very great value of the work of conceptual analysts in ethics, and particularly that of R.M. Hare himself, in rigorously and illuminatingly analysing the logical relations which hold between different types of moral claim. I am also sympathetic to the then prevalent scepticism about the view that philosophers are any better equipped than anyone else to answer the substantial general questions about how we should conduct ourselves in our personal and political lives. Scepticism is especially appropriate when people make claims which are obscurely expressed and/or take for granted some canonical authority – Marx, say, or Aquinas.

However, all the ethicists I study here, while continuing to endorse these lessons from the analytic philosophy in which they were nurtured, have been dissatisfied with the restrictiveness of an analytic philosophy which eschews addressing the big issues of philosophy, as traditionally and popularly understood. Thus, they have wished not only to know when, if ever, and why it is right or wrong to lie, to kill, to ignore other people's suffering, to engage in certain sexual activities, to sacrifice equality to freedom or vice versa, or to save the lives of many strangers instead of those of a few people whom one loves greatly. They certainly do want to know these things but they also want to know: "What, if anything, makes life worth living?" "What would it be to have lived a morally admirable life considered as a whole?" "What activities and conditions, if any, are to be accounted objectively worth desiring regardless of the contingent preferences and practices of particular individuals or communities?" "What gives individuals a justified sense that their and others' lives are not just pointless but that they are meaningful and important?" "What, if anything matters objectively, ultimately and enduringly?" "What can we reasonably hope for and what, consequently, may become rational objects of our strivings?" "What and whom should we love and care about, and why?" "What political causes should we support?" "And, given the answers to these questions, what makes it good, as cosmic optimists claim, that the universe exists? Or would it have been better, as pessimists claim, if the universe had never existed at all?"

To all these questions, except the last, moral nihilists answer with variants on the word "nothing," To the last question they answer: "Yes, better never to have been." The non-nihilist philosophers I shall be considering recognise that to answer concrete moral questions positively it is necessary to rebut the nihilists' general claims about these broader questions. In terms of the categories I am using, I originally took Taylor to be a straightforward +EEH but have now concluded that there is not only a strong strain of traditionalism and respect for authority in his overall thinking about Christianity but also a certain hostility to liberal economics which is more characteristic of –ECE. Perhaps his faith is best described as caught in the cross pressures which he so fully describes. It may also be that it is difficult for a sincere Roman Catholic, especially a convert like himself, not to be defensive of the anti-Enlightenment strain which persists in Roman Catholicism, even post-Vatican II.

I take Machiavelli to be a kind of proto-Nietzschean, i.e. a -EEH. I go back to Machiavelli because, as I argue in chapter three, I think that what I understand to be the challenges of Machiavellianism have not only never been effectively rebutted but also have no comparably convincing champions amongst contemporary students of ethics in business and politics. Machiavelli is thus uniquely important for studying the ethics of ambition. Berlin, Dennett and Parfit are, on my understanding,[23] +EEHs. Keith Ward is emphatically a +ECE (or liberal Christian humanist). Consequently, I reserve much of Part Three to a discussion of his work as it relates to ethics.

I use this discussion to make the case that +ECEs and +EEHs are indeed in Taylor's phrase "brothers under the skin" and so can and should collaborate in developing a global humanistic ethic. However, I also follow Ward in thinking that Christian ethics is more successful, because of its beliefs in benign teleology and eschatology, in rationally rebutting moral nihilism and amoralism. There are, of course, many other contemporary +ECEs on whom I could have focussed, who also argue convincingly that Christian humanism out-narrates atheist humanism in meeting the challenges of moral nihilism and amoralism. Consequently,

[23] I stress this because my understanding is not uncontested. John Gray, for example, reads Isaiah Berlin as a pluralist who is mostly a champion of the Counter-Enlightenment. Similarly and more controversially, I also dissent from Alasdair MacIntyre's own view of himself as an implacable opponent of Enlightenment values. He may identify three types of rationality but he remains a rationalist and his critique of contemporary understandings of freedom and democracy issues from his abiding endorsement of the Marxist critique of how these ideals become travesties before the imperatives of modern capitalism. I also regard Marxism, itself, as essentially an apotheosis in Enlightenment thought in its emphasis on scientific rationality, the evils of inequality, the nature of true freedom, as well as its utopianism.

though I have learned much from other +ECEs, my indebtedness to these others will be only partially reflected in footnoted and bibliographical references.[24] Having said this, I think it is true that Keith Ward has done more than anyone else to reconcile the findings of contemporary science with orthodox Christian belief. He is also an exceptionally learned, persuasive and forthright champion of liberalism in theology and ethics.
I should also mention that one reason I have chosen to write about the philosophers on whose work I focus is that they are all (except Machiavelli!) more or less my contemporaries and I have known each of them personally to a greater or lesser extent, as well as some of their close friends and colleagues. This has made it possible for me not only sometimes to talk ethics and religion with them directly but also to get an enhanced sense of what it is like to see the world from their point of view.

Limitations

This study, then, seeks, primarily to identify some important problems, to explicate critically some important texts relating to them and to offer conclusions of my own which are, I hope, in some sense and to some degree original or at least interesting. Inevitably, much of the discussion of individual authors is expository of what I believe their work can contribute positively to debate between atheist and Christian humanists and so confirm or disconfirm my two central hypotheses.

Ideally, such a study would also do justice to a substantial body of secondary literature about the authors studied. It would also pursue interesting discussions about issues closely related and relevant to, but not identical with the initial problems originally identified. Here, discussions about the meaning(s) of life would be a clear example. With regard to the secondary literature, its paucity is partly due to the fact that my subject-matter has led me to focus much of my discussion on material by my protagonists which has not been extensively written about by others.

With regard to exploring all relevant related issues, such an ideal study would probably take twenty years to write and ten years to read. It could certainly not be accomplished within 100 000 words, even if it were not

[24] Amongst Christian writers about ethics, all of whom I would characterise as, at least in my sense, broadly +ECE and by whose work I have been much impressed are, in alphabetical order: Robert Merrihew Adams, Nigel Biggar, John Cottingham, John E Hare, John Hick, Alasdair MacIntyre, Tim Mawson, and Michael Oakeshott. I owe at least an equal debt to several more or less contemporary spiritual writers, notably: Frederick Buechner, Henri Nouwen, W H. Vanstone and J. Nevill Ward. My greatest debt, however, is not to what I have learnt in lecture halls, in seminar rooms or from material to be found in libraries: it is to what I have learnt sitting in many different places of worship, listening to the preaching and counsel of wise, loving and largely unsung ministers of religion who have devoted their lives to the cure of souls.

beyond my competence. I have, therefore limited my study to the primary texts and taken only exiguous account of the secondary ones. As Isaiah Berlin constantly reminds us, it is a necessary truth that we cannot have everything.

CHAPTER TWO

THE PERENNIAL CHALLENGES TO MORALITY

It is clear that, for at least these five thinkers, ethical judgments about what matters are closely connected to metaphysical judgments about the nature of ultimate reality and the truth about the human condition. The metaphysics which seems to pose a serious challenge to non-nihilist ethics denies the existence of God, the fundamental goodness of the universe and the possibility of a life after death in which "all shall be well." That this raises exceptionally difficult moral problems is perhaps most forcefully expressed in a celebrated passage from Bertrand Russell's essay, "A Free Man's Worship." Russell writes:

> That Man is the product of causes which had no prevision of the end they were achieving; that his origin, his growth, his hopes and fears, his loves and his beliefs are but the outcome of accidental collocations of atoms; that no fire, no heroism, no intensity of thought and feeling, can preserve an individual life beyond the grave; that all the labours of the ages, all the devotion, all the inspiration, all the noonday brightness of human genius, are destined to extinction in the vast death of the solar system, and that the whole temple of Man's achievement must inevitably be buried beneath the debris of a universe in ruins – all these things, if not quite beyond dispute, are yet so nearly certain, that no philosophy which rejects them can hope to stand. Only within the scaffolding of these truths, only on the firm foundation of unyielding despair, can the soul's habitation henceforth be safely built."[1]

It should be noted at once that Christian metaphysics denies categorically every one of these claims and Christian ethics offers a *prima facie* much more secure foundation of unyielding hope on which the soul's habitation can be safely built. Whatever else may be said against Christianity – and the problem of rational credibility in the face of the problems of evil and evidence is the most formidable charge – it is clear that Christianity offers a complete and robust rebuttal of moral nihilism and amoralism, That, indeed, is why, if true, it is extremely good news.

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[1] (Russell, 1903, 1918 and 1961, p. 67).

Nevertheless, the fact that this was written before the terrible events of the 20th century had justified its claim to have been the worst century ever, suggests to me that Russell is articulating the most fundamental and perennial challenge to non-nihilist ethics. He is certainly articulating a deep fear about the true nature of the human condition, which is profoundly embedded in the work of at least some of history's most lucid and sensitive thinkers and artists. Similarly, the horror which this vision of a godless universe can inspire plays a crucial role in the Christian thought of, say, Pascal, Kierkegaard, Dostoevsky and T.S. Eliot.

Many but not all contemporary atheists, by contrast, while accepting Russell's account of the way things in fact are, find it difficult to understand or endorse the profound *angst* and pessimism which these alleged facts about ultimate reality engender in Russell and which continue to haunt many others. They also do not see these facts as constituting serious problems for establishing credible answers to moral questions and rebutting moral nihilism and amoralism. This is not necessarily to their credit. As we shall see, it may betoken, as Taylor suggests, a shallowness and impoverishment of moral and spiritual sensibility.

Parfit is an outstanding exception to this indifference to the possible truth of moral nihilism and his entire philosophical enterprise is devoted to rebutting moral nihilism without recourse to religion, Another honourable exception to this charge of insensitivity amongst contemporary atheists is David Benatar who tells us:

> Earthly life is thus without significance, import or purpose beyond our planet. It is meaningless from a cosmic perspective…Neither our species nor individual members of it matter *sub specie aeternitatis*. Whatever other kinds of meaning our lives might have, the absence of *this* meaning is deeply disturbing to many. [2]

In his conclusion, Benatar also expresses the same view as Russell, not only about cosmic meaninglessness, but also about the ultimate annihilation of everything and everyone. But neither he nor Russell give any reasons for their "accidental-universe" convictions. How do they know that the universe exists for no purpose?[3] Actually, it seems to me

[2] David Benatar (2017): *The Human Predicament.* (U.K. Oxford. University Press) p.34. See also his earlier (2006) book: *Better Never to Have Been: The Harm of Coming into Existence* (U.K. Oxford. University Press).

[3] Benatar does suggest that one can justifiably claim to know about the non-occurrence of bizarre and utterly implausible events in places and at times of which we have no knowledge – e.g the deeds,

that on the basis of current physics and cosmology the most rational view of the ultimate nature of reality is that much of it is beyond human understanding, as both Pascal and Kant believed. However, like Parfit, Benatar also sees that metaphysical nihilism may seem to entail the view that it might have been better if the universe and we ourselves had never come into existence. Unlike Parfit, he takes the pessimistic view that it would indeed have been better for everyone if they had never been born. He also sees that what is truly dismaying about nihilism is that it calls into question whether our lives are worth living at all and quotes the first sentence of the dramatic opening lines of *Le Mythe de Sysiphe*, a fuller version of which reads:

> The only truly important philosophical question is the question of suicide. For this question alone raises the issue of whether life is or is not worth living. Everything else – whether the earth goes round the sun or vice versa … – is a matter of profound indifference.[4]

The Case for Amoralism

Few people, including Benatar, conclude that because nothing really matters we should do away with ourselves at the earliest opportunity. Instead, they maintain a version of the view that we might as well make the most of the lives that are actually available to us. Amoralists, however, believe that the project of trying to live the best possible lives is likely to be frustrated if we are inhibited by the requirements of any conventional

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attributed by scientologists, to a tyrant, named Zenu, in a remote galaxy billions of years ago. This is a false analogy which equates absence of evidence with evidence of absence. Some people do indeed encounter no evidence which suggests to them the existence of purpose, divine or otherwise, in the universe or in their lives. Most such people simply do not think about the issues which is what applies for most of us to the doings of Zenu and claim, if pressed, that thy have no good reason for thinking that the universe is purposive. They do not claim, and could not reasonably claim that they have better reasons for believing that the universe exists for no purpose than for disbelieving this. Theistic believers by contrast are convinced that they do have stronger reasons for thinking that the universe and our own existence needs to be, and can be explained teleologically, rather than thinking it to be a gigantic, pointless and tragic accident. Atheists belief that there are no such credible reasons should lead them to agnosticism. However, the real reason that atheists like Parfit and Benatar reject benign teleological explanations is that they think the evidence against them from the facts of suffering is overwhelming. But they are not alone in their sensitivity to the facts of suffering: the most convincing Christians are also acutely alive to these facts and the fact that they constitute immense, but not ultimately conclusive evidence against the existence of God. Theists, in particular, believe that much positive counter-evidence needs to be set against the negative evidence from the facts of suffering. See Basil Mitchell's response to Antony Flew's discussion of the unfalsifiability of religious claims in A. Flew and a MacIntyre (Eds) (1955): *New Essays in Philosophical Theology*. London. SCM, See also the concluding sections of this chapter. In general, it is clearly a case of *petitio principii* to claim that because the universe seems to me to provide no evidence that it exists for a purpose, it therefore exists for no purpose: the purpose or purposes may be ultimately inscrutable.

[4] Albert Camus: (1942) *Le Mythe de Sisyphe.* (Paris. Gallimard) p.1.

morality. This view is often reinforced by claims that conventional morality is a kind of confidence trick designed to enable the strong to oppress the weak or the weak to constrain the strong.

The *locus classicus* for a discussion of these issues is the introductory discussion of justice in Plato's *Republic*. Particularly relevant to the theses of amoralism and egoism is the passage where Glaucon restates the thesis that it is foolish to live in accordance with conventional morality by imagining the contrasting lives of a perfectly just and a perfectly unjust man.[5] The unjust man ruthlessly pursues his own interests regardless of the consequences for others, while simultaneously enjoying all the advantages which accrue from having cultivated a bogus reputation for perfect justice or righteousness. The perfectly just man, by contrast is wrongly thought to be wholly unjust and suffers all the consequences including (like Socrates) being condemned to death. Glaucon then beseeches Socrates to show their audience why the life of the unjust man will not be a "happier" life – one which a reasonable person would prefer for themselves – than that of the just man.

An equally famous and repugnant argument to the effect that without religion there can be no morality is the claim made by Dostoevsky's Ivan Karamazov: "If God does not exist, everything is permitted." A similar line of thinking underlies Voltaire's dictum: "If God did not exist, it would be necessary to invent him."

These amoralist arguments suggest that we are justified on atheist assumptions in our dealings with other people, to treat them as if their lives and well-being only matter to the extent that they affect our own ability to get what we want – in Kantian terms solely as means to (our own) ends and never as ends in themselves. The persuasiveness of this conclusion is finely illustrated in the book and screenplay which Graham Greene was commissioned to write for the film, *The Third Man.* At a crucial turning-point in the story the hero, Holly Martins, has finally persuaded his old friend-turned-war-racketeer, Harry Lime, to meet him (so that Martins can betray Lime to the police) on the Big Wheel in the Prater Park in post-war Vienna. When the wheel has reached its apogee, Harry Lime looks down on the minuscule forms of people moving about below and asks his friend:

> "Would you really feel any pity if one of those black dots stopped moving – for ever? If I said you can have twenty

[5] Plato: (ca 375 BCE): *The Republic* Bk II 327-62 Trans. Desmond Lee. (2nd ed 1974) pp 102-07.

> thousand pounds for every dot, would you really, old man,
> tell me to keep my money – without hesitation?"[6]

All these considerations show that the question of ethical nihilism is not merely another of those questions which moral philosophers and others argue about interminably without ever either reaching agreement about how to refute the doctrine or in any way changing other people's actual behaviour or, indeed, in most cases, their own. It is rather *the* question – what really matters and how much - which most people are seeking to address, even if unconsciously, when they think about what they should do with their lives and about how they should behave in their relationships with others or, indeed, how they should behave in relation to their careers.

It is true that most of what we do and how we treat others is based not on ratiocination but on value judgments which seem to us to be commonsensical or self-evident or which accord with our basic intuitions. Nevertheless, our perceptions about what is self-evident are not just given and fixed any more than are our habits, dispositions and intuitions: they are shaped by many factors and revisable as a consequence of thinking about them, particularly when confronted with novel situations or new evidence. (This is pretty much what it is to have free will[7].) Besides, not all intuitions or deliverances of commonsense are equally sound or veridical and many turn out to be demonstrably wrong.

Moreover, although most of us most of the time neither can nor need to engage in ethical reflection in deciding what to do when confronted with choices, most of us do need to engage sometimes in often quite hard reflection about what matters, how much and why. This is usually in situations where different facts count in favour of different courses of action. Typically, in these cases it is not easy to decide what it will be best to do or what we have the strongest reasons for caring about. For these situations it is helpful that the most cogent and imaginative thinking by ethicists about both immediate and indefinite alternative futures be made available to all of us through our upbringing by parents and other educators or as a result of the thinking of ethicists having been absorbed into our ambient culture.[8]

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[6] Graham Greene (1950): *The Third Man*. (London, Bodley Head) p. 129

[7] The most sustained and persuasive account of free will along these lines is, in my view, Dennett's loc. cit. An earlier persuasive treatment along these lines is to be found in Stuart Hampshire's *Thought and Action* (1959). Michael Oakeshott in *On Human Conduct* (1975) pithily equates free action with intelligent action

[8] If you want to know the answer to any ethical question and why it is important ask yourself: "What should we teach our children about this?" I think I owe this thought to R.M..Hare.

Attempts to rebut moral nihilism and amoralism are, therefore, not inappropriate and unnecessary, particularly given our own constant proneness to substantial moral failures. These consist not only in the vitiation of so many of our actions by the compulsion to self-centredness – the tyranny of what Iris Murdoch brilliantly identified as "the fat, relentless ego".[9] They also consist in the sins of omission which we all inevitably commit, as well as our constant tendency to deceive ourselves and the grievous wrongs we inflict on others because we know not what we do. Nor should we assume that, unlike many ordinary and extraordinary people in the past, we are immune from becoming willing participants in the infliction of mass suffering and death and similarly horrendous moral evils. In this connection it should be noted that those who dismiss the study of ethics on the grounds that we all know what is right and wrong should be aware that they may find themselves in awkward and unsavoury philosophical company[10].

Arguments for Moral Nihilism

In any case, there are strong *prima facie* philosophical arguments which support the nihilist and amoralist conclusions that nothing really matters and that there is consequently no truth of the matter concerning morally right and wrong conduct.

One such argument is epistemological. This reaches ethically nihilist conclusions on the basis of premises which cumulatively assert that we can never know whether any moral claim is true of false. For example, it is alleged that we can never produce conclusive reasons, of the sort we have for thinking the earth goes round the sun or that 2+2 = 4, for claiming even that kicking babies to death for fun is morally wrong, let alone that sex outside marriage is wrong.

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[9] Murdoch Iris (1999): *Existentialists and Mystics*. (London Penguin Books) p384. See also Murdoch, Iris (1970): *The Sovereignty of Good* (London. Routledge) Ch 2.

[10] Heidegger provides a particularly grim lesson in the dangers of this view when espoused as serious philosophy. He dismissed ethics as trivial because everyone knows the difference between right and wrong: that it is wrong to lie that you ought to pay back what you owe etc. Shortly after writing this, he became Vice-Chancellor of his University and, as a senior Public Servant of the Nazi Party, carried out or at least condoned some of their anti-Jewish policies. Although he resigned as Vice-Chancellor a year later for reasons which remain unclear he never resigned from, nor ceased to serve in a significant capacity in the Nazi Party. He also ever after refused to apologise and remained almost entirely silent on the subject of the Holocaust. The nature and extent of Heidegger's moral culpability (if any) is much disputed and much of the relevant evidence is unclear or contradictory. Some defenders of Heidegger point out that it was reasonable for patriotic Germans to have high hopes for Nazism in 1933 and that he may not have been anti-semitic. What is certain is that Heidegger's own behaviour demonstrates the dangerous falsity of his claim that ethics is an unnecessary study because we all know what is morally right and wrong.

Another route to moral nihilism runs through determinism. Here, the claim is that since all our actions are ultimately to be explained in terms of forces over which we have no control, our ability to choose one course of action over another, in any sphere of human activity including the ethical sphere, is illusory. Therefore, there is no such thing as right and wrong and it doesn't really matter what we try to do.

A third route concerns eschatology and how we can reasonably hope that things will turn out in the end. This claims that, if things are not going to turn out, as a consequence of what we do now, much better in the foreseeable future than they are presently, then it doesn't really matter what we do. One might also think that if they are *inevitably* going to turn out much better, again it does not much matter what we do.

All these considerations, taken together with Russellian nihilist metaphysics, seem to many, to constitute strong reasons for cosmic pessimism – there is nothing much we can realistically hope for, for ourselves or for the future of the world. Such pessimism tends to undermine confidence in the value of pursuing moral causes and, in some cases, no doubt, to discourage paying serious attention to any moral claims.

However, it seems likely that the strongest arguments which determine people's convictions about the truth or falsity of religious claims are phenomenological or derived from lived experience. These relate to their perceptions about the true nature of the human condition. This is true not only of those given to deep philosophical speculation but also to all of us, especially on occasions of great joy and great grief.

Thus, the most persuasive facts which count in favour of moral nihilism for both religious believers and exclusive humanists of all sorts derive from the facts of suffering, the certainty of death, and the propensity of human beings to inflict both on one another and on animals. On the other hand, I suggest that the strongest grounds both believers and unbelievers can adduce for concluding that, despite suffering, life is indeed worth living derive from the facts of human loving and associated forms of goodness. In concluding this account of the perennial challenges to morality, I shall, therefore, seek to spell out what both these sets of facts are and why they constitute the principal evidence which needs to be assessed by anyone, whether Christian or exclusive humanist, who wishes to rebut moral nihilism and ascertain the deep truths about human morality.

Evil

The facts of human suffering are these: that we live in a world racked by myriad forms of disease and disaster, each of which cripples, torments and kills with its own trademark nastiness and many of which suddenly and inexplicably obliterate whole communities, nations and species so that it is as if they had never been; that our very survival at every moment of our lives is more or less dependent on luck, and degeneration and death are the universal lot of everything; that for most human beings and for other living creatures, life is characterised by an extraordinarily difficult struggle to survive and reproduce, full of physical pain, terror and other forms of intense psychological distress – a struggle which in most cases fails and which compels many animals, including ourselves, to kill each other with ferocious savagery; that the vast majority of human lives, when not cut short in infancy, have been, and very many continue to be, passed in abject and grinding poverty which is wretched in itself and leads to premature death of many sorts; that human history, far from being an environment in which love and other forms of goodness can readily flourish, consists of a seemingly inexhaustible litany of human violence and viciousness – billions slaughtered in wars, the terrors and tortures of despots and their henchmen, the savageries of mobs, the genocides, infanticides, and all the appalling degradations and cruelties which individual human beings daily inflict on their fellows. As for the world we have created, whatever its glories, it is radically disfigured by poorhouses, orphanages, hospitals, prisons, lunatic asylums, battlefields, torture chambers, death camps, slaughterhouses, mass graves and all the other institutions which constitute monuments to the triumph of human and natural evil over goodness.

These facts seem to suggest that for at any rate many, if not most people, life is not, or has not so far, been worth living; that what we can do to make the world a less unhappy place is infinitesimally little and extremely transient; that it would have clearly been better if a universe conducive to the emergence of sentient, let alone human life had never come into existence; and that, consequently, the best we can hope for is that we will be amongst the lucky few able to find some enjoyment in the relatively minute period of time available to us before we are finally annihilated for ever.

It is well-known why the realities of evil constitute a major objection to Christian belief in a benevolent God, although Christianity has always been aware of the problem of theodicy, inherited from Judaism, and has sought to provide answers to it. The problem for Christianity is whether

such answers can avoid being rationally incredible when not in themselves morally horrible.

It is less well understood by contemporary exclusive humanists - though it was well understood by earlier atheists like Russell and Camus - why, on an atheistic view, the facts of suffering seem to warrant a nihilistic despair. The reason is well brought out in the remarkable novel, *The Last of the Just*, by Andre Schwarz-Bart which won the *Prix Goncourt* for 1959. The novel chronicles the sufferings of Jews over many generations – sufferings which are, however, to some extent mitigated by the belief that suffering generally is a privilege bestowed by God so that the world may be finally saved. In particular, it is believed that at any one time there are just thirty-six just men upon whom, and upon whose sufferings (and unbeknownst to them) the whole fate of humanity depends. The novel culminates with the death of the eponymous hero in the Holocaust which is taken as the final and incontrovertible evidence that God's plan to save the world has failed or, more prosaically, that belief in God is impossible. At one point in this novel Benjamin, the father of the last just man, works in his youth in a tailor's shop where he encounters an elderly Jew, Mr Goldfaden, who has become an atheist. Benjamin has never before met anyone who didn't believe in the existence of the merciful God of Judaism. As the realisation dawns of what it is like to see the world through the eyes of atheism he is devastated:

> "Am I to deduce, dear Mr Goldfaden, that you don't believe that God created the heavens and the earth and all that followed?"
> As he pronounced these words he was illuminated by a sudden insight and Benjamin understood that good Mr Goldfaden quite simply did not believe in God.
> ' "But after all, dear Mr Goldfaden," he went on chilled with fear, "if God did not exist what would you and I be?"
> The old man gave a compassionate smile and his voice sought vainly for the lost tone of gaiety: 'Poor little Jewish working-men, no?'
> *'And that's all?'*
> 'Alas,' said the old presser.
>
> That night, on his mattress set directly on the floor, Benjamin tried to picture all things as Mr Goldfaden must see them. Bit by bit he arrived at the terrifying conclusion that if God did not exist, Zemyock was only an absurd fragment of the universe. But then, he wondered, where

> does all the suffering go? And seeing again Mr Golfaden's hopeless expression, he cried out, in a sob that ripped through the darkness of the workshop: *It gets lost, oh my God, it gets lost!*"[11]

We shall revert to Jacob's question throughout our discussions of both exclusive humanist and Christian views.

So the facts of apparently pointless suffering, inflicted and endured, are one indisputable feature of the human condition. To many, these facts make it seem obvious that there is no God and they become atheists for whom the case is now closed. But even committed believers, if they are sensitive and thoughtful, are also inclined, in some moods, to share this feeling that the sheer volume of evil in the world makes their faith incredible. From such a perspective it seems to miss the point, in a manner which is almost offensive, to demonstrate that the universe could *logically* have been brought into being by an all-powerful creator who loves us all and has furnished us with an environment which ensures that in the end, after we are dead, we shall realise our deepest desires. Intermittently, then, for many believers, it will seem that the most ingenious theology, the most sublime myth-making, the most poignant poetry in defence of the sacred, are powerless to protect hope for the human race and the human condition from being overwhelmed by the relentless accretion of pointless agony inflicted on the innocent.

Nor is doubt generated only by attending to the vast amount of apparently useless suffering that there is in the world and which makes it seem absurd or perverse to deny the truth of atheism and of the pessimistic view of the world which accompanies it. Doubt inspired by the contemplation of evil will quite likely be reinforced by other reflections. Thus for all but the tiny minority of the exceptionally fortunate our pursuit of love in many different forms as well as of fulfilment in creative and constructive work are either almost entirely absent from people's lives or are characterised by profound and ineliminable frustrations. They are always to some extent vitiated by our own manifold moral failures and blindnesses, and seem destined to be terminated in a condition of incompleteness by degeneracy and death.

Other empirical experiences may also shape our metaphysical and moral convictions. The eternal silence of interstellar space will feel like overwhelming testimony to the non-existence of any God and of the

[11] Andre Schwarzbart (1959):: *Le Dernie des Justes* (Editions Seuil) trans.(1961) Stephen Becker: *The Last of the Just.* (London, Secker and Warburg) pp73-4.

infinitesimal significance of our own lives. Similarly, the unnerving sense that the history of the world is literally just one futile thing after another - "a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing"[12] - will seem to reinforce the view that at the heart of the universe there is only emptiness. So the existence the existence of the universe and of ourselves is not only a gigantic and pointless accident: it is also a catastrophe.

Goodness

And yet, and yet…we all also know that this is only half the story. The other half concerns all the goodness in the world, all the joy, all the harmony, all the beauty of nature and art, all the occasions for awe, all the ordinary human happiness as well as those rare but, as it seems, ungainsayably self-authenticating experiences when the whole universe seems to be saturated with divinity in different kinds of revelation for different people.[13] Then there are all the astounding achievements of human creativity, imagination, intelligence and determination, not only in the fashioning of great works of art and the breath-taking accomplishments of the sciences, but also in the realms of commerce and the creation of prosperity and in professional services from healing to educating and entertaining, in political and economic co-operation, in the effective relief of suffering and the furthering of all sorts of human enjoyment on however small a scale. Most tellingly of all there are all the manifestations of human selflessness: all the kindness, all the courage, all the cheerfulness, all the laughter, all the heroism, all the love – from the most banal to the most sublime, from the flawed and inadequate to that which gives us intermittent intimations of eternal perfection. Attending honestly to these things disposes us to wonder about the possibility that benign creativity inheres in the structure of the universe itself.

Conclusion

Certainly, we live in a world in which theism can often appear to be obviously false, either because we think there is no evidence which counts

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[12] William Shakespeare: (1606): *Macbeth.* Act V, Scene V.

[13] Taylor cites many instances of such experiences as recounted in autobiographies and expressed in poetry. For me perhaps the most persuasive account of such an experience is to be found in Edward Muir's poem *The Transfiguration*. This recalls an experience he shared with his wife while walking in Scotland. It was at once an experience of complete union with nature and a vision of a world perfected in which finally "Judas, damned, [shall] take his long journey backward/ From darkness into the light and be a child/ Beside his mother's knee and the betrayal/ Be quite undone and never more be done." Even as they were experiencing this transfiguration they knew that it was a transient moment but nevertheless also a timeless one in which they felt themselves to be experiencing the ultimate truth about reality. Edwin Muir (1960) *Collected Poems.* (London. Faber). The full text is also available in several places on the web.

in favour of this belief or because we think the evidence of apparently pointless suffering counts decisively against it.

But atheism can also appear to be obviously false. Sometimes we – or at least many of us - are inclined to think it incredible that the universe just happens to be there; that it is either simply a gigantic and appalling accident or a mere and mostly horrible brute fact without beginning and without end (whatever that might mean). It seems to beggar belief that the universe and we ourselves should have come from nowhere and should be going nowhere. On the contrary, we and the universe seem to be quite obviously and literally made for one another. Similarly, it seems quite incredible that life in this universe is a further accident within an accident, and constitutes no more than a brief and minuscule flickering amongst the aeons of dead space-time which lie behind and before us. Finally, it seems especially absurd that the consciousness which gives us a sense of the unique identity and significance of our own lives and those of others, especially of those we love, is yet another accident resulting from the random interactions of atoms and that we and they are destined to vanish out of existence for ever.

To be asked to believe such things is grotesque - at once horrific and laughable.[14] On the contrary, we are disposed to say, the universe - space and time as well as matter and energy - were obviously created by a being or force which or who subsists outside of creation even though how this can be is necessarily mysterious to us - though no more mysterious than the claims of contemporary physicists about the true nature of the universe. On this religious view, the universe was obviously created for a purpose or purposes and these purposes are being realised through the unfolding of natural processes. And we ourselves are an important part of those purposes: our lives are not just pointless meanderings; they are, whether we realise it or not, journeys – pilgrimages, even – with starting-points and with destinations. Moreover, because this is so, the choices we and others make, the goals that we set out to accomplish, the values we seek to promote have real, objective importance: they are not just reflexes, conditioned by impersonal forces over which we have no control, periodically occurring in the long history of a futile struggle to survive and reproduce. For some believers these reflections may lead them, understandably, albeit wrongly, to regard the case in favour of theism as

[14] Thomas Nagel, who rejects religious accounts of the nature of reality (or thinks he does) has greatly disturbed the complacency of exclusive humanists by endorsing the view that it is irrational to think that the universe and our own existence within it are wholly explicable in terms of the movements of mindless phenomena. See Thomas Nagel: (2012) *Mind and Cosmos.*

closed, just as atheists also wrongly regard the case against theism as closed.

But, just as honest and sensitive believers ought to feel the force of the arguments against theism from the reality of evil and the apparent absence of evidence, so hardened sceptics, if they are also honest and sensitive, can, do and ought to have intermittent inklings of what it is like for the universe to appear as it appears to believers. This is perhaps the most persuasive conclusion drawn by Charles Taylor in his monumental and magisterial study of exclusive humanism in particular and, of the moral and spiritual condition, in general, of those who live in the contemporary West. I now therefore turn to a fuller elaboration of Taylor's account of exclusive humanism and of his tripartite critique of this philosophical position from the perspective of a (mostly liberal) Christian.

CHAPTER THREE

THE CONTEMPORARY SECULAR CONTEXT

Introduction

In this chapter, I move from considering perennial challenges to ethics from moral nihilism and amoralism, to elaborating particular challenges which arise in the contemporary secular societies that have emerged from Latin Christianity ("The West," for short).

I use some of the arguments in Charles Taylor's *A Secular Age* (hereafter "*SA*") to establish the need for debate or conversation between contemporary atheists and Christians about ethical issues in these societies. I also seek to characterise the convictions in respect of the nature and purpose of ethics in general, which Taylor shares with all the other authors, atheist as well as Christian, discussed in this study. I then characterise more fully the exclusive humanist world-view and identify three potential charges identified by Taylor which atheist ethicists need to address if they are to rebut moral nihilism and amoralism in the circumstances of contemporary secular societies. These are that they fail to respond coherently and convincingly to the phenomenon of pluralism; that they unwarrantably take for granted the truth of the version of naturalism which asserts that "this is all there is'" and that their understanding of the deepest human experiences of desiring and enjoying is shallow even when not insensitive. In this way, Taylor's account of our "secular age" identifies the principal challenges from the facts of secularity to be considered in the rest of this study.

I am especially concerned with the kind of exclusive humanist view, characterised by Taylor, which identifies what it is to live well with the possibility of enjoying good personal relationships and participating successfully in apparently worthwhile work. Such exclusive humanism, in its pro-Enlightenment form, also justifies morality as a matter of acting out of concern for the well-being of others. Christian ethicists endorse these substantive views about the importance of love and work and our duty to others. The central question on which they differ, identified by Taylor and which I hope to answer, is whether this kind of +EEH, which denies rationality to any belief in allegedly transcendent realities, is *enough* to refute the nihilist judgments that nothing much matters, that life for very many people is not worth living, and that we have no adequate reasons for not living as thoroughgoing egoists in our pursuit of worldly happiness. Taylor

does not address these questions directly and he does not seek to supply a rebuttal of atheist ethics or a defence of theistic ethics. This is because his objectives, unlike mine, are explanatory rather than evaluative. Thus, I am seeking to make the case that, while atheists and Christians can and should agree on the most substantive moral questions which we now face individually and collectively, Christian ethics offers more credible grounds for accepting, and trying to live by such substantial moral judgments. Taylor, by contrast, though he in fact agrees with this claim, is mainly concerned to explain how it has come about that atheist ethics now seems, to many, to offer more credible and more admirable reasons than Christian ethics for accepting the substantive moral views which they both endorse.

Taylor on Ethics in General

Taylor is on the whole unimpressed by the "the widespread take on moral philosophy today, with its exclusive focus on obligatory action, the question of what it is the right thing to do [which] abandons wider issues of the nature of the good life, of higher ethical motivation, of what we should love."[1] Taylor also stresses, rightly in my view, that ethics should attend not only to what constitute good reasons for our choices and convictions but also to what motivates us or inspires us or attracts us to adopt them. Taylor speaks of the "the eclipse of the issue of moral motivation"[2] which he describes as "the missing perspective in modern moral philosophy."[3] He refers to as "moral sources" the conjoint phenomena which both incline us subjectively, and generate within us the necessary will-power to behave as we ought to. He also makes commendably clear what the central issue in a debate about ethics between atheists, Christians and other contenders must be. At least pro-Enlightenment atheists (+EEHs) claim that attention to human flourishing and the virtues required to secure it, based on the assumption that this life is all there is, are enough to ground humanist moral visions of what makes life worth living and how, consequently, we should live. It is thus enough to ward off the challenges of moral nihilism and amoralism. Christian ethicists claim that it is not enough: there needs to be more. What this "more" essentially consists in, Taylor articulates in terms of an awareness of "triple transcendence," which is what exclusive humanists exclude, i.e, "belief in some agency or power transcending the immanent order...the sense that there is some good higher than, beyond human flourishing [in the here and now]... [which] we could think of as agape, the love which God has for us and which we can partake of through his power...But then thirdly, [acceptance of] the

1 (SA, p. 590)
2 (SA, p.703)
3 (*SA*, p.707)

Christian story of our potential transformation by agape [which] requires that we see our life as going beyond its 'natural' scope between birth and death."[4]

Secularity

Taylor thinks the need for debate arises primarily from the unique character of contemporary Western societies as they have evolved over the past millennium. What makes these societies unique is their extreme pluralism combined with both the widespread acceptance of varieties of exclusive humanism alongside many enduring and some novel religious belief systems. It is in this sense that he thinks these societies are peculiarly secular. Secularity for him is not most importantly a matter of the absence of religion from the public sphere and its relegation to the domain of the private; nor is it primarily a matter of what proportions of the population no longer hold traditional religious beliefs or engage in specifically religious practices. Rather it is the fact that contemporary Westerners, whatever they themselves believe, know that many other people in their societies hold radically different beliefs. Moreover, for the first time in history, one of the beliefs that very many people have, and seek to live by, is that it is possible and morally admirable to live a fully good and happy human life as an atheist who thinks that this life is all there is, i.e. to be an "exclusive humanist." This plurality of choices means crucially for Taylor that the "lived experience" of both believers and unbelievers – what it *feels* like to be either a Christian or an atheist – is profoundly different from what it has been in earlier ages. It also explains why, for many people, religious belief and especially Christianity have come to seem intellectually incredible and morally superfluous or worse.

Taylor, therefore, proposes to write "[t]he *Entstehungsgeschichte* of exclusive humanism"[5]. He begins from the uncontroversial view that between 1500 and the present we have moved from a credally monist world into one of superabundant pluralism. In 1500 it was impossible for all but a tiny minority (of whom Machiavelli may have been one) *not* to believe naively or unquestioningly in the existence of God (and all the central tenets of Christianity which were understood as following from that belief). Taylor himself describes his project as follows:

> [T]he change I want to define and trace is one which takes us from a society in which it was impossible not to believe in God , to one in which faith, even for the staunchest believer, is one human possibility amongst others. I may find

[4] (*SA*, p. 20.)
[5] (*SA*, p. 26)

> it inconceivable that I would abandon my faith but there are others, including perhaps some very close to me, whose way of living I cannot in all honesty just dismiss as depraved, or blind, or unworthy, who have no faith (at least not in God, or the transcendent).[6]

Thus in 1500 in Europe almost everyone believed the same things about the human condition, human nature, human destiny, about what is the best kind of life that human beings can reasonably hope for and how consequently they ought to live. These beliefs were those enshrined and propagated in contemporaneous Christian teaching which took for granted not only the existence of God, of heaven, hell and purgatory, and of other truths proclaimed in Christian teaching but also the reality of many other powerful supernatural phenomena such as angels and demons, sacraments and miracles, holy people, places and times – some of these beliefs being Christianised adaptations of earlier pagan beliefs.

By 2000, for almost everyone, including Christians, the world had become radically "disenchanted" in the Weberian sense of which Taylor makes extensive use. Many of the traditional supernatural beliefs of mediaeval Christianity have been dismissed as irrational and morally reprehensible superstition. Many others, like the traditional conceptions of heaven and hell, have been reinterpreted by most theologians and Church leaders so as to render them more acceptable to what are perceived to be the demands of both reason and morality.

By the beginning of the twenty-first century, however, this has not led to a situation in which everyone accepts a rationally purified version of Christian ethics, purged of both irrational superstition and the inhumanities of exclusivism, intolerance, political injustice and life-denying puritanism. But nor has it led to a situation in which everyone has grown out of the need or the taste for any kind of religious belief to support their understanding of what it is to live good and happy lives. In particular, it has not led to any diminution of people's sense that they have a moral obligation to accord at least equal importance to the interests of others in living such a life as they do to their own. Indeed, feelings of altruistic obligation, have increased in scope, as Peter Singer shows,[7] as well as in frequency and intensity, no doubt to the greatly increased availability of images and accounts of suffering furnished by modern media. Instead, what has emerged in the West, amidst an extreme plurality of views about how we should live and why. For some people altruism is still grounded and inspired by Christian and other religious

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[6] (*SA.* p.3)
[7] Peter Singer: *The Expanding Circle)*

beliefs but many other people and in many influential contexts, the atheist ethics of exclusive humanism offers not only the only rational view of the nature of reality but also wholly and uniquely satisfactory, religionless answers to the central questions of ethics.

Exclusive Humanism and Christianity on the Good Life

All ethics is, as we have seen, in some sense, about human flourishing. For Christians, according to Taylor, concern with human flourishing, in the here and now as well as in the hereafter, arises in theology as part of the sanctification of ordinary life in the millennium-long reformist history of Christian ethics (Taylor's "Reform Master Narrative - RMN"). For the religious believer, flourishing in the ordinary life of working and loving becomes, in this process, an intrinsic good to be desired and promoted for oneself, for one's neighbour and for the world as a whole. But this form of flourishing is only a partial good and not the highest form of human flourishing of which human beings are capable. This is still communion with the God of love. Moreover, according to believers, we are (most of us) not able to flourish even in the world of ordinary life without access to divine grace through various forms of prayer. Thus, flourishing in ordinary life is experienced by Christians as a "middle position". Taylor tells us:

> We come to…some stable, even routine order in life, in which we are doing things which have some meaning for us, for instance, which contribute to our ordinary happiness, or which are fulfilling in many ways, or which contribute to what we conceive as the good. Or, often in the best scenario, all three: for instance, we strive to live happily with spouse and children, while practising a vocation which we find fulfilling, and also which constitutes an obvious contribution to human welfare.[8]

While living in this condition the believer "goes on placing faith in a fuller condition, often described as salvation, and can't despair of it, and also would want to feel that she is at least open to progress towards it, if not already taking small steps thither."[9].

It is the loss or abandonment of this faith in the possibility of, and the need for progress towards some final condition of beatitude to be enjoyed in life after death which defines exclusive humanism. For exclusive humanists "the place of fullness" is to be located only in the here and now – exclusively within what Taylor calls "the immanent frame." EHs thus take for granted that there are no transcendent realities, and typically espouse a form of scientific naturalism,

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[8] *SA*, p. 6-7
[9] Ibid.

usually monist materialism. For Taylor, Christians and exclusive humanists do not differ in respect to the celebration of human flourishing in ordinary life: what they differ on is whether this is all that is possible for us and whether it is enough to ward off doubts about whether (attenuated) moral nihilism might be true. Thus, Taylor says of the manner of living described above that it is central to how EHs also aspire to "Fullness". He writes:

> But there are surely many unbelievers for whom this life in what I've described as the "middle condition" is all there is. This is the goal. Living this well and fully is what human life is all about – for instance, the threefold scenario I described above [good personal relationships, fulfilling work and a sense of making the world a somewhat better place]. This is all human life offers but, on this view, this is a) no small thing and b) to believe there is something more, e.g. after death, or in some impossible condition of sanctity, is to run away from, and undermine the search for this human excellence.[10]

Thus, EHs also endorse a concept of "fullness" (*eudaimonia*) which combines notions of personal fulfilment and flourishing and forms of positive subjective feeling ranging from contentment to joy, awe and ecstasy. They also, like religious believers, recognise the opposite of fullness in experiences of "confusion, melancholy, exile, impotence, exclusion, irremediable loss."[11] Their conception of fullness also commits them to a purely humanist ethic which purports both to furnish an adequately motivating conception of human flourishing and to supply a basis for strong judgments about the moral rightness and wrongness of conduct. The situation, for exclusive humanists is that it follows from their atheism that they must answer affirmatively the plaintive question of a popular Peggy Lee song which Taylor cites with obvious affection: "Is this all there is?"[12] But for them the fact that this life is all there is by no means implies that they must doubt the possibility of identifying and living worthwhile and morally admirable lives.[13] For exclusive humanists, who believe there is no life after death, increasing progress towards human flourishing for ourselves and others here and now is the best that human beings can aspire to - but crucially, as we have already seen, for them it is *enough*. Whether it really is or can be enough is what we shall consider in discussing the views of the three particularly impressive exclusive humanists to which I devote subsequent chapters as well as in explaining what I take to be the conclusions of a pro-Enlightenment Christian ethics.

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[10] SA, p. 7
[11] *SA*, p.6
[12] *SA*, p. 311
[13] It is just worth noting that for Peggy Lee herself, an affirmative answer would mean that we should all go and get drunk.

Meanwhile, Taylor notes that if a purely immanentist view is really to ground for EHs, not only an ethic of mutual benevolence, but also a measure of optimism about the human condition, then unbelievers, no less than believers, need to see the "threefold scenario" middle position as "furnishing a sense of continuing contact with their place of fullness and of slow movement towards it."[14] For them, no less than for believers, it is a middle position between intermittent experiences of feeling thoroughly fulfilled and experiences of dejection of one sort or another, which they need to keep at bay. Taylor seems to be here talking mainly of the sense of making personal progress towards an ideal. It is clear, however, from his discussions of the Enlightenment and of many modern humanist philosophies that optimistic exclusive humanists - such as, very conspicuously, Parfit - no less than Christians also need a sense that humanity as a whole is making progress and participating in this "slow movement" – or perhaps rapid movement - towards universal improvement.

Moreover, it is not only the structure of their world-view, with its emphasis on avoiding decline into wretchedness and progressing towards the best possible life, that +ECEs and +EEHs share. Much (if not all) of the positive content of exclusive humanism is shared with much (if not all) contemporary mainstream Christianity. Taylor dubs the ethics which both believers and unbelievers have inherited from the Enlightenment the "Modern Moral Order (MMO)". Essentially this is an ethic of "mutual benefit" which requires only that we see ourselves for what we really are: free, equal, sociable and happiness-seeking individuals – masters of our own destiny but also dependent on collaboration with others for the achievement of our own well-being as others are on us for the achievement of their well-being. The key virtues of this MMO or "ethic of freedom and mutual benefit" in relation to interpersonal morality are individual responsibility, benevolence, honesty and fairness. In political morality the MMO requires governments and associated institutions to be "liberal" in the sense of being committed to:

1. maximising equal liberty for all to choose for themselves how they will live
2. being "democratic" in the sense that the ultimate power to make decisions which are binding on all should reside equally with all those individuals who make up the "people" being governed
3. securing a "free market economy" meaning that the creation and distribution of wealth should be determined by exchanges of the fruits of their individual labour between willing buyers and willing sellers

[14] Ibid

> in agreements which are freely entered into with no recourse to force or fraud by either party.

Today, many Christians endorse all these claims centrally associated with the Enlightenment – though the third is the most controversial and the one of which Taylor is himself most critical. Indeed, they welcome them as major intellectual and moral achievements which are certainly compatible with New Testament teaching where not actually required by it.

It is these shared beliefs and values, no doubt, which enable modern believers and unbelievers to live together with much mutual tolerance. However, Taylor is quite clear that, however much they have in common in terms of many substantial moral commitments, the ethics of Christianity and the ethics of exclusive humanism are at bottom not commending essentially the same moral precepts and behaviours. As he says: "The injunction 'Thy will be done' isn't equivalent to 'Let human beings flourish."[15] So for exclusive humanists secular morality is the only morality whereas for the Christians there is a higher morality based on the duties of agapeistic love, i.e. our duty to seek to reciprocate the unconditional love which God has for us and to imitate it in our relations with fellow creatures. I shall claim further, in discussing Christian ethics in Part Three – though Taylor does not make this claim – that this higher morality includes duties, unrecognised by exclusive humanists, of humility, penitence, gratitude, and what in the eighteenth century the Abbé De Caussade called "Self-abandonment to Divine Providence." He also does not consider, as I shall, the extent to which Christian ethics prescribes works of supererogation as well as the extent to which atheist ethics ultimately appeals to no more than reciprocal altruism and enlightened self-interest here and now, with some additional material supplied by cases of more or less easy rescue.

Avoiding Dismissiveness

Taylor is not, however, concerned to show that either Christian or exclusive humanism is the only position which a rational and morally admirable person can take in relation to what the human condition is and how we should live in response to it. What he is concerned with is that neither believers nor unbelievers should be dismissive of the other but rather should engage in constructive conversation with those who disagree with them and seek to learn from those who see the world differently from the way they see it. Consequently, he is critical of both EHs and CEs when, however convinced of the truth of their own views they may personally be, they hold their views

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[15] *SA*, p. 17

uncritically, ahistorically and without sensitivity to the "cross-pressures" and "dilemmas" (chapters 16-18) characteristic of our contemporary predicament and which properly issue in honest uncertainty.

He is also consequently critical of what he sees as the retreat from rationality in the face of common dilemmas by some Christians (and other believers) into unchallengeable assertions of fundamentalist, faith-based certitude. Such fundamentalism, whether Catholic or Protestant, he regards as wrong-headed, often morally repugnant and typically idolatrous. He thus refutes, with quiet radicalism, some important substantive world-views: namely, not only those which assume that atheism *is* self-evidently and/or easily-shown-by-science-to-be true but also those which claim that Christianity *can* be immunised from doubt by sufficiently robust reliance on some form of absolute authority whether of Church or text or conscience. The former, he thinks, is regrettably and indefensibly prevalent amongst academics and those who have been taught by them. Though Taylor doesn't say so and though I think, on the whole, CEs, over the past 50 years, have been more willing to listen to EHs than *vice versa*, many Christian ministers and those they minister to do tend to rely unwarrantably on faith-based certitudes. A consequence of such reliance, I would argue, is that Christians find it difficult to get any kind of hearing from EHs and other non-Christians and so actually defeat their own evangelical missionary purposes.

Taylor, however, is much more explicitly and extensively concerned to show why unbelievers should not be dismissive of the views of believers. He is, consequently, concerned to show that a version of Christian humanism *could* be rationally defensible and, if so, *might* serve us better than exclusive humanism in meeting our need to find credible and morally attractive answers to moral nihilism and amoralism. However, if Christianity is to be given a hearing, especially in the domain of ethics and politics, it is necessary to dispel two illusions under which EH naturalists unknowingly labour. The first is that Christian metaphysics are demonstrably or self-evidently mistaken in postulating the existence of God and of an afterlife, and in denying the truth of (scientific) naturalism. The second is that there is nothing distinctive about Christian ethics which cannot be absorbed without loss into an exclusively humanist ethic and that much can be discarded from Christian ethics with the effect of rendering our morality more rational, more humane and more honourable.

Taylor calls both these views "subtraction stories" which explain the currently (fairly) widespread acceptance of exclusive humanism in terms of "human beings' having lost, or sloughed off, or liberated themselves from certain earlier, confining horizons, or illusions, or limitations on

knowledge."[16] Against such stories, he tells us, he "will be making a sustained polemic."[17] Taylor's positive purpose in seeking to dispel both these illusions is to facilitate the hearing of the claims of, and call to *agape* in debates about morality in contemporary Western societies. His complaint against EHs is that they want to deny such claims and silence such calls because they are "held captive" by a false (Wittgensteinian) "picture" or Heideggerian "unthought"[18] or simply a taken-for-granted assumption. It is thus taken for granted by many that the rise of secularity is fully explicable in terms of the successive triumphs of science over superstition, of reason over ignorance, and of humanity over inhumanity. They thus recount history as a process of the progressive elimination of folly and wickedness which many EHs think or hope is continuing and will sooner or later reach completion.

Taylor's alternative theory he calls his "Reform Master Narrative". This explains the origins of modernity and secularity in terms mainly of creative innovations within Christian ethics, many though not all of them positive or smoothly progressive and benign. Such perpetual reform Taylor believes to have characterised Latin theology throughout the last millennium and is a process which he thinks continues to be needed today in the form of both discovering new theological understandings and rediscovering old ones.

What is crucial for Taylor's alternative account is his understanding that the nature and origins of secularity as it has developed in the West were not primarily caused by changes in people's scientific, but in their moral understandings - of right and wrong but also, and more profoundly, of "fullness," of what makes life meaningful and truly worth living, of what it is to have lived a good life and, correspondingly, what it is to live a largely empty, worthless life, to have wasted one's life and to feel that one has failed to live well.

If Taylor is right, the falsity of subtraction stories suggests that EH may not be enough on its own to answer the central questions of ethics. Taylor, however, thinks that there are three particular features of living in a "secular age" which may seem to supply particular contemporary grounds, in addition to the perennial grounds discussed in the previous chapter, for thinking that moral nihilism and amoralism are true. Thus, EHs, no less than CEs, must confront in the modern world the phenomena of pluralism, the limitations of science in respect to ethics and the sense that any wholly religionless world-

[16] *SA*, p. 22
[17] *Ibid*
[18] *SA*, p. 53

view seems shallow and insensitive to our most profound longings and experiences.

Pluralism

Thus, everyone today is aware that traditional Christianity, which itself now manifests in many co-existing ("neo-Durkheimian") forms, is only one option amongst a great diversity of ("post-Durkheimian") world-views which purport to tell us what we should believe and how we should live. So, far from living in a world where everyone believes the same things, we are now confronted with what Taylor calls nova- and supernova-like explosions of options about what to believe about religion and morality. Crucially, for the first time, one of those options is to deny the reality of all things supernatural, transcendent, theistic and eschatological but still claim that it is possible and reasonable for us to try to live good and virtuous lives. This is +EEH. However, for those who do not accept this whole "exclusive humanist" package there are a vast number of alternative sets of religious and quasi-religious beliefs.

It follows from this great plurality of world-views that a central feature of our moral and spiritual experience, whether as believer or unbeliever, ought to be a measure of uncertainty. The final Part V of the book begins with a critical consideration of the modern assumption that the only realities are immanent realities (Chapter 15) and ends (Chapter 20) with a discussion of cases where despite the prevalence of this assumption, some remarkable modern individuals have "broken out of the immanent frame"[19] and (re-)converted to Christianity – Vaclav Havel, Chesterton, Belloc, Eliot, Waugh, Peguy, Merton and Maritain and many others, many more recently and not all of them less well-known.[20] In between, however, in chapters entitled "Cross Pressures," "Dilemmas 1," "Dilemmas 2" and "Unquiet Frontiers of Modernity," Taylor explores many different kinds of doubt which he thinks ought to beset honest contemporary thinkers whatever their religious beliefs. These range from questions about sex and violence to issues relating to economic and political organisation. Here he discusses the adequacy of the intellectual resources which most contemporary ethicists currently rely on for addressing such questions, whether derived from pure scientific and analytical reasoning or from religious authority. He also notes the diverse alliances amongst pro- and anti-Enlightenment believers and unbelievers in criticising or defending humanism. These alliances emerge from shared recognition by opponents of real intellectual difficulties for each of the four

[19] (SA, p. 728)
[20] E.g. W.H Auden, Elisabeth Bowen, Graham Greene, David Jones, Gabriel Marcel, Edwin Muir as well as Taylor and Keith Ward themselves.

positions that these antinomies generate: liberal (reformist) and conservative (traditionalist) Christianity, on the one hand, and Enlightenment and Nietzschean atheist humanism, on the other.[21] He concludes that what is distinctive of our modern predicament is that no-one, whatever they believe and whatever the moral principles and practices they are committed to, can, as they could in 1500, hold these beliefs *naively*, i.e. without an awareness that other not obviously foolish or wicked people in their own society and in other countries have different beliefs. Consequently, whatever we believe, we ought to have at least occasional doubts and on many issues, admit that we can see the force of arguments on different sides. The truth is that neither believers nor unbelievers can be justifiably confident that they have a monopoly on truths about ethics and religion. In relation to believers, Taylor writes:

> Belief in God is no longer axiomatic. There are alternatives. And this will also mean that at least in certain milieux, it may be hard to sustain one's faith. There will be people who feel bound to give it up even though they mourn its loss…There will be many others to whom faith never even seems an eligible possibility. There are certainly millions today of whom this is true.[22]

Thoughtful, well-informed and sensitive navigation amongst these alternative answers to questions about how we should live is now unavoidable for serious ethicists, whatever they believe. In the process, they will have to consider the probability that none of the answers express the truth the whole truth and nothing but the truth of how we should live and what we should do. Indeed, they will need to face up honestly and courageously to the possibility that there are simply no right answers to be discovered in ethics, i.e. that moral nihilism and amoralism may be true.

Naturalism

Exclusive humanists, because they deny the transcendent realities in which Christians believe but continue to profess and seek to propagate an ethic of some self-sacrifice, need to justify their ethical commitments in purely naturalist terms, i.e. within what Taylor calls a purely "immanent" framework of beliefs. They tend to believe this is easy and consequently regard the adducing of considerations from Christian ethics as superfluous, distracting, corrosive of motivational purity and/or more likely to diminish

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[21] *SA*, pp. 636-8. As noted in chapter one, Taylor's discussion is mainly triadic in that it treats Christianity as a single option opposed to the pro- and anti- Enlightenment versions of atheism. I have expanded this into a fourfold categorisation which also distinguishes pro- and anti-Enlightenment.versions of Christian ethics (+ECE and –ECE).

[22] *SA*, p. 3

than enhance general persuasiveness. Just as they think it unnecessary and obviously mistaken to postulate the existence of transcendent or religious realities in order to understand how the world works and how to harness this understanding to human ends, so they think religious beliefs are neither needed nor helpful in supporting an ethic which prescribes duties of benevolence, fairness and integrity. Taylor challenges both the empirical and the ethical assumptions of EH naturalism, arguing that both have only become possible as a consequence of a millennium-long and ongoing history of reforms within Christian theology.

Taylor's own critique of the alleged scientific vindication of atheism by +EEHs seeks to show that it is neither philosophically cogent nor historically accurate, despite the fact that "the presumption of unbelief has become dominant in more and more…milieux and has achieved hegemony in certain crucial ones, in the academic and intellectual life, for instance."[23]. However, Taylor is emphatic throughout the book in judging that such presumption, though psychologically understandable and in some ways morally admirable, is intellectually unwarranted. This is because it constitutes an attempt to achieve a kind of "naïve" atheism by reaching "for rather gross error theories to explain religious belief: people are afraid of uncertainty, the unknown; they're weak in the head, crippled by guilt etc."[24]. His conclusion is that: "[N]aivete is now unavailable to anyone, believer and unbeliever alike."[25]. Instead, we must all be "reflective."

Thus, one key feature of +EEH is that it embraces some form of anti-religious naturalism about empirical matters and most commonly a monist materialist one. However, it is equally striking, as we have seen, how similar are many of the substantive ethical commitments of both +EEHs and +ECEs despite the naturalism of the former and the transcendentalism of the latter. Taylor thinks there is so much Rawlsian "overlapping consensus" between contemporary EHs and contemporary CEs about moral matters because the emergence of EH owes less to scientific than to theological progress. This makes not only constructive debate, peaceful coexistence and mutual learning possible: it also continues to allow for shared moral and political commitments and collaborative action.

Against "Subtraction Stories"

In order to understand why Christians can share and endorse the methods and findings of the natural sciences, we need to understand more

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[23] *SA*, p. 13
[24] (*SA*, p. 12)
[25] (*SA*, p. 21)

substantially the case (or, rather series of cases) Taylor makes against subtraction stories. Taylor is certainly not unappreciative of the achievements of (post-Galilean or post-Baconian or post-Newtonian) science. Indeed, he regards the development and deployment of what he calls "disciplined," "disengaged" and "instrumental" reasoning or more generally the capacity to investigate the world objectively and to make good use of the resultant findings as the most distinctive accomplishment of Western culture in the past thousand years.

He is also fully appreciative of the desire for objectivity in the study of history: indeed, his whole book is an attempt to provide such an objective study. His point, however, is that enthusiasm for studying the world "rationally" and scientifically and the development of disciplined, "disengaged" methodologies for doing so, themselves arose out of a millennium-long process of Reform within Christian ethics. Moreover, our admiration for rationalism in general and science in particular has been, since Kant, sustained not just by its explanatory successes and the useful technologies these have made possible, but at least as much by the heroic moral values which we attribute to the rational inquirer. Indeed we like to include in our own self-image: courage, honesty, realism, and selfless dedication to the cultivation of the noblest of all human faculties. This is typically identified as rationality which is essential for successful engagement with the exceptionally honourable human activity of pursuing of truth disinterestedly but especially when such truths as can harnessed to the promotion of human well-being.

So the success of science has its roots in habits of mind and moral aspirations which were developed within Christian theological ethics. Initially the drive to Reform - which in this respect Taylor sees as going back to the Axial Revolution, a phenomenon which he himself does not deem to have been unambiguously positive - was a matter of driving out superstition and "bad" magic. Initially this was replaced with the "white magic" of monotheism and then of properly Christian sacraments and finally with no magic at all - not even rational, life-affirming, humanistic acts of ritual worship of the sort which were tried with such signal lack of success in post-revolutionary France.

Thus, from the beginning moral reform requires discrimination between religious truth and religious falsehood. The discrimination is made primarily in terms of what actually works empirically – Bonaventure fells the sacred trees of the pagans and nothing bad happens so the pagans are converted.[26]

[26] *SA*, p. 94

The disciplined habits of "disengaged" reasoning then become applied to the workings of the everyday world without any specifically religious motive but because they prove successful in enabling us to conform natural phenomena to purely human needs and wants. This culminates in Bacon's claim that the justification of scientific method is pragmatic or utilitarian, i.e. what justifies empirical science is that it enables us better to manage the forces of nature.[27]

In Latin Christendom such progressive discriminations have issued in the gradual Weberian disenchantment of our world-view. Our conception of our environment has been transformed from being one in which there are many non-human entities, many of them possessed of minds like ours and all them possessing powers which can affect our lives for better or worse, to one in which there are no such entities. This process culminates in the scientific revolutions of the 16th and 17th centuries and eventually the Darwinian one in the nineteenth century which eliminated all reference to the supernatural and so all teleological explanation in the study of particular natural phenomena. This in turn leads to the transformation of our view of the world from being an ordered and orderly cosmos, whether Platonic or Christian (or both) into simply a universe governed by impersonal laws of cause and effect.

In support of the view that modern science largely became possible as a result of, and not as the primary cause of, changes in world-view which were initially driven by ethical motives within Christianity, Taylor instances:

i) the desire to rid Christian worship of pagan superstition
ii) attempts to understand the laws of the created cosmos as part of appreciating the greatness of God's glory
iii) the passion to elicit and impose good order in all spheres of human activity from the liturgical, the personal and the political to the intellectual
iv) the consequent impulse to subject Christian truths to disciplined and disengaged or objective study which eventually led to scientific and historical methodologies
v) the emergence of widespread interest in harnessing nature to a pragmatic desire to bring Christianity (back) into the ordinary human world by more effectively relieving disease, poverty, ignorance and drudgery and engaging in works of charity as exemplified in Jesus's own ministry

[27] *SA*, pp. 542-3.

vi) the desire to incorporate into a holier worship a theology which sees that creation as a whole is an environment in which we are intended to flourish in this life here and now as well in life after death

vii) an understanding of human beings not just as miserable sinners but also as creatures endowed with intimations of divine intelligence so that they can both begin to understand the architecture and workings of the natural world and to shape and control them

viii) the perception of our vocation as being to collaborate with God in the salvation and perfection of creation.

All these reformist enthusiasms within Christian theology served in different ways to promote the scientific study of the natural world and to harness the power which science conferred on our ability to control nature so as to promote human well-being. However, these were essentially the effects of a process whose common goal was Christian moral purification of different kinds, as understood by different Christian moral teachers.

These Christian teachers themselves advocated a Christianity which was increasingly rational and increasingly purged of reprehensible superstitious beliefs and magical practices and indeed which understood the discoveries of science as at bottom, if not superficially, compatible with Christian teaching and helpful to Christian practice. It has been long part of mainstream theological thinking (in much of the Church Fathers, in Augustine and very explicitly in Aquinas) that Christian theology must be consistent with the most cogent conclusions of non-theological human rationality and with the most authoritative non-Christian bodies of human knowledge. In the modern world many of those exemplars have been scientists of many sorts, historians, political theorists etc., and Christianity has needed sooner or later to accept what the best evidence from these disciplines supports. This continues to involve, as it has in the past, a process of sometimes radical reinterpretation of what was once taken to be core doctrine and an attempt to re-identify and to recover what is truly essential to the salvific message of Christianity.

The deep and abiding yearning for transcendence

It is, however, not difficult to see how the elimination of all reference to the transcendent from scientific explanations opens up the possibility, now embraced by exclusive humanists, that the only kind of rationally credible understandings of anything at all are those which take for granted, as exclusive humanists now do, the non-existence of any transcendent reality, most notably God. At the time of the Enlightenment, where the dominant religious creed was what Taylor dubs “Providential Deism” which was also

the dominant religion amongst the founders of the USA, God is still needed by Newton amongst many others to explain why we exist at all and why our environment is so benign and one in which we are (or will be) able to flourish so successfully. This makes the problems of theodicy especially acute at this period but, once overcome, God could be worshipped as the Supreme Being who had created the universe and the laws that govern it. Creation could then be viewed as progressing towards a perfection to be achieved without further divine intervention, past or present. Instead, it would depend solely on progress in the natural sciences which would enable us to eradicate all forms of natural evil from the world, and in the moral sciences which would enable us to eradicate all forms of man's inhumanity to man – war, crime, injustice, oppression etc. Subsequently, it came to be thought that Darwin had finally explained why we exist and so the last reason for postulating God was thought by many to have disappeared while the traditional "hyper-Augustinian" Christian answers to the problem of theodicy came to seem increasingly incredible and morally abhorrent.

Thus until the period of history which succeeded the Enlightenment - until, say, the age of Darwin - Christian theology could comfortably accommodate the findings of the natural sciences which it had itself nurtured, as we find with Locke and Descartes, Leibniz and Kant. Once, however, it seemed that the natural sciences could provide non-teleological accounts for the origins of life on earth, including human life, it seemed that atheism was first of all a possibility that had to be considered, and then increasingly one that seemed to many honest doubters to be regrettably irresistible. Simultaneously many believers felt compelled to retreat into one or other form of fideism or fundamentalism. So where are we now?

For contemporary pro-Enlightenment exclusive humanists the belief in science both as the sole means of accessing truth in any domain of human experience and as the great hope for reducing and perhaps eventually eliminating suffering from the world remains a given. The postulation of purposes in explanations is unwarranted and, although of course intentions have to be taken into account in explaining why human beings (and some other animals) behave as they do, these intentions themselves are ultimately to be explained in terms of the activities of entities which do not themselves have intentions. All this means that we no longer inhabit a cosmos where everything is purposefully ordered; we inhabit a largely incomprehensible universe which is just inexplicably there, extending into unfathomable infinitudes of space and time and governed by wholly impersonal laws of nature which leave no place for any form of transcendence in either our intellectual or our moral life. Taylor's objection to this narrowly naturalist account of the universe is that contemporary advocates of scientism simply

assume that these metaphysical claims have somehow been shown to be true by science itself so that they are now "common sense". In fact, they are *prima facie* implausible, highly contested claims that are not scientific but philosophical. Moreover, their real attraction to their adherents is grounded, not in a neutral assessment of the facts, but rather in a particular moral vision of human beings as finally mature adults no longer needing the consolation of childish fantasies and heroically facing the truth about the human condition, no matter how grim it may be. These issues are discussed by Taylor in greatest detail in his Chapter 15 in relation to what he calls "closed world structures" within an exclusively "immanent frame", i.e. understandings of the nature of reality which assume that there is no place for any kind of transcendence.

Taylor calls this set of naturalist assumptions about our habitat a "cosmic imaginary." Unsurprisingly, many people find the idea of a universe which is empty of purpose, of eschatological hope and of any aspiration to a higher kind of human flourishing a bleak prospect which reinforces our tendency to think that nothing much matters. Other people seem to find the infinitudes and emptiness of the universe awe-inspiring, if only because it allows us to retain from traditional Christianity the sense that we, human beings, are astoundingly special. Taylor believes that atheists, too, whatever they claim, retain a need for the numinous and what has been called "le désir de l'éternité."[28] He not only very forcefully makes the point that the "immanent counter-enlightenment" which culminates in Nietzsche and his inheritors and which Taylor traces to Romanticism and especially to Schiller, springs precisely from protest against the loss of all sense of the sublime and against the tawdry, flattening, life-denying, character of the moral world-view of Enlightenment rationalists. He also identifies, even in modern scientistic rationalists such as Dawkins, an abiding need for something like a mystical sense of the awe-inspiring magnificence of the natural world and a desire to feel at one with it.[29]

Most importantly of all for Taylor, scientistic EHs simply dismiss or ignore those profound personal experiences of transcendent, i.e. for Taylor religious, realities which are found in many of the writings of the saints, which continue to be described by many different kinds of moderns, not all of whom interpret them, at least initially, as encounters with God.

[28] A phrase used by Taylor but without attribution. In fact, it comes from the Nobel Literature Laureate, Romain Rolland in a letter to his friend, Sigmund Freud, explaining why he thinks Freud has (in *The Future of an Illusion*) seriously misunderstood what religion is most fundamentally about, viz. the satisfaction of a "desire for eternity". Freud expresses himself, in the opening pages of *Civilisation and Its Discontents*, completely baffled by this criticism having never himself experienced anything resembling such a desire. I discuss this further in Part Three. (p 366-67)

[29] *SA*, p. 606

Experiences of transcendence also feature in the ordinary prayer life of countless ordinary believers, including Taylor himself. At all events, it is clear to Taylor that neither science itself nor "naturalist" philosophy has yet succeeded in explaining, let alone achieving consensus about, why anything at all exists, why life exists, or why consciousness and, especially, self-consciousness exist (or what they are): it is still all down to something like Bertrand Russell's "accidental collocation of atoms." Nor has science, despite many attempts from the Enlightenment up to the present to do ethics "scientifically," made any better progress than anyone else in answering the questions of what really matters and how we ought to live, let alone causing people actually to live, individually or collectively, unambiguously superior moral lives.

Taylor's accounts of the continuing longing for transcendence which offer an alternative to "subtraction theories" and constitute his "Reform Master Narrative" (RMN) have important consequences for his understanding of the future prospects of religion. "Subtraction theories" are "variants on a narrative of coming of age, moving from a childlike to an adult consciousness".[30] According to this narrative the future of religious belief is to die out or to survive only on a shrinking lunatic fringe of society or, as Dennett suggests, in museums. Taylor's RMN, by contrast, is a story of both exceptional and ordinary people, in succeeding generations and including our own, wrestling with perennial problems of how best to live in response to often unprecedented changes in the character of the world they live in and, at best, reaching reasonable and inspiring answers. Crucially, however, the answers will always be incomplete and still contestable, albeit in significantly different ways appropriate to the changed circumstances which succeeding generations confront. It has been this drive to what was essentially the moral reform of Latin Christendom that led to developments within Christian theology that, while often successful in their own terms, also made possible ways of looking at and experiencing the world which did not depend on accepting Christian truths. It was, therefore, the cumulative result of these side effects, rather than some simplistic process of growing up and constantly exchanging (superstitious) error for (scientific) truth, that made possible and widespread the exclusive humanism which is today taken for granted by many in the West.

On the other hand, exclusive humanism is, in Taylor's view, neither rationally irresistible nor is its universal adoption even likely, let alone inevitable. Taylor holds this latter view not because he believes, as some pessimistic atheists do, that human stupidity is ineradicable. It is rather partly

[30] *SA*, p. 589

because he thinks the hunger for meaning and a sense that one's life and how one lives it really matter will go increasingly unsatisfied by the more glib and shallow claims of (non-Nietzschean), exclusive humanism. He writes:

> This heavy concentration of the atmosphere of immanence will intensify a sense of living in a "waste land" for subsequent generations, and many young people will begin again to explore beyond the boundaries. Where this will lead, no-one can predict.[31]

Most importantly he thinks religion will survive because it is true, and Christianity will survive and prosper to the extent that people come to realise that the whole process of Reform has not been a story of unmitigated progress towards the final enlightenment of exclusive humanism. There has rather been substantial and sustained moral progress within Christian ethics, although it is also true that much that is of value has been lost on the way and is waiting to be recovered. As we have seen, he cites in evidence of these claims the fact that many of the most intelligent, sensitive, knowledgeable and creative men and women in modern secular societies have converted away from exclusive humanism and back to some form of traditional Christian faith. (Chapter 20 is all about such conversions). Indeed, Taylor himself is such a convert though he does not mention this. Consequently, the main reason he thinks the future, and the future of ethics, will not be religionless is that he believes religion is not only true but indispensable in providing for us the inspiration and resources to live truly fulfilling human lives, to achieve "fullness," to live as morality, in the broad sense, requires. Thus he writes:

> I foresee another future, based on another supposition. This is the opposite of the mainstream view [that religion will virtually disappear from the life of at least "modern" societies]. In our religious lives we are responding to a transcendent reality. We all have some sense of this which emerges in our identifying and recognising some mode of what I have called "fullness," and seeking to attain it. Modes of fullness recognised by exclusive humanists, and others that remain within the immanent frame are, therefore, responding to transcendent reality but misrecognising it. They are shutting out crucial features of it. So the structural characteristic of the religious (re)conversions that I described above, is that one feels one is breaking out of a

[31] *SA*, p. 770.

> narrower frame into a broader field, which makes sense of things in a different way, which corresponds to reality."[32]

Criticisms of Taylor

My principal disagreements with Taylor relate not to his theological writings but to his to his writings on politics. He is well-known as a champion of so-called "communitarianism," which allegedly opposes "liberalism" to the extent that it proposes that the latter focuses on individual self-interest and so allegedly promotes selfishness, whereas the former enjoins a commitment to the common good. In the Canadian context, within which on several occasions Taylor ran for elective office, this would be a clearly count as a "left-wing" position hostile to the view that free markets are socially benign. In fact, I think that the communitarian-individualist antithesis is a false and malign one though this is not the place to argue for that substantive view. What is relevant here is that when Taylor treats of the emergence of free market economics, (ch 4, esp. sec 3) he suggests that the emphasis in modern politics on economic policy is regrettable rather. This implies denying that prosperity, both personal and communal, is a personal and social good which will need to be incorporated into any kind of global ethic of the sort discussed in chapters 8 and 9. More generally, he seems to me to be wrong to think that economics was comparatively unimportant in public life before the 17th century – in this rejecting or ignoring what I would have thought was amongst the most valuable lessons to be learnt from Marxism. Similarly, in his emphasis on theology in his account of mediaeval ethics, he arguably overlooks the deep and enduring importance of both the common law and Roman traditions of jurisprudence, as noted, for example by Durkheim.[33] Repairing these omissions and distortions would expand the areas where +EEHs and +ECEs already agree and facilitate further agreements about ethics.

I also think Taylor tends to minimise the importance of theodicy suggesting that it only came to prominence with the arrival of "Providential Deism". It must, I think, be accepted as, emphasised in chapter 1, that this is and has always been the main stumbling block to belief in a benignly created universe, and the single most persuasive reason why contemporary atheists find belief in God not only impossible but also offensive. Taylor notices that the facts of apparently pointless suffering are a problem for atheists too, especially in respect of the suffering and death of loved ones, and says that

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[32] *SA*, p. 768

[33] E.g. in Emile Dürkheim☹1938): *L'évolution Pédagogique en France* Paris. Presses Universitaires de France.,n especially chapter XIII..

Christians can only offer hope in the face of such suffering. But it will be necessary to offer more than apparently groundless hope and at least to intimate the possibility of a more substantial theodicy if Christians are to counter the despair which both leads to, and results from moral nihilism and amoralism. I revert to this issue in chapter 7.

Finally, I regret that for the most part, Taylor's own views have to be gleaned by adding together what come across as almost casual asides and which often appear in the endnotes.[34] I regret this to the extent that it would have been helpful to know what one of contemporary Roman Catholicism's leading philosophers believes about religion and why he believes it. A consequence of this is that it is not always easy to know whether he is concealing a preference for +ECE out of laudable humility, out of deference to the -ECE strain in much Roman Catholicism, or whether he is simply undecided, or sitting on the fence.

Conclusion

Nevertheless, Taylor's work is a monumental achievement by any standards. For the purpose of the present study, what Taylor's book most valuably achieves is to demonstrate the need, and to soften up the ground, for a constructive and rational debate in highly pluralist societies about the merits or otherwise of diverse forms of religious and religionless ethics as responses to moral nihilism and amoralism. The fact of pluralism is undeniable. The question is whether the significantly different responses to it of atheists such as Berlin, Dennett and Parfit show a more realistic and profound understanding of the character of our moral dilemmas in contemporary secular societies and offer more cogent arguments about them than the also

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[34] One typical passage (complete with aside) in which Taylor cautiously declares his own view appears on p. 769: "if I am right that our sense of fullness is a reflection of transcendent reality (which, for me, is the God of Abraham), and that all people have a sense of fullness then there is no absolute point zero. But there is a crucial point where many come to rest in our civilisation, defined by a refusal to envisage transcendence."
A footnote of the sort which expresses one of Taylor's own beliefs is number 72 for Chapter Twenty: "I hope it will be evident how my (admittedly ill-defined) notion of 'God's pedagogy' differs from a view like Lessing's…It's not just that the course doesn't end in a Deistic-inspired moralism but more fundamentally, since the pedagogy turns on deepening our sense of the mysteries of sin and atonement, it never properly "ends" at all: there is no era of satisfied graduates who can look condescendingly down on the imperfect grasp of their less-advanced predecessors." P.851. This claim of Taylor's should not be mistaken for a denial of Christian eschatology or of the possibility of theological progress sometimes understood as progressive revelation. It is rather a denial that any particular era in the history of Christianity, past or present, was or is especially blessed and therefore should be taken as a model. Even more clearly, coming as it does, in a chapter about Christian converts (of whom Taylor is one) it denies that the holiness of the best Christians today is somehow superior to that of earlier Christians. And, of course, the reverse is also true as Taylor also emphasises.

diverse arguments and responses of contemporary Christians like Keith Ward and many others, including Taylor himself.

As Taylor says, atheists and Christians need to debate ethics because "we both [believers and unbelievers] emerge from the same long process of reform in Latin Christianity. We are brothers under the skin. "[35] Moreover, "both sides need a good dose of humility, that is realism, and the issue is ... not who has the final and decisive answer. Rather it appears as a matter of who can respond most profoundly and convincingly to what are ultimately commonly felt dilemmas."[36]

I have suggested that even if one disagreed with the detail of Taylor's account of our present circumstances or his explanation of how we got here, he has made it clear that the big moral questions remain up for debate between believing and unbelieving humanists as well as with various kinds of anti-humanist. Further, he has made clear three issues which both atheist and Christian ethicists need to address in conducting such a debate in contemporary secular societies, and, I would argue also in a global context. These are the questions of what ethicists should say, in contemporary circumstances about the facts of pluralism, about justifying an ethic of some sacrifice on the basis of naturalist assumptions only, and about the realities of human experience in relation to our deepest desires. EHs think they have answers to these questions in the form of their own scientific version of monism, their "modern moral order," and their belief in various kinds of progress. The adequacy of these answers we shall examine in Part Two with special reference, respectively, to Isaiah Berlin's pluralism, Daniel Dennett's naturalism and Derek Parfit's rationalism.

Taylor's position is that the morally commendable emphasis in all ethics on ordinary human flourishing is a consequence of the Christian Reformist desire to affirm ordinary life, as integral to God's creation and therefore to sacralise the principal obligations of ordinary life in terms of participating in loving families and engaging in useful work. This eventually leads to a view where loving personal relationships and productive work come to be seen as *enough* for living a fully eudaimonistic life, and the ordinary human virtues honesty, benevolence, and fairness seem to be all that is necessary for living such a life. Contemporary Christians and exclusive humanists can thus far agree, save that for Christians more is needed both to characterise what it is for human beings to flourish and in relation to the virtues that the fullest and truest forms of human flourishing require. Roughly, exclusive humanists are largely satisfied with an ethic of reciprocal altruism and enlightened self-

[35] SA, p. 675.
[36] *Ibid.*

interest in the here and now. Christian ethics demands, in addition to this, works of supererogation. Commitment to Christian ethics is based partly on what Taylor sees as its greater realism and partly on what he sees its greater capacity to motivate and empower us to move, in our lives here and now, towards that which is truly sublime and eternal: divine love.

Both Christians and exclusive humanists, however, are faced with the problem about what to do or say about the millions who fail to flourish and to practise the virtues which they both endorse. In particular, they are faced with the millions of lives which have been, and continue to be, passed in multitudinous forms of quiet desperation if not great distress and the very considerable numbers who, at least in their working life, fail to achieve fulfilment. Worse, they must both account for those who, in fact, take Machiavelli's advice and ignore the moral prescriptions of both Christian and exclusive humanists and, consequently, tend to make the world a considerably worse place than it would otherwise have been - in a not a few cases spreading human misery and degradation on a spectacular scale.

This relates to one aspect of Taylor's account of what he calls the "middle" position to which I want to draw especial attention – much more than Taylor does himself. This is that it seems to me to go to the heart of the question of whether, in the broad sense, a religionless ethics is a coherent project at all, especially in relation to discussing whether this "middle position" is, indeed, all there is and whether it is, indeed, *enough* to ward off moral nihilism and amoralism.

This is the emphasis in his account of the role of work. It will be recalled that his account of what it is to live a thoroughly good and fulfilled life while believing that "this is all there is" places great emphasis not only on living "happily with spouse and children" but also on "practising a vocation which we find fulfilling and also which constitutes an obvious contribution to human welfare."[37]. This indeed is what he calls the "threefold scenario" for living a good life here and now which precisely is not enough for believers but is enough for unbelievers.

Thus a key part of the good life for ordinary individuals for both believers and unbelievers is work which is a) fulfilling, b) beneficent. Unbelievers, however, say of such a life: "This is the goal. Living this well and fully is what human life is about." For them it is certainly as good as it gets.

But more substantially, I believe this account of the good life especially in relation to the role it accords to work, in fact fails to provide people with good reasons - understood as both cogent grounds and effective motivation - for behaving as morality is assumed to require. To feel the full force of this argument we need to return to its originator at the very start of the period which Taylor identifies with modernity, namely Machiavelli writing at the beginning of the 16th century. Machiavelli's challenge to all ethics, especially business ethics, ought to be fundamental to the way these subjects are studied and taught today but, in fact, it is mostly ignored because, I suspect, no-one so far has come up with a persuasive answer to the challenge which Machiavelli poses. I, therefore, conclude Part One of this study, in which I set out of the challenges to both atheist and Christian ethics from moral nihilism and amoralism, by explicating the particular challenge of Machiavellianism.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE CHALLENGE OF MACHIAVELLIANISM

Introduction

In this chapter I narrow the focus of the case for moral nihilism and amoralism still further and examine the particular problems confronted by both atheists and Christian ethicists (though more acutely by the former) of rebutting a ruthless and thoroughgoing egoism in the world of contemporary work. In particular, I set out the challenge to non-nihilist ethics which emerges when we consider how the principles set out by Machiavelli for being a successful Renaissance ruler might be applied to the pursuit of worldly success in any essentially competitive activities which constitute the greater part of the world of contemporary work.

Like Freud and surely uncontroversially, Taylor claims that a successful working life is a major ingredient in the attainment of "fullness," happiness, or *eudaimonia* in the modern world, whatever people's religious beliefs. If this is so, one might expect that studying the ethics of ambition in particular and of work more generally would feature prominently amongst the concerns of contemporary ethicists.

Of particular concern in such studies would be issues relating to the ethics of leadership: its nature and the morality of people's motives for seeking to exercise it; how it is morally right or acceptable to behave in seeking to secure and retain a position of leadership; and how one should conduct oneself in order to be judged a successful leader. There are also more fundamental questions about what we should be ambitious for and what role ambition for success at work should play in our lives in relation to other concerns. More generally, questions arise about to what extent, if any, worldly success of the sort achieved through various kinds of work ought to be regarded as a worthy and rational object of desire and as something that ought to matter to us a great deal and perhaps supremely. This then raises questions about the nature and scope of the moral obligations, which ought to direct and constrain our conduct in the pursuit of worldly success.

In fact, contemporary ethicists have paid remarkably little attention to these issues, a phenomenon which I explore below. This is regrettable, particularly in the context of the present study of moral nihilism and amoralism, because to rebut moral nihilism we need to show what really matters and why, and to rebut amoralism we need to show why we should conform our conduct to moral requirements, notably those of honesty, fairness to others and beneficence. On the other hand, these issues are precisely the ones addressed with enduring clarity and fierceness by Machiavelli around the year of Taylor's archetypal date for the start of modernity, the year, 1500. Moreover, his commendation of amoralism in seeking to gain and retain positions of power, though frequently deplored or interpreted in such a manner as to render it honourable, has never been satisfactorily rebutted. Nor is his claim to be describing the amoral ways in which people actually do behave when seeking success in zero-sum competitive activities any less plausible today when applied generally to ambitious people than it was when Machiavelli applied it only to those who pursue political power and military success.

Here I will, therefore, elaborate on the continuing relevance of the Machiavellian challenge to the possibility of rebutting moral nihilism and amoralism, whether from an atheist or Christian perspective. I shall then spell out in detail precisely and, I hope, with appropriate nuance, what I take Machiavellianism to consist in. This prepares the ground for the argument I make in the final chapter of this study about the challenge of Machiavellianism to atheist and Christian versions of pro-Enlightenment humanism. Here, I shall argue that Christianity has resources, which exclusive humanism needs to borrow, for rebutting Machiavellian amoralism, by proposing that all successful work and all careers need to be seen within the context of a vocational ethics.

On the Paucity of Relevant Literature

It seems to me that the case for Machiavellian amoralism, and the task of rebutting it, have been unduly neglected by liberal humanist ethicists, especially in relation to the conduct of business.[1] Moreover, the question of how to lead a good life as a

[1] Parfit makes this same claim about not only the ethicists but also the social scientists who were writing when he began work as a philosopher in the 1960s and 1970s: they had nothing to say about what really matters and why and, as he tersely adds, in today's academia "little has changed".(OWM I, p. xiv)

human person while undertaking various kinds of work and usually paid employment is a question which is barely mentioned in courses on business ethics. For confirmation of this neglect, see the entry for "Business Ethics" in the *Routledge Companion to Ethics* (Ed John Skorupski). Similarly, there is no mention or discussion of this and associated issues of what people ought to want out of their working lives and what habits of conduct (virtues) they need to cultivate in order to realise their ambitions in the *Oxford Handbook of Business Ethics* (eds. Breknert, G and Beauchamp, T) – which, however, in its introduction rightly deplores the relegation of business ethics by philosophers to the periphery of their discipline, and the failure of business practitioners and students to take the subject seriously. Again, the *Economist* book, *Business Ethics: Facing Up to the issues*[2] in fact fails to face up to those real issues for business people which form part of their answer to the question: "How shall I live?" Nor, as far as I can tell, is this question addressed in any of the myriad undergraduate and post-graduate courses which are offered by Universities and Business Schools to people who hope to embark on a career in the world of commerce or to enhance their professional development in a commercial career.

If the role of fulfilling and beneficent work is as central to a life well-lived as Taylor claims it is, for both religious believers and unbelievers in the contemporary Western world – something that I suspect very few ethicists would deny whatever their religious convictions – it is surprising that moral philosophers both, religious and religionless, have, in general, paid very little attention to moral issues relating to the conduct of business. This is especially clear if we compare this inattention with, say, the attention they have lavished on issues of medical practice or the pursuit of social justice. This may be because they wrongly think that the answers to questions about how people should behave when pursuing worldly success are obvious: they should be honest, fair, reasonably benevolent and generally decent in their working life, no less than in the rest of their lives. This is wrong as Stuart Hampshire[3] argues in relation to Machiavellian deceptions and cruelties in circumstances such as those which he had himself felt obliged to practice and to get others to practice when working in British Intelligence in the 2nd World War. Moreover, the moral

[2] The editors of *The Economist* (2001): *Business Ethics: Facing Up to the Issues* London. Economist Books

[3] See Stuart Hampshire (1989): *Innocence and Experience*..(Harvard University Press)

problems, which arise from human ambition, typically do so in contexts where success depends on victories of various sorts in zero-sum competitive activities where relationships are largely rivalrous. Such problems clearly arise when my personal ambitions or those of my organisation conflict with the requirements of some greater good or the public interest. Moreover, when they do not so arise, they confront even the most public-spirited leaders with complex conflicts not only of competing legitimate interests but also of competing moral principles. Consequently, these issues typically have no clear right answers, and decisions have to follow the exercise of judgment.

Conceivably, also, mainstream academic ethicists ignore the challenges of Machiavellian amoralism because they recognise (whether with humility or disdain) that they don't really understand very much about how the world of business works and the problems which confront its practitioners. They may consequently assume that such matters are dealt with by teachers of "business ethics." As we have seen and, as any perusal of topics and reading covered in business ethics courses will confirm, this assumption is largely mistaken.[4] Perhaps the most startling instance and honest instance of neglect of "business ethics" in a business school is provided by Oxford's Said Business School which appears to believe the subject simply doesn't exist. Instead, it teaches a skill which is certainly extremely useful in a successful, profit-driven business career, namely "reputation management." But, of course, the assumption of those philosophers who have taken seriously the case for living a life of systematic injustice or wickedness (as Plato does through Glaucon in the introduction to *The Republic*) have always, like Machiavelli himself, recognised the importance of securing through the skilful deployment of hypocrisy a reputation for being exceptionally virtuous.

Taking Machiavelli Seriously

Whatever the truth about the neglect of Machiavellianism in relation to business ethics and ethics in general, perhaps the most fundamental reason is that there is certainly nothing approaching a consensus about how to rebut Machiavelli and perhaps no-one

[4] A very honourable exception to this generalisation is Lee Hardy: (1990, reprinted 2001) *The Fabric of the World::Inquires into Calling, Career Choice and the Design of Human Work*. I discuss Hardy views in chapter 9.

has so far succeeded in providing a convincing rebuttal of his highly uncomfortable amoralism in relation to ambition. This makes Machiavelli unique in making the case against much of both contemporary atheist and Christian ethics. I shall, therefore, seek in the rest of this chapter to make clear exactly what it is in Machiavelli's writings that creates exceptional difficulties for both atheist and Christian ethicists who argue against a ruthless and thoroughgoing egoism.

Moreover, there are two powerful reasons why, though a generalised amoralism may be dismissed as mere cynicism, it is imperative to take Machiavelli's contextualised amoralism very seriously . The first is that, as he himself stresses, he is describing how many people actually behave and even, perhaps rightly, see nothing wrong in so behaving, when pursuing their ambitions. Thus, it is not difficult to dissuade people from thinking that it is wrong to torture babies for pleasure, because it would occur to hardly anyone to think otherwise let alone to act upon such a thought. Similarly, when we do wrong, by breaking promises or acting maliciously, we are more likely to make excuses than to deny that promise-breaking and maliciousness are in general morally wrong.

However, in the morally neutral world of business and similar competitive activities, it is very unclear whether a case can ever be made for treating the interests of other (sentient, rational) beings as of equal importance to our own, let alone for thinking that, on some occasions, we should make substantial sacrifices in respect of our own ambitions for the sake of securing the success of our competitors. And indeed, the vast majority of ordinary people who work in business and other areas of the world of action take it for granted that their principal objective should be winning – defeating rivals and out-performing competitors. They are, consequently, not expected by others and should not expect themselves to treat competitors according to the same high standards of honesty, fairness and benevolence which, for the most part, they think they ought to try to adhere to in their relations with family and friends.

The second reason for taking Machiavelli seriously is that, uniquely amongst those who feature prominently in all histories of moral and political philosophy, Machiavelli was a man of action, first, and only secondarily – and even somewhat half-heartedly -

an intellectual interested in the exploration of ideas for their own sake. Machiavelli's challenge to both Christian and humanist ethics is thus a rare articulation of the challenge often heard from pragmatic people engaged in the world of making things happen, when they question whether it is not simply impossible, and in any case pointless to seek a general normative set of principles which will justify or vindicate the activities they undertake.

Machiavelli's position, which I suggest is in reality shared by many exclusive humanists in Taylor's contemporary secular societies, is simply this. What makes life worth living is worldly success in the here and now. At best, this means getting to the top of whatever tree one is climbing; otherwise, as near to it as possible. Such success generates the greatest of satisfactions available to human beings which are those of fame and its accoutrements and these, in turn, require the acquisition and retention of power, which may also offer additional psychological satisfactions on its own account. What matters, in short, is becoming an "alpha" human being or, in the colloquial sense, "making it." However, according to Machiavelli, if you are serious about wanting to be a success in the world of action you must become an amoralist: that is, someone who is prepared to ignore the requirements of any alleged code of morality and who is always willing to subordinate the interests of others to her own. This means that to refute Machiavelli it is necessary to show either that worldly success, as Machiavelli understands it, is not what defines the best kind of life that human beings are capable of leading or that worldly success does not require Machiavellian amoralism or both. I argue in chapter 9, that it is possible to do both but only by invoking the essentially Christian concept of vocations and vocational ethics.

Machiavelli's Enduring Challenge to Ethics

Under these circumstances, it is unsurprising that Machiavelli's work has continued to be the object of fascination, revulsion, admiration and myriad interpretations from the first dissemination of his ideas in the early 16th century to the present. These diverse and often passionate responses to Machiavelli have been elicited and endure not only amongst scholars but also amongst those practitioners of the exercise of power in the political, commercial and other domains of collective human enterprise and activity. Frederick the Great and Mussolini are famous examples of anti- and pro-Machiavellian views. More recently, Jonathan Powell has written an account of his years at the heart of the Blair Government in the UK under the title, *The New Machiavelli: How to Wield Power in the Modern World* (2011). Similarly, Anthony Jay, himself an experienced manager before he became famous as the co-author of the masterly television series, *Yes Minister* and *Yes, Prime* Minister, wrote a serious, albeit witty, study called *Machiavelli and Management* (1967) which was for many years – and a very rare exception to general practice - prescribed reading at the Harvard Business School.

The reasons for this interest in Machiavelli are threefold:

i) Machiavelli's proto-Nietzschean critique of (he thinks, degenerate) Christian ethics as a religion for weaklings;
ii) his highly original repudiation of the ethics of virtue and decency advocated by exclusive humanists both before and after the Enlightenment – in antiquity, in his own day and in modern secular societies, and
iii) the practical relevance of his writings for those who wish to achieve worldly success in politics, business or any other profession involving the exercise of power over others and the leadership and management of organisations. Thus Anthony Grafton in his introduction to the 1999 Penguin edition of *The Prince* writes: "Machiavelli's *Prince* reads...like an abstract manual, one whose tenets apply almost as well to a modern corporation as to a Renaissance state." (p. xiv).

On the reading of Machiavelli, which I take to be correct (but which, even if it is not, remains the commonest reading[5]) Machiavelli's most radical challenge is to those who claim that behaviour in public life should be exclusively grounded in either Christian or exclusive humanist universal moral principles. His alternative claim is that, whatever your conventional ethical principles, you must, whether as an individual or a state, suppress them in pursuit of success and whenever necessity requires it – which is frequently. It will become clear how morally far-reaching and disturbing Machiavelli's challenges are when we consider them in more detail. Meanwhile something of the flavour of Machiavelli's challenges is well-captured by, for example, Quentin Skinner who writes:

> Machiavelli's criticism of classical and contemporary humanism is thus a simple but devastating one. He argues that, if a ruler wishes to reach his highest goals, he will not always find it rational to be moral: on the contrary, he will find that any consistent attempt to cultivate the princely virtues will prove to be a ruinously irrational policy. But what of the Christian objection that this is a foolish as well as a wicked position to adopt, since it forgets the day of judgement on which all injustices will finally be punished? About this Machiavelli says nothing at all. His silence is eloquent. Indeed epoch-making: it echoed around Christian Europe, at first eliciting a stunned silence in return and then a howl of execration that has never finally died away.[6]

In similar vein, Isaiah Berlin, in his remarkable essay on "The Originality of Machiavelli" cites Meinecke's assessment that

[5] My own reading of what Machiavelli means is broadly in line with the readings of both Isaiah Berlin and Quentin Skinner. However, I disagree with the former that the real source of Machiavelli's disturbing originality is his unwitting discovery of value pluralism and I disagree with the latter that he was, at bottom, a champion, albeit a critical one, of republican virtue whose more ferocious texts must be read as ironic and polemical. Interestingly, Skinner obviously disagrees quite substantially with Berlin since he excluded a bibliographical reference to Berlin's essay between the publication of the first version and the second versions of his short study of Machiavelli for Oxford University Press, first published in 1981 in "The Past Masters" series and revised for *Machiavelli, A Very Short Introduction*, 1996). My reading also dissents from nothing in Alan Ryan's (2013) account of Machiavelli in *On Politics*.

[6] Skinner (1981), p. 42.

"Machiavelli's doctrine was a sword thrust in the body politic of Western humanity, causing it to cry out and struggle against itself.[7] Berlin thinks that it is this ruthless knifework on the part of Machiavelli which constitutes the coolly devastating character of his assault on both conventional Christian and contemporary humanist ethics and has rendered Machiavelli's writings "so deeply fascinating and horrifying to his readers from his day to our own."[8].

The Problem of Interpreting Machiavelli

There are, of course, numerous alternative interpretations of Machiavelli which seek to deflect these challenges. Some seek, like Strauss, to do so by making Machiavelli more easily dismissible as an unambiguous "teacher of evil" or, in Russell's phrase, the author of a "handbook for gangsters". Others, like Rousseau, seek to reconcile him to a version of now conventional political morality by treating him as an ironist who is really promoting the loftiest of ancient republican ideals – a position recently elaborated and endorsed by Erica Brenner who also makes Machiavelli a champion of Kantian justice when she writes: "The bedrock of his [Machiavelli's] reasonings are obligations of justice that should hold irrespective of anticipated result."[9]

On the general question of interpreting Machiavelli, most modern commentators begin by stressing the vast diversity of the literature and/or the competing views on whether and to what extent, if any, his popular reputation as an advocate of political immorality is deserved. The question of whether Machiavelli is really recommending immoral or amoral behaviour to those who exercise power in government or business is also the starting point for the recent defences and commendations of the contemporary usefulness of Machiavelli's teachings by both Jonathan Powell (2011) and Antony Jay (1967), as cited above. More substantially, *The Cambridge Companion to Machiavelli* (Edited: Najemy, 2010) devotes two chapters to the "reception history" of Machiavelli's work, which review how Machiavelli's writings have been understood, respectively, between their composition until the 18th century and from the 18th century to the present. In

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[7] Quoted in Berlin: 1981: p. 39.
[8] Ibid: p. 79
[9] Brenner, 2009: p. 496

the first of these chapters by Victoria Kahn, she claims that the Preface to the posthumous edition of *The Prince* in 1532:

> suggests that, at its initial publication, the four basic elements of the later reception of *The Prince* were already in place: (1) the view of Machiavelli as a teacher of tyrants; (2) the view of Machiavelli as a secret critic of tyranny; (3) the view that Machiavelli was merely describing the world of politics, not recommending a particular course of behaviour; or (4) that he was peddling a particular art or skill, a technique of political power that could be used well or badly."[10]

These views appear with numerous variations and in many combinations which become possible because some of these readings are mutually supporting and none of the basic categories exclude the others if one allows – what few deny - that Machiavelli may have had different objectives in his different writings or may indeed have contradicted himself within and between the main texts.

The main problem with getting agreement about how to read Machiavelli derives from the insuperable nature of the task of determining whether and when he actually meant what he said and, relatedly, to what extent he was consistent in his views. Since my project is not concerned with the correct interpretation of Machiavelli's texts but rather with the substantive challenges to all forms of public morality with which he has been rightly or wrongly associated, I adopt the view of Machiavelli's work (which, as it happens, I believe to be the correct one) which takes the vast bulk of his writing to mean what it appears to mean without requiring it to be read as satirical and ironic or needing to be understood with reference to classical conventions of rhetoric, dialectic and historiography. It also takes the view that such differences as there are between *The Prince* and *The Discourses* arise not so much from the fact that Machiavelli is writing about the differences between republics and principalities as from the fact that in *The* Prince he is emphasising how individuals should

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[10] Victoria Kahn in *Cambridge Companion to Mavhiavelli*.(2010) p. 241

behave, and in *The Discourses* he is primarily concerned with what nations or cities (*patriae*) should do. However, in both cases he is concerned with how they should conduct themselves if they are to achieve success here on earth. He does indeed express clear preferences for republican polities, which depend on the *virtu* of inculcated by good laws and exhibited by good citizens rather than for polities which depend on the *virtu* of one person only. (D. II.2: 275-6). However, this does not mean that *The Prince* and *The Discourses* contradict each other; only, that their differences are analogous to those one might expect from a modern author, such as Anthony Jay, writing about how to become and remain a successful CEO and the same author writing about what makes for the success and failure of individual companies in a competitive market place.

What was not Controversial in Machiavelli

In order to understand both Machiavelli's originality and his contemporary relevance to the ethics of ambition generally and the ethics of business in particular, it is necessary to see how many premises he shared with both the received account of virtue drawn from classical authors and the at least partial absence of hostility he displayed to conventional Christian morality. Only when we see this will we see how radically and original and still profoundly challenging to both Christians and humanists are the conclusions which he draws from these premises.

Thus, Machiavelli shares the ethical perspective of all Christian, classical and humanist Western writers before the eighteenth century[11] that the answer to the basic ethical question of how should we live as individuals and communities is to be answered by identifying the best kind of life which human beings can rationally strive to live and the human dispositions to action and qualities of character which are necessary for, or conducive to leading such a life. The first question in ethics, therefore, is: "What does true human well-being (*eudaimonia*, *felicitas*) consist in?" or "What is the supreme good (*il somma bene*, *summum bonum*) for human beings?" The second question is: "What virtues or forms of excellence in conduct (*aretai*) must people cultivate in order to live such a life?" For Machiavelli, as for many classical and contemporary humanists, the best kind of life available to human

[11] See Macintyre, 2002: pp. 81-105

beings is that which, as we have seen, leads to success here and now. Nor do Christian theologians, as Taylor shows through his pervasive emphasis on their millennium-long sanctification of ordinary life, disparage enjoyment of the goods of creation, even though supreme beatitude which is our ideal destiny consists in ultimate union or fellowship with God. But for exclusive humanists, like Machiavelli, If the post-mortal future matters at all in morality, this relates to how we shall be remembered rather than to what happens to us when we die.

For Machiavelli the best kind of life available to human beings is one crowned with worldly success in the domain of politics and the world of action generally - especially, for Machiavelli the world of governing states by winning wars and enforcing effective laws. Success in leading communal endeavours (i.e. political success) leads to the most desirable of all human goods, namely the achievement of glory in both contemporary public opinion and in subsequent history. He makes no argument for the view the achievement of glory in the world of action is what makes life supremely worthwhile. He shows almost no interest in the glory which success in the arts and sciences brings. The world of action is the most worthy arena in which to pursue glory both because that is simply what it was for him and because the ideal of glory in the world of action was largely taken as a given amongst contemporary humanists. Machiavelli's greatest heroes from the past are, consequently Moses, Cyrus, Theseus and Romulus all of whom achieved "the twofold glory, in having founded a new state and in having adorned and strengthened it with good laws, sound defences, reliable allies, and inspiring leadership."[12] He also much admires Scipio, (though without disparaging Hannibal) for his "high moral standards, courtesy, humanity and generosity"[13] which Machiavelli thinks Scipio learnt from Xenophon's account of Cyrus. Of contemporary rulers he is mostly critical, but of Ferdinand of Aragon, he writes: "From being a weak king, he has risen to being, for fame and glory, the first king of Christendom.[14] The achievement of this kind of glory requires the acquisition and retention of political power, i.e. becoming a leader of people. It also requires the accumulation of riches, partly because great wealth is itself a source of glory, partly to pay for citizen armies and, whether by obligating individuals by giving them money or

[12] P, p. 128
[13] P, p. 90
[14] P, p 119

by funding activities which elicit the admiration of the masses, to retain the loyalty of all classes of citizens.

None of this is shocking in itself: it did not shock contemporaries and subsequent readers, nor does it shock most people today, whether Christian or humanist, in societies where worldly success is equally identified with success in becoming powerful in the management of commercial enterprises as it is in the government of polities. Since it is an exclusive humanist's view it is clearly inconsistent with a Christian view of the supreme good for human beings who understand glory quite differently ascribing true glory only to God and to ourselves in as far as we come to enjoy "the glorious liberty of the children of God" both here and in Heaven. However, Christians (notably Augustine and his followers) have always recognised the need for effective government in the here and now and have not been dismissive of the love of glory which inspired the noblest of Roman leaders.[15] Indeed, the Christian churches have always seen the work of politics as potentially an honourable vocation to be exercised in accordance with the virtues of a Christian prince.

Nor indeed, though the issue is contested by both Christians and humanists, have past and present readers been particularly shocked by Machiavelli's Hobbesian claims about the need for strong and fearsome government to control the otherwise rampant egoism of individual citizens. Still less are they shocked by his claim that "when the safety of one's country wholly depends on the decision to be taken, no attention should be paid either to justice or injustice, to kindness or cruelty, or to its being praiseworthy or ignominious. On the contrary, every other consideration being set aside, that alternative should be whole-heartedly adopted which will save the life and preserve the liberty of one's country."[16] Karl Barth makes the same claim though more reluctantly.[17] So why should Machiavelli's views continue to generate as much shock and horror as they do amongst both Christians and humanists alike?

Christian Ethics

[15] St Augustine: *City of God*, V.
[16] D.III.41).
[17] *Church Dogmatics*, 300, 461, quoted in Nigel Biggar, 1993, p. 93

Machiavelli initially caused the greatest offence because of his highly critical account of specifically Christian ethics and of religion more generally. In this context it something of a surprise to read in the *Discourses*: "Those princes and republics, which desire to remain free of corruption, should above all else maintain incorrupt the ceremonies of their religion and should hold them always in veneration."[18] It soon becomes clear, however, that Machiavelli's view of the importance of religion has nothing to do either with its truth or with the salvation of human souls for eventual fellowship with God. Instead it has everything to do with maintaining political stability through securing the obedience of citizens to their ruler, and especially of soldiers in times of war. Machiavelli cites with approval the extensive use of oaths in Roman religion and even the forced swearing of oaths of loyalty as exacted by Scipio from mutinous troops.[19] He also commends preying on people's propensity to superstition. He commends Numa, the founder of Roman religion because he "pretended to have private conferences with a nymph who advised him about the advice he should give to the people."[20] He similarly approves of Savonarola for having persuaded people that he conversed with God even though Machiavelli is agnostic about whether he really did. He also commends the judiciously favourable interpretation of all oracles, especially to boost the confidence and enthusiasm of soldiers in fighting with the divinely foretold expectation of victory. He further thinks that rulers should endorse and interpret the significance of apparent miracles because these, too, will encourage people to believe that what the ruler commands is also the will of God, even if the miracles are associated with "religions that are false"[21] In short, "the rulers of a republic or a kingdom should...uphold the basic principles of the religion which they practise and, if this be done, it will be easy for them to keep their commonwealth religious and, in consequence, good and united. They should ...foster and encourage everything likely to be of help to this end, even though they be convinced that it is quite fallacious."[22]

Machiavelli's truly shocking amoralism

[18] D", 1.12, p.142.
[19] D, 1.11, p. 40
[20] Ibid.
[21] D", 1.12, p. 143
[22] Ibid

The main reasons for finding Machiavelli's political morality repugnant are the same for both religious and religionless humanists who share a horror of the kind of repugnant conduct, conventionally condemned as evil but advocated as necessary by Machiavelli especially at "P", XV-XIX.

Humanists, both then and now, share with Machiavelli the belief that what matters is how we live here and now. They would also probably agree now, as they would have certainly agreed then, that a great deal of human happiness or what makes for a successful life depends on the good opinion of others: this is what Machiavelli and his fellow humanists understood as the pursuit of glory and we might think of as the pursuit of greatness. Where the difference arises then and now (and apart from the modern exclusive humanists' dismissal of piety as a virtue) is in Machiavelli's insistence that those who would be successful should not follow the prescriptions of conventional humanist virtue. Conventionally, it is better for a man, and especially a Prince, not only to be courageous rather than cowardly and virile rather than effeminate. He is also required to be generous rather than miserly; beneficent rather than self-seeking; compassionate rather than cruel; faithful rather than faithless; courteous rather than proud; chaste rather than lascivious; flexible rather than stubborn; grave rather than frivolous; religious rather than sceptical, "and so forth."[23]

Machiavelli denies all this and "proposes, instead, to draw up an original set of rules"[24] because he wants to say "something which will prove of practical value to the inquirer"[25]. He has consequently thought it proper to represent things "as they are in real truth rather than as they are imagined [since] the gulf between how one should live and how one does live is so wide that a man who neglects what is actually done for what should be done moves towards self-destruction rather than self preservation.[26] He then proceeds to elucidate with historical examples why conventional morality as outlined above needs sometimes – indeed quite often - to be stood on its head if the Prince, or any other man of action, is to flourish. Thus, on the whole, princes should usually or often be miserly, cruel, faithless, and, in general feared rather than loved if

[23] P, XV, p. 91
[24] P, p. 90
[25] Ibid
[26] Ibid

they cannot be both. They should not indulge in these genuinely evil practices gratuitously – that will be counter-productive and deny them the glory of being accounted great men, as happened to Agathocles on account of his excessive and unnecessary viciousness. However, the wise ruler must, for his own good - and, Machiavelli thinks, ultimately for the good of his state – be ruthless and treacherous as occasion demands.

Above all, perhaps, Machiavelli shocks humanist moralists by his insistence on the vital importance of hypocrisy in achieving worldly success. Princes need not only the ferocity of the lion but also the duplicity of the fox. They must break promises, abandon friends and allies, tell all manner of lies so that "a Prince need not necessarily have all the good qualities mentioned above but he should certainly appear to have them...You must realise that a Prince cannot observe all those things which give a man a reputation for virtue, because in order to maintain his state he is often forced to act in defiance of good faith, of charity, of kindness, of religion. And so he should have a flexible disposition varying as fortune and circumstances dictate."[27]

According to Machiavelli, then, humanists have no credible resources for prescribing adherence to an objective ethic of integrity, justice and beneficence in the domain of public affairs. What is unsettling about this is the uneasy feeling it provokes that a life of conventional virtue may really be, as Machiavelli claims, incompatible success in competitive careers. Moreover, his claim may, also, be vindicated by observing the actual conduct and practices, not only of the ancients and Renaissance Europeans but also of people who work in the worlds of politics and business in our own 21st century, secular societies. It will be the argument of Part Three that this feeling is justified and cannot be answered by even the most humane and ingenious exclusive humanist thinkers without borrowing versions of foundational concepts in Christian ethics. Christians, I shall claim, can meet the challenges of Machiavellinism in the pursuit of ambitions because they have a rationally credible belief in the benign purposiveness of the universe and of our own individual lives within it. They also believe in an eschatological destiny for the whole of creation, including ourselves, in which in some way which we cannot presently expect to understand "all shall be well." This makes all

[27] P, XVIII, p. 560

ethics in all contexts a matter of discerning and acting on what God is calling on particular individuals to do here and now in whatever situations they find themselves. In this way, all ethics becomes vocational and, to meet the Machiavellian challenge, atheists need simulacra of vocations.

Machiavelli did not subscribe to the first of these Christian metaphysical propositions since he thought the world governed, not by teleology, but by the interplay of a largely capricious *fortuna* and the exercise of human will-power; and, if he believed in an afterlife at all, this belief plays no part in his views on how human beings should live.

Nevertheless, I shall argue in chapter 9 that with respect to achieving *eudaimonia* through the prosecution of ambitions for worldly success amongst rivals, the Machiavellian pursuit of the advancement in a career needs to be contained within, and constrained by something like the essentially Christian requirements of following a vocation. A corollary of this is that the moral dilemmas which, for Machiavelli, appeared to confront only exceptionally ambitious individuals now confront a majority of people in secular societies in relation to the pursuit of success in their careers.

Machiavelli's recommendations are about how to get power and keep it. In general, power is a matter of using diverse means to cause people to behave other than they would if left to their own devices.[28] As such, everything Machiavelli advises can be transposed into advice for students of business hoping to have successful careers which will lead to senior management positions in the commercial world or high office in the political world. It also identifies what many people, whether realistically or cynically, believe are the principles which in fact govern the way politicians and businesspeople actually behave. Moreover, even if (as I believe) many politicians and businesspeople conduct themselves in the world of action with integrity, decency and genuine concern for the public good, it is undeniable that many others do not let ethical considerations get in the way of their ambition. It is not obvious that the former fail to prosper because of their conventionally ethical conduct but nor is wickedness obviously a bar to success – and indeed to glory provided it is not

[28] Anthony de Crespigny (1970): "Power and Its Forms" in De Crespigny, A, and Wetheiemer A: *Contemporary Political Theory.* Nelson Press, USA

found out. So morality, as opposed to the demands of law and the counsels of prudence, seems to be neutral in respect of the pursuit of worldly success. It is in this sense that Machiavelli advocates wholesale amoralism in the pursuit of worldly success rather than the immoralism which says: “Evil, be thou my good.”

For these reasons, Machiavelli’s account of the ethics of ambition and leadership should greatly alarm the kind of Taylorian +EEH who subscribes to what Taylor describes as the “Modern Moral Order.” It should also alarm all those who embrace what I have simply been calling “liberal humanism,” whether religious or religionless. This alarm should be particularly acute in relation to the claim I shall be making in chapter 8 that liberal humanism provides the best answer to the challenge to non-nihilist morality which is posed by the facts of Taylorian secularity. Machiavelli’s answer to this challenge is in his dualism which asserts that you can be a conventionally good person (whether Christian or atheist) or a successful leader but you cannot be both. Extrapolating from this, as Berlin does, we may say that there may be many kinds of satisfaction you can pursue while conforming to conventional morality derived from Christianity. However. If you are ambitious and seek fame and fortune through sustained success in politics, business and similarly competitive activities, you must only pretend to care about anyone but yourself and, in fact, do whatever is necessary, regardless of moral considerations, in order to realise your ambitions. In this sense, Machiavelli’s amoralism leads to pure egoism.

A Machiavellian view of Taylor’s secular societies, then, would be that in reality trying to ascertain what a reasonable ethics requires, and then to persuade people to live in accordance with these requirements, is pointless. This would be so because, so a Machiavellian realist would claim, in the real world what most people care about most is success, and moral considerations – as opposed to purely prudential ones - are irrelevant to that, except perhaps as something they should pay lip service to. As we have seen, Parfit genuinely feared that the study of ethics might actually be pointless in that we don’t have any good reasons to care very much about anything other than what we actually happen to care about. And if we marry this thought to Machiavelli, we must conclude that, if what most people, most of the time, actually care about is worldly success, then the only practical questions worth

asking are about how we should conduct ourselves in order to have the best chance of achieving such success.

Misunderstanding Machiavellianism and the Problem of "Dirty Hands"

It might be thought that the issues of how to behave as morality requires as a politician (or, by parity of reasoning, a businessperson or military commander) have been addressed by philosophers, like Sartre and Michael Walzer who have addressed the problem of "dirty hands." Similarly, it might be thought that ethicists who have written about political realism or about Max Weber's somewhat obscure distinction between "an ethic of ultimate ends" and "an ethic of responsibility," have at least attempted to meet the Machiavellian challenge. This is especially so since Machiavelli is usually cited in the literatures on these topics as a progenitor of the debates.[29] However, Machiavelli is not concerned with the problem of "dirty hands". It is true that Machiavelli probably believed, though he never explicitly said: "if the means accuseth, the end excuseth," but the end in question for Machiavelli in *The Prince* is the getting and keeping of power by an individual pursuing personal glory. For him the means to this end include – admittedly only when the pursuit of success requires it, which, however, is frequently – resort to lying, promise-breaking, miserliness, treachery, ruthless cruelty and – crucially - hypocrisy. In "dirty hands" and associated discussions the problems are all about choosing between engaging in, or refraining from engaging in courses of action normally accounted immoral in order to secure some perhaps morally more important end. The paradigmatic example is the choice between bombing large numbers of innocent civilians or facilitating something like a Nazi conquest of the whole of Europe. The former may be accounted necessary in order to avoid the allegedly greater evil of the latter – or it may not. Alternatively, evil means are held to be justified as necessary or maximally effective ways of promoting a greater public good like making the world safe for democracy or achieving national liberation or establishing some sort of alleged utopia like a classless society or a global caliphate or the Kingdom of Heaven on earth or, simply, rescuing the innocent.

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[29] For a full discussion and extensive bibliography on these issues which, as I argue, do not deal with Machiavellian amoralism, see Coady, C.A.J., "The Problem of Dirty Hands", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2014 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.),

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For Machiavelli, however, the supreme end which justifies immoral means is personal glory achieved through the getting and keeping of power in a *patria*, and the end which justifies violence in and between *patriae* is national glory, as well as independence. At the personal level, the end of satisfying ambition can, Machiavelli claims, only be achieved through ruthlessness and duplicity in outmanoeuvring or destroying enemies and rivals as well as through sometimes betraying friends and allies. At the national level, he is certain that glory is attained only attained through the successful prosecution of defensive and expansionist wars or the threat of such wars. For +EEHs and +ECEs there is no *problem* of dirty hands if the objectives of the moral soiling are simply the satisfaction of one's personal lust for glory or the expansion of national territory through conquest. The resort to immoral means to secure *these* ends is simply morally wrong. For Machiavelli there is no problem for the opposite reason that in the pursuit of glory, moral conduct is frequently not an option.

Self-Deception

I shall attempt in chapter 9 to rebut Machiavelli's claims both about the *summum bonum* for human beings and about the need for his contextualised amoralism in the pursuit of success in competitive careers. Meanwhile, I note an aspect of the way people actually behave which I think Machiavelli overlooks. He emphasises the need for the skilful use of hypocrisy in seeking to attain and retain high office. What he overlooks, I believe on the basis of the same kind of participant observation on which Machiavelli himself relies, is the extent to which many people who do succeed in rising to the top in business and politics benefit from a well-developed capacity for self-deception. People typically convince themselves that what's good for my career is good for the organisation and what's good for the organisation is good for my country and what's good for my country is good for the world, and good absolutely. Similarly, they convince themselves that they are entitled to exceptionally large earnings on the basis that their talents are outstandingly rare and/or their contribution to the success of an enterprise is very many times greater than that of their colleagues. Similarly, people convince themselves that they are entitled to many of the rewards of wealth creation, regardless of whether they have contributed through their work to the creation of that wealth and despite idleness and culpable incompetence. Even more crudely they may believe they are entitled to a

disoporportionate share of many kinds of resource simply through accidents of birth or good fortune in their upbringing.

Although it is beyond the scope of the present study to address questions of economic justice, about which Machiavelli (unlike Hobbes) says virtually nothing, it will be important for my final argument about Machiavellianism that a life grounded in self-deception is ultimately morally defective. It may produce the illusion of being a life well lived but a truly well-lived life - true *eudaimonia* – requires, I believe though do not here try to show, the systematic cultivation of accurate self-understanding.

Conclusion

I believe that the challenge of Machiavellianism is the hardest of the three challenges for contemporary ethicists to meet.

After all, with respect to the perennial challenge, it never occurs to most people in Taylor's secular societies to wonder about *really* matters, enduringly and *sub specie aeternitatis*. They accept the facts of suffering, failure and death and do what they can to mitigate or reconcile themselves to these facts in their own lives and the lives of those they care about. Otherwise, the largely abstract knowledge they have that into each life some rain must fall, that nobody's perfect, and that sooner or later we all die has little impact on the choices they make between alternative possible futures in the life they are actually living now. Mostly, they know roughly what they want from their lives and they don't agonise much about whether their conception of what it is right and wrong to do in seeking to get what they want is rationally defensible.

Nor, with respect to the challenges of contemporary secularism in these societies, are they much bothered that other people hold different beliefs and value different things to those they themselves care most about, and so seek happiness in manners of living and forms of work quite different to those which they choose for themselves. In general, they subscribe to a pluralist ethic of tolerance which prescribes that we should live and let live, only resorting to violent resistance against monist political entrepreneurs who, through Weberian charisma and Machiavellian ruthlessness or both, seek to inspire in their followers a passionate determination not to let the rest of us live as we choose or even at all.

The third challenge to morality from Machiavellianism is much less easily ignored or rebutted by apparent common sense. This is for three reasons.

First, temptations to behave in morally repugnant ways - through duplicity, callousness and self-seeking regardless of the harm to innocent others – confront all of us as we seek worldly success for ourselves, our families and others who are close to us. These temptations are frequent, especially where our ambitions are concerned for our families as well as ourselves, and most of us yield to them more often than our self-image would have us believe. Behaving morally is thus very difficult – much more difficult than most ethicists suggest. It is also much more difficult to give people cogent reasons for behaving morally where morality requires is that they make substantial sacrifices of their chances of achieving worldly success - paradigmatically by ruining their careers or disadvantaging their families by doing what is morally right and refusing to do what is morally wrong.

Second, Machiavelli's claim that he is writing about how people actually behave rather than how they ought to, or say they behave, rings uncomfortably true. If this is so, it is easy to become sceptical about whether the pronouncements of ethicists make any difference at all to how people – including perhaps ourselves – actually live. If so, are ethicists, as Derek Parfit feared, wasting their lives?

Third, a careful reading of Machiavelli shows that he is not advocating something which is wholly or obviously morally repugnant. He is advocating what I have called a proto-Nietzschean ethic of heroism which celebrates exceptionally talented and energetic individuals whom, at least many of us in secular societies, are prone to admire. Amongst the superstars we admire are today's business tycoons or – people who through outstanding determination, enterprise, boldness, hard work, brilliant public relations and luck succeeds in acquiring and keeping a flourishing business empire. Our admiration for tycoons may be diminished by our greater admiration by those who eschew worldly success or, less honourably, by envy or snobbery of various sorts. It is, however, not, on the whole, much diminished in the popular imagination by the thought that the tycoon's success has probably involved a fair amount of duplicity and brutality towards rivals, i.e. a fair amount of indifference to what ethicists,

whether atheist or Christian, almost unanimously teach. All this suggests that we are more disposed to admire what Machiavelli admired than perhaps we like to think.

The Machiavellian challenge to an ethic which sometimes demands real and substantial sacrifices is one which clearly confronts atheists at a practical level in their daily lives and especially in the pursuit of their ambitions. Atheist ethicists, however, also need to meet the more theoretical perennial challenges and those which are peculiarly acute in the circumstances of Taylor's contemporary secular pluralism.

The general public may be indifferent to – even irritated by – the ratiocinations of moral philosophers, whether religious or religionless. However, history is replete, and may again become so, with atrocities perpetrated by large numbers of ordinary people who have accepted, and become enthused by philosophically indefensible forms of moral nihilism and amoralism. To combat this, it is important that some (eccentric) people in all societies do ask questions about the ethical grounds for, and consequences of believing or not believing that "this is all there is." It is also important in secular societies that they address the challenges of pluralism in such a way as to avoid both tyrannical monism and Hobbesian moral anarchy. I now therefore proceed to consider how three different types of answer are given to all three challenges by what I take to be exceptionally persuasive versions of atheist ethics as argued for by three especially admirable exponents of this position.

PART TWO

ATHEIST ETHICS

CHAPTER FIVE

ISAIAH BERLIN'S PLURALISM

Introduction

In this chapter I shall follow the same procedure I use for explicating and evaluating the three +EEHs whose ethics I consider in this and the following two chapters of Part Two. Since I am discussing three +EEHs whose work and manner of living I have greatly admired, I argue that if they cannot satisfactorily rebut the challenges to a liberal humanist morality from moral nihilism and amoralism, this provides important evidence that, on atheist premises, the task may be impossible.

The procedure consists in seeing to what extent they confirm my two basic hypotheses. Thus I, first, identify the theoretical and practical issues with which they have centrally engaged and the context in which they have experienced and explored these issues. In the bulk of each chapter I will then offer an account of the version of exclusive humanism they espouse in relation to the refutation of moral nihilism and amoralism. In each case, I shall, in the course of this discussion try to do justice to what they think about religious belief, because, unlike many of their fellow atheists they, each of them, see the point and value of religious belief and are consequently neither dismissive of it nor scornful of, and hostile towards religious believers. I shall then seek to identify what I take to be most valuable in their account which either accords with the claims of +ECEs and by which Christian ethicists can be enriched, mainly their contribution to liberal humanism. Finally, I seek to show that their answers to moral nihilism and amoralism cannot be rationally justified without adopting analogues for some central tenets of Christian ethics, which I judge to be less plausible than their theological originals.

In the case of Berlin, like everyone else, I am hugely indebted to Henry Hardy, Berlin's archivist and editor of genius[1] who has devoted his life to

1 One editorial service Hardy has rendered which is particularly useful for studies like the present one is to have collected many of Berlin's most important essays into a single volume: *The Proper Study of Mankind*. Where essays to which I refer below appear in this volume I shall, for convenience, give reference to their place there rather than to publications where they originally appeared. I should also record that my enormous admiration for Hardy as an editor does not imply that I think he always interprets Berlin aright or is justified in his occasional criticisms. For example, in his contribution to *The Book of Isaiah,* he chides Berlin for being for not being sufficiently militant in his atheism and particularly for continuing to participate regularly in Jewish rituals without believing in the Jewish faith. Hardy's, as it seems to me unconvincing argument is that because religion is often baleful in its effects, it should always be

recovering, editing and publishing the large body of Berlin's literary corpus without which it would have vanished forever. Almost exclusively, as a result of Hardy's efforts, Berlin has been rescued from relegation to the periphery of modern intellectual history, being regarded as little more than a dilettante of brilliant early promise who, however, largely frittered away his talents in occasional pieces. Instead, he is now unquestionably a major twentieth century moral and political thinker, whose contribution to a particularly rich and subtle brand of liberal theory has yet to be fully explored and appreciated.[2] I have, however, also made substantial use of collections of Berlin's conversations and interviews which have not yet been anthologised into an individual volume. It is also true that Berlin is the only one of the three atheists I discuss with whom I have personally had fruitful conversations specifically about his views on religion.

After discussing Berlin's philosophical arguments for value pluralism, I conclude that on atheist assumptions, pluralism is inadequate to meet the challenges of moral nihilism and amoralism, without resorting to Berlin's analogues for the deliverances of something very like a faith. However, the enduring value of his work consists in the powerful support it gives to +ECEs, no less than to +EEHs, in the practical task of working towards a global (political) ethic which combats all forms of (monist) anti-liberal totalitarianism.

The Problem of Pluralism

The phenomenon of extreme pluralism, which Taylor thinks central to the ethical problems of secular societies, confronts pro-Enlightenment ethicists, both religious and religionless, with a dilemma. Either a diversity amongst competing views about what is morally right and wrong are equally defensible or there is a single view which is uniquely supportable by sound reasoning and within which all other views can either be accommodated or by which they must be rejected.

Such ethical dilemmas currently show up with especial clarity with respect to such diverse but often related issues as sexual morality, the rights and duties of minorities, war, crime and punishment, the treatment of women, and religious education. They are exacerbated by the fact that there seems to be no one agreed method for settling the ensuing (typically passionate) disagreements. Certainly, no ethicists, whatever they believe about religion, seem to have succeeded so far, in generating the same kind and degree of

discouraged. One reason for thinking that this position (shared by Richard Dawkins) is untenable is that the same could be said about art. Berlin's own reasons are for not dismissing religion and religious believers are given below.

[2] Much, however, has been and continues to be done under the auspices of the Isaiah Berlin Trust whose activities are recoded on their website, http://berlin.wolf.ox.ac.uk/

consensus, which we find in empirical disciplines, in relation to answering either substantive ethical questions or methodological ones about how we should set about justifying our answers,. This is what leads Alasdair Macintyre to complain about the "interminable character"[3] of modern arguments about morality - a frustration he shares with Dennett.

For these reasons, the phenomenon of value-pluralism raises the spectre of moral nihilism and amoralism, understood as the view that it doesn't really matter how we live and treat others. It all comes down to a Humean matter of personal inclinations and perceptions, individual or communal.

Monist Ethics

The most common and, perhaps, the most natural answer amongst professional ethicists to this challenge has been to claim that, though it is true that many people believe many different things about moral questions, it is nevertheless possible to identify and justify the one true set of answers and one right method for ascertaining what they are. This is the position which fideist and, in the strict sense, authoritarian (as opposed to rationalist and liberal) adherents of Christianity and the other monotheistic religions seem compelled to take - -ECEs as opposed to +ECEs. It is also the position of orthodox Marxists as it is of Freud and his followers. Most importantly for present purposes, it is the position that many, perhaps, most contemporary +EEHs take – certainly in those milieux, most notably academia, where, as we have seen, according to Taylor this doctrine is now "hegemonic".

Thus, some liberal, religionless ethicists, i.e. +EEHs, avoid the problems posed by the facts of pluralism by adopting a monist conception of their own ethical views and assert that there is one coherent and rationally defensible (monist) set of truths about moral questions, namely those espoused by +EEHs. In different ways this is the strategy of both Dennett and those who subscribe to his kind of naturalist, atheist ethics (such as Sam Harris) and of Parfit and other advocates of rationalist and religionless moral realism (such as Peter Singer). Such atheists emphatically reject all forms of subjectivism and cultural relativism because they hold strong and personally demanding moral convictions and do not believe these are "merely" a matter of taste or opinion or psychological disposition. Instead, they affirm that their conclusions about questions of ethics are the only ones which reasonable people, possessed of adequate knowledge of the empirical and metaphysical facts, can possibly reach. In the next two chapters we shall consider,

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[3] Alasdair MacIntyre (1985): *After Virtue, London,* Duckworth, P. 1

respectively, the adequacy of such naturalist and rationalist responses to the challenges of moral nihilism and amoralism.

Berlin's pluralist alternative

Isaiah Berlin, by contrast, though unquestionably a fellow +EEH, is dissatisfied with both these monist approaches to atheist ethics, precisely because they are monist. Instead, he proposes an alternative response to the challenge to +EEH which is posed by the empirical phenomena of pluralism. This is to embrace value pluralism and reject all forms of ethical monism and accept the inevitable "interminability" consequences. Such value-pluralism accepts that there are many different equally justifiable views of what matters and of how we should live. This is because there are, in truth, a variety of moral ideals and principles which we should acknowledge, of moral objectives which we should pursue and of manners of living or "forms of life" which are authentically worthwhile. This is so even though these views of life may be incompatible with one another and the values which they enshrine may conflict irreconcilably and tragically. On this view, there is no one right answer to many moral questions. In many cases, irreconcilable moral positions may be defended with equal justification in terms of adhering to the requirements of rationality and accurately assessing the available facts of experience. This kind of value-pluralism, Berlin thinks, is not only more rationally defensible in itself and much truer to the evidence of our experience, past and present than any form of ethical monism: it may also lead to greater humaneness and less cruelty in especially our individual and communal dealings with those who disagree with us.

It is his articulations and elaborations of this doctrine of value pluralism which Berlin considered to be his most important contribution to ethics and all those who have written about him concur, even when they reject the doctrine. It informs almost all his writing, despite the great diversity of his subjects, and largely accounts both for his choices of these subjects and the perspective from which he evaluates them.

Berlin's Exclusive Humanism

Berlin is a paragon of the kind of exclusive humanist whom Taylor finds so distinctive of modern western culture. Taylor was a long-time friend of Berlin's and his successor to the Chichele Chair of Social and Political Theory in Oxford. He might thus have been thinking of Berlin amongst others when, as we have seen, he noted that one of his own experiences as a contemporary Christian has been that of living amongst many atheists whom

it is impossible to regard as foolish or wicked or blind, indeed impossible not to love.

Berlin believes that this life is all there is, but he also believes that the possibilities which this life offers are *enough* for us to account it worth living and adequately to ground vitally important ethical judgments about how we should live individually and what we should strive for in order to make the world a better place. Unusually, at least amongst more recent EHs, Berlin's writing has a strong streak of pessimism. He is fully aware of the extremes of appalling and pointless suffering which continue to horrify us as we survey human history, past and present, He is also acutely aware of the tragic fact that he first learned from Machiavelli that we can't have everything and sometimes have to make nigh-unbearable choices between incommensurable evils and between equally worthy but ultimately incompatible ideals and values. In fact, he believed himself to have lived through "unquestionably, the worst century ever" and he recognised with humility and immense gratitude that he had been astoundingly fortunate. He did not fear death or think that it made good things less good because they don't last for ever. However, again unusually amongst fellow atheists, he would have personally just wanted to go on and on (and on). When he knew he was dying, he did not change his mind about the fact that he was entering eternal nothingness, but he did become depressed and amongst his last words were to say of death: "What a waste!"

Nevertheless, in his extensive elaboration and passionate defence of the doctrine of value pluralism, Berlin stresses, that despite all that is negative in the human condition, there are many wonderful human relationships and achievements to be enjoyed and many morally worthy objects of human striving. Nor are these things less good because they cannot all be subsumed under, or integrated within a single *summum bonum,* thus obviating the need to make often painful choices.

Berlin was not the only atheist moral and political philosopher in recent years to espouse ethical pluralism. It is implicit, for example, in Popper's "Open Society;" in Sartre's notion that we each commit our lives to different *"projets;"* in Oakeshott's conception of the diverse "adventures" which make life worth living; in Rawls's account of competing conceptions of the good life, as well as in the moral philosophy of Ronald Dworkin and Bernard Williams. Berlin's originality consists in the fact that, whereas for other philosophers value-pluralism is peripheral to their ethics, for Berlin it is central to all his work in both ethics and the history of ideas. In this work, he both pursues pluralism to its logical conclusions and defends it against what he recognises as strong objections. Moreover, no-one has expounded

pluralism more explicitly, comprehensively, vigorously, attractively and persuasively than Berlin or sought to show more consistently that value-pluralism does not entail, but furnishes a credible refutation of moral nihilism and amoralism. It is for these reasons that Berlin's philosophy of pluralism was so influential during his lifetime not only amongst philosophers but also amongst the general public. In my view, it is also why interest in Berlin's pluralism is likely to endure better than that of other expositors, in rather the same way and for the same reasons that he thought Mill's liberalism had endured better than that of many of his fellow liberal Victorians.[4]

Berlin's Importance

How history will come to assess his achievements is unclear – a point made by a number of contributors to the posthumous *Festschrift* edited by Henry Hardy, *The Book of Isaiah*.[5] Famously, he reported having given up philosophy as a youngish man in favour of the history of ideas because he wished to know more at the end of his life than he did at the beginning. There is no reason to doubt his truthfulness but some reason to doubt whether he accurately described the change he made. For one thing, he only gave up a very narrowly defined form of philosophising as some of the quotations below will show. Rather, he took the broad view of ethics as part of a comprehensive world-view as described in chapter one and which many other ethicists now take, including all those studied here. For another, he also opposed, again like many other ethicists, the ahistorical study of philosophy and ethics.

However, I think it mislocates not only his originality but also the nature of greatness to see him as a historian of ideas in the manner of, say, Arthur Lovejoy. Rather, I think he was more like an imaginative artist. He painted superb intellectual portraits of all sorts of individual thinkers and of a number of different intellectual landscapes. These depictions have the kind of qualities we associate with great creative art, both visual and literary. They represent the deepest truths, often hidden, about the subject or subject matter. They depict the person and the scene portrayed usually as sympathetically as possible but always, even in the case of seeming monsters (like de Maistre and even Hitler) as humanly comprehensible. They illuminate their subjects, whether familiar or unknown to us, bringing them to life for us and rendering them enduringly intriguing. Berlin once said that after writing his early book on Karl Marx he now knew exactly what it would be like to be in a room

[4] See Isaiah Berlin: "John Stuart Mill and the Ends of Life in *Four Essays on Liberty*. (Oxzford, OUP) pp 205-06.
[5] Henry Hardy (Ed) (2009) Woodbridge, UK. The Boydell Press.

with him.[6] My own assessment of what I think it right to call Berlin's greatness is that it should be located in his artist's ability to communicate to us a clear, highly colourful and persuasive impression of what it would have been like to know and understand, not only Marx, but also Mill, Hamann, Herder, Vico, Herzen, Tolstoy and many, many others, as well as those about whom he wrote explicitly personal impressions including, Churchill, Einstein, Weizmann and others. Similarly, he is prolific in communicating to us what it would have been like to be enthused by the ideas of, and caught up in the activities of the great movements of the Enlightenment, the Counter-Enlightenment, Russian liberalism, early German and later post-imperial nationalism, as well as Zionism. He also became, later in life, as I shall seek to show, much more sympathetic in his understanding of Christianity and religion in general, even though he remained a somewhat regretful unbeliever literally to his dying day.

Whether or not I am right to accord Berlin something akin to the greatness of great painters, he has unquestionably been one of the most influential and persuasive – Noel Annan thinks the most influential and persuasive[7]- moral thinkers and champions of post-war exclusive humanism. As such, his sustained elaboration and defence of pluralism has been his principal contribution to rebutting three challenges to ethics from moral nihilism and amoralism, with which this study is concerned.

Although I shall concentrate in this chapter on Berlin's philosophical arguments for value pluralism, I shall conclude that the enduring value of his work consists in the powerful support it gives to +ECEs, no less than to +EEHs, in the practical task of working towards a global (political) ethic which combats all forms of (monist) totalitarianism.

Berlin and the Perennial Challenges from Moral Nihilism and Amoralism

Berlin thus offers one of the most distinctive, influential, attractive and radical EH responses to the problems of moral nihilism and amoralism in Taylor's pluralist societies where fundamental disagreements about moral values appear irresoluble. This is to accept that value pluralism is true and all forms of value monism (atheist of religious) false.

The perennial reasons for thinking that it doesn't matter how we live derive from the realisation that our lives are short, involve much suffering and

[6] "He would very much have wanted you to agree with him."

[7] Noel Annan, writing a Foreword to PSM which is adapted from his discussion of Belin in his own autobiographical work, *Our Age*, says: "he seems to me to have written the truest and the most moving of all interpretations of life that my own generation made" (*Proper Study*, p. xv).

failure, and end for ever in death. Berlin believes this and deplores it. He would like the comforting beliefs offered by religions to be true but he can find no good reason for thinking that that they are. This is indeed all there is – alas. But that it is no reason for us not to try to make the best of our lives and, despite the facts of suffering, failure and death, there is still a plurality of good and noble ends to be pursued here and now, of good things to be enjoyed, and of worthy ideals to which to devote our talents and energies. Amongst these numerous important and well-founded moral values are freedom, justice, security, prosperity, the pursuit of truth, beauty, love and happiness. These good things are not the same as one another nor do they all complement one another and fit frictionlessly into some single greater scheme of things whether designed by God or Reason or History or Nature. On the contrary, they may, and often do, conflict irreconcilably with one another and they may be incommensurable with one another, in the sense that one cannot say that this value is of greater importance than that one by some measurable amount. There are instead often cases where moral principles, both equally valid, may conflict in often agonising ways – as is most obviously the case in relation to war. There are also many different morally admirable ways of living, individually and collectively, but we cannot typically live them all. We cannot, perhaps, live a Christian life of humility and charity, preparing our souls for union with God in life after death and be the effective or heroic rulers of a flourishing republic, or fulfil our obligations to our families and paint magnificent pictures in Tahiti, or fight against tyranny and take care of our families.[8] But it is a necessary truth that we have to make these kinds of choices and the capacity to make such choices is part of what makes us human and capable of fulfilment as human beings.

The Refutation of Monism

In the expanded version of an address given in 1988 when Berlin was 79 and published that year under the title "The Pursuit of the Ideal," Berlin summarised his intellectual development in terms of how he came to subscribe to the ethical doctrine of pluralism. Here, as elsewhere, he describes it in terms of what he came to reject, namely all versions of a Platonic ideal which held:

> [I]n the first place, that, as in the sciences all true questions must have one true answer and one only, all the rest being necessarily errors; in the second place, that there must be a dependable path towards the discovery of these truths; in the

[8] The first example is based on Berlin's reading of Machiavelli; the second from Bernard Williams's essay "Moral Luck;" the third from Sartre's "Existentialism is a Humanism."

> third place, that the true answers, when found, must necessarily be compatible with one another and form a single whole, for one truth cannot be incompatible with another – that we knew a priori. This kind of omniscience was the solution to the cosmic jigsaw puzzle. In the case of morals, we could then conceive what the perfect life must be, founded as it would be on a correct understanding of the rules that governed the universe.[9]

This triple set of doctrines constitutes for Berlin the core claims of all versions of ethical monism - ancient and modern, religious and religionless, socialist and liberal, Eastern and Western, Russian, Jewish, continental European and Anglo-Saxon. It is stated in very nearly the same terms in the earlier essays in the history of ideas, e.g. "The Decline of Utopian Ideas in the West"[10] and ""The Apotheosis of the Romantic Will".[11] Items in the doctrine - moral questions must have answers; these must be discoverable; all true answers must be compatible - and their repudiation appear not only in most of Berlin's treatments of particular topics in moral and political philosophy but also in his intellectual portraiture of individual thinkers, This is especially true of the less mainstream ones who impressed Berlin early on in his career and convinced him of the truth of pluralism, notably Machiavelli, Vico and Herder. Ethical monism or monism in respect of values more generally is a doctrine which Berlin believes to be demonstrably false. In his presidential address to the Aristotelian Society for 1963-4, published in the Society's *Proceedings* (1964) under the title "From Hope and Fear Set Free" he suggests, in speaking of a refusal to accept the truth of value-pluralism, that perhaps ethical monism rests:

> [o]n the optimistic view…that all good things must be compatible, and that therefore freedom, order, knowledge, happiness, a closed future (and an open one?) must be at least compatible, and perhaps even entail one another in a systematic fashion.[12]

And he concludes:

> But this proposition is not self-evidently true, if only on empirical grounds. Indeed, it is perhaps one of the least

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[9] "The Pursuit of the Ideal" in *PSM*, p. 5.
[10] Isaiah Berlin (1990): *The Crooked Timber of Humanity*. London. John Murray, p. 24.
[11] *Crooked Timber* p.209.
[12] *PSM*, p. 117-18.

> plausible beliefs ever entertained by profound and influential thinkers.[13]

The intellectual case for pluralism

It is not only - though it remains mainly - on empirical grounds that Berlin rejects all forms of monism. He also often stresses the logical impossibility or conceptual incoherence of thinking that all truly good things must be combinable or reconcilable in such a way that they never conflict tragically. In conversation with Ramin Jahanbegloo subsequently published in 1991 as *Conversations with Isaiah Berlin,* he says:

> I believe…that some of the ultimate values by which men live cannot be reconciled or combined, not just for practical reasons, but in principle, conceptually…You cannot combine full liberty with full equality…Justice and mercy, knowledge and happiness can collide. If that is true, then the idea of a perfect solution of human problems – of how to live cannot be coherently conceived…Utopian solutions are in principle incoherent and unimaginable…Certain values cannot be combined, because they are incompatible with one another... so there have to be choices. Choices can be very painful…There is no avoiding choices between ultimate human values, ends in themselves. Choices can be agonising, but unavoidable in any world we can conceive of. Incompatible values remain in them all.[14]

Berlin's defence of value pluralism is reiterated in numerous other essays and is implicit in all his treatments of individuals and movements in the history of ideas. It is born of the recognition that monism in all its forms, religious and religionless, is untrue, very dangerously untrue, and can be shown to be both. In "Two Concepts," he tells us that its falsity can be clearly seen in common experience but its falsity is what confers on us the freedom to choose which is itself one amongst a plurality of ends in themselves:

> The world as we encounter it in common experience is one in which we are faced with choices between ends equally ultimate, and claims equally absolute, the realisation of some of which must inevitably involve the sacrifice of

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[13] *Ibid*, p. 118.
[14] Ramin Jahanbegloo: (1971) *Conversations with Isaiah Berlin*. London Halban, p 142-3.

> others. Indeed, it is because this is their situation that men place such immense value on their freedom to choose.[15]

Moreover, "[t]hat we cannot have everything is a necessary, not a contingent truth."[16] On the other hand, we should value our freedom to choose for ourselves as an end in itself and, on the other, sometimes be willing to curb or sacrifice this freedom when it conflicts irreconcilably with other values, as Berlin claims it indubitably sometimes does. Both claims, Berlin thinks, follow from "what constitutes a fulfilled human life."[17] Even if monism were not in principle and necessarily false, the pursuit of monist perfection would only be possible for beings who were unrecognisable as genuinely human beings, possessed of freedom of choice.

The political case for pluralism

There are, thus, analytic, empirical and moral arguments about human fulfilment which Berlin thinks can be forcefully adduced in support of pluralism. However, the most pervasive reason for Berlin's championing of pluralism is political. This is that that it provides a bulwark for a liberal society in which, where possible, accommodations are sought between competing values and, where this is not possible, mutual tolerance is mandatory. Pluralism thus defends peaceable and "decent" societies and rejects the claims of all forms of fanatical monism - Platonic, Christian, Fascist, Marxist - which, in the name of finally bringing about a perfect world where all good things are enjoyed harmoniously by all, in fact inflict the unspeakable atrocities of all totalitarian politics to which all history so painfully attests. In "Two Concepts of Liberty" Berlin concludes with a defence of pluralism on precisely these grounds. Here he writes:

> One belief more than any other is responsible for the slaughter of individuals on the altars of the great historical ideals – justice or progress or the happiness of future generations or the sacred mission or emancipation of a nation or a race or a class, or even liberty itself, which demands the sacrifice of individuals for the freedom of society. This is the belief that somewhere, in the past or in the future, in divine revelation or the mind of individual thinkers, or in the pronouncements of history or science, or in the simple heart of an uncorrupted good man, there is a final solution. This ancient faith rests on the conviction that

[15] Ibid, p. 239
[16] Ibid, p.240
[17] Ibid, p. 240

> all positive values in which men have believed must, in the end, be compatible, and perhaps even entail one another.[18]

He recognises the attractions of monism to both those who believe in either future perfectibility and/or the recovery of an allegedly prelapsarian past since "monism, and faith in a single criterion, has always proved a deep source of satisfaction both to the intellect and the emotions."[19] In practice, however, he thinks this leads to the justification of the "barbarities of Procrustes, the vivisection of actual human societies into some fixed pattern dictated by our fallible understanding of a largely imaginary past or a wholly imaginary future."[20] By contrast, he judges:

> Pluralism with the measure of 'negative' liberty that it entails, seems to me a truer and more humane ideal… It istruer because it does, at least, recognise that human goals are many, not all of them commensurable, and in perpetual rivalry with one another…It is more humane because it does not… deprive men, in the name of some remote, or incoherent, ideal, of much that they have found to be indispensable to their life as unpredictable self-transforming human beings.[21]

With characteristic realism and, in this case consistency, he does not regard liberal pluralism as itself constituting the one true faith: it may be that future generations will regard it with little comprehension just as past generations had no conception of this view of the world and how we should conduct ourselves in it. Still, "principles are not less sacred because their duration cannot be guaranteed."[22]

Berlin and Religion

The use of the word "sacred," in the last paragraph of Berlin's most famous essay in relation to moral principles raises the question of what Berlin thinks we should think about the role of religion in contemporary Western culture and, more particularly, how he thought moral nihilism and amoralism could be rebutted in a religionless ethic.

Despite breaking decisively with logical positivism, Berlin remained an empiricist who could find no evidence for the existence of any God.

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[18] "Two Concepts of Liberty" in *Proper Study*, p 237-8.
[19] Ibid
[20] Ibid, p241
[21] Ibid, p.242
[22] *Ibid*, p. 242

Moreover, the Judaism in which he had been brought up and which had been taken over by the official Christianity of both his native Russia and his adopted England, provided paradigmatic empirical evidence of the way in which monism is easily harnessed to the infliction of appalling suffering in the name of advancing the cause of true religion. He also often seemed to account for religious belief (as for the craving for monism, more generally) in terms of a kind of childish immaturity. Taylor cites him as a typical teller of "subtraction stories" about religion, and at the end of *Two Concepts of Liberty*, he writes after the sentence quoted above about the sacredness of values: "Indeed, the very desire for guarantees that our values are eternal and secure in some objective heaven is perhaps only a craving for the certainties of childhood and the absolute values of our primitive past".[23]

However, this is by no means the whole story. Berlin never despised religious belief or believers as many contemporary British atheists[24] tend to. In *Personal Impressions* he writes sympathetically of one of his subjects' devout Anglicanism. He also famously described the Orthodox, rather than the Reformed, Synagogue as the one he didn't go to. It is also possible that his own views mellowed towards religion and his understanding of it deepened. Thus in *Conversations* we read:

> I have myself no sense of a reality above and beyond the life I know. I am not religious, but I place a high value on the religious experience of believers. I am moved by religious services – those of the synagogue, but also of churches and mosques. I think that those who do not understand what it is to be religious, do not understand what human beings live by...That is why dry atheists seem to me blind and deaf to some forms of profound human experiences, perhaps the inner life; it is like being aesthetically blind.[25]

Berlin, then goes on to elaborate the comparison between religion and art in terms of what amounts to a form of epistemological pluralism and in which one of the key concepts in both religion and art – and, indeed, in philosophy as well - is profundity. We read:

> Mere capacity for feeling is not enough to enable one to understand other human beings, believers, unbelievers, mystics, children, poets, artists. Reason and experience are

[23] *Proper Study*, p.242
[24] For example, R. Dawkins, S. Blackburn, A.C. Grayling, C. Hitchens et al,. who, in this respect contrast sharply with American atheists such as D. Dennett and S.Harris. (See Chapter Five below).
[25] *Coversations*, p.110.

> not enough. When you are profoundly moved by a work of art, it is difficult to say that it is an empirical experience. Every experience is, of course, in a sense empirical, but this is not something you can subject to verification or experiment. You can't say it is true or false, real or unreal, you can only say it is sublime, upsetting, beautiful, profound or shallow. If you ask me what "profound" means, I am unable to tell you. There are all kinds of words we use, which we know the meaning of, but which we cannot explain. Take, for example the word "profound." Why do we say that Pascal is a profounder thinker than Russell, Wittgenstein than Ayer? Because they touch a nerve and thereby reveal sometimes quite suddenly something which is part of our common experience and matters very greatly in our lives, but of which we were not clearly aware. Even Hume was not an atheist. *The Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* simply say that the arguments for the existence of miracles are weaker than the arguments against it. Hume was an agnostic.[26]

He goes on to support this contention by noting that Hume was deeply shocked to learn from Baron d'Holbach in Paris that he was at dinner with something like twenty atheists. Further, in the book of his televised conversation with Bryan Magee he specifically describes Christian religion as "one of the deepest beliefs, visions of reality, on which a very large number of exceedingly unshallow human beings have built their lives".[27]

In this connection it is crucial to note that Berlin adds to his reasons for wanting to denounce value-monism and the false and abhorrent political policies and practices which it is used to justify, his own version of belief in the Judaeo-Christian doctrine of original sin by invoking Kant's formulation of this doctrine. This he does in many places by citing one of his favourite (slightly mistranslated and thereby much improved) quotations from Kant: "Out of the crooked timber of humanity no straight thing was ever made."[28] This, indeed, is the major issue on which he sides with some major thinkers of the Counter-Enlightenment against the entire Enlightenment. He tells us:

> What the entire Enlightenment has in common is denial of the central Christian doctrine of original sin, believing

[26] *Ibid*, p.110
[27] Bryan Magee: (1982): *Men of Ideas*. Oxford. Oxford University Press, p.8
[28] e.g. at "Two Concepts" in *Proper study*, p. 241, and The pursuit of the Ideal" in *ibid*, p. 16. For details of this quotation from Kant and how and why Berlin uses what is (arguably) a mistranslation, see Henry Hardy's editorial preface to *Crooked Timber*, p. xi

> instead that man is either born innocent and good, or morally neutral and malleable by education and environment, or, at worst, deeply defective but capable of radical and indefinite improvement by rational education in favourable circumstances or by revolutionary reorganisation of society as, demanded, for example, by Rousseau.[29]

Moreover, when he speaks of Kant in other places he frequently stresses (as other EHs who make use of Kant do not) that Kant not only remained imbued with the devout Christian pietism in which he had been nurtured but also believed in the existence of God and of life after death – which, indeed, he thought were indispensable (albeit Berlin thinks wrongly) to making sense of our character as rational moral agents for whom the supreme good is the unification of goodness and happiness.

What attracts Berlin to this doctrine apart from its realism about human nature is its corollary that for beings as fundamentally fallible, intellectually and morally, as ourselves it is always a mistake to think we have finally grasped the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth about how human beings should live. Consequently, all utopianisms, theistic and atheistic, have an inherent tendency, which is flawed both intellectually and morally, to justify totalitarian government and the extensive use of violence in promoting its goals and preserving its power. The mandatory implementation of monist world-views is also liable to have horrible unintended consequences, which completely betray the idealistic character of the original monist moral vision.

Of course, religious belief has made claims to precisely this kind of monopoly on moral wisdom and virtue with terrible results. But in Berlin's lifetime, the threats to human freedom and human fulfilment in a peaceable society had come primarily from atheist utopianisms, whereas his experience of individual religious believers often filled him with admiration and affection. Perhaps this is why, in general, his views on religion seem to have grown over the years from one which combined bafflement, dismissal and a touch of condescension to one of deep curiosity and real respectful disagreement.

Berlin on the Meaning of Life

How then, does Berlin answer the fundamental challenges to +EEH of moral nihilism and amoralsm, given that ethical questions cannot be settled by

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[29] PSM, p.164.

appeal to God's will, as articulated in texts and interpreted by acknowledged authorities, or to any other alleged source of moral authority such as the logic of History or the pronouncements of the Vanguard of the Proletariat?

With respect to the perennial challenge, as issued by Russell, Camus and others[30] and which religion emphatically rebuts Berlin thinks that though religion may be benign, it is ultimately irrational to believe that its central tenets about teleology and eschatology are true. He thinks that what people, seeking the meaning of life really want to know is what is the purpose of life. He recognises that:

> [T]here were Greek thinkers , influenced by Aristotle, and mediaeval and Renaissance Christians or influenced by Christianity - or ... by Judaism – who were quite convinced that everything had a purpose. Every thing and creature had been made with a purpose either by God...or by Nature.[31]

Moreover,

> [I]f everything does have a purpose a lot of important things follow: such as the reality of natural rights, the nature of human ends, what people are allowed or not allowed to do, what is human and what is inhuman, what is natural and what is unnatural.[32]

He, however, sides with:

> [O]thers who conceive the cosmic process as having no goal, as a purposeless and meaningless movement, which men, because they cannot face this bleak and despair-inducing truth, seek to hide from themselves by constructing comforting illusions in the form of religions that promise rewards in another life, or metaphysical systems that claim to provide rational justification both for what there is in the world and for what men can do and should do; or scientific systems that perform the task of appearing to give sense to a process which is, in fact purposeless, a formless flux which is what it is, a brute fact, signifying nothing (PSM, p.263)

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[30] See chapter one.
[31] Men of Ideas, p.20
[32] Men of Ideas, p.21

Berlin is not himself much haunted or dismayed by the spectre of metaphysical nihilism thus conceived in the way that Pascal is haunted and dismayed by the eternal silence of infinite space, or Russell by the prospect of the eternal extinction of everything or Camus by cosmic absurdity. He is consequently little concerned with what answers EHs should give to those who expect philosophy to tell them what is the meaning of life. His response to those who question the meaning of life is partly the (slightly apologetic) Oxford analytic one about "what do you mean by meaning?"[33] It makes sense to ask about the meaning of words or sentences, but it does not make sense to ask whether life as a whole has a meaning? Instead, Berlin is concerned to affirm that, in a godless universe where history has no natural or supernatural goal and the pursuit of perfection is logically and practically impossible, our lives are not just pointless so that nothing really matters very much.

In making this case, Berlin uses language reminiscent of logical positivists, on the one hand, and of Existentialists, like Sartre and Camus, on the other, and endorses Spinoza who, he tells us, "denied that it made sense to ask whether things in general had any purpose." After all,

> what could possibly count as evidence in support of the proposition that everything has a purpose? What could count as an argument against it? Indeed, does it even make sense to say that everything has a purpose? Things only have purposes if we impose purposes on them.[34]

Berlin's own view is that our lives can only have the purposes we select for ourselves. He credits his particular hero, Alexander Herzen, with propounding the thesis that "the purpose of life is life itself."[35] He also cites Herder's claim that "We live in a world which we ourselves create"[36] and, elsewhere, writing of Romanticism, he identifies "the doctrine that forms its heart, namely, that morality is moulded by the will and that ends are created not discovered".[37]

In short, Berlin exemplifies precisely what Taylor identifies as the defining convictions and attitudes of the Exclusive Humanist: this is all there is but it is enough. It is enough to ward off despair in the face of evil, suffering, failure and ultimate extinction though, in Berlin's case, this leads to a qualified and realistic pessimism very similar to Camus's in *La Peste*[38],

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[33] Men of Ideas, p.20

[34] Ibid

[35] Conversations,, p.15

[36] Proper Study, p.359

[37] Proper Study, p.580

[38] Cp. Albert Camus:: (1948): La Peste. Paris. Gallimard ."The plague bacillus never either dies or disappears but lurks in the sewers waiting for the day when it will re-emerge and infect a city once

which does not anticipate any kind of inevitable or even probable progress towards the eradication of evil. On the other hand, there is a diverse multitude of morally admirable and fulfilling manners of living and many sources of enjoyment. There are many kinds of loving personal relationships and of creative work in the arts and sciences and in the world of action. Consequently, there is a diverse multitude of values worth cherishing, of virtues worth cultivating, of ideals worth pursuing, even though one cannot have everything and sometimes painful choices will have to be made.

On the Justification of Moral Value Judgments in Secular Societies

However, the harder questions for Berlin relate to the justification of moral judgments for atheists in Taylor's contemporary secular societies. Thus, if there are many values which can justify different moral judgments, how can we rationally choose between competing morally desirable are mutually exclusive?

Berlin's answers combine a limited version of rationalist empiricism with intuitionist claims, especially for decency, similar to those which he makes for profundity. He also invokes a version of the Existentialist doctrine most closely associated with Sartre that "man is the creator of values" and that the meaning of our lives is the meaning (or meanings) which, as free agents, we choose to confer on them.

In the book version of his television conversation with Bryan Magee[39], Berlin, in illustrating what philosophy can be good for, considers the claim made by one of Dostoevsky's characters that he would refuse to purchase the happiness of millions of people at the price of the torture of one innocent child. He claims that it is not the philosopher's job to consider whether this is the right answer or whether appeals to utility or patriotism which might be made to deny this claim are warranted and, in some circumstances, ought to override an allegedly categorical imperative prohibiting torture of the innocent. However, he continues:

> [I]t is very much his [the moral philosopher's] job to explain… what are the issues and values that are involved, to examine, and adjudicate between the arguments for and against various conclusions, to make clear the forms of life which have come into collision, the ends of life, and perhaps the costs, which he has to decide between. In the end, of

again".pp331-32 "Nevertheless "there are more things to admire about people than there are things to despise", p..331

[39] Men of Ideas, P.8

> course, a man has to accept personal responsibility, and do what he thinks right: his choice will be rational if he realises the principles on which it is made, and free if he could have chosen otherwise. Such choices can be very agonising. Obeying orders without reflection is easier.

Later in the same conversation he elaborates on his conception of moral reasoning by considering a "Doctor's dilemma" about who should get a kidney machine – a great scientist in his prime or an ordinary child. Again he tells us that it is not the moral philosopher's business to advance arguments from which a prescriptive conclusion follows and which obviates the ultimate need for choice. All the ethicists can do is to shed as much light as possible (of which there is never enough) on the implications of the alternatives and all other considerations relevant to making it.[40]

This is how, according to Berlin, we discriminate between right and wrong in both personal and political morality when we are either unsure what to do or compelled to choose between competing values. These values are not rationally justifiable by showing how they relate to some supreme source of goodness such as Plato's "Form of the Good" or the will of God or inexorable human progress. Nor can they be explained in relation to some quasi-empirical hypothesis about what will in fact be most effective in securing human happiness. Nor are they logically deducible, using Kantian transcendental arguments or their modern analytic variants, about what is presupposed by our concepts of reason and goodness. Finally, according to Berlin, we are not possessed of a special cognitive faculty – conscience, intuition - which enables us to perceive the right and the good directly. That moral claims are neither analytic nor empirical claims is precisely what Berlin thinks makes them paradigmatic philosophical questions.[41]On the other hand, morality is not just a matter of taste, as subjectivists claim.

Despite these denials and disclaimers and, indeed, inconsistently with them, Berlin does in the end justify moral judgments with an essentially empirical appeal to what makes, and has always made, for human flourishing for nearly all individuals in nearly all societies of which we have any knowledge. This, however, is combined with forms of both intuitionism and conventionalism. In the Conversations with Jahanbegloo, Berlin asserts:

> The idea of human rights rests on the true belief that there are certain human goods – freedom, justice, pursuit of happiness, honesty, love – that are in the interest of all

[40] Men of Ideas. P. 19

[41] Men of Ideas, p. 8-11 and elsewhere

> human beings, as such, not as members of this or that nationality, religion, profession, character; and that it is right to meet these claims and to protect people against those who ignore or deny them. There are certain things which human beings require as such, not because they are Frenchmen, Germans or mediaeval scholars but because they lead human lives as men and women…such rights exist and they are an empirical pre-condition of the leading of full human lives – that has been recognised in every culture.[42]

This is an empirical claim which occurs at a point where Berlin is contrasting his own position with what he takes to be Christian notions of conscience, Kant's postulation of a special noumenal faculty which discerns moral (and metaphysical) truths, what he calls [Leo] Strauss's "magic eye" and more generally of moral intuitionism which, usually in the name of reason, makes possible "the immediate perception of the eternal truth of certain norms."[43]

However, it seems to me that Berlin also relies ultimately on a version of intuitionism. This he tells us, in answering the question why he believes in human rights:

> [I]t isn't based on rational insights. If you ask me why we believe [almost universally] in human rights, I can say because that is the only decent, even tolerable way human beings can live with each other…I believe passionately in human rights; this follows from a great deal else that we all accept, but it is [not] demonstrable *a priori*. Of course, I don't deny that there are general principles of behaviour and human activity without which there cannot be a minimally decent society. Don't ask me what I mean by decent. By decent I mean decent - we all know what that is.[44]

Berlin denies that this is intuitionism, claiming instead that what he is noting is the existence of values which, as a matter of fact, are universal in the sense that they have been "admired in every society known to us."[45] It is true Berlin acknowledges that when we come to evaluate the ethical commitments of cultures which are alien to us, we find not only some values which are universally, and as it seems to us, rightly endorsed: we also find others (like those of the Nazis) which - though still intelligible in the sense that we can

[42] Conversations with Isaiah Berlin, p.39
[43] Conversations. p.113
[44] Conversations, p.114
[45] Conversations,, p. 37

imagine what it would be like to believe that some people are simply *Untermenschen* and may be treated as such - are nevertheless objectively evil. Yet others may be incompatible with our own values even though we acknowledge that the values cherished by these others are, in no way, inferior to ours.

His earliest recognition of the truth of pluralism came, Berlin tells us on a number of occasions, with his reading of Machiavelli. He credits Machiavelli with having said there is the view of the world, the way of life, the moral vision and the set of virtues of the great men of action in the ancient world, especially the pagan Romans, and the view of life, values and virtues of contemporary Christianity. They share some common values and virtues, (such as the celebration of courage) which are accounted admirable in all cultures but they also differ profoundly and irreconcilably on many ultimate ethical issues including their identification of the best life which human beings can live and what they must do in order to live it. Neither, Berlin claims, is superior to the other: we must choose. He may also have been influenced by Wittgenstein in articulating his pluralist ethics in terms of "forms of life." Thus he tells us:

> The norms don't need justification, it is they which justify the rest, because they are basic. The question is: "How do we reach these norms?" Well, there are all sorts of norms. One just finds that one's form of life presupposes certain concepts, categories and beliefs…You can say that every civilisation distinguishes between good and bad, true and false. From that it does follow that this is a virtually universal fact about mankind; but not an *a priori* form of rational knowledge."[46]

One difficulty in pursuing decency as Berlin understands it is that is not a very inspiring ideal for which people are enthusiastic about fighting and dying. Nor should we "overdramatise the incompatibility of values – there is a great deal of broad agreement among people in different societies over long stretches of time about what is right and wrong, good and evil."[47] As a result when there are conflicts, we must become casuists "for whom the concrete situation is almost everything."[48] But, in the last resort, there is no escaping the necessity of choice; consequently moral risk cannot, at times, be avoided. In these circumstances:

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[46] Conversations, p. 113
[47] *PSM*,, p.25
[48] *Ibid*, p.25

> All we can ask for is that none of the relevant factors be ignored, that the purposes we seek to realise should be seen as elements in a total form of life, which can be enhanced or damaged by decisions.
>
> But, in the end it is not a matter of purely subjective judgment: it is dictated by the forms of life of the society to which one belongs, a society among other societies, with values held in common, whether or not they are in conflict, by the majority of mankind throughout recorded history. There are, if not universal values, at any rate a minimum without which societies could scarcely survive.[49]

In respect of political morality, he tells us

> Of course, social and political collisions take place…Yet they can, I believe, be minimised by promoting and preserving an uneasy equilibrium…that alone…is the precondition of decent societies and morally acceptable behaviour.[50]

What these diverse quotations show is that Berlin's +EEH rebuttal of moral nihilism and amoralism relies on a pluralism which is also epistemological.

Berlin on Machiavellianism

For Berlin, the importance of Machiavelli was in paving the way for pluralism by arguing that there is more than one way of living a worthwhile and morally admirable life. It seems to me unclear that Machiavelli really does argue for this, given his patent preference for the pursuit of success in the competitive world of action, where what is sought is power and glory here and now, over success in the private life here and now and glory in the hereafter. Be that as it may, Berlin, in common with almost all other ethicists (but not novelists), has little to say about the ethics of ambition and it would seem that he mostly takes it for granted that we should, in the pursuit of our ambitions, be constrained by the requirements of decency. No doubt, these include at least some degree of honesty, fairness and benevolence. At other times he seems to think that Machiavelli may have been right to think that there is typically a genuine moral conflict between the pursuit of goodness and the pursuit of greatness, and that the latter may require different qualities

[49] *Ibid*, p.25
[50] *Ibid*, p. 26

of character (virtues) from those associated with conventional morality, whether of +EEH or +ECE.

However, it is reasonable to infer - though I am not aware that he ever explicitly states this - that Berlin thought totalitarian regimes much more likely to emerge from Machiavellian monarchies than from representative democracies, and he certainly thought that totalitarian regimes were much more likely to employ Machiavellian cruelties and deceits than liberal regimes. He recognised, however, that liberal societies might also need to resort to such practices but would do so only in extreme cases, most clearly in the case of wars fought in defence of liberal humanist values against ruthless monist ideologues.

For Berlin the political consequence of pluralism is that it compels governments to make minimal use of their monopoly on the legitimate use of violence. If the truth of value pluralism is properly understood, then governments will be morally disposed and pragmatically required to engage in the non-violent resolution of conflicts not only of individual and collective interests but also of moral principles and ideals. He summarises his own advice to rulers as follows:

> The first public obligation is to avoid extremes of suffering. Revolutions, wars, assassinations, extreme measures may in desperate circumstances be required But history teaches us that their consequences are seldom what is anticipated; that there is no guarantee not even, at times, a high enough probability, that such acts will lead to improvement. We may take the risk of drastic action, in personal life or in public policy, but we must always be aware, never forget, that we may be mistaken, that certainty about the effect of such measures invariably leads to avoidable suffering of the innocent. So we must engage in what are called trade-offs – rules, values, principles must yield to each other in varying degrees in specific situations. Utilitarian solutions are sometimes wrong but, I suspect, more often beneficent. The best that can be done, as a general rule, is to maintain a precarious equilibrium that will prevent the occurrence of desperate situations, of intolerable choices – that is the first requirement for a decent society; one that we can always strive for, in the light of the limited range of our knowledge,

> and even of our imperfect understanding of individuals and societies.[51]

Interestingly, from the perspective of comparing Christian and exclusive humanist ethics, he adds immediately: "A certain humility in these matters is very necessary"[52]. The crucial justification for liberal politics derives from the enduring possibility that we may be wrong and that there may be much to be said in favour of views we do not share. Conversely, he is sceptical of Romantic and Nietzschean ethics of heroism which he perceives - particularly when allied to nationalism - as too easily declining, and as too often having declined, into the kinds of ruthlessly oppressive totalitarianism he most dreads.

However, given the importance he attaches to Machiavelli, it seems to me a weakness that Berlin, no less than other +EEHs, fails to address is the central Machiavellian question of whether great cruelty, treachery and deceitfulness are justified in the pursuit of personal glory and at the expense of great suffering inflicted on others. Nor more generally does he have much to say which bears directly on the ethics of ambition and the pursuit of worldly success.

Evaluating Berlin

How successful, then, are Berlin's own religionless ethics in rebutting the moral nihilism and Machiavellian amoralism?

On the perennial challenge, Berlin is more pessimistic than most contemporary EHs and more aware of the extensiveness of pointless suffering which, if there is no God and no afterlife, does indeed just get wasted, as Schwarz-Bart's Jacob feared.[53] However, he is disposed neither by temperament nor conviction to dwell on these tragic features of the human condition to the point of morbidity, nor to let them obscure the many compensating good things which life makes available to us. I do not think he is to be faulted for this common view of our condition as a mixture of good and bad, in which for most people most of the time life is adequately and sometimes supremely worth living. Indeed, to the perennial challenge of moral nihilism, most Christians as well as most atheists probably find it morbid and certainly unnecessary to spend much time plumbing the depths of the awfulness of life rather than getting on with what they can do to improve their own lives and the lives of those they care about. This is

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[51] "The Pursuit of an Ideal" in *PSM,* p.24-5.
[52] *Ibid*
[53] See p. n

essentially the view which Voltaire took in responding to Pascal in the *Lettres Philosophiques or Lettres Anglaises*[54] and it was Darwin's view, too. It is a position which, in practice, Berlin also shared. On the other hand, Berlin did think to a limited extent and at least until his later years, that religious belief is immature wishful thinking for people who cannot face up to harsh realities. In subscribing to this Taylorian "subtraction story", he lays himself open, though much less so than other +EEHs, to the charge of some shallowness, and of himself failing to face up honestly and courageously to the truly appalling realities of hopeless and irremediable human suffering, given that the world exists for no benign purpose and everyone is destined for eternal annihilation.

On the secular challenge of justifying moral judgments in an ultra-pluralist society and globally, Berlin's answers seem to me more problematic. In general, as we have seen, he strongly endorses the values of the Enlightenment – reasonableness, tolerance, individual freedom of choice, equality, an ethic of mutual beneficence, the repudiation of all forms of superstition, fanaticism, tyranny and inhumanity. However, he also agrees with some of the champions of the Counter-Enlightenment that the value-monism of the Enlightenment thinkers like Condorcet was both wrong in itself and also led to the dangerous doctrine of the perfectibility of human nature.[55] This doctrine is dangerous because it leads most notably to the atrocities committed in the name of Rousseauesque Marxism and Nationalist Fascism, no less surely than those committed in the name of religion. Berlin's arguments for pluralism are, I think, compelling and attractive in encouraging no-one – especially ourselves – to think we possess a monopoly on moral truth and that the set of moral truths we espouse is complete and unrevisable.

However, I do not see how pluralism can enable us to make rational choices in situations where we face choices not only between what we take to be right and wrong courses of action but also between what we justifiably take to be equally good courses of action. When Berlin tells us that after engaging in the best kind of ratiocination of which we are capable, we cannot finally avoid having to choose, it seems to me that such choices, like Sartrean Existential choices, become simply a matter of plumping. This leaves pluralism sliding inexorably into subjectivism and relativism.

Most ethicists cannot accept this value pluralism. Their commitment to their moral values is sufficiently strong that they are convinced they must be rationally justifiable in such a way that those who disagree with them must

[54] Volatire (1733): *Lettres Philosophiques* aka *Letters Anglaises*, (Paris. Garnier, Tome 22)
[55] Proper Study, p.245

be wrong, and demonstrably wrong. If there is a line of reasoning which shows that it is always *prima facie* wrong to inflict suffering on the innocent, a similar line of reasoning ought to be able to show that it is normally wrong to lie or break promises. Why should this not apply to all moral judgments, at least in principle? Moreover, when values conflict in the way Berlin maintains they quite often do, there ought to be a rational procedure for determining which value, on some particular occasion or with reference to some contested issue ought to take precedence. All this suggests that ethical reasoning needs to be monist in the sense that systems of ethics or moralities have to form a single coherent unity if debates are not to take on the "interminable" character which MacIntyre ascribes to contemporary debates about morality. This leads to moral anarchy in Taylor's highly plural, secular societies and to moral judgments which, when not merely subjective or conventional, issue from rationalised self-interest. Most EHs, like Parfit and R. M Hare before him, assume that this is because we haven't yet successfully persuaded everyone else of what we have ascertained to be the true basis for all morality, so that all that is left to debate is how our fundamental moral principles are to be applied in particular cases. Standard examples of such cases are those in which we wonder whether we should or shouldn't lie or punish the innocent in order to secure some greater good or remain consistent with some supreme moral principle.

It seems to me that most ethicists are right not to accept Berlin's pluralism thus understood. After all, even fundamental values are not, in fact, almost universally shared: different societies, past and present, have and have had very different moral convictions, for example about the badness of inflicting unnecessarily extreme suffering and death upon various kinds of enemy and on comparatively minor wrongdoers. History does not suggest that we all know what decent behaviour is and requires of us, especially in our dealings with rivals. Nor do arguments about what it is to be fully human or fully rational or about what promotes human flourishing actually settle substantial moral disputes about when it is and isn't wrong to pursue our own interests at the expense of others.

Moreover, metaethical debates, which are supposed to tell us how to set about settling substantial moral disputes, themselves never seem to reach consensus. It is also not clear what sense can be given to the claim that "man is the creator of values." This phrase seems to me to be literally nonsensical. Values can be recognised or endorsed and valuable objects can be created, but I cannot make justice or kindness or courage into good things by deciding to behave justly, kindly or courageously. If it is morally desirable or right for me to behave in such ways it is because justice and kindness and courage are moral goods regardless of how I behave. If values are not objective in this

sense they must be taken to be based on the subjective sentiments and preferences of individuals. This makes moral choosing either arbitrary or trivial. There are consequently no compelling reasons for not behaving as Machiavelli recommended.

In Part Three, I shall argue that a monist Christian ethics, based on the sovereignty of a God of love, has resources for celebrating the diversity of good things that Berlin identifies while recognising that we cannot have everything. Most importantly it has resources for defending, as universal, the personal and political values of liberal humanism which retain all that is most attractive in Berlin's version of this doctrine, while not being vulnerable, as he and many other +EEHs are, to charges of arbitrariness and ultimate irrationality.

Conclusion

In relation to the two hypotheses which this study is exploring, my conclusion is that Christian ethicists should welcome the eloquence and erudition with which Berlin makes the case that we can know and do much that is good but we must always act on the assumption that our moral knowledge will always be imperfect here on earth. Indeed, precisely because of the finitude of our moral knowledge, Christians should collaborate in propagating the Enlightenment values of liberal humanism globally, as I argue in chapter eight.

Berlin concludes his critical evaluation of Romanticism cited above by crediting the Romantics with having:

> permanently shaken the faith in universal, objective truth in matters of conduct, in the possibility of a perfect harmonious society, wholly free from conflict or injustice or oppression – a goal for which no sacrifice can be too great…an ideal for which more human beings, in our time, have sacrificed themselves and others than, perhaps, for any other cause in human history.[56]

This, however, is consonant and not in conflict with his general endorsement of the Enlightenment, He tells us unequivocally:

> I am a liberal rationalist. The values of the Enlightenment, what people like Voltaire, Helvetius, Holbach, Condorcet

[56] *Ibid*, p.580

> preached are deeply sympathetic to me. Maybe they were too narrow, and often wrong about the facts of human experience, but these people were great liberators. They liberated people from horrors, obscurantism, fanaticism, monstrous views. They were against cruelty, they were against oppression, they fought the good fight against superstition and ignorance and a great many things which ruined people's lives."[57]

There is nothing in either quotation from which Christians should dissent.

Indeed they show why Christians can and should embrace and incorporate a pluralist version of the values of the Enlightenment in their ethics. In the case of the view attributed to Romantics, Christians know not to expect perfection this side of paradise. In the case of the achievement of the Enlightenment thinkers, Christian ethicists should wholeheartedly agree since, as Taylor has shown us these values have emerged from, and continue to develop within the continuing tradition of reformism in Christian ethics.

Finally, Christians should welcome Berlin's rejection of both monist naturalism and monist rationalism in his meta-ethics. Berlin draws support for his pluralism from a variety of meta-ethical strategies: empiricism and consequentialism, Kantian transcendentalism and rationalism, eudaimonism and virtue theory, conventionalism and existentialism. He also embraces a kind of epistemological pluralism: he rejects scientific monism – the doctrine that the only things human beings can know are things they can know through application of the methods of the natural sciences. He credited the thinkers of the Counter-Enlightenment with forcing people to consider "the belief that science and reason do not have all the answers" [and to recognise] "that to some central questions of value – ethical, aesthetic, social, political – there can be more than one valid answer."[58] He is particularly hostile to the notion that there can be a science of human behaviour or social or historical or political sciences analogous to physics, chemistry and biology, or geology, cosmology or the theory of evolution, since all attempts to construct such sciences would perforce omit what is crucial: the study of moral choices and the beliefs and desires which underpin them.[59]

Nevertheless, I think his invocation of many different types of ethical argument to support his views leads to some inconsistencies and

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[57] Conversations**,** p. 70

[58] Conversations,, p.68

[59] See for example, "The Concept of Scientific History," "Historical Inevitability," "Does Political Theory Still Exist?" and "The Sense of Reality."

contradictions. More seriously, it conceals the extent to which Berlin's pluralism rests on a series of ethical doctrines each of which is vulnerable to well-known difficulties which he recognises but does not resolve. This is true of what he says about utilitarianism, Kantianism, conventionalism, Existentialism and intuitionism. Indeed when he runs into the difficulties of one of these metaethical doctrines he seems to reach out for one of the others. This gives his overall position something of the character of a series of fudges.

This suggests that his ethics needs analogues for the virtues of religious faith. Indeed, despite his protestations to the contrary, Berlin ultimately relies on a form of moral intuitionism in rebutting amoralism and asserting that there really are good and bad states of affairs which we should try to bring about or to combat, and real differences between right and wrong conduct. This intuitionism shows up in his claim, noted above, that "we all know" what the virtues of decency consist (namely those which promote, with Condorcet, education, tolerance, and racial and social equality). As with faith, when people dissent about intuitions there is nothing more to be said. And the same is true of the justification of the other central values which Berlin identifies as "equally absolute" – freedom, justice, pursuit of happiness, honesty, love."

However, if it is true that, for atheists, belief in such fundamental moral goods or values is something we all know intuitively to be true but cannot further justify, it is hard to see how these beliefs differ, from the point of view of rationality, from items of "infused" religious faith which, Aquinas thought, enable us to recognise and cultivate both the theological and cardinal virtues.

We shall find the same problem with Dennett's "sacred values" in a purely 'naturalist" account of reality and with Parfit's "irreducible normative truths." For atheist ethicists, when moral intuitions clash irreconcilably, there is ultimately nothing more to be said. By contrast, Christian ethicists have the advantage at this point because they can continue to practise tolerance, to acknowledge that they may be wrong, and to support a liberal humanist morality, while at the same time saying a great deal more about what makes moral goods or values truly worthy objects of our desiring and truly worthy determinants of our choosing.

The more that they have to say is what Christian ethics consists in and it bases its moral claims on the belief that we should live our lives in accordance with the will of a God who desires that perfect goodness in all its forms should come to flourish throughout the universe for ever. Nor is faith

in the existence of this God or the possibility of knowledge of what God wills rationally groundless. It is based on intelligent interpretation of many different kinds of experience of the presence of God. These include attending to holy Scriptures, to the aspects of divinity we discern in other people, to our experiences of prayer, as well perhaps to other experiences of nature and art, Believers who attend to such experiences with as much honesty, intelligence and carefulness as they can muster typically come to believe that the general and particular will of God is, at least, partially disclosed to them.

Whether such experiences are veridical or delusional is another debate to be had elsewhere. But even atheists admit that if Christian accounts of teleology and eschatology were true, they would indeed provide us with reasons for our conclusions about what really matters and how consequently we should try to live. If exceptionally wise and good people like Berlin have never had such experiences, it may be because they have never sought them. It may also even be, that if, as he wished, he is still - and no doubt to his great surprise - just going on and on, he may yet come to seek such experiences and to find them.

CHAPTER SIX

DANIEL DENNET'S NATURALISM

Introduction

Contemporary atheist ethicists have not on the whole been prepared to abandon the search for a monist basis for rebutting moral nihilism and amoralism because they think, rightly as we have seen, that pluralism renders important, real-life moral truths too uncertain and moral arguments ultimately undecidable. These arguments may focus on issues of personal morality, often about sex and money, or on issues of public policy, typically about the rights and obligations of some classes of people and the duties of government to use taxation to secure the rights and enforce the obligations. Many such atheists recognise, however, that religionless ethicists have been signally unsuccessful in generating agreement both amongst general populations about substantial moral issues, and amongst themselves about how we should set about resolving disputes about morality. Consequently, some such atheists have hoped to resolve them by elaborating a monist metaethics and a single supreme criterion for judging actions morally required, forbidden or permissible. Often they have hoped or assumed that the methods of reasoning which have proved so successful in the natural sciences could be applied to moral problems and moral decision-making.

This is the version of atheist ethical naturalism I shall be exploring in this chapter while recognising that significantly different doctrines also go by this name.[1] I shall explore it mainly through the work of Daniel Dennett, who is a leading champion of metaphysical naturalism in its monist materialist form. After explaining my reasons for focussing on Dennett and setting his ethics is the context of contemporary debates about religion, I shall go on to explicate the most important features of his rather meagre writings about ethics (and the reasons for their meagreness). I shall seek to evaluate these against the three challenges to moraI nihilism and amoralism. I shall then consider what both +EEHs and +ECEs can learn from Dennett's philosophising and how studying his work contributes to my first hypothesis about the possibility and desirability of collaboration between atheist and Christian ethicists. I shall then show how, as Dennett himself candidly acknowledges, Dennett's ethics, because of their atheist

[1] See Dreier, James (2005) "Moral Relativism and Moral Nihilism" in Copp, David (Ed): *The Oxford Handbook of Ethical Theory*.

premises, need to be supplemented by borrowing from at least one of the central tenets of Christian, and indeed all religious ethics: namely, the idea of the sacred. In this way, he furnishes some confirmation for my two basic hypotheses: that atheist and Christian ethicists have much to collaborate about and that atheist ethics require analogues for some central tenets of Christian faith. Finally, I shall critically discuss one item – democracy - in Dennett's canon of interconnected "sacred" values. These effectively constitute the common sense morality of the American mainstream in Taylor's secular age. However, I shall seek to show that these actual ethical commitments risk, if they subsist in a religious void, being not merely anodyne but seriously confusing and dangerously so. In this and other ways, Dennett seems to me to fail to meet the Taylorian charge of shallowness in ethics, albeit I recognise that his accounts of freedom and determinism and evolutionary ethics are particularly helpful to Christian ethicists in rebutting the more demoralising forms of "scientism" in relation to ethics.

Dennett and the "New Atheists"

The "New Atheists" are commonly identified as the authors of the texts discussed by Tina Beattie[2] in her In book *The New Atheists* which more or less overlaps with the list given in the fine introductory essay by Robert B. Stewart[3] to the volume, *The Future of Atheism* (2008). At one time, the "four horsemen" of this supposed apocalypse which would bring an end to religious belief were identified as Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, Sam Harris and Christopher Hitchens. This transient publishers' PR exercise, while possibly effective with a gullible public who were keen to have their already settled convictions reinforced, has been unhelpful to the cause of making the best possible case for a liberal exclusive humanism today. That cause has, for example been much better served by the collection of essays in Louise M. Antony's *Philosophers without* Gods.

A further complaint is that, as a matter of fact, the "New Atheism" is not particularly new at all. It is really a largely unconscious resurrection of the earliest forms of atheism and the more common anti-clerical and agnostic beliefs associated with the Enlightenment as exemplified in the works of, say, Denis Diderot and his fellow *Encyclopédistes* in France and their intellectual *confrères* throughout Europe and North America. This atheism was, above all characterised by optimism and confidence. The hope was

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[2] Beattie, (2007):: *The New Atheists The New Atheists* (Darton, Longman & Todd)

[3] , Robert Stewart, R (ed) (2008): *The Future of Atheism*. (SPCK)

widely held that the progress of science would increasingly solve the material problems of existence and the spread of education in rational ethics would solve our moral problems, not only enabling us all to agree on what is right and wrong but also to become people who actually do what is right and eschew what is wrong. This, in turn, would increasingly enable us to achieve true happiness and to resolve the major social problems of tyranny, fanaticism, injustice and war. Religion was seen as having proved itself a major obstacle to the achievement of these "enlightened" objectives, and the removal of the superstitions with which it indoctrinated people was seen as a vital ingredient in humanity's progress towards its final utopian destination. This optimistic Enlightenment consensus concerning the inevitability of progress towards material happiness, the elimination of wickedness and the establishment of a finally just and free society culminated most influentially in the writings of Karl Marx.

The ahistorical character of much contemporary atheism is further revealed in its apparent ignorance of, or indifference to the much more pessimistic views of their predecessors in the 20th century. As we have seen, for Russell, Sartre, Camus, and novelists like Schwarz-Bart and others, having grown to maturity amidst two World Wars, the rise of militantly atheist Communist and other tyrannies, and the re-evaluation and often violent disintegration of colonialism, ethical issues were profoundly painful and difficult. The attempt to replace the ethics of Christianity with the ethics of liberal humanism is what Sartre contemptuously described as trying to get rid of God on the cheap ' (se débarrasser de Dieu à bon marché).

Talk of "new atheism" has also been misleading, I think, partly because it suggests both more homogeneity of subject-matter and conclusion, to say nothing of quality of argument, than in fact exists amongst today's exclusive humanists. It also excludes somewhat earlier, optimistic atheist thinkers who have addressed ethical questions, on the basis of much greater immersion and sophistication in philosophical analysis. A,J, Ayer, Karl Popper, and Antony Flew (before his conversion to theism) are examples.

Though Daniel Dennett is not wholly immune from these criticisms, he towers, as a philosopher, above more shallow contemporary atheists. I, therefore, focus mainly on his work as an EH who seeks to accommodate a humane ethics within an uncompromisingly Naturalist metaphysics and epistemology. The version of Naturalism I am concerned with holds that there are no transcendent realities or non-natural properties of anything,

and that what can be known about natural properties can only be known by the kinds of dispassionate, intersubjectively confirmable observing, reasoning and imagining that constitute scientific method. Finally, it is worth stressing that some of Dennett's answers to ethical questions are original, ingenious and persuasive. As such they deserve the attention of ethicists whatever their religious beliefs.

Dennett on religion

Dennett's own version of atheism and his correspondingly constructive view of religion is articulated in a number of places. Alister McGrath brings out clearly the distinctiveness of Dennett's atheist ethics in his opening remarks in the *Dialogue on the Future of Atheism* which he held with Dennett in 2007 and which is reprinted in Stewart[4] (2008). McGrath states:

> I do not intend to imply that the very weak arguments I find in Dawkins's work recur in Dennett's. Let me put on record my belief that *Breaking the Spell* is a well-argued, thoughtful and interesting work which shows no signs of the ranting and rambling I fear I find, for example, in Dawkins's. *The God Delusion*. Dennett is right – beliefs are critical. We base our lives upon them; they shape our decisions about the most fundamental things... Dennett is correct – unquestionably correct – when he demands that we examine our beliefs."[5]

Dennett himself says in responding to McGrath: "There's a great deal we agree about."[6] Earlier Dennett has told the audience that he thinks religious phenomena are "deeply important, amazing phenomena and they are going to become more important as the century progresses."[7] The spell he wants to break is the taboo on studying religious phenomena rationally and bringing all the resources of modern science to bear on trying to understand them better and, indeed, perhaps to render them more benign in their influence on our personal and political lives. As he puts it: "My book is not a 'virulent attack' on religion as some critics have said, and I do not hate religion. I am not an enemy of religion. I am a student of religion."[8]

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[4] Stewart
[5] Stewart, pp.:28-9
[6] *ibid* p. 34
[7] *ibid*, p.20
[8] *ibid*, p.22

Dennett is an exception to the charge of philosophical illiteracy which can clearly be levelled against his fellow "horsemen" Dawkins and Hitchens though not Harris. Like Keith Ward, he engaged in doctoral studies under Gilbert Ryle. He has consequently absorbed, albeit he rejects much religionless ethics in the Kantian and Utilitarian traditions. He also largely endorses the first of my hypotheses and, with surprising succinctness, provides some support for the second. Non-philosophers, like Dawkins, Hitchens and others, tend to take the superior rationality of their metaphysics and their morals for granted in precisely the way that Taylor shows to be unwarranted. Also, together with some philosophically educated contemporary atheists like Simon Blackburn and A.C. Grayling, these atheists seem to be proud of the fact that they despise religious belief, thus vitiating their work with a strong streak of moral self-congratulation. Dennett, by contrast, sees the possibility of atheists and Christians (and other religious believers) collaborating in resolving common problems in ethics which we all recognise.

In general, the style and substance of Dennett's atheist ethics is very different from that of someone like Simon Blackburn. Blackburn, for example, describes and (at least partially) defends an act of deliberate rudeness on his part towards a Jewish host who, on asking Blackburn to "respect our beliefs" concerning the Sabbath rituals, replied that he "could not in conscience do what was required...why should I respect belief systems that I do not share?"[9] It is certainly also a far cry from Dawkins who not only displays an unattractive contempt for religious believers in his public utterances and through his constant recourse to sarcasm in his writing, but also argues in chapter 8, entitled "What's wrong with religion? Why be so hostile?" that hostility to even moderate religious belief is necessary because "moderation in faith fosters fanaticism."[10] I demonstrate the falseness of this claim in chapter eight.

It is consequently likely to be more constructive, in terms of the present inquiry, to engage with the philosophical arguments in Dennett who is open to genuine conversation and seeking the "socially valuable... metamorphosis of religion, not its destruction,"[11] This seems more promising in terms of reaching agreement about a global ethic than looking at the arguments in Dawkins and others who wish merely to proselytise and hope that a "final scientific enlightenment will deal an overdue deathblow to religion and other juvenile superstitions."[12]

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[9] Blackburn in Antony,p.179
[10] Dawkins, pp. 301ff
[11] Dennett in Brockman, 2007:22.
[12] Dawkins in Brockman, p.27

By contrast, Dennett, in the final chapter of *Darwin's Dangeous Idea*, "In Praise of Biodiversity" tells us:

> Long before there was science or even philosophy, there were religions…. They have inspired many people to live lives that have added immeasurably to the wonders of our world, and they have inspired many more people to lives that were, given their circumstances, more meaningful, less painful, than they otherwise could have been…[at this point he quotes in full W.H. Auden's poem, *Musée des Beaux Arts*, with its magnificent account of the character of human suffering] That is our world and the suffering in it matters, if anything does. Religions have brought the comfort of belonging and companionship to many who would otherwise have passed through this life all alone, without glory or adventure. At their best, religions have drawn attention to love, and made it real for people who could not otherwise see it, and ennobled the attitudes and refreshed the spirits of the world-beset. Another thing religions have accomplished without this being thereby their *raison-d'être* is to have kept *Homo Sapiens* civilised enough, for long enough, for us to have learned to reflect more systematically and accurately on our position in the universe. There is much more to learn. There is certainly a treasury of ill-appreciated truths embedded in the endangered cultures of the modern world, designs that have accumulated over eons of idiosyncratic history, and we should take steps to record it and study it, before it disappears for, like the dinosaur genomes, once it is gone, it is virtually impossible to recover.[13]

None of this is to suggest that Dennett is any less uncompromising in his atheism than his fellow atheists. He is as horrified as anyone else, including +ECEs, by the cruelties that have been perpetrated in the name of religion. He deplores the anti-scientific ignorance which religion has sometimes vigorously and often successfully fostered (especially in the USA). He also deeply regrets the role of religion in the tragic impediments and waste of resources which have prevented or delayed all sorts of progress in reducing the suffering and wickedness in the world, or in increasing happiness and goodness. Moreover, he is emphatic that there

[13] (1995:518-9).

are limits to tolerance and violent, fanatical intolerance must be resisted, if necessary with greater violence. He writes:

> We preach freedom of religion, but only so far. If your religion advocates slavery, or mutilation of women, or infanticide…then your religion has a feature which cannot be respected. It endangers us all…You are free to preserve or create any religious creed you wish as long as it does not become a public menace. We're all on earth together, and we have to learn some accommodation. The Hutterite memes were "clever" not to include any memes about the virtue of destroying outsiders…Other religious memes are not so benign. The message is clear: those who will not accommodate…who insist on keeping only the purest and wildest strain of their heritage, we will be obliged, reluctantly, to cage or disarm and we will do our best to disable the memes they fight for."[14]

In short, Dennett thinks there is good and bad religion - differentiated by being based on what he calls "tonic" or "toxic" memes - and he has no wish to see the bad religion drive out the good. Bad religion combines irrational, superstitious belief with morbid, perverse, often delusional and boundlessly destructive motivation. We will need global education in scientific rationality in all its forms and on an extensive scale, if we are to excise from our world the dangerously diseased parts of our ethical belief systems before we allow them to destroy us. The final chapter of *Breaking the Spell*, addresses the questions of what we can do about the dangers that face us not only from religious fanaticism but also from other extremely destructive collective behaviours.

Dennett on the Perennial Challenges

The view that nothing really matters and that it would have been better if the universe had never come into existence is, I have claimed, most commonly the result of reflection on the immensity of pointless suffering in the world, the nugatory and transient character of all our noblest efforts to make the world a better place, and the certainty of eternal annihilation for ourselves, for everyone we care about, and for everything we accomplish. Dennett does not much engage in such reflection. Indeed, he seems rather contemptuous of those who do reflect on these apparently eternal verities. Sometimes, he seems to think, like Freud, that anyone who

[14] (1995: 516)

questions the meaning of life is ill, mired in the morbid fantasies of childhood. His disdain for those who concern themselves with the perennial challenges from moral nihilism, rather than getting on with the morally much more admirable business of engaging in scientific research and harnessing it to improving the human condition, appears in the following passage:

> Look around at those who are participating in this quest for further scientific knowledge and eagerly digesting the new discoveries, they are not short on optimism, moral conviction, engagement in life, commitment to society. In fact, if you want to find anxiety, despair, and anomie amongst intellectuals today, look to the recently fashionable tribe of post-modernists, who like to claim that modern science is just another in a long line of myths.[15]

Dennett doesn't say who he has in mind but they are presumably the kind of European philosophers who, however obscure and often impenetrable their language and however unpersuasive their hostility to what they take to be traditional liberal values, are nevertheless striving, as Nietzsche strove, to find a basis for affirming the worthwhileness of human life in a godless universe where great evils abound. Dennett, like many of his fellow +EEHs, is regrettably insensitive, indeed indifferent, to the problem of rebutting moral nihilism.

It is true that he quotes with some regret Darwin's haunting words:

> Believing as I do that man in the distant future will be a far more perfect creature than he now is, it is an intolerable thought that he and all other creatures are doomed to complete annihilation after such long-continued slow progress. To those who fully admit the immortality of the human soul, the destruction of our world will not appear so dreadful."[16]

However, this does not spur him to look at the argument and evidence about the immortality of the soul such as those found in John Hick's work:[17] he takes Darwin's words rather to be itself evidence of why so many people are disposed to hold a belief which is obviously wishful

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[15] *FE*, p.5
[16] Quoted in*BS*, p 278.
[17] Especially, John Hick (1976): Death and Eternal Life. London. Collins. Fontana Books.

thinking. He also does not consider whether the abandonment of a Christian or other eschatology might lead to a dangerous and distressing loss of the sense of identity and purpose in some people's lives which undermines their sense that their existence really matters and their lives are really worth living. Nor is there any argument to support the assumption that belief in a life after death is, in fact, a false belief and doomed to wither away. I think Dennett thinks that his materialist metaphysics means that life after death is logically or physically impossible. However, this metaphysical position is disputed by many scientists and, in any case, does not entail the impossibility of life after death and the resurrection of the body. For example, the Nobel-Prize-winning quantum physicist, Erwin Schrödinger, whose eponymous cats have baffled physicists and amused the rest of us by being alive and dead at the same time, wrote extensively about mind and matter and argued for the indestructibility of mind.[18] Nor is Dennett in agreement with his fellow "new atheist," Sam Harris. In the conclusion of his book, *The End of Faith* (2005), Harris takes the view that we simply don't know what happens to us when we die (and cannot find out). We also don't know why there is a universe at all: it, like consciousness, is a mystery – something which Dennett denies. Harris also argues that we should practise meditation and study sacred literature as a source of spiritual wisdom about how to achieve happiness.[19] He sums up his position by saying: "Mysticism is a rational enterprise. Religion is not."[20]

Moreover, in as far as Dennett discusses life after death at all he focusses only on the implausible and ignominious belief that the only, or at least the strongest, reason people have for behaving as morality requires is the fear of punishment and the hope of reward in an afterlife. He does not seem to know that many Christian ethicists, as we shall see in Part Three, deplore any such doctrine quite as categorically as Dennett (or Kant). The reassurance which Christian eschatology offers consists in a denial that everything is pointless and ends in nothingness. The fact that people would like Christian beliefs, or anything else, to be true tells us nothing, as Freud himself recognised,[21] about whether they are, in fact true.

Dennett is, however, less naïve in his optimism about the future than the 150 or so +EEH contributors to the volume, *What are you optimistic about*?[22] He is fully alive to the difficulties of combatting virulent,

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[18] Schrödinger, Erwin (1944): *What is Life* (Cambridge University Press.)
[19] Harris, 2005: *The End of Faith.* Pp 204-27
[20] (*Ibid*:221).
[21] In *The Future of an Illusion*
[22] John Brockman (ed) (2007): *What are you optimistic about?*, London. Simon and Schuster.

irrational fanaticism. He is less pessimistic about bringing future generations to continue to make moral progress in their understanding that an unduly egoistic concern only with one's own interests is ultimately self-defeating as well as simply ugly. Moreover, no less than Parfit, Dennett demonstrates great commitment to the relief of suffering, the reduction of global inequality and the preservation of the human habitat. He retains a qualified Enlightenment optimism about the power of education to lead the world to ever increasing scientific mastery over nature and its harnessing to the indefinite betterment of the human condition. He also has considerable Enlightenment faith in the power of global education to foster a universal rational morality.[23]

Dennett and the Secular Challenges.

Although ethical naturalists generally share the substantive values of liberal humanism which Berlin identifies and celebrates, they are typically uncomfortable with his insistence that these values are often incommensurable and can conflict irreconcilably. They tend to think (correctly, as I have argued) that if some line of reasoning justifies, in a way which no-one could reasonably dispute, the conclusion, say, that it is *prma facie* wrong to inflict suffering on the innocent, the same kind of reasoning should justify other ethical claims such as that it is normally wrong to lie or break promises. It then seems that if we can ascertain the common factor which makes these actions morally wrong, then we should be able, in principle at least, to formulate a single criterion for deciding the reasonableness of all moral claims. The principal contenders for the role of such a criterion have been happiness and rationality. The former claims that it is wrong to do things likely to diminish the maximisation of happiness for sentient beings; the latter, that it is inherently irrational not to recognise and fulfil moral obligations. Consequently, atheist ethicists tend to defend some version of ethical monism. They think the solution to the problems of pluralism in secular societies and of the MacIntyrean interminability of moral debates to which they lead, is for everyone to accept the version of monism for which particular atheists argue. This is usually a refined version of utilitarianism or Kantianism which seeks to meet objections from actual or imaginary counter-examples and to reconcile what are taken to be the insights of opposing views. As we shall see in the next chapter, Parfit seek to resolve this problem by both excising what he thinks is false in consequentialism, deontological ethics and

[23] All these views are summarised in the concluding two paragraphs of Dennett's contribution to John Brockman (ed), pp23-24. Dennett's essay is entitled "Thank Goodness" as an alternative to "Thank God" hut unconsciously thereby confirms my first hypothesis about the huge overlap between +EEH and +ECE ethics as does his concluding sentence: "Eventually, the truth will set us free."

contractarianism and to bring all three together into a harmonious, objectivist, religionless ethic on which we should all be able to agree.

Dennett's approach to the interminability problem in pluralist societies is different. He begins by noting that though moral codes with their attendant imperatives abound, ethics, unlike mathematics and physics, has *not* achieved reflective equilibrium so that they command " the untroubled consent of all those who have studied them carefully."[24] This is despite the efforts - some of them magnificent cultural artefacts - of philosophers since Plato who "have attempted to organise these imperatives into a single rationally defensible universal system of ethics, so far without achieving anything approaching consensus."[25] He then goes on to suggest that both Utilitarian (Benthamite) and deontological (Kantian) ethics as well as the hybrid ethics of Mill's *Utilitarianism* have failed because they are in fact useless for most real-life decision-making which inevitably occurs under time constraints and with inadequate knowledge of potentially relevant facts. The practical impossibility for even wise, experienced and benevolent decision-makers using Millian cost-benefit analysis to decide real-life issues is illustrated by the "Three Mile Island problem" – a serious but non-catastophic meltdown at a nuclear power station, which even 30+ years later we have no means of calculating whether, all things considered, it was a good or a bad thing. It would be bad if the immediate and long-term ill effects outweighed the overall effects of minimising subsequent ill effects thanks to the lessons learned (at comparatively little cost) and which would not otherwise have been learned. It would be good if the reverse obtained. Unfortunately, it is simply impossible to make these kinds of calculation.

Kantian moral reasoning, which focusses on universalisable "maxims" or principles, is similarly unhelpful in resolving real life problems because "there seems to be an inexhaustible supply of candidate maxims; consequently it is impossible to know the scope of one's maxims."[26] Dennett does not give an example but I think what he means is that all rules intended to be subjected to the litmus test of the categorical imperative, will be of the form "Do X or don't do Y, except when…" His point is that the number of plausible exceptions is infinite which is why modern Kantians can disagree about almost all real-life moral and political problems. In this Dennett is echoing Macintyre's complaint about the "interminable" character of moral argument since what he sees as a catastrophic disintegration of Thomist and Aristotelian ethics before the

[24] *DDI*, p. 495
[25] (*DD*I: p. 494)
[26] (Ibid).

onslaught of "Enlightened" Rationality.[27] Dennett, however, puts the point in rather different language. He says:

> [N]o remotely compelling system of ethics has ever been made *computationally tractable*, even indirectly, for real world moral problems. So, even though there has been no dearth of utilitarian (and Kantian and contractarian etc) *arguments* in favour of particular policies, institutions , practices and acts, these have all been heavily hedged with *ceteris paribus* clauses and plausibility claims about their idealizing assumptions. These hedges are designed to overcome the combinatorial explosion of calculation that threatens if one actually attempts – as the theory says one must – to *consider all things.*[28]

So how does Dennett justify the moral judgments to which he subscribes and the ultimate values on the basis of which we are to determine what doing the right thing consists in in concrete situations. Dennett professes himself reluctant to try to justify the values he believes in and seeks to live by, even though he recognises that "as a philosopher" he supposes he is obliged to do so. His reluctance interestingly stems from the fact that he holds his moral convictions to be sacred and so feels there is something shameful about even questioning them. He thus sets out his own moral credo, deliberately and surprisingly in the language of faith. He writes:

> In spite of the religious connotations, even atheists and agnostics can have sacred values, values that are simply not up for re-evaluation at all. I have sacred values – in the sense that I feel vaguely guilty even thinking about whether they are defensible and would *never* consider abandoning them (I like to think). My sacred values are obvious and quite ecumenical: democracy, justice, life, love and truth (in alphabetical order).,.My goal [in this book] is to play the ambassador introducing (and distinguishing, criticizing and defending) the main ideas of that literature [which deals with the scientific study of religion]. This puts *my* sacred values to work: I want the resolution of the world's problems to be as democratic and just as possible and both justice and democracy depend on getting on the table for all to see as much of the truth, bearing in mind that sometimes truth hurts and

[27] (Macintyre, 2007: ix-xvi, 1-5).
[28] (DDI, p. 500. Dennett's emphases.)

> hence should be left uncovered out of love for those who would suffer were it revealed.[29]

Dennett thinks these values are "obvious and quite ecumenical". In fact, they seem to me to be neither obvious nor universal except in a banal and vacuous "motherhood-and-apple-pie" sense. It also seems to be a pretty bloodless form of loving which consists in concealing truths from people so as not to hurt their feelings. I shall seek to show in the next section precisely why it is misleading, and dangerously so, to treat democracy as a sacred value "not up for re-evaluation,"

In general, I think the weakness of this important passage about naturalist ethics, when taken together with his critique of secular metaethics, shows up the basic deficiency in all naturalist ethics. In this connection, I note that as we have seen with Berlin and as we shall see with Parfit, Dennett's atheist ethics ultimately relies on a form of intuitionism where moral intuitions inspire the same strong confidence about the truth of moral claims as do the deliverances of religious faith or revelation. To this extent Dennett very clearly and openly confirms my hypothesis that atheist ethics cannot do without employing analogues to basic tenets in Christian ethics: notably faith in the reality of goodness and a sense that moral prescriptions derive their obligatory force from something akin to the attractiveness of things that are holy. As I shall argue again in relation to Parfit, the difference between "Goodness requires" and "God commands" seems to be wafer thin.

Justifying Moral Value Judgments

Dennett does, however, propose what I take to be a highly ingenious illustration of the way in which fundamental, faith-like moral intuitions in a naturalist ethic can be helpfully invoked in providing realistic solutions to difficult real-life moral problems. He imagines that a University Department has unexpectedly been bequeathed money to fund a post. The conditions are appropriately designed and advertised but then astoundingly you receive by the deadline 250 000 *legal* applications. There is no possibility, within any non-ludicrous time-frame of debating the merits of each of the candidates so there is no possibility of reaching a fair or rational decision whatever your overarching moral theory: you will be bound to invent criteria which either you know to be inadequately crude or self-confessedly based on luck. What Dennett thinks his example does is "to illustrate enlarged and in slow motion, the ubiquitous features

[29] *BS*, p. 23

of real-time decision-making."[30] Principal amongst these are the physical impossibility of considering all relevant things, the need for rules which one knows to be inadequate but are better than nothing, and trade-offs between, for example, the ease of application of a rule and reliability in terms of yielding results which come closer to what we think we ideally and normally ought to do. Dennett imagines ethical reasoning on the model of how the members of a Department would actually conduct a meeting designed to address the problem of the 250 000 candidates. Ideas come from different participants with different expertise and collectively the Department exhibits "alert," "wise" habits of thought. But in the end the Chair will have to make decisions about how to bring the conversation to an end. At this point Dennett introduces the idea of "conversation-stoppers" and the suggestion that some conversation-stoppers are better than others and that we can learn from experience how to improve our conversation-stoppers. His suggested conversation-stoppers include:

> "But that would do more harm than good"
> "But that would be murder"
> "But that would be to break a promise"
> "But that would be to use someone merely as a means"
> "But that would violate a person's *right*." [31]

He believes that such conversation-stoppers function as the "utterly 'indefensible' set of defaults" which nevertheless enable us to make decisions about what to do now with the time available to us about the choices concerning both what we want to do with our own lives and how we want to respond to the myriad claims, most of which we have to shut our ears to, which others are making all the time on our resources of every kind. He sums up his position as follows:

> Ethical decision-making, examined from the perspective of Darwin's dangerous idea, holds out scant hope of our ever discovering an algorithm for doing right. But that is not an occasion for despair; we have the mind-tools to design and redesign ourselves, ever searching for better solutions to the problems we create for ourselves and others.[32]

We shall consider in concluding this discussion how satisfactory this kind of naturalist ethics is in when we consider the case of "democracy" as an

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[30] (*DDI*: 502).
[31] (*DDI*, p. 507)
[32] (*DDI*, p. 510)

"obvious and quite ecumenical" sacred value, which consequently should not be up for serious re-evaluation. It is important, first, to say something more about the inadequacy of Dennett's sacred values in relation to to ambition generally and the ethics of work.

The Machiavellian Challenge

It is a fundamental weakness of Dennett's ethics, as it is of most contemporary ethicists – especially, I think those who are atheists, that they pay little or no attention to the ethics of ambition or of seeking worldly success through work. Consequently, they furnish us with no intellectual resources for rebutting Machiavelli's contextual amoralism. This is particularly unsatisfactory given the clear views they often advocate quite vigorously about political morality. Thus I shall argue that it is a serious flaw in +EEH ethics, in general, and that of Dennett, in particular, that they do treat democracy, as Americans understand it, as an item of quasi-sacred faith, expected to enjoy the kind of immunity from rational criticism which they deplore in matters of religious faith.

First, we should notice that Dennett gives us some clues about what the thinks an ethic of work entails in what he says about both the work of scientists and his own work in the passages quoted above regarding the *angst*-free virtuousness of scientists at work and the way his own sacred values integrated harmoniously in his own work. Plainly, he sees morally admirable work as exemplifying the characteristics, to be explored in chapter , of a vocation rather than simply of a successful career. Most notably, the work that he and his scientists undertake is creative, engages their particular talents and enthusiasms, requires a high degree of integrity, humility, and courage, involves much constructive co-operation and little destructive competitiveness, and is driven by a single-minded desire to discover truths and harness them to making the world a better place. In short, the ethics of ambition here and the ethics of work in pursuit of worldly success is the ethic of what is supposed to be the ethic of an academic life, devoted to the collaborative and disinterested pursuit of valuable truth. It is not necessary to be a Machiavellian realist to recognise that this idealised picture reflects what people say they do or think they ought to do in academic life rather than what they actually do. In fact, the pursuit of eminence in academic life is highly competitive and plays a central role in the motivation of many academics. Even academics sometimes employ, often without realising it, the self-interested amoralism, and the ruthlessness and cunning associated with it, which Machiavelli thought was essential to a pursuing glory through attaining to and retaining positions of political power. It is certainly not obvious that

scientists and philosophers , and even ethicists, are in fact more morally admirable in the conduct of their working lives than are professional politicians and businesspeople, just as it not obvious whether Christians, on the whole, live more morally admirable live than atheists, or *vice versa.*

Evaluating Dennett's Naturalist Ethics

The failure to do justice to Machiavellianism and the ethics of ambition is, I have suggested a common failing in virtually all ethics since Machiavelli and the Machiavellian problem remains largely unaddressed and unsolved by contemporary ethicists, both religious and religionless. In Dennett's case, however, the omission is particularly regrettable since his inclusion of democracy amongst his "sacred values" reveals what I take to be the particular weakness of atheist ethics which are compelled to rely on what are ultimately items of the faith-like intuitions Dennett calls "conversation-stoppers."

By including democracy amongst his sacred values Dennett clearly wants ethics to apply to the domain of political activity, rather than just the private one of personal relationships and the kind of fulfilling work which his morally splendid young scientists engage in (instead of agonising about the meaning of life). Indeed, the whole project of Dennett's book is political in that it seeks to popularise arguments which suggest that large numbers of Americans ought to cease regarding their religious views, on matters especially of public policy, as beyond scientific study and informed, rational criticism. In this, he seems to be suggesting, paradoxically, that Americans cease to regard their religious views as sacred in his sense. Be that as it may, it is plausible to think that most Americans do regard the proposition, "democracy is the best form of government" as indubitable, and by "democracy" they mean democracy as it is supposed to be practised in the USA and other so-called "liberal democracies." This, however, seems to me to be both a philosophical and a practical mistake. This is not because the proposition is, in fact, false. On the contrary, I think it is true. But precisely for that reason it must not be taken for granted as necessarily a good thing and beyond rational criticism from its many detractors, past and present. Instead, its philosophical defence needs careful analysis of what 'democracy" means, how it works in practice and why (and when and how) it is desirable. to establish and strengthen democratic practices. Defending it in practice also requires paying due attention to situations where democratic decision-making is flawed, inappropriate, impossible or corrupted (typically by money). Similar criticism can be levelled at Dennett's other sacred values.

Paradoxically, this makes the fundamental weakness of Dennett's naturalist ethics that it is fails to apply to itself the canons of scientific rationality.[33] This makes him certainly a liberal humanist but an unreflective one and, in Taylor's sense, a culpably naïve one.

However, Dennett has rendered extremely valuable service to the cause of +EEH in another paradoxical way from which +ECEs may derive considerable benefit. This is to show, not only the many ways in which science cam illuminate human behaviour as well as greatly benefitting the advancement of human well-being, but also to explain why the scientific study of human behaviour does *not* entail the abandonment of many of the fundamental assumptions of ethics.

Most conspicuous amongst these is the wholly naturalist account he gives of free will as a capacity which has evolved in human beings quite naturally out of avoidance behaviours in very primitive animals. This, however, in no way forces us to abandon our belief that we possess "the only kind of freedom worth wanting"[34] and the moral responsibilities that go with it. This is the freedom to foresee alternative possible futures and assess what we are capable of doing to influence which of these futures comes to pass. We can then deliberate about which it would be most desirable to try to bring about. Such deliberations need to take into account that we are not only dependent on others for the attainment of our individual goals, but we have evolved as the kinds of creatures whose

[33] That these canons can be very effectively applied to the analysis and justification of democratic government is amply demonstrated in much of the literature of democratic theory. Of particular impressiveness and relevance to the Machiavellian question is the lifelong work of Robert A Dahl, especially his book, *Polyarchy*. Dahl defines democratic politics in terms of competition for political power, where the costs of failure to gain or retain power are low: losing does not result in ruination, imprisonment or death. The justification for democracy is that it uniquely secures the ideal of political equality so that all individual members of a community (a *demos*) exercise power (*kratos*) equally.over the decisions of those who rule them. They do this mainly through the institutions of free, fair and frequent elections which, in turn, require a high degree of freedom of expression and freedom of association. The power exercised by the "people" does not, however, need to be direct power (as in participatory democracy where individual issues are put to the vote). Democracy is no less authentic – a point stressed by Gioavani Sartori – if the power is "reactional", i.e, those who rule are compelled to rule in accordance with what they believe will be the reactions of their electorates. If those who rule are compelled constantly to conform their conduct to what the ruled want (or will tolerate) this is because electorates permanently exercise the indirect power of anticipated reactions over their governments, i.e. as a consequence of what those who rule believe, rightly or wrongly about public opinion. Where there is no coherent public opinion there is no democracy. Also, the ideal of political equality which is enshrined in democracy is not the same as that of individual liberty, may often conflict with it, but may as a matter of empirical fact be more likely to foster it that than non-democratic forms of government. Democracy may be more likely also to foster Dennett's sacred virtue of justice but is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for it. Nor does democracy necessarily yield optimific policy decisions. See Dahl, Robert A. (1971). *Polyarchy: participation and opposition*. Also, Sartori, G (1987): *The Theory of Democracy* I also discuss these issues at book-length in Collins, Peter (1994): *Ideology AfterThe Fall of Communism.*

[34] The subtitle of Dennett's book, *Elbow Room.*

desires include loving other people and so caring for their well-being without any necessary reference to our own.

This relates to a second way in which Dennett's naturalism is extremely helpful to ethicists of all persuasions. He does not think (nor does Dawkins) that the theory of evolution entails that what we ought to do *now*, individually and collectively, is maximise the survival chances of our genes. If that were so, the categorical imperative would be something like: "Have as many grandchildren as possible." Nor does he think adaptive behaviours favoured by the principle of natural selection are ones we ought necessarily to engage in. Sometimes morality requires us to work against this principle through, for example, championing biodiversity and population control. Certainly, he does not think there is something called evolutionary ethics which can furnish us with an alternative sovereign principle to those of Utiltarianism and Kantianism which would enable us to reach specific judgments about what to do on particular occasions. Dennett thus performs an unintended service to Christian ethics – as do Berlin and Parfit in different ways - by showing why "evolutionary ethics, no less than religionless Utilitarianism and Kanianism, are inadequate strategies for settling moral disputes and so successfully addressing the interminability problem.

Conclusion

I think Dennett's overall contribution to constructive debate between atheist and Christian ethicists is mixed. He concedes that his focus is overwhelmingly on religion in the USA. It is true that in some milieux there what +ECEs, like Ward, would also describe as bad religion, flourishes to the point of alarming rampancy. Thus +ECEs, no less than +EEHs like Dennett and other atheists, also deplore, anti-scientific, superstitious, authoritarian and inhumane dogmatism in matters of ethics. Sometimes such dogmatism is based on claims about God and/or life after death, but sometimes it invokes some non-religious set of beliefs, including those, like social Darwinism, which claim the support of scientific rationality. Indeed one of Dennett's most valuable and convincing achievements in *Darwin's Dangerous Idea* and elsewhere is to expose the fallacies of what he felicitously calls "greedy reductionism" such as, supremely, B.F. Skinner's behaviourism and, specifically, "greedy ethical reductionism".

It is unfortunate, therefore, that he shows little appreciation for (or knowledge of) the work of the kinds of Christian theologians who, from the outset to the present, have sought to reconcile the specific insights into

the truth about the human condition and human nature found in the Bible with prevailing understandings of what rational and systematic reflection on empirical evidence appears most convincingly to reveal. Like the most admirable natural scientists, the best theologians do not take their views to be immune from criticism and further development. Nor are they unwilling to reconsider how their ethical principles apply when the social and material circumstances of how people live change substantially. They also believe that the discipline of theology makes progress, albeit unevenly so and without ever reaching a final destination, in a way not dissimilar to progress in the natural sciences. As Taylor has exhaustively shown, the history of Christian theology is a history of perpetual reform as is the "scientific method" which developed out of it.

The best and the worst of Dennett's atheist ethics is revealed in an essay he wrote for the 2007 collection. *Philosophy without Gods*. He wrote this while recuperating from a life-threatening heart disease after being saved by the wonders of modern medicine. The essay is entitled: "Thank Goodness" and essentially seeks to show why it would be inappropriate to thank God for his recovery but appropriate to try to demonstrate his gratitude through engaging in future good works. On the other hand, it is entirely appropriate to be hugely grateful for the goodness of the thousands of people who have contributed to making his recovery possible and, indeed, to the billions who, in different ways make his and other people's lives more enjoyable than they otherwise would be. He also proposes that people like him show their gratitude by doing what they can to contribute to the total sum of goodness in the world.

None of this would be denied by the kind of +ECE like Keith Ward whose specifically Christian ethics I explore in Part Three. All this provides strong support for my first hypothesis about the possibility and desirability of collaboration between Christian and atheist ethicists in agreeing a potentially global ethic. Dennett also provides in his appeal to the sacred character of moral values as well as with his faith-like intuitionism about legitimate "conversation-stoppers" confirmation of my second hypothesis about the indispensability for atheist ethics of incorporating analogues for some central faith-based tenets of Christian ethics.

Unfortunately, what Dennett says about prayer in "Thank Goodness" reveals the shallowness, indeed the radical mistakenness of his understanding of what Christian doctrine actually enjoins. He appreciates the goodwill of those who tell him they have been praying for him but insists that he needs to forgive them for their stubborn irrationality. Dennett clearly assumes that the point of praying for those "who are in

any way afflicted in mind, body or estate" is to cause specific and allegedly obvious good things to happen to them which otherwise would not have happened. Prayer is thus supposed to be causally effective in getting God to do some charitable deed for a particular person which God would not otherwise have done. It is only necessary to state this position to see its absurdity. The short answer to this criticism of prayer is to say that the point of prayer is not to get God to do what you want but to get you to do what God wants. More generally, as will be discussed somewhat more fully in Part Three, the value of practising the virtues of piety are to assist in the discernment of the will of God. All specifically petitionary Christian prayer is, consequently, qualified by the sentiment: "Nevertheless, Thy will, not mine be done."

The fact is that Dennett, despite his claims to have studied religion extensively, has, like most contemporary atheists, an extremely naïve conception of what at least many highly intelligent and well-informed Christian ethicists actually believe. However, Dennett's ignorance and that of many other atheists about the richness and profundity of much Christian ethical thought is understandable for, unfortunately, it is true that many Christians do hold – and are encouraged by their ministers to hold - irrational, erroneous and, often morally obnoxious beliefs about Christian ethics. What the world sees and hears about what Christian ethics teaches is too often far from inspiring, edifying and deeply attractive, This, therefore, constitutes a regrettable failure on the part of all those responsible for Christian education by precept and example.

CHAPTER SEVEN

PARFIT'S RATIONALIST ETHICS

Introduction

In this chapter, I shall begin by setting Parfit's thought in context. He differs from most of his contemporary, Anglo-Saxon fellow +EEHs, precisely by taking very seriously, rather than being dismissive of the deep, ethical problems of moral nihilism and amoralism. He also recognises that these challenges might be adequately answered if religious claims about the universe were true, although he regretfully thinks that the problem of evil makes such claims untenable.

Throughout his philosophical life he has consequently been haunted by the possibility that in a universe for which teleological explanation is impossible and in which our individual lives end in annihilation, nothing really matters about how we live and what it is right and wrong to want and to do. Moreover, he finds the possibility that nihilism and amoralism may be true both bleak and very difficult to rebut. In this, he is again rare amongst contemporary EHs and most ordinary people, who, in as far as they recognise the awfulness of existence as conceived by Russell and Benatar, think it sensible and morally legitimate to "divert" their attention (in Pascal's sense) from the realities of suffering and death. Instead, they simply try to do what they can to make their own lives as good as they can be, and those of others they care about a bit better than they otherwise would be. After all, what's the use of worrying and, anyway, what else can you do? Finally, Parfit stands out amongst contemporary atheist ethicists because he is convinced, and goes to great lengths to show, that no form of subjectivist or naturalist ethics, which ultimately reduce moral claims to psychological ones about what we, in fact, want or would want under ideal circumstances, is adequate to rebut moral nihilism and amoralism.

After explicating the distinctiveness of Parfit's rebuttal of moral nihilism, I shall the set out his own answer to the questions of how to justify moral value judgments and what he thinks his own metaethics means for the practical problem of what we should be doing about what matters most in the world today. I conclude by considering how Parfit's heroic project of establishing a wholly religionless ethic which demands a sublime measure of personal self-sacrifice fits with my two original hypotheses.

I argue that Parfit's powerful criticisms of subjectivism and naturalism, and his insistence on the reality of irreducible moral norms considerably strengthen the Christian case for an ethic based on the will of God. However, his positive case requires an eschatology of secular progress which is less plausible than Christian eschatology, issues in its own Berlinian irresoluble conflicts and may require, like Marxism, the kind of totalitarian politics for its implementation which Berlin and other liberal humanists both fear and deplore. For these reasons I speculate that Parfit's position should point him and his readers in the direction of atheistical Buddhist ethics rather than exclusive humanism.

Parfit and the Perennial Challenges of Moral Nihilism and Amoralism

The first important expression of Parfit's conception of ethics which I share is given in the title, *On What Matters* (2010), hereafter *OWM*. He explains in the Preface:

> of my reasons for becoming a graduate student in philosophy, one was the fact that in wondering how to spend my life, I found it hard to decide what really matters…It was disappointing to find that most of the philosophers who taught me, or whom I was told to read, believed that the question: "What matters?" couldn't have a true answer or didn't even make sense.[1]

Fortunately, he was rescued from premature disillusion with ethics by reading Henry Sidgwick's *Methods of Ethics*, since Sidgwick at least believed that some things matter. He also notes more ominously in the Preface that when he was young "most philosophers believed that there could not be any normative truths. So did most economists, social scientists and much of the wider Western world. Well-educated non-religious people took for granted the distinction between facts which are objective and mere values. Little has changed."[2] What this foreshadows is a dismaying personal conclusion which Parfit reaches toward the end of the second volume. In a section entitled "Normative Truths," Parfit cites Hume's account of his "forlorn solitude, in which I am placed in my philosophy…I call upon others to join me…but no-one will hearken me…All the world conspired to oppose and contradict me"[3].He compares his own situation with Hume's, lamenting that:

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[1] *OWM* I, p. xi
[2] *Ibid*, p,xi
[3] *OWM* II, p. 452

> Most philosophers seem to reject my meta-ethical and other meta-normative beliefs. In one way, my predicament is worse than Hume's. Many of these people don't even understand what I believe. When I talk to these people we can't even disagree. It took me some time to realise the state I am in. Given the range, subtlety and depth of [Bernard] Williams's writings about normative questions I assumed for many years that Williams had some purely normative beliefs. I failed to see that Williams's claims about reasons, and about what we ought to do, are actually psychological claims about how we might be motivated to act. I also failed to understand Mackie's similar claims. Since I knew both these people well, I am puzzled and disturbed by our failures to understand each other.[4]

There are some consolations. Thus he tells us:

> My state is in two ways better than Hume's. I am not alone, since some other people have beliefs like mine. Nor am I a skeptic…I believe that some things matter, and that we often have decisive reasons. But it was a shock to realize that when Williams, Mackie and several others seemed to be denying these beliefs, they were not really doing that, since they never even considered whether these beliefs are true.[5]

Parfit's shock is justified. Given the problem of evil we cannot believe that things matter because they accord with the will of God. But given the facts of transience and death, it may be that nothing really matters at all, and certainly not enough to give us reasons to make great personal sacrifices in order to reduce the immensity of suffering in the world and to preserve the planet. Parfit thus agrees with Taylor that +EEHs are unlikely to be right in thinking that it is *obvious* what matters and makes life worth living and that it is pretty much obvious – and ought to be uncontroversial - what morally right and wrong conduct consists in.

It is also possible that many ordinary religious unbelievers are really moral nihilists who simply prefer not to think about this and instead to get on with enjoying whatever there is to enjoy while they yet can. With self-conscious intellectual atheists it is possible that they are shielded from the

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[4] *Ibid*, pp452-53
[5] *Ibid*

pervasive badness of the human condition by their own exceptionally fortunate material circumstances, of whose rarity they are inadequately aware. What they see as realism and commonsense in the circles which they inhabit may, in fact, be a lack of moral imagination. Above all, their prosperity and other fortunate circumstances may have insulated them against an understanding of the realities of suffering – as was allegedly the case with the youthful Gautama, the Buddha, and as Marx claimed in relation to the bourgeoisie. If so, false consciousness arguably continues to be a disfiguring intellectual characteristic of many affluent, middle-class Westerners who have received much schooling.

The Justification of Moral Value Judgments

Because Parfit is exceptional amongst +EEHs in feeling deeply and taking seriously[6] the challenges of moral nihilism and rational egoism (the central subject of his earlier, much-acclaimed book, *Reasons and Persons*) I shall focus my discussion on his substantive attempts to rebut these twin doctrines. I shall mention but not discuss the feature of *OWM* which consumes much the largest part of the text and has attracted the most widespread criticism, viz. his detailed critiques and proposed revisions and combinations of different versions of Kantianism, consequentialism and contractarianism. I do, however, endorse his central contention that we cannot rationally justify moral judgments unless we accept that there are irreducible moral norms. These are paradigmatically the badness of suffering, failure and death as well as all the goodness of the things that make life "wonderful." These norms give us objective reasons to care about different things to a greater or lesser extent. Consequently, normative claims can be true or false as surely as empirical and analytic ones.

Parfit is in no doubt that a credible religionless ethic must be monist in the sense that it does not allow for interminable disagreements about what we should do based on competing, incommensurable but equally absolute values. Susan Wolff criticises him for his monism. She notes that Parfit has been trying to show, by seeking to reconcile Kantian, Consequentialist

[6] Taking nihilism and pessimism seriously does not prevent Parfit from making good jokes: for example he compares Schopenhauer's dual grounds for pessimism that life is wretched and that we shall soon be dead to Woody Allen's complaint about his hotel: the food's lousy and they serve such small portions. Later he considers the comparative probability of a universe whose stars moved as they do in our universe with one "where the stars move together in the patterns of a minuet, and they are shaped like either Queen Victoria or Cary Grant" (*OWM*, II p. 638). A capacity for humour, Parfit might agree, is a not negligible component of the virtue of benevolence and certainly a valuable ingredient in any antidote to pessimism and despair.

and Contractarian theories, "that there is a single true morality, crystallized in a single supreme principle." She claims, however:

> there is no reason to assume that there will be such a principle, and it would not be a moral tragedy if it turned out that morality were not so cleanly structured as to have one (*OWM*,II, p.154).

Parfit responds:

> If there is no single supreme principle that, I agree, would not be a tragedy. But it *would* be a tragedy if there was no *single true morality*. And conflicting moralities could not all be true. In trying to combine these different kinds of moral theory, my main aim was not to find a supreme principle, but to find out whether we can resolve some deep disagreements. As Wolf claims, it would not matter greatly if morality *turned out* to be less unified, because there are several true principles which cannot be subsumed under any higher principle. But if we cannot resolve our disagreements, that would give us reasons to doubt that there are *any* true principles. There might be nothing that morality *turns out to be*, since morality might be an illusion[7].

In order to demonstrate this, Parfit attempts to defend against all-comers a meta-ethical position which he calls the triple theory because it seeks to combine what he takes to be the best versions of (religionless) Rule Consequentialism, Kantian Universalism and (Scanlonian) Contractarianism into a single formulation. The triple theory asserts:

> An act is wrong just when such acts are disallowed by the principles that are optimific, uniquely universally willable, and not reasonably rejectable.[8]

These three ethical theories are all religionless and support a pro-Enlightenment exclusive humanist morality. Each item in the theory is vulnerable to criticism individually as is the theory as a whole. Parfit has devoted much energy, before and after the initial publication of

[7] *OWM*, I, p. 155
[8] *OWM* I. p. 25

publication of *OWM,* vols, 1 & 2,[9] to addressing such criticisms. What is important for present purposes is that Parfit's theory is rationalist in that it is based solely on what we have objective reasons to care about. Consequently, Parfit thinks it essential to refute Subjectivism and Naturalism in all their forms, including subjectivist forms of Naturalism. This is because he thinks they all lead to something too close for comfort to nihilism. He writes in summarising his views:

> on subjectivist theories, *nothing matters.* We should reject this bleak view."[10]

A little later he tells us:

> "We ought… to reject Non-cognitivism and… Naturalism. These views are close to nihilism. Normativity is either an illusion, or involves irreducibly normative truths. I shall… defend one version of non-naturalist cognitivism."[11]

A consequence of the fact that he takes seriously questions about what really matters is that he does not flinch from considering whether engaging in moral philosophy is itself something that matters and, consequently, whether he and others have devoted their lives to an activity that is actually pointless because the objectives it sets itself cannot possibly be achieved. These objectives are, for Parfit, to ascertain what we have decisive reasons to care about and to think it right and wrong to do and to want. He argues exhaustively that neither non-cognitivist accounts of the moral claims, nor attempts to equate them with, translate them into, or reduce them to claims about natural facts enable us to resolve moral disputes.

The Refutation of Subjectivism

Parfit consequently is vigorous in his repudiation of all forms of Non-cognitivism whether based on the kind of view, associated with Mackie (and Sartre) that we create moral values rather than discovering them or on the view that in articulating our moral convictions we are not making truth-claims, even if we think we are: instead, we are expressing attitudes, preferences, decisions and commitments. He is, consequently quite fierce in his repudiation, for example, of R.M. Hare's non-cognitivist treatment of nihilism in the latter's 1972 essay "Nothing Matters." Hare seeks to refute moral nihilism by showing that it is simply based on a linguistic misunderstanding of how the verb "to matter" functions in English.

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[9] Vol 3 is entirely devoted to rersponding to critics and reasserting the main conclusions.
[10] *OWM,*I, p.5
[11] *OWM,* I, p. 10

(Berlin, as we have seen, does something similar with "meaning".) This is a view which he characterises as being, like Gibbard's, Blackburn's and that of other "expressive non-cognitivists," "close to nihilism."[12] According to Parfit, Hare thinks that things cannot matter objectively: they can only be of (subjective) concern to particular subjects. Parfit thinks that Hare's claim is linguistically false. He writes:

> The word 'matter' has a meaning, I believe, which Hare did not understand. Things can matter in the sense that their nature can give us reasons to care about them[13]

Hare thinks that the underlying mistake made by objectivists about subjectivism is that:

> If we can say of the answer to a mathematical problem that it is right, and can say *the same thing* of a moral judgment, this is held to show that a moral judgment is in some way *like* the answer to a mathematical problem, and therefore cannot be 'subjective' (whatever that means).[14]

To this Parfit tersely replies:

> That is what it means. Like answers to mathematical problems, moral judgments can be objective in the sense of being right or wrong, by being true or false.[15]

Parfit, then, thinks that believing that there are normative truths in precisely the same way that there are mathematical truths and other necessary truths is the only alternative to the nihilist view that nothing matters. Moreover, the fact that most people don't seem to agree that normative truths *are* objectively true in the same way or sense that mathematical truths are, itself constitutes a reason for doubting that there are such things as moral truths in the nihilism-denying sense. He is not worried about the sorts of commonplace disagreements which characterise much moral debate and where substantive disagreement is in fact quite rare about propositions such as that torturing children for fun is wrong. He is, however, extremely worried about fundamental disagreements about the nature of morality itself. He writes:

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[12] *OWM*,II, p. 410
[13] *Ibid*, p. 411
[14] quoted at *OWM* II, p.413, italics original
[15] Ibid

> Of the reasons we have for doubting that there are moral truths, one of the strongest is provided by some kind of moral disagreement…These disagreements are deepest when we are considering not the wrongness of particular acts, but the nature of morality and moral reasoning, and what is implied by different views about these questions. If we and others hold conflicting views…that should make us doubt our view. It may also give us reasons to doubt that any of us could be right.[16]

In other words, as he makes repeatedly clear throughout both volumes – most thoroughly and perhaps painfully when discussing Williams in Chapter 34 - the alternative to believing in the objectivity of intrinsic moral values is moral nihilism. Since most moral philosophers do hold positions which have the corollary that there are no such things as objective, intrinsic moral values, they are committed, albeit usually without realising it, to moral nihilism. Most don't even address this issue and of the philosophers who do some, notably Nietzsche, got things right – at least according to Williams -"because Nietzsche saw that nothing is in itself good or bad. Nothing matters. Nietzsche's struggle to avoid nihilism failed."[17]

The Refutation of Naturalist Ethics

Parfit is equally forceful in rejecting versions of ethical Naturalism which, while acknowledging that there can be true normative claims, reduces them to claims about our psychology, i.e. to what we would in fact want and be motivated by if we had all relevant knowledge about, and had thought through logically and accurately the implications of all the alternative courses of action open to us. Such theories, of which various forms utilitarianism are the most widely advocated, deny that rightness is "an irreducibly normative property," i.e. one which is not "helpfully defined in terms of other terms."[18] But if this naturalist view is correct, explorations of ethical disagreements of the sort to which philosophers like Sidgwick (as a Utilitarian) and David Ross (as an Intuitionist) have devoted a great deal of time and energy are futile. Thus, if rightness just *is* the natural property of maximising happiness as opposed to, or also, or instead of possessing the property of conforming to the requirements of fidelity or justice, the disagreement between Sidgwick and Ross becomes

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[16] *OWM* I. pp. 418-9
[17] *OWM*, II, p.602
[18] *OWM*, II p. 302

superfluous (and settled on *a priori* grounds in favour of Sidgwick). Thus Parfit imagines Sidgwick himself complaining:

> If your view were true [i.e. that rightness is simply a way of referring to the property of maximising happiness], Ross and I would have wasted much of our lives. We have spent many years trying to decide which acts are right. We both believe that when acts maximize happiness, that might always make these acts have the property of being right. I believe that it does. Ross believes that it doesn't. If there were no such different property, as your view implies, Ross and I would both be mistaken. Morality as we understand it would be an illusion.[19].

Parfit is again surprised that so many Utilitarians find it hard to grasp this point. They think that, having discovered or recognised or otherwise ascertained that "[m]aximizing happiness is the same thing as being right," they have solved Sidgwick's problem about how we should live and what we ought morally to do in such a way that not only is morality not an illusion but what morality requires turns out to be just what Sidgwick says it is. Parfit again seeks to bring out why this is wrong by imagining Sidgwick's own response:

> You have not seen how deeply you and I disagree. Though you and I are both Utilitarians, and Ross rejects Utilitarianism, my view is much closer to Ross's view than it is to yours. Your view *does* eliminate morality, as Ross and I both think we understand it. Ross and I both know that some acts have the property of maximizing happiness. We believe that we can ask the further question, which is whether such acts also have the *very different*, irreducibly normative property of being right. If your view were true, *there would be no such property*, and no such further question. That would be how, in trying to decide which acts are right, Ross and I would have wasted much of our lives (*OWM* II, p.303. Italics original).

To illustrate this crucial point Parfit uses an illuminating, though, as he admits, crude and partial analogy:

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[19] *Ibid*, p.203

> Suppose that I believe in God, and I have spent many years trying to decide which religious texts and theologians give the truest account of God's nature and acts. You tell me that you also believe in God. Love exists, you say, in the sense that some people love others. God exists, because God is love. I could reply that if your view were true, I would have wasted much of my life. I believe that God is the omniscient, omnipotent and wholly good Creator of the Universe. If God was merely the love that some people have for others, I would have made a huge mistake, and all my years studying religious texts would have taught me almost nothing[20]

Parfit's case against naturalist ethics is an extended and elaborate assertion of the "Naturalist fallacy" which consists in trying to derive conclusions about what ought to be the case from premises about what is the case, as a matter of empirical – and typically psychological - fact. Parfit writes:

> All Naturalists believe both that all facts are natural facts, and that normative claims are intended to state facts. We should expect that, on this view, we don't need to make irreducibly normative claims. If Naturalism were true there would be no facts that only such claims could state. If there were no such facts, and we didn't need to make such claims, Sidgwick, Ross and I and others would have wasted much of our lives. We have asked what matters, which acts are right or wrong, and what we have reasons to want and to do. If Naturalism were true, there would be no point in trying to answer such questions.
>
> Naturalism is close to nihilism. So we have reason to be glad if, as I have argued, Naturalism is not true.[21]

Irreducible normative truths.

What Parfit defends is that there are irreducibly normative facts, which cannot be translated into either claims about what we do or would desire under particular circumstances or to any other natural facts, notably facts about what would be conducive to our and other people's happiness. Parfit's objections to all forms of subjectivism and his corresponding defence of an objective (or object-given) theory can be summed up by

[20] *Ibid*, pp.303-4
[21] *OWM*, II, pp. 367-68

saying that subjective theories all ultimately depend on what we, in fact, presently desire or would presently desire if we were fully informed and fully logical. They leave no room for rational consideration of what we *ought* to desire, of what is truly desirable and intrinsically worth wanting and trying to do, For such consideration to be possible we need to know normative facts about what truly matters and how much and what events and states of affairs we should, consequently, try to bring about because they are good and what actions we should engage in because they are morally right. To sustain this case, without having recourse to religion requires Parfit to assert the objective existence of moral norms whose metaphysical status is no more mysterious than the real existence of numbers or truths.

Parfit goes to a great deal of trouble to show that what is usually called moral realism, which posits the real existence of moral norms, need not commit us to any views which are in Mackie's phrase "metaphysically queer" or indeed ontologically so. In Appendix J, "On What There Is" he lists the following as examples of necessary truths:

> [T]here are prime numbers greaterthan100
> No proposition can be both wholly true and wholly false
> If P implies Q and P is true, Q must be true
> If we know both that P implies Q, and that P is true, we have decisive reasons to believe Q
> We have reasons to prevent or relieve the suffering of any conscious being if we can.

His primary and paradigmatic example of a necessary normative truth which is neither analytic nor empirical is "the nature of agony gives us reasons to want to avoid future agony."[22] This claim is to be understood to mean that we all have reason to avoid or mitigate the future agony not only of ourselves but of all sentient creatures. This claim is not true by definition and it cannot be (and does not need to be) translated into claims about what we are or might be actually motivated by. Some people are fully informed and rational sadists and many people continue to live for the moment despite a clear understanding of the agonies of smoking-related disease – to say nothing of eternal damnation. By contrast, Parfit maintains that morally prescriptive claims assert necessary normative truths which remain true regardless of what we in fact want or would want under any set of circumstances. A fundamental moral obligation consequently becomes to minimise pointless suffering in our own lives, in

[22] *OWM*, II, p.551

the lives of those we care about and in the lives of everybody else who exists or who may come to exist. Devoting our lives to the relief of suffering can thus give our lives meaning. However, devoting one's life to the relief of suffering cannot be not the whole of what ethics requires.

> [I]f there were no great, positive goods which could outweigh the suffering in people's lives, it would not be worth continuing human history…We should all have no children. For it to be worth our staying alive and having children, we and they must be able to have lives which are not only meaningful but good.
>
> That is clearly possible. Life can be wonderful as well as terrible, and we shall increasingly have the power to make life good.[23]

We clearly have a duty, therefore, also to make life as wonderful for rational and sentient beings as it is possible to be.

Irreducible moral norms also enable us to determine relative obligations. Thus, we have decisive reason to save another's life at the cost of sacrificing one of our fingers but we also have decisive reason not to sacrifice our own life to save someone else's finger. Again, Parfit thinks we have reason to choose to save our own child from drowning rather some other child to whom we have no close ties. On the other hand, Parift thinks the rich have decisive reasons to make great material sacrifices in order to reduce inequality and eliminate extremes of poverty.

But amongst many of Parfit's fellow +EEH critics his appeal to irreducible moral norms falls on deaf ears precisely because these critics think that believing in Parfitian norms does commit us to something like a religious belief at least of the sort which is posited in Plato's theory of the Forms.

Most Subjectivists and Naturalists are hostile to the view that any such religious or metaphysical claims might be true. Since Parfit's whole project is to construct a religionless ethics he is disappointed that so few of his fellow religionless ethicists understand that his normative truths are no more mysterious than any other necessary truths. Nor do they seem to see either the need or the possibility of revising their own meta-ethical views so as to ground the important substantive moral insights which their own work in ethics yields in precisely such irreducible normative truths.

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[23] *OWM*, II, p.618

Moreover, on the substantive issue of what matters he is on their side, seeking to revise their meta-ethics so as to support our beliefs that we have real, religionless moral duties to alleviate the suffering and promote the happiness or well-being of others and to persuade people to do what duty requires by fostering ever-greater rationality.

Parfit and Profundity

Perhaps Parfit's most important and comparatively rare achievement relates to the seriousness with which he addresses the possibility that moral nihilism and amoralism may be true and how he consequently avoids Taylor's charge that, unlike much EH, his ethical pronouncements are simply shallow in relation to the deepest longings and terrors which human beings experience. He is also radical in his substantive moral demands. Thus, he thinks we may have good reason to sacrifice much, not only of our own, but also of our children's happiness, to ensure the possibility that rational beings may come to flourish in the universe, in greater numbers and to a greater degree than we can presently imagine, at some remote point in the future. Only belief in such an eventuality would, Parfit thinks, enable us to ward off the deep pessimism which the appalling facts of present suffering engenders, and to ground the hope that in the end "it will all have been worth it." This may be implausible but it shows that Parfit takes the case for pessimistic moral nihilism with the philosophical seriousness it deserves. Shallower ethicists, who regard moral nihilism both as obviously false or easily rebutted tend to mock Parfit's work as obsessive and/or obviously misguided.[24]

Thus the philosophical stakes are very high for Parfit – almost as high as for Pascal - since, if he is wrong his only alternative, given that he cannot accept any ethics based on religion, is that there is really no such thing as right and wrong and nothing really matters - not love, not friendship, not morality, not knowledge, not beauty, not even truth. In his words:

> If there are no such [irreducibly normative, reason-involving] truths, nothing matters.[25]

For Parfit, this would mean that we would have no reasons to decide how to live. He has a vivid sense (which many Christians share) of what it

[24] See, for example the unrevised review by Simon Blackburn (on his website, the Times Educational Supplement having declined to publish it as originally written) and the chapter by James Lenman entitled "Naturalism Without Tears" in SuIkkanen and Cottingham (2009).
[25] *OWM*, II, p.465

would be like for nothing to matter, not just in the trivial sense that there are lots of things which some, many or most people in fact care about.

Rather, nothing might matter in the sense that there are facts about the universe and our situation within it which prevent all of us from having cogent reasons for trying to live good lives by engaging in morally right actions and adopting morally admirable attitudes. Parfit, again like many Christians, also hopes that things really matter in the great scheme of things and in the context of an indefinite future. He can also, Ozymandias-like,[26] imagine what it would be like for nothing to matter in this sense - something which, as many Christians would agree with Parfit, constitutes a very depressing ("bleak") view. Most philosophers and most people cannot and do not share this understanding of moral nihilism. Many, indeed, experience the thought that nothing much matters as an antidote to anxiety and depression in the face of failure and our fears about it.

The stakes would be, and are for Parfit, comparatively low to the extent that it might turn out that one element in the triple theory is right after all and the others wrong, or if different theories were right about different moral issues so that there is more than one mountain to climb. The really appalling prospect is that none of the paths lead to the peak of any mountain whatsoever from the summit of which we can survey a clear and sunlit moral landscape. Instead, all the paths just meander upwards into nowhere and no matter how high we climb, we remain enveloped by cloud. This is what I think Taylor has in mind when he criticises +EEH for its lack of depth. Notoriously, Dennett was much criticised for equating atheists with what he dubbed "Brights " - the implication being that believers are "Dims". Rather feebly, he seeks to ward off the hostility, which this characterisation of atheists as "Brights" attracted, by suggesting that the believers can call themselves "Smarts." This misses the point that Taylor wants to make, and Parfit to answer: namely, that indifference to the possibility that moral nihilism may be true is a mark of intellectual and imaginative shallowness so that the real antithesis is between the shallow and the deep – a distinction which, as we have seen, is important to Berlin and which doesn't neatly coincide with the difference between believers and unbelievers, as Parfit and some other unbelievers clearly show.

[26] P.B. Shelley: "My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings./Look on my works, ye mighty, and despair. Nothing remains…"

Parfit on What Now Matters Most

Nor are the stakes for Parfit only high in terms of moral philosophy: they are huge in terms of his substantive, practical ethical beliefs. At the end of Volume One Parfit tells us:

> What now matters most is that we rich people give up some of our luxuries, ceasing to overheat the Earth's atmosphere, and taking care of the planet in other ways, so that it continues to support intelligent life. If we are the only rational animals in the Universe, it matters even more whether we shall have descendants during the billions of years in which that would be possible.[27]

Volume Two concludes similarly:

> What now matters most is that we avoid ending human history. If there are no rational beings elsewhere, it may depend on us and our successors whether it will all be worth it, because the existence of the Universe will have been on the whole good.[28]

Issues of "easy rescue", demanding small personal sacrifices to secure great goods for others, are no more problematical for Parfit than for anyone else. On the other hand, Parfit does want to show that making colossal sacrifices to secure the flourishing of future generations is precisely what his objective, rational, normative and moral convictions most emphatically entail. This is despite the fact that for Parfit, as for Marx but not for Christians, we who make the sacrifices here and now won't be around to participate in the future flourishing of the "supra-people" who may yet evolve over billions of years.

Parfit's radical anti-Machiavellianism

Parfit argues in both his major books that we should be deeply concerned about the thriving of future generations, because we have a discoverable duty of care to strangers, remote in time as well as in place, as well as to ourselves and those close to us. Thus, there are normative moral truths regarding how we should behave towards those we don't know and who may not yet - or who even may never - exist. This means that we have a moral obligation to ensure that our world remains congenially habitable

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[27] *OWM*, I, p. 419
[28] *OWM*, II, p. 620

for rational beings and conducive to human thriving. He sees, moreover, that to achieve this will require a vast transfer of wealth and income from rich to poor, given the huge inequalities which obtain in the present state of the world. At a minimum, Parfit thinks we (rich) have a moral duty to give away to the poor certainly not less than 5-10% of what we have but more probably like 30% or 50%.

This is about as far from Machiavellian amoralism and contextual egoism as it is possible to imagine an atheist ethics to get. Moreover, the proposition about the severe sacrifices required of the rich is not one about which most moral philosophers and other laymen agree with (or practise), as they do in the case of propositions that one should mostly eschew cruelty, tell the truth, act justly, keep promises, be kind to neighbours and those in manifest need and abstain from harmful discrimination against people on the basis of morally irrelevant features they have been born with. They also doubt on purely intellectual and ethical grounds whether they have much of a duty to make very substantial sacrifices themselves, or acquiesce in the substantial sacrificing of their children's happiness, for causes which will benefit to a very small extent very much larger numbers of strangers and members of future generations who may never be born.

The fact that Parfit raises, as other religionless ethicists on the whole do not, this crucial concrete question of substantial and really painful self-sacrifice does him credit for taking rational egoism very seriously. He does not take on the specific Machiavellian claim that rational egoism or amoralism is necessary for the achievement of success in the competition for glory, power and wealth. Rather he leapfrogs this context to meet the uber-Machiavellian moral and political challenge which would claim we have no obligations ever to sacrifice our own interests to secure the elimination of poverty and more equal global well-being now and in the future. He takes this to be the most urgent and drastic concrete instantiation of Sidgwick's "Profoundest Problem in Ethics." Parfit distinguishes the rational egoist view that we always have most reason to do what is best for ourselves" from the "rational impartialist" view that we always have most reason to do what is impartially best." On Sidgwick's view according to Parfit:

> We always have most reason to do whatever would be impartially best, unless some other act would be best for ourselves. In such cases, we would have sufficient reason to act in either way, if we knew the relevant facts[29]

[29] OWM, I, p.131

Moreover, Sidgwick thinks that the reasonable claims of duty and self-interest are ultimately incommensurable: we could not have stronger reasons for promoting the interests of ourselves and those we love than for promoting those of strangers, however numerous. As Parfit notes, this problem doesn't arise for religious believers in an afterlife: our reasons for always doing what is right coincide always with what is best for ourselves. Thus he writes:

> Many people accept…that duty and self-interest never conflict. Since each of us will have some future life in which, if we have done or failed to do our duty, we shall get the happiness or suffering we deserve.[30]

Since Sidgwick doubts that we shall have an afterlife he passionately hoped, Parfit tells us, that duty and self-interest never conflict since there would be no way of resolving such conflicts and this would, as we saw in chapter one, confirm for Sidgwick the abysmal truths of moral nihilism and amoralism.

This issue then clearly goes to the heart of religionless ethics generally. It is particularly central to Parfit's highly ambitious claim that amongst the duties which we have most reason to fulfil is that of making very substantial sacrifices of our own rational and (and often morally legitimate) interests to secure the interests of others. He wishes to rebut moral nihilism sufficiently comprehensively to show that we have a rational duty to sacrifice, not only much of our own material well-being, but also that of our children and of others to whom we have close ties, in order to relieve the poverty of millions of currently existing people who are wholly unknown to us and to try to secure hitherto unimaginable forms of goodness and happiness for billions of people who have not been and may never be born. Moreover, we should make this choice because we have reason to care even more passionately about the sufferings of the poor and the salvation of the planet than we do about the people we care about because they are close to us. This is an attempt to ground in reason an ethic of good causes not dissimilar in structure from missionary religion and patriotic nationalism. It should be noted – and though Parfit notes this, he doesn't spell it out - that, these substantial sacrifices may include not only money but also our own and our loved-ones' opportunities for self-chosen loving personal relationships and fulfilling work – i.e. the goods which Taylor claims are paradigmatic for what makes life worth living for

[30] *OWM*, I.p.142

exclusive humanists. It may also be necessary, in order to secure a Parfitian utopia, to sacrifice our freedom to make our own choices about procreation and much else besides, as Berlin forewarns.

Much of the text of both volumes of *OWM* is devoted to Parfit's exploration of possible responses to this "profoundest problem" and their consequences for moral choices, and culminates in his contention that the triple theory enables us to decide how much weight we ought morally to accord to different reasons for acting in circumstances where we are confronted with difficult choices. This involves examining possible criteria for identifying what matters and why and for considering whether morality itself matters. Parfit's hope is that the result of such examination would yield a purely rational account of what matters and how we should live. This would justify the claim that we ought, in relation to the most important actual and potential evils afflicting humanity, to make substantial sacrifices of our own well-being for the sake of making life at least minimally worth living for others and, hopefully, replete with many kinds of great goodness. He seeks to do this without postulating either the benign purposiveness of the universe or an eschatology which includes the survival of individuals in a life extending indefinitely beyond the grave.
Is such a religionless ethic credible? I shall argue in Part Three that it is less credible than Christian ethics. Meanwhile I consider objections to Parfit's views on his own terms.

Parfit on Religion

At this point it is important to be clear about what Parfit actually thinks about religion. To his credit he has thought about the possible truth of religious claims a good deal more deeply and accurately than other exclusive humanists. He sees the rational possibility and point of asking the questions, "Why Anything? Why this?" – the title of Appendix D - which many others regard as pointless or unintelligible or simply unanswerable and therefore not worth bothering about.[31]

In these writings Parfit recognises not only that questions about why the universe exists as it does are worth asking but also that the God hypothesis might provide a possible, and as Swinburne suggests, the simplest answer. He argues that whatever answer one gives to these questions ultimately

[31] This Appendix is based on an earlier article written by Parfit for the *Times Literary Supplement* of July 3rd, 1992, and to which Richard Swinburne wrote a response, both pieces being subsequently republished in 1998 in *Metaphysics: The Big Questions*, edited by Peter van Inwagen and Dean.W.immerman

one is choosing amongst brute facts which cannot themselves be explained and which cannot be self-explanatory. The existence of God might be one such brute fact so might other axiarchic explanations which claim that the universe is the way it is because it is good that it should be so. The insuperable objection to belief in God and other axiarchic explanations is the existence of evil: "Since our world seems to contain pointless evils, we have reason to reject the axiarchic view."[32]

It may also be that Parfit thinks that belief in the fundamental goodness of the universe is morally objectionable: even where theodicists do not come across as callous about the realities of human suffering, Parfit thinks the belief that everything must be in some way be good has been an obstacle to progress in ethics. He cites Hume's claim:

> [T]wo thousand years with such long interruptions and under such mighty discouragements are a small space of time to give any tolerable perfection to the sciences.

He then comments:

> It is one such interruption to our moral thinking that, for many centuries, many people believed that everything must in some sense be good.[33]

A final objection to Christian and other religious ethics to which Parfit alludes is what Taylor calls a "hyper-Augustinian" account of desert. On such an account, evil in the world exists because we deserve it, even though we could not help committing the sins which are alleged to require that people (and animals) suffer agony either personally in an afterlife, or as atonement for the sins of others. This is a consequence of the radical fallenness of the whole of creation so that burnt fauns in forest fires to say nothing of the agonies of tortured children as catalogued by Dostoevsky's Ivan Karamazov, are seen as collateral damage in God's just war on man-made evil. Even in a mild and not obviously repulsive form, which suggests only that individuals must suffer in a future life for the wrongdoing they have committed in this one, this doctrine is unacceptable to Parfit. Suffering is for him "doubly bad" because it is always bad in itself and doubly bad when it is undeserved. But, Parfit thinks, no-one ever deserves to suffer – all retributive accounts of punishment are false and misconstrue the nature of human responsibility. Section 39 of Volume One is entitled; "Why we cannot deserve to suffer" and makes a number

[32] *OWM*, II, p. 639
[33] *OWM*, II, p.567. On this he is at one with Berlin.

of claims which, Parfit thinks, demonstrate the impossibility of any kind of just, divine punishments[34]

No thoughtful and humane Christian or other theistic believer denies that the problem of evil constitutes a major and often excruciating objection and obstacle to belief in a God of love. Nor do most Christian apologists now deny that traditional doctrines of eternal damnation are morally repugnant. (See, e.g., Ward, 2013, discussed below). Christians, however, are disposed to hope that this problem of evil does or will have an eschatological solution precisely because they see the alternative as involving the kind of nihilism which Parfit, like Nietzsche, feels the force of so keenly and has devoted his life to rebutting.

My concern is whether Parfit's or any other version of religionless ethics could achieve what all ethics based on religion claims to be able to do: namely, to provide adequate grounds for our belief that some things – perhaps all things - matter objectively and very greatly; that what these grounds are gives us decisive reasons for identifying what is right and wrong and knowing how best to live; that morality frequently requires a demanding but also sublimely inspiring degree of selflessness and self-sacrifice; and that in the end all shall be well and it will turn out that "it has all been worth it." Christian ethics asserts that things matter objectively because they have been created by God so that love and other forms of goodness should flourish in the universe. This means that for Christians, to desire and work for the flourishing of goodness and love throughout the created universe is the same as doing the will of God or obeying divine commandments. Parfit acknowledges that this is not irrational. He writes:

> Most of us would agree, for example, that if the Universe was created by an omniscient, omnipotent, and wholly good God, we ought to obey this God's commands.[35]

He cannot, as we have noted, accept the protasis here because of the problem of evil. Nevertheless, it seems to me that his postulation and defence of objective norms and values is not only almost wholly convincing against the many forms of subjectivism and Naturalism which he refutes, but also has something of the same force necessary to translate beliefs and desires into actual deeds which has traditionally been supplied by divine command theories. By this I mean that there is rather little difference between the form of claims expressed in terms of "God

[34] *OWM*, I, pp.263-72
[35] *OWM*, II, p.552-53

commands…" and Parfitian claims expressed as "Goodness (i.e. what we have objective reasons care about and desire) requires…"

Moreover, he places obligations to selfless conduct at the heart of his ethics in a manner which, in the primacy it implicitly accords to a very strong conception of our duties of compassion, is often redolent of Christian (and Buddhist) ethics, for example, when he writes that "any criminal's well-being matters just as much as ours"[36]. He also looks to the future to furnish grounds for cosmic optimism and for asserting that it could be true that, despite the facts of past and present suffering, it is good that rational beings have come into existence.

For Parfit, to vindicate this optimism, we need to know what we can reasonably hope for Parfit defends what he takes to be the maximum degree of optimism possible without resorting to religion. The ultimate question for him is whether "it will all have been worth it." By this he means whether it would have been better or worse if nothing had ever come into existence. Most of the contemporary, Anglo-Saxon philosophers who disagree with Parfit on other issues never consider this question or see how much hangs on it.

Though he thinks, as noted, that few people would deny that undeserved suffering is a bad thing and its alleviation, in most circumstances, a good thing, and, moreover, that most people would agree on most substantial moral and political issues if they were adequately informed about logical implications and issues of empirical fact, on the substantial issues which Parfit thinks most matter now and on which he thinks the successful refutation of nihilism mostly depends, there is little agreement. He is himself unsure whether it would have been better if the past had never happened. Everything depends on the future. For the Universe as a whole to be accounted good we have to strive successfully to bring about what is, in effect, a utopia. Only if we foresee and help to create, a world where billions of rational beings live thoroughly worthwhile lives, will we be able to give an affirmative answer to the question which launches Parfit's final chapter 36: "Has it all been worth it?"[37]

All this places Parfit in a tradition of atheism which includes Marx and Nietzsche, each of whom sought to rebut nihilism and ground morality by finding substitutes for Christian doctrines of the sovereignty of love and its perfect consummation in life after death: Nietzsche, by postulating a sometimes sublime, sometimes obscene ethic of heroism and the (as it

[36] *OWM*, II, p. 651
[37] *OWM*, II, p. 607

seems to me) insane doctrine of eternal recurrence; Marx, by asserting the obligations of revolutionary engagement and postulating a utopian classless society in which all will finally be well (except for those who fail to survive to enjoy it).

Evaluation (1) Machiavellianism

I am unpersuaded by Parfit's attempts to resolve the dualism between duty and interest identified in Sidgwick's account of the "Profoundest Problem" and so, of his refutation of rational egoism overall[38]. Most importantly, it seems to me that Parfit's account fails to address the challenge of Machiavelli.

He may not think much of the pursuit of personal recognition (or glory) and prosperity as intrinsically worthwhile telic desires, but these are, as Machiavelli would have stressed, what actually motivates many people for most of the time. It is also not obvious that the desire for worldly success in acquiring fame, influence and wealth as a businessperson or politician, or indeed, as a scientist, scholar, creative artist, or other professional, is an intrinsically evil telic aim or object of desire. Moreover, most people whose work requires them to compete with others to make profits or to win political office accept that this work requires them to behave largely amorally in respect of the norms that they recognise as governing personal relationships. This means that what would be ruthlessness or dishonesty if practised in relations with family and friends becomes admirable toughness and ingenuity in the context of fierce competition with people who are rivals. The same behaviours may also be justified as necessary and even be regarded as admirably skilful in dealings with largely anonymous consumers or voters. What is required to succeed in contemporary business and politics may not be the same, or as bloody, as what was required in 15th century Florence but the meta-ethics is the same: there is no place for anything other than rational egoism here and now.

In fact, what Machiavelli thought to be true of his contemporaries, can plausibly be accounted true of ours: namely, that indifference to moral considerations and patently immoral conduct are alarmingly widespread in the way that wealth, power and status are pursued in contemporary Western societies. Moreover, most of those who engage in amoral or immoral practices don't believe that they or others are doing anything seriously wrong, let alone irrational: they really do manage to convince

[38] Michael Smith elaborates a sympathetic but telling critique of this part of Parfit's argument in his chapter "Desires , values, Reasons and the Dualism of Practical Reason" in Suikkanen and Cottingham (2009).

themselves that what's good for them is good for their company or their party and what what's good for these latter is good for the world. Alternatively, they take the view that business and politics operate in a Hobbesian state of nature where rationality makes virtues of the effective use of force and fraud, so that these can only be curbed by fear of punishment from a Leviathan-like sovereign who can terrorise them into ethical conduct and is answerable to no-one (except, for Hobbes, to God). Minimally, they hold, with Polemarchus in Book One of Plato's *Republic*, that right conduct consists in doing good to one's allies (friends) and harm to one's rivals (enemies).

However, even if that is not so, I shall argue in the third part of this study that the concept of vocation provides a much more persuasive account of how to ground moral conduct in the public domain. More generally an ethics of vocations allows us to resolve profound Sidgwickian problem of conflicts between the demands of personal and partial interests and duties to treat everyone's interest as being of equal importance, i.e. as something we have decisive reasons to care about impartially and omnipersonally.

Evaluation (2) *Eliminating Poverty and Conserving the Planet*

Parfit does not tell us what he thinks about modern business ethics or the concept of what Weber famously called "politics as a vocation." Consequently, from Parfit's demonstration that there are at least some "object-given," necessary moral truths about how we should live, what we should strive for and what we should do, it is a long way to his claim that we have a moral duty to make the substantial sacrifices necessary to eradicate extreme poverty *and* to conserve the habitability of the earth.

Most people accept that these two objectives are intrinsically desirable and would be willing to make – as many already do – some personal sacrifices in order to promote them. Parfit would also, no doubt, accept that many, if not most, of the difficulties in achieving the objectives are technical in nature: they do not derive solely or mainly from our culpable moral indifference or selfishness but rather from the fact that the issues involved in finding practical solutions to these problems are extremely complex. They are doubly complex because they involve both a huge variety of conflicting interests and a substantial number of competing moral principles. Consequently, it is very hard to know what set of measures would, in fact, reduce poverty and conserve the planet without having unintended consequences of the sort which make matters worse than they already are, e.g. by sparking world war.

The one philosophical point I want to make in the present context is that Parfit does not seem to notice how importantly his twin candidates for the moral desiderata that now matter most are in conflict with one another in the tragic way that we have seen Berlin characterise and emphasise. To illustrate this I shall follow Parfit in engaging in a thought experiment which I call: "*Fridge*."

Suppose it is possible, by international agreement, to raise world-wide progressive taxes to pay for every household in the world to have a fridge and the supply of fuel to run it. Suppose further that this is agreed to be a minimal criterion for success in the war on global poverty. Suppose still further, however, that this would greatly increase anthropogenic global warming with catastrophic results 100 years hence for the habitabilty of the planet.

In this situation there is a clear choice between the well-being of billions of poor people who are alive now and of even more billions of people who may (or may not) be alive in the future. Whose interests should we prefer? Which objective matters most? Parfit seems to lean towards the view that the well-being of future generations trumps that of those who are presently alive mainly because, if we conserve the planet there may well be over the next billion years vastly more rational beings, able to enjoy enormously more worthwhile lives than is the case now or will be in the near future. There may be a case for the view that this is what an objectivist ethic requires but it does not seem to be a claim which embodies, as the "triple theory" demands, a principle which is universally willable, which no-one could reasonably reject or whose application will be clearly optimific.

More generally, it seems to me doubtful whether, on religionless premises, any case can be plausibly and persuasively made that the presently poor have decisive moral reasons to be sacrificing their and their families' prospects of attaining to a modest level of prosperity here and now for the sake of people who, it can only be hoped, will come to exist and live wonderful lives over the next billion years or so.[39]

There is a further problem. Let us assume, as Parfit suggests, that we and our children are willing to accept a reduction in the quality of our own lives, e.g. from very well worth living to just worth living, in order to secure the much greater well-being of very large numbers of possible future people. How long are we expected to keep this process up? Let us say we are prepared to implement policies now which will ensure that,

[39] *OWM*, II, pp. 612-17

while we and our children will have significantly worse lives than they would otherwise have but that the result will be that a trillion future rational beings will have immensely more worthwhile lives which they would not otherwise have – perhaps since they wouldn't exist. Such a policy would presumably be optimific. It might also in some sense be rationally willable and not rationally rejectable by us and our children. However, it is hard to imagine how this might be plausibly claimed if, for example we had to make everyone's life only just worth living for the first half million years on the assumption that things would pick up sufficiently to compensate for all this sacrifice over the next several million years.

Parfit adumbrates an answer to this question by claiming we live "during the hinge of history."[40] This means, as he sees it, that we are now uniquely confronted with choices which will determine whether rational beings become extinct in the universe or whether our life becomes so good for so long in the future that it will certainly all be worth it. It would consequently be morally terrible if we did not do what we can now to make such a future possible over the next hundreds of millions of years, compared with which human history is very short:

> Our descendants might, I believe, make the further future very good. But that good future may also depend in part on us. If our selfish recklessness ends human history, we would be acting very wrongly.[41]

It is not, I think, particularly difficult to persuade many people to care about the future of the human race: indeed, lots of people already endorse a major, moral commitment to conserving the environment. For many others, it would be wrong to make substantial sacrifices of their children's chances of living fully worthwhile lives in the hope of ensuring the indefinite and highly speculative continuation of human life. Worse for conservationists, the Machiavellian challenge recurs here since the relevant decisions about securing these sacrifices are likely to be taken by those for whom what is most important subjectively is success in careers which involve the generation of profits or votes or military victories. This means that the imperative of giving consumers or voters what they presently actually want mostly trumps or renders impossible all attempts to make or impose the necessary sacrifices of present perceived interests to objectively desirable long-term moral goals. This failure of all other contemporary ethicists, both religious and religionless, to address the challenge from Machiavelli is, I think due to what Parfit identifies as the

[40] *OWM*, II. P.616
[41] *Ibid*

failure of his own critics in their repudiation of his attempts to rebut nihilism: they don't even recognise that there is a major problem here which badly needs to be addressed.

Evaluation (3) Eschatology and Whether It Will All have been Worth It?

Parfit's account of the role of possible futures in determining how we should each live now brings us to the questions which, in religious ethics, doctrines about eschatology and pareschatology are intended to answer.

Parfit, like many religious teachers and champions of non-religious ideologies, advocates an ethic which requires substantial sacrifices from those of us who are presently alive in order to secure the worthwhileness of lives which are now blighted by poverty and other forms of suffering and to keep the universe safe for the living of many more, even more worthwhile lives by future rational beings. We need, therefore, to consider and assess Parfit's religionless eschatology to the extent that it relates to the answers he gives to the deepest questions in ethics, according to Camus and Williams, if not to Sidgwick: namely, "Is life worth living?" and "Will it all finally have been worth it?"

It is worth pointing out, first of all, that there are many thoughtful people who have concluded that the Universe is a bad thing and that it would be better for everyone if they had never been born.[42] This is not, in itself, moral nihilism and some who hold this position like David Benatar, while conceding that they are pessimists, are exceptionally committed to living by rigorous and benign ethical principles here and now. They also regard it as something that matters greatly that we bring about the painless termination of all sentient life on the planet through ceasing to reproduce. Parfit himself refers to exponents of this kind of view such as Silenus: "Better never to have been born."[43]

The issue here concerns suffering and the finality of death. One view is not only pessimistic about the future but also nihilistic about the past in the sense that it holds that it were better that nothing had existed than that

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[42] The most vigorous and lucid, though ultimately, I think, unconvincing defence of this ultra-Schopenhauerian position with which I am familiar is found in Benatar, David (2006): Better never to have been: the harm of coming into existence.(Oxford. OUP). Interestingly it appears that Parfit's wife, the philosopher Janet Radcliff Richards also claims to be unconvinced that it is better that there should be something rather than nothing, while conceding that once there is something (and part of that something is us) then many things are better and worse than other things. See Larissa McFarquhar's long essay on Parfit's life and work: "How to be Good", New Yorker, Sept 5th, 2011

[43] *OWM*, II, p.607

the world as we have known it should have existed. The claim here is that the volume and intensity of suffering in the Universe has been so great that nothing could justify the view that overall it is a good thing that the Universe exists. In the most pessimistic version of this view it is further claimed that our puny efforts to reduce suffering can make no more than the most nugatory and transient difference to the unbearable and unimaginably colossal total of the whole. A less extreme version claims only that some actual, individual suffering is so appalling that no utopia enjoyed by others could compensate for it. Conversely no accumulation of the most magnificent achievements – intellectual, artistic and, above all, moral – could ever "outweigh" the miseries of the past even if – as seems to many implausible - the future were to be mostly miseryless.

Indeed, the best way of terminating human misery might be to annihilate the entire planet painlessly – something Parfit himself acknowledges would be the rational policy if indeed the badness of past and foreseeable future suffering would be so bad as to warrant the termination of history.[44]

Parfit rejects this pessimism because he thinks it does justice only to one half of the human condition, namely the amount of apparently pointless evil there is in the world. But as we have seen, he also stresses that "life can be wonderful as well as terrible" and, in respect to the story so far of life on the planet, Parfit writes:

> In asking whether human history has been worth it, we are asking whether the horrors and the suffering have been outweighed so that human history has on, on the whole, been good.[45]

He confesses himself "weakly" persuaded that, as far as the past is concerned, the good probably does outweigh the bad. But what is really important to him is that "[h]uman history is not yet over."[46] This means that the crucial question for him in deciding whether it has all been worth it and, more importantly, in deciding what we ought to do is: "Might the future, on the whole, be very good?"[47] Parfit, therefore, develops an eschatology of his own that culminates in each of the two normative conclusions to his two volumes, as cited above. These claim that if we develop our capacity for recognising the moral norms which identify what matters to the same extent as we have developed our capacity for scientific

[44] *OWM*, II, p. 615
[45] *OWM*, II, p.607
[46] *OWM*, II, p. 612
[47] OWM,II, p. 615

understanding, we will realise that the goodness of lives lived by future generations may yet make it all worthwhile. Crucially, he claims that this will be true even for those of us who have not lived good or fulfilling lives in pre-utopian times and whose lives may indeed have been worse than not living them at all. This is the Enlightenment view of Progress, writ almost as large as Marx wrote it, and in terms suitable for our current technological and material circumstances. Egalitarianism and environmentalism furnish the ideals and play the role of supremely and intrinsically worthy causes in Parfit's ethics which, he hopes, will have the potential to inspire people to self-sacrifice in the same way that religious faiths and secular ideologies like communism and nationalism inspire substantial self-sacrifice.

However, like other atheist causes which rely on eschatology to inspire and vindicate present sacrifices, the implementation of what Parfit thinks "matters most" confronts serious difficulties. First, there are the practical problems already encountered of how to motivate people actually to make the sacrifices necessary for the establishment of utopia. Then and most importantly there are questions about whether Parfit's position really is morally defensible.

The practical problems are those which Berlin, Popper and others raise on the basis especially of twentieth century historical experience. This is that all forms of this-worldly utopianism by their nature permit the infliction of extreme suffering on, and the killing on a large scale of, innocent people here and now. Worse, while the greatness of the present evils are indubitable, the greatness of the good to come is highly uncertain. It seems unlikely that everyone would be willing to make the sacrifices necessary to secure Parfit's quasi-utopia without being coerced. Nor are there many grounds for confidence that those with the power to coerce would use that power to respond effectively to Parfit's objective moral norms rather than pursuing Machiavellian personal ends in Machiavellians ways. Again it is significant that Parfit is more optimistic about the possibilities of benign progress into an indefinite future than Berlin, because, unlike Berlin, he lacks an equivalent concept to original sin (Berlin's "crooked timber of humanity") to explain why our best-laid and most idealistic plans so often degenerate into tyranny and terror. Instead, he adopts a version of the kind of "subtraction story" which Taylor argues so extensively against and which ascribes our failures so far in the moral and political realm to the fact that rationalist, religionless ethics is a young study. Indeed, as far as the history and future of life on earth is concerned, we are only in our early infancy. This seems not very different from the kind of optimistic belief in progress characteristic of the Enlightenment which relied on the spread

of reason and science and culminated most influentially in Marxism. The hope was that science and its applications would not only to rid us of our physical ills, but rational persuasion and education would also eliminate the moral depravity of man's multiform inhumanity to man. Notoriously, these Enlightenment hopes were dashed with the wholly unforeseen rise of chthonic nationalism and the world-wide horrors of 20th century political experience starting with the First World War and continuing today in alliance with various religious fundamentalisms of which militant Islamism is the most conspicuous and the most cinapicuously vicious. At all events Parfit's rational utopia is dangerously vulnerable to all the objections which Berlin urges against all such monist totalitarianisms.

Evaluating Parfit (4) Utopianism

However, much the greatest difficulty with Parfit's account of how it might all "turn out to have been worth it" is theoretical. It concerns his conviction that one person's suffering can be compensated for or - what is different - outweighed by the happiness or goodness of other people's lives. Here we should look again at the last words of Volume One:

> Some of our descendants might live lives and create worlds that, *though failing to justify past suffering*, would give us all, *including those who suffered*, reasons to be glad that the universe exists.[48]

The fatal clauses in this atheodicy – addressing the problem of evil on atheist assumptions - are the italicised ones. Parfit thinks that the past sufferings of innocent individuals might be sufficiently compensated or outweighed by sufficiently good things that happen to *other* individuals, but not to themselves, in the future, so that the universe would be, as it were, exonerated of the charge of being too evil to deserve to exist. Parfit thinks that suffering may be compensated for and outweighed in such a way that even those who suffer would have reason to be glad that the universe exists. This view seems to me both unbelievable and perverse for the reason given by Schopenhauer which Parfit cites:

> [T]hat thousands had lived in happiness and joy would never do away with the anguish and death-agony of one individual[49]

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[48] *OWM*, I, p.419. Emphasis added)
Transcend

[49] Quoted at *OWM*, II, p.611

In fact, Schopenhauer thought that the sufferings of animals alone would be decisive on this question. Schopenhauer's position is also Ivan Karamazov's, though not Dostoevsky's own view, for whom the facts about the torturing of children provide decisive reasons for rejecting any kind of theodicy and so for accepting moral nihilism. Parfit believes that such views are too extreme in the sense that it is logically possible that history might have been such that only a few people had lives which were worse than nothing but not so bad as to involve long periods of intense suffering. Simultaneously, for each of these wretched unfortunates there could have been a hundred people living thoroughly worthwhile and happy lives. In that case Parfit thinks that the answer to the question: "Has the past been worth it?" would be "Yes." Therefore, conceivably, a good enough future could vindicate the goodness of the universe for everyone even though there can be no personal compensation or the furnishing of great individual goods for individual tortured children, burnt fawns in forest fires, and all the victims of the kind of atrocities for which Auschwitz has become archetypal.[50] In this connection, Parfit refers to Nietzsche's claim that:

> We ought to look…for an end to whose achievement our pain and suffering would be a necessary means. We would then understand that our pain and suffering are not bad.[51]

He criticises Nietzsche for looking for such an end to be given by life itself, since while, as Parfit concedes, God might be able to give life such a purpose or end, life itself may have no purpose or its purpose may be teleologically malign.Besides, Nietzsche (and Parfit) in fact think that the universe is indifferent to our well-being.

Nietzsche, however, seems to me to be right here. The problem of evil for atheists is not, for example, that the persecution of Jews throughout history and similar manifestations of undeniable evil are undeserved and not outweighed or compensated for by much greater goods enjoyed by other people. They are unconditionally evil because, if they turn out to be *pointless*, as they must be if God does not exist and there is no afterlife, then it cannot be denied that the answer to the question: "Where does all the suffering go?" – as quoted from Schwarz-Bart in Chapter One - must indeed be "It gets lost…It just gets lost."

This is the real challenge to cosmic optimism, whether Christian or atheist. If the past suffering of the innocent – and indeed the not-so-innocent –

[50] *OWM*, II, pp. 611-12
[51] *OWM*, II, p. 597

cannot in some sense be justified by being transmuted into forms of sublime goodness whose emergence would have been logically impossible without this evil and suffering, then the evil endured by those who suffer can never be offset by the good enjoyed by others more fortunate.

Such a suggestion seems to be not only incoherent but also offensive. The eventual emergence of a Parfitian utopia would not, therefore, in the uncertain event that it might occur, give all of us, including those of us who have suffered "reasons to be glad that the Universe exists." In the same way, the death and suffering of the millions slaughtered and otherwise immiserated in History's final triumphant march towards the eventual Marxist classless society of justice, freedom, brotherhood, peace and universal creativity are not in any sense outweighed or compensated for by an outcome in which they will not participate. If death is indeed the end, then this suffering also does indeed "just get lost."

Christian and other theodicies – whether or not they postulate the existence of an Abrahamic God – need not be vulnerable to these objections. The explanation of evil may be not about compensation for deserved or undeserved suffering – thought it has too often been misrepresented in this way. Instead, it may be about what Nietzsche said it was about: the identification of a sublime good for the realisation of which the suffering in the world is a logically necessary condition.[52] For all of us, it is painfully difficult to imagine what such a good could possibly be and the pull of nihilism is correspondingly strong (or would be if we didn't avert our gaze). Parfit himself quotes Williams on what would be the effect if we really had full knowledge of the conscious lives of others: "then, surely, we would annihilate the planet."[53] The implication is that the total mass of misery and nastiness would utterly overwhelm any possible compensating goodness.

Nietzsche himself notoriously identified such an end as consisting in the greatest (and some of the most horrible) human and superhuman achievements. Christians, however, identify it with the final flourishing of perfect love in a condition of theosis in life after death. Buddhist eschatology is, in practice, not very different, though it dispenses with any

[52] The best exposition of these two kinds of account known to me remains John Hick (1966), *Evil and the Love of God* (London, Macmillan). Hick rejects what he sees as the dominant juridical theodicy of Augustine, Calvin and Barth in favour of an Irenaean, pedagogical account which explains the existence of suffering as necessary in a world which constitutes a vale of soul-making and claims that a world which has fallen and been redeemed is a better world than one which had never fallen in the first place, as the ancient "*felix culpa"* prayer affirms.

[53] *OWM*, II, p.698

sort of personal God and celebrates absorption into a paradoxically blissful nothingness and pure immaterialism.

All eschatological hope, it seems to me, involves staking everything on a prospect which alleged common sense adjudges a fairly long shot. Parfit's imagined future is, it is seems to me, no more or less improbable than that there is life after death of the sorts which the different metaphysics of Christianity and Buddhism postulate. Indeed Parfit's eschatology is not incompatible with a religious one. Parfit himself stresses what Christians also aver: that we can know very little about the future and the most we can speculate about is how it might conceivably be good enough for us to repudiate nihilistic despair and so do what we can to try to ensure that the future is (much) better than the past.

There is a danger for all religious ethicists that it may turn out they are wrong: we may have wasted our lives trying to discover the will of a God who does not exist. But there is an analogous danger for religionless ethicists like Parfit. This is that as a result of their refusal or inability to admit the possibility of any kind of transcendent reality, of the sort which Taylor defends, they will find, when they have climbed their mountain and arrived at the peak, that all they can see is a moral landscape in which nothing matters. Instead, the view is similar to Harry Lime's looking down from the top of the big heel as described in chapter one. In relation to this, it seems to me that Kant was right to think that only God can ensure that, in the end, it will all have been worth it, by securing for us the eternal beatitude in a life after death. We shall return to some of these issues in considering the Christian virtues of faith and hope.

Conclusion

I conclude that Parfit's arguments are inadequate in respect of the two main issues with which this thesis is concerned: the rebuttal of moral nihilism and Machiavellian amoralism. Parfit, with characteristic candour, comes to the same conclusion in *On What Matters* with respect to the former issue just as he did in *Reasons and Persons* with respect to the latter. In particular, he tells us that now, at the age of 67, it is too late for him:

> to resolve the misunderstandings and disagreements I have partly described [and]… to find ways of getting many people to understand what it would be for things to

> matter, and of getting these people to believe that certain things really do matter.[54]

I shall not conclude, however, that his life is in danger of having actually been mostly wasted.

On the contrary, my view is that he has performed a formidable service to moral philosophy by striving so heroically to generate a religionless ethics which furnishes positive answers to the most profound questions of morality. These are those which concern, first, whether, despite the facts of suffering, failure and death, life on this planet remains worth living and preserving; and, second, what reasons we can have for making very substantial, personally very painful sacrifices to secure the well-being of other sentient and rational beings in the present and the future. In the process, he shows decisively that these questions are not only factually meaningful in the sense of having true and false answers but also of fundamental importance to moral philosophy if this discipline is to contribute anything useful or interesting to making the world a better place. Most other atheist moral philosophers in contemporary, Anglo-Saxon academia regard the first question about the worthwhileness of existence as being either easily answerable, and/or unnecessary and/or even somewhat comically silly. Nor do they feel the full of force of the second question about the magnitude of sacrifice which creating a better world requires and the corresponding difficulties, stressed by Taylor, of motivating people to make these sacrifices on the atheist assumption that "this is all there is,"

The reason that Parfit's work is so misunderstood is thus that he understands the importance of questions about which other ethicists, including Berlin and Dennett as well as many much less impressive contemporary writers, tend to dismiss or otherwise fail to address. Parfit discomfits his atheist critics because not only does he show that the question of moral nihilism needs to be answered but he shows comprehensively how inadequate are the answers which are implicit in most of their writings. In so doing he suggests what does not occur to them: namely, by devoting their lives to the study of ethics they, like himself, may be wasting those lives since there are no moral truths to be discovered - only illusions.

This is a major achievement though it has a corollary that may be unwelcome to Parfit and also accounts for the determination of his fellow

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[54] *OWM*, II, p.453

atheist ethicists to refute him. Thus, if Parfit is right about the inadequacies of subjectivist, non-cognitivist and Naturalist religionless ethics to provide adequate defences against (qualified) moral nihilism and, if further, his own alternative account so far fails to convince his religionless ethicist colleagues, this might be not, as he hopes, because the subject is in its infancy but rather because the project of religionless ethics is inherently unrealisable. If this were so – as I believe it is – then what Parfit's work would have shown is that we do, after all, have to choose between moral nihilism and amoralism, on the one hand, and, on the other, trying to discover or rediscover a rational, non-nihilist ethics, grounded in credible religious beliefs.

For one thing, on substantial moral issues, the conclusions of Parfit's religionless ethics, like those of Berlin and Dennett, are to a large extent consonant with the moral conclusions of Christian ethicists in the pro-Enlightenment tradition of Locke, Leibniz, Butler and, I would argue, Kant himself, as well as those of Keith Ward and other contemporary Christian ethicists some of whose convictions are discussed in Part Three.

More controversially, perhaps, Parfit's own distinctive views are quite close to some religious views, particularly to the version of Buddhist religious but atheist ethics. He seems always to have been sympathetic to Buddhism, particularly in relation to the Buddhist account of the illusoriness of personal identity and its emphasis on realism about suffering and the consequent primacy of the virtue of compassion.[55]

Buddhism postulates no gods but does endorse what I shall be arguing are the two principal metaphysical commitments of all religious faith. These are that the universe furnishes an environment that is hospitable or conducive to the realisation of our deepest desires and that, indeed, all shall be well in some way of which almost all of us can presently have only partial and intermittent but still powerful intimations. Thus Buddhism postulates morally significant life after death whose pareschatology means that we shall have to live in our post-mortal futures with the consequences of the moral choices we make here and now, and whose eschatology seems to involve some kind of self-transcendence and self- obliteration into a condition of sublimely blissful nothingness. This apparently paradoxical conception becomes intelligible when we realise that in this nothingness what has been annihilated is the illusory individual self which is now wholly absorbed or dissolved into a condition of blissful

[55]. McFarquhar, *loc cit.* It is also of some interest that another contemporary atheist philosopher, the late Ronald Dworkin, was at the time of his death in 2013 working on a substantial book, the surviving parts of which have been published as *Religion Without Gods*. (Oxford.2013)

union with the entirety of the universe which, at least in the spatio-temporal form in which we currently seem to apprehend it, may also turn out to be ultimately an illusion.

Whether this captures something of the similarity and difference between Christian and Buddhist religious accounts about what gives us good reason to live as an objective morality requires, Buddhist metaphysics remain attractive to Parfit, who was before his death interested in the thesis that time itself may be an illusion.

What this shows is that if, as I think, a credible religionless ethics is severely limited in its ability to rebut moral nihilism and rational egoism, it does not follow that a religious ethics requires us to believe a large number of metaphysical and historical propositions which we lack good reason to believe. Nor do we need to subscribe to moral views, advocated within particular religions, which we rightly judge to be pernicious.

Religious doctrine subsists on a continuum which stretches from the highly rational to the wholly irrational, and its morals on a continuum from the sublime to the repugnant. This thought opens up another possibility. This is that the best kind of religionless ethics which I have been considering as articulated in the work of Berlin, Dennett and Parfit has much to commend it and may be superior to some, even much, religious ethics.

However, it is also possible that in important ways some versions of Christian and other religious ethics are no less intellectually credible and are actually morally superior to all forms of atheist ethics. Their supertiority consists not primarily in identifying better how we ought to live, but rather in inspiring and empowering us to try to live the best kind of lives of which we are capable. I shall, therefore, now turn in Part Three to the task of describing what I take to be some of the key elements in a version of a specifically Christian humanist ethics which, I argue, is richer and more credible than exclusive humanism in rebutting moral nihilism and Machiavellian amoralism.

PART THREE

CHRISTIAN ETHICS

CHAPTER EIGHT

CHRISTIAN ETHICS AND THE PERENNIAL CHALLENGES: THE THEOLOGHICAL VIRTUES

Introduction

In the third and final part of this study, I seek to show how a version of Christian ethics, because of its anti-nihilist metaphysical convictions, clearly and convincingly rebuts all three forms of nihilism and amoralism. This chapter and the two following explore, respectively a Christian humanist answer to the perennial challenge, to the challenge from contemporary secularism, and to Machiavellianism. Moreover, I seek to show that exclusive humanists should acknowledge that at least some aspects of Christian ethics are more reasonable, attractive and empowering for the living of good lives than an ethics of mere mutual benevolence or of irrational (Nietzschean) heroism. In this respect, I am arguing that Christian humanist ethics "out-narrates" exclusive humanist ethics.

The substantive version of Christian ethics which I here explore in relation to moral nihilism and amoralism is essentially the same as that which Charles Taylor himself endorses as a liberal Roman Catholic. However, because his purposes are essentially historical, analytic, and descriptive rather than evaluative and apologetic, his positive convictions about Christian ethics have to be extracted, as noted, from asides and footnotes or inferred from his discussions of other writers, many of whom are (notoriously obscure) poets rather than philosophers or theologians. For this reason, I have found Taylor invaluable for setting out the complexities and contexts of the debates between exclusive humanists and Christian ethicists in the contemporary West. However, I have not found it possible to use his text for making a clear and constructive case for the view that, in important respects (some) Christian ethics are more cogent than any version of atheist ethics and, consequently, that atheist ethicists can profitably learn from them. For this reason, I am focussing my exposition and discussion of specifically Christian answers to moral nihilism and amoralism mainly on some of the work of Keith Ward, paying especial attention to his early (and now unjustly neglected) book, *Ethics and Christianity* (*EC*) (1970), *Rethinking Christianity* (*RTC*) (2007) and his more recent *Morality, Autonomy and God* (*MAG*) (2013). I also make use of the selection from his voluminous writings published as *Faith and Reason, The Essential Keith Ward*, (*EKW*) (2012) edited by Curtis Holtzen and Roberto Sirvent and approved by Ward himself and for which

he wrote an illuminating and original first chapter. This chapter was also mostly written before the 2017 publication of his *Love Was His Meaning* (2018) which fortifies and enriches Ward's Christian humanism. I am also reassured, by having subsequently discussed with Ward the work which I do expound, that I have not seriously misrepresented his views nor neglected central elements in his Christian humanism which appear in the parts of his work that I have not written about.

Why Keith Ward?

I concentrate on Ward, in addition to the reasons given in Chapter One, because Ward has, more than most other Christian ethicists, compared and contrasted the rationality of Christian ethics with that of what he usually calls "secular" or "non-religious" ethics. He thus focuses on the central questions with which I am also concerned.

In the introduction to *EC* he identifies some of the subject matter of moral philosophy as being to identify what acts or principles are right, and what things are good; what we mean by claims about this; how we might know whether they are true; and how they relate to the general human condition.

He then writes:

> To each of these questions Christian ethics has a distinctive answer and the purpose of this work is to expound and defend these answers. Though non-religious systems of morality may agree with Christianity in some of the answers…I hope to make it clear that there is a distinctive Christian ethic; that it is different in fundamental and important respects from secular ethics; and that where the two differ the Christian ethic has at least a good claim to be the fulfilment and corrective of the secular. (EC, p. 37).

46 years later, in the conclusion to *MAG*, he writes:

> [T]heistic morality is importantly distinctive, and is not merely an add-on to some universally establishable secular morality. Theism provides morality with an objectivity, authority, and hope for realisation that it is very difficult for secular morality to match…It is in the union of a morally sensitive theism and a transcendentally grounded morality that we may sustain a sense that the

> highest business of life is to live well in a just and compassionate society. (*MAG*, p. 215).

My project is similarly to find as much common ground as possible between exclusive humanist ethics and Christian ethics, while nevertheless asserting fundamental differences between them. In particular, I argue in support of Ward's claim that these differences make Christian ethics more rationally defensible than any version of atheist ethics, however honourable and humane, because Christian ethics are grounded in a no less plausible and much more inspiring and sublime metaphysical understanding of the nature of ultimate reality. In particular, they are grounded in an optimistic account of teleology and eschatology which is unavailable, except in the form of simulacra, to exclusive humanists. Moreover, Ward is a particularly good exponent of Christian ethics to set beside Parfit because he shares Parfit's fundamental conviction that ethics must be grounded in metaphysics and his core commitment to objectivity in ethics. Like Parfit and for similar reasons he is an ethical monist and rejects the kind of pluralist ethics which dissolves into relativism and subjectivism as well as the kind of narrow naturalist ethics which treats moral experience and insight as purely psychological phenomena. For him, as for Parfit, values and moral norms are part of the fabric of reality. Like Parfit, too, he sees that, if people believe that the universe exists because it is good that it should do so – the axiarchic hypothesis - then it is rational for them to seek to live their lives in accordance with whatever it is that constitutes that causally efficacious goodness. Where Ward and Parfit differ is on whether this hypothesis is rationally believable, given the immense problem of evil.

Ward and Pro-Enlightenment Christian Ethics

Keith Ward has thus been a staunch apologist for the theistic belief which underpins all Christian ethics. He has also been, and continues to be one of the most comprehensive and prolific exponents and defenders of what I have called pro-Enlightenment Christian ethics (+ECE). I think that he would be, despite an aversion to labels, content to identify himself as belonging to this tradition of Christian ethics. Certainly, he argues vigorously against all forms of anti-Enlightenment fundamentalism, whether Catholic or Protestant. He also broadly agrees with Taylor in seeing the core values of the Enlightenment as emerging from a millennium of progress in Christian moral theology. As an Anglican priest, he would know and welcome the fact that this tradition is especially strong within Anglicanism, and would acknowledge that its most celebrated philosophical progenitor, at least within Anglicanism, is John

Locke. As a philosopher, he also recognises the less obvious contribution of Leibniz to this version of Christianity. He would further agree that the tradition owes a substantial, though not always acknowledged debt to Aquinas and he would understand why, and be sympathetic to the fact that for many years the most influential English exponent of this tradition was Bishop Butler. Particularly importantly, he claims - on the basis of having, rather rarely but again like Parfit, read Kant's entire *oeuvre* - that Kant, far from being a Parfitian religionless ethicist, in fact expounded metaphysical and ethical positions which were powerfully supportive of pro-Enlightenment Christian commitments, even if they were hostile to many of the anti-Enlightenment teachings and practices of contemporaneously mainstream Churches (such as the obligation to attend church).

Pro-Enlightenment Christian ethics is most clearly identified by its commitment to rationality, and especially by respect for the best available scientific and historical evidence. This contrasts with versions of Christian belief that are not only high in superstitious content, but accord reason and empirical evidence only a limited role in ascertaining salvific truth.

Instead, they see them as often in conflict with, and always to be subordinated to the deliverances of ecclesiastical authority, Kirkegaardian leaps of faith, supposedly inerrant scriptures and/or direct divine revelations.[1] For Keith Ward reason and faith are mutually supportive and he has himself done as much as, or more than any recent philosophical theologian to acquaint himself thoroughly with the most advanced findings of the natural sciences. His conclusion is that, contrary to the belief of many, they are consistent with, and often supportive of a Christian - or more generally - a theistic account of the nature of reality.

Ward and the Three Challenges from Moral Nihilism

Thus, reason and faith are allies not enemies in respect of Christian belief and Ward has always sought to show that a credible ethics requires rationally defensible metaphysical foundations. These metaphysical foundations provide the Christian answer to the perennial reason for thinking moral nihilism may be true. They can be largely assimilated to the theological virtues in Christian ethics. Thus, they include faith that the existence of the universe and of ourselves is not to be explained as a set of gigantic, pointless and largely tragic accidents but is rather the product of perfectly benign purposing. The ultimate explanation of everything we

1 I have already mentioned Richard Hays as one impressive (if not wholly consistent) champion of anti-Enlightenment Christian ethics, defined in terms of the authority of revelation over reason.

can possibly experience must, therefore, be teleological and refer to the will of a sufficiently powerful creative being (God) who desires that love and other forms of goodness should emerge from nothingness and come to flourish perfectly throughout creation. This belief warrants the eschatological hope that all shall finally be well, albeit in some manner of which, here and now, we can only glimpse occasional intimations. Given these teleological and eschatological foundations, the answers to questions about how we ought and ought not to live are to be given in terms of God's perfect love for each of us and for all creation.

The importance of the theological virtues in Christian ethics is not that they are rationally indubitable or incontestable: they are bedrock beliefs which cannot be shown conclusively to be true but nor can they be shown to be false. However, this does not make them irrational, let alone meaningless. Our experience of evil counts agonisingly against them and intimations of perfect goodness count tantalisingly in their favour. They both admit of rational criticism and need to be revised in response to changing social circumstances and intellectual progress. Indeed, such revisions, often in response to rational criticism, may lead - and according to Ward, as well as Taylor, generally have led - to more realistic, more humane, more profound and more contemporaneously illuminating interpretations of these propositions and of their moral implications. From its earliest days, there have certainly been revolutions in Christian morals and doctrine, of which Ward identifies several particularly important ones. These have not self-evidently constituted uniform linear progress in moral conviction and conduct. However, it is reasonable to discern in the development of theological ethics, as both Taylor and Ward do, a kind of Hegelian evolution which may be more traditionally attributed to progressive revelation. Nevertheless, the theological virtues, as understood by philosophers like Ward, summarise the Christian answer to the perennial challenge posed to any non-nihilistic ethics by the facts of death, suffering and failure, as described in chapter two above.

With respect to Taylorian secularity and the challenges to ethics from pluralism, discussed in chapter three, Ward has also remained true to what I have taken to be the Enlightenment tradition of liberal humanism. I discuss Ward's Christian account of this ethical position in the next chapter. Meanwhile, the key to any credible defence of liberal humanism as a distinctive, coherent, universalisable and monist set of ethical truths is the denial that any form of monism can be legitimately based on claims to authoritative knowledge of the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth in matters of ethics. Rather it must be based on a recognition that, though we certainly make progress in our rational understanding of the

subject matter, our understanding is never complete, unrevisable, and perhaps on occasion needs to be radically modified in response to new experiences and the discoveries of others. Certainly, we must always proceed with a realistic and humble (though not neurotic and debilitating) recognition that we may be to varying degrees and in some respects wrong. Thus rational thinking about ethics, whether atheist or Christian, should proceed in exactly the same ways as it does in the sciences.

Finally, though Ward does not directly address the challenge of Machiavellianism as set out in chapter 3, he has useful things to say about the role in Christian ethics of vocations and the attitudes appropriate to them, as well as about creative work and idealistic causes. I take the concept of vocation to be essential to a convincing Christian rebuttal of Machiavellianism for which atheists need an analogue. I broadly endorse Ward's specific account of the primarily vocational nature of Christian ethics but claim that this concept needs to be extended in a full Christian rebuttal of moral nihilism. In this way, perhaps, I endorse the allegedly anti-Enlightenment tradition in moral theology which John E Hare[2] traces particularly to Duns Scotus and which is central, at least in Nigel Biggar's[3] account, to the ethics of Karl Barth. Thus, I am less concerned to criticise Ward's account of vocation in Christian ethics than to emphasise and expand it. In particular, this concept seems to me to be crucial for the project of rebutting moral nihilism in the three main forms I have identified.

Points of disagreement

Unsurprisingly, I disagree somewhat with some of what Ward claims. For example, I accept that Christian ethics, if the term is to have any meaning, must be grounded in reflection on the life, work, teachings, death and afterlife of Jesus of Nazareth as recorded, because of their supposed salvific importance, in the selection of writings that eventually became the New Testament. I do not, however, accept Ward's claim that the Jesus of the New Testament possessed *unique* authority in discerning the will of God and so of uniquely revealing by his example what morality requires. (See e.g. *EC*, pp.97, 102, 166). Relatedly, I find, as does John Hick, Ward's admittedly ingenious attempts to rehabilitate the doctrines of The Trinity and the Atonement unconvincing, compared for example with mythopoeic[4] understandings of the historical Jesus. More generally, I

[2] John E Hare: *God's Call*

[3] Nigel Biggar: *The Hastening That Waits*

[4] When I say of an assertion that it is to be understood mythopoeically I do *not* imply that it is literally false. It may be literally true or untrue or contain a mixture of fact and fiction. In this sense, If an assertion is to be understood mythopoeically the question of literal truth is irrelevant to understanding

think that what Ward says in some places about the exclusively salvific nature of Christian ethics (cp Jn XIV.6) is at variance with what he says in other places both about other religions and about hell. I also do not really understand his fairly sustained and passionate commitment to idealist metaphysics and am unsure how it relates to a doctrine such as the resurrection of the body, which seems to me to be crucial to Christianity. Originally, I thought Ward was at least confused in his account of the relation of self-interest to Christian virtue and tended to conflate self-interested with both egoistic and with selfish behaviour. I have now omitted my discussion of this issue since Ward has informed me that he had already changed his mind on these issues and now accepts the discriminations I make amongst these concepts in chapter one.

I do not explore these points of some disagreement further because they do not bear on the central issue of rebutting moral nihilism and amoralsim. Instead, I single out for discussion and elaboration the three major themes in Ward's philosophical theology which constitute Christian answers to the three types of moral nihilism and amoralism I expounded in Part One. I focus on Ward's treatment of these themes as evidence that Christian ethics can - as exclusive humanism cannot - credibly rebut a despairing moral nihilism.

Faith

Keith Ward's entire *oeuvre* may be construed as a set of cohering attempts to show the reasonableness of the Christian understanding of the theological virtues where "virtues" are understood in the sense of Greek *aretai*. These are the habits of thought, feeling and conduct which are necessary for the achievement of *eudaimonia*, meaning the condition of being to which all reasonable persons aspire and the condition of complete satisfaction which comes from the enjoyment of all and only those things which are truly worthy to be desired.
In his earlier book, *CE*, Ward does not treat as separate topics the theological virtues either collectively or individually. However, throughout this book and the rest of his writings he is adamant that a non-nihilistic and non-amoralist ethic requires metaphysical foundations. In *CE* he sums up what he has been trying to do as having "tried to develop the Christian view of the metaphysical basis for morality" (*CE*, p.274). This metaphysical basis is the existence of God as the source, and godliness as the final object, of all moral striving. In *MAG* he discusses

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what is important about it. In the case of the claims made in the New Testament what is important is that they were and are believed to reveal salvific theological truths about the nature of the human condition in relation to ultimate reality and how we should consequently try to live.

the theological virtues specifically, largely quoting or paraphrasing Aquinas, and he does so in the context of the beatific vision. Thus, he tells us:

> For a believer in God there are not only natural goods at which we aim. There is also the more important supernatural good, a supreme goal of all positive desire… That goal is God."[5]

The theological virtues are necessary for achieving this supernatural goal and we cannot cultivate them by exercises of our own wills alone: we need for them to be graciously "infused" in us by God. Thus Ward tells us:

> Faith is the virtue of desiring God…Faith is not knowledge…Faith is more like firm attachment to a belief, because on hearing about God we are attracted to this vision of goodness, by the prospect of moral failure and ignorance of truth, and the hope of a better life, the beginnings of which we seem to feel in the encounter with God.[6]

It is important to note that for Ward and Aquinas, though faith is "much more than the acceptance of propositional beliefs" – most notably multiple forms of fidelity to the love of God as revealed in Christ Jesus - "it does entail the acceptance of propositional beliefs" (*MAG*, p. 198). For Ward, as for Aquinas, these are the propositions set out in the orthodox Christian creeds. I want to suggest, however, that all non-nihilist, anti-amoralist ethics must make specific metaphysical claims which ultimately have to be accepted on something that is, in fact, indistinguishable from faith.
In discussing Bradley Ward identifies theistic metaphysical claims as being about:

> the self in relation to ultimate reality, which will make sense of our natural feeling that moral commitment requires both self-sacrifice (of the self-concerned ego) and self-realisation (of the higher self) and that in such commitment something like an authentic human way of life is to be found[7]

This echoes a claim Ward made in *EC*:

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[5] *MAG*, p. 197
[6] *MAG*, p 198
[7] *MAG*, p. 197

> The question of the metaphysical foundations of morality is of special importance in any consideration of Christian ethics for… Christian ethics is essentially metaphysical in nature…but…to the secular moralist … one can say that the integral relation of metaphysics is not peculiar to theists or Christians.[8]

Consequently, moral philosophy must *inter alia* "give some account of how the moral life is to be conceived in the context of the general nature of man and his world."[9] For Christianity human beings are both mired in ineluctable, self-destructive sinfulness (which Ward identifies with selfishness) and capable, through their own endeavours in cultivating responsiveness to divine grace, of achieving liberation from sin and death and thus attaining to salvation and fitness to inhabit the kingdom of heaven. This is achieved by discovering what God wills for them which is the ultimate ground of all moral decision-making.

Hope

Clearly, as Ward tells us, "Faith carries with it the theological virtue of hope for eternal beatitude which only God can provide."[10] This hope is for the eventual triumph of good over evil and the future happiness of ourselves and others. Acting in the hope of securing our own real best interests, as Alasdair MacIntyre pointed out in his *Short History of Ethics* (1967), is fundamental to the *eudaimonistic* ethic which Christianity took over from the Greeks. This was only much later and misguidedly (in Macintyre's view) repudiated by Kant who insisted on an impossible dichotomy between the pursuit of duty and the pursuit of desire. Consequently, for MacIntyre, in Christian ethics moral struggle is between what is truly worthy to be desired (worshipped) because it leads to salvation and beatitude and what is in reality worthless or counterfeit, whose worship is idolatry and whose consequences are wretchedness.
As we shall see more fully below people who behave lovingly do not do so in the hope of securing future pleasures or other rewards – if they do that we find they are only faking love. Rather behaving lovingly towards another and seeking their good rather than one's own is (paradoxically) what satisfies one's own most profound present desires and is what constitutes one's present happiness, enjoyment and delight. In *EC*, Ward himself offers a nuanced critique of Kant's dichotomising of virtue and happiness. He writes:

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[8] *EC*, p. 35
[9] *EC*, p.36
[10] *MAG*, p 199

> [T]he division should not have been made in that way in the first instance. For what is binding on man is not the negation but the fulfilment of his nature. Kant also believes that morality is the fulfilment of human nature *qua* rational agent; but it still seems to him that such fulfilment cannot be guaranteed to bring happiness in its train...But…if one asks what the condition will be of the man who obeys the moral demand and so fulfils his nature, being just what he ought to be, does it not seem clear that it will *ipso facto* be a condition which can be appropriately described as "happiness? (*EC*, p. 230-31).

The issues of selfishness and fulfilment will resurface when we come to discuss the theological virtue of love and to address the Christian refutation of Machiavellianism. Meanwhile, the role of hope is crucial in beginning to answer what Ward identifies as the two most formidable objections to theism.

When writing about G.E. Moore and Iris Murdoch. He tells us "they see no evidence of purpose in the cosmos, and they see too much evil and suffering for it to have been brought about for the sake of good."[11] These twin objections to theism overlap since it is the existence of immense and apparently pointless suffering that provides the most compelling evidence for the nihilist view that nothing really matters because *everything* is ultimately pointless and destined for extinction so that it will finally be as if it had never been. From this it seems to follow that there is no reason why we should not live as thoroughgoing egoists, doing whatever we happen to want. Thus, there is no reason why we should not behave as Machiavelli recommends. There is also, of course, no reason why we should not choose to live lives of much generosity, integrity, humility and kindness, as many atheists do, if that's what we want to do. But, either way, our conduct is strictly irrational and determined by our contingent tastes in behaviour. Alas, this certainly need not, and mostly does not, require trying to eliminate from our lives substantial dollops of avarice, vanity, malice, cowardice, idleness, callousness, and passing by on the other side. On atheist assumptions the relation between the practice of virtue and the hope of happiness is tenuous at best.

The case for amoralism is thus greatly reinforced by the nihilist view of suffering. This is that suffering is ineradicable and overwhelmingly

[11] *MAG*, p. 100

pointless in a universe which itself exists for no purpose. The Christian answer to this resides in an eschatology according to which, as was famously revealed to Julian of Norwich, "sin is behovely but all shall be well, and all shall be well and all manner of thing shall be well." (*Revelations of Divine Love,* Ch. 27). The relation of Christian faith and Christian hope, then, is this. A reasonable faith grounds the theistic teleological postulation that everything that exists is ultimately to be explained in terms of perfectly benign purposing. Consequently, given the power that such creativity presupposes, it becomes reasonable to hold fast to the sure and certain hope that those purposes will finally be realised. Specifically Christians hope that, in some post-mortal existence which we can only dimly imagine and of which we can have only occasional intimations here and now, all suffering will be transmuted into forms of sublime goodness, such that without the earlier suffering the future good could not, as a matter of logical necessity, have come to exist at all. Christians deny, in respect of suffering, what atheists who accept the finality of death are compelled to assert: namely, that in the heart-breaking words quoted in Chapter One from Andre Schwarz-Bart: "if there is no God…all the suffering… gets lost; it just gets lost." For Christians "not even the fragments shall be lost."

Hope then, in Christian ethics, is what provides an antidote to the despairing moral nihilism which the immensity of apparently pointless evil in the world seems to render inescapable.

Keith Ward discusses the problem of evil at many places including *EC*, pp 220-30, EKW, loc 501, *Why There Almost Certainly Is a God*, pp 90-95. Ward's general position is that, as Leibniz claimed, every evil is a necessary evil, given that God's omnipotence is not such that God could do everything that isn't logically impossible but rather that God is a being than whom none more powerful could conceivably exist. God also cannot but express creatively or actualise the essential goodness of the divine nature. Evil and suffering exist not because God intends or desires that they should but because they are necessary to the sublimely great good which is the evolution of beings such as ourselves capable of freely choosing between good and evil and freely loving God and one another.

To the extent that Ward relies on a version of the free will defence, I think there is much to be challenged in this kind of theodicy both in relation to what God can and cannot do and to what human freedom actually consists in. This debate which Ward engages in, *inter alia,* with John Hick (*EC*, pp 220-30) is, however, not centrally relevant to the rebuttal of moral nihilism. What is crucially relevant is Ward's consideration of Ivan

Karamazov's view that no amount of goodness, now or in the future, could possibly justify God's permitting a world to come into existence where undeserved suffering is so extreme and widespread or where even one innocent little creature is tortured to death. Ward responds to this by invoking the central Christian doctrine of the hope of heaven. He writes in relation to the tortured child described by Ivan:

> Suppose, however… that God could take the life of that creature, and place it in a world of supreme happiness and love for endless time. Suppose that creature could not otherwise have existed and that its tears are not 'unavenged', for they are part of a continuing universe in which justice will reign, and all tears will be wiped away…I am not saying that this makes the suffering all right. I am not denying that it is horrendous. I am suggesting that God could transform it in a greater and wider reality so that it becomes part of a whole life and a wider community that, though tragic, yet realizes undeniable and unique forms of goodness (IWTCG, p.95).

Taylor points out that exclusive humanists, as a matter of fact, often do not regard their own deaths as any great evil and may indeed think themselves intellectually and morally admirable because of this. They cannot, however, be so easily detached and brave about the irremediable disaster of the purposeless suffering and final death of their loved ones. Nor can they, as the best atheists do not, minimise the sheer volume of undeserved, irremediable, uncompensatable and utterly pointless misery which has characterised, continues to characterise, and will clearly go on characterising for a long time the existence of many of the sentient inhabitants of this planet. Christians, says Taylor, may not have anything concrete to offer in the face of suffering and death but they do offer hope. Atheists do not even have this at least for those they care about who are alive now - even if they sustain the hope, in the manner of Marx or Parfit, that all may yet be splendid for countless fortunate individuals who may come to exist in the future.

The hope that all suffering will be shown not to have been pointless at all in a life or lives after death would be indistinguishable from rather feeble and ignoble wishful thinking if that hope were entirely groundless. But the hope that no suffering need be finally wasted, that it may all turn out to be an indispensable ingredient in the most perfect joy, is not groundless. It is a hope which is grounded in our experience here and now of ordinary

human loving of many kinds. I find Christian theodicy unpersuasive (and often offensive) when it claims that evil is necessary to the existence of beings possessed of (some) free will. A more plausible theodicy, I believe, claims that suffering is necessary if there are to be creatures in the universe capable of love. After all, to love, as Aquinas citing Aristitotle avers (ST. II. IIAE, 20.1), is to desire the good of the object of love. And in a universe which literally left nothing to be desired there could be no love since there would be no presently absent good which anyone could seek to bring about for a loved one. And in a world where love was logically impossible so would be all the other virtues associated with love in I. Cor XIII and elsewhere in the NT.

Nor, indeed, would there be any logical space for the practice of the cardinal virtues relating to the pursuit of our own good, whether these need to be infused (Aquinas) or not (Augustine). In this I follow John Hick and think that the key to beginning to understand how a perfectly good God could create a universe in which all the sufferings we encounter occur, is to think through what a universe in which no-one ever suffered anything at all might be like. Then perhaps we can begin to imagine what a universe would be like in which we had plenty of choices selecting diversely delicious dishes from vegetarian menus and magnificent pieces of music to listen to from catalogues brimming with many types of masterpiece. After that, perhaps we can think about what difference to the problem of evil it would make if the world were populated by billions of wonderfully happy, fully rational Parfitian super-beings beings and the only suffering ever experienced was one slight headache afflicting only one person, only once and for thirty seconds. Fortunately, it is unnecessary to pursue such thought experiments here: we need only to hold on to the reasonable hope that the problem of evil may not finally prove insoluble. This will be easier if what matters most in our experience is not the avoidance of suffering but the flourishing of love.

Love

I take it to be ungainsayable that love is the sovereign virtue in Christian ethics, given the multiple and diverse places in the New Testament, most obviously in the double-love commandment, where this is explicitly stated or implied. This means that, for at least most early Christians, loving aright and well was the essential condition for living as we ought to and for attaining beatitude in accordance with God's will for us. For them, this had been revealed by Jesus's teaching and example and by the activities of the Holy Spirit. Exclusive humanists. according to Taylor, also acknowledge interpersonal love, alongside the kind of fulfilling work which can be regarded as an expression of love, as essential to a life well lived and the attainment of "fullness." As such, in the form of general and particular benevolence, it is at the heart of all non-nihilist and non-amoralist ethics, whether religious or non-religious and even in their most austerely impartial, dispassionate and Kantian versions.

It is this agreement about the central moral importance of love which most conspicuously exposes how much religious, especially Christian ethics have in common with non-religious, especially exclusive humanist ethics. Love is also, for the vast majority of humankind what most makes life worth living and what motivates much selfless activity on the part of parents and children, lovers and friends, colleagues and comrades engaged in furthering common causes. It is true that some people, including some theologians, object to according central importance to love in Christian ethics. They find the concept too vague or sentimental or think it undermines the role of divine justice or is too closely associated with sexual desire. Alternatively, as in Parfit's imaginary example, (p.228 above) they may simply find the term, "love," vacuous and unhelpful, having so many different meanings that it ceases to mean anything much at all. Such objectors often make a linguistic distinction between the meaning of the Greek word "*agape*" and other words like "*eros*" and "*philia.*" Whatever else may be said for them these distinctions are not warranted by analysis of ordinary language where the Greek verb *agapein* continues to have the same versatility as the English "to love" and is commonly employed in Greek popular songs and romantic fiction in exactly the same way as the English verb, "love." – "s'agapo" = "I love you."

Ward himself is in no doubt about the sovereignty of love in Christian ethics. In *EC*, Chapter XV on the work of grace, he writes:

> [T]he Christian belief is that the highest conceivable human good lies in the actualisation of the possibilities of love inherent in the free encounter of persons in a common world…The Christian contention is that love is the supreme moral excellence; and love may be summarily defined as complete devotion to the well-being of others. " (*EC*, pp 236-67).

I shall largely follow Ward in arguing that the cultivation of many forms of loving, as ordinarily understood, do indeed identify the essence of what it is to live well and in accordance what morality requires. I shall, however, take Ward's suggestion here of the transfiguring power of love further than he does himself.

At least in his later writings, Ward offers a eudaimonistic account of morality which draws heavily on Plato, Platonists and Augustine and accords more closely with the Christian version of Aristiotelianism found most comprehensively and influentially in Aquinas. A eudaimonistic Christian ethics assumes that in answering the fundamental question of morality, "how should we live?" we are necessarily asking the question: "what future state of affairs is it truly most desirable for us to try to bring about and to enjoy?" Christian eudaimonistic ethics sees the basic question for Christian ethics as being about discerning what is most truly worthy to be desired because it will uniquely lead to true beatitude. We know that this is not exclusive self-concern from our experience of ordinary human loving here and now where our own interests are identified with the securing of the interests of others and what makes us most happy is sharing in the happiness of others who also share in ours. As Taylor puts it, what is distinctive about Christian ethics by contrast to all forms of exclusive humanism is that "a paradigm bodily emotion is seen as *criterial* for right action - as in the case of the New Testament agape." (SA, p.615. Emphasis original). Hence, New Testament teaching about pearls of great price, treasure in heaven, and the paradoxes of saving one's life by losing it.

As Taylor also stresses, an ethic of charity is much more than an ethic of mutual benevolence even though the two overlap and the latter emerges from the former. It is also philosophically superior since an ethic of charity answers, as religionless ethics cannot, the vital and, Taylor thinks, lamentably neglected question of moral motivation. Ward concurs. The exclusive humanist's ethic of mutual benevolence (which Taylor calls "the modern moral order" and Ward calls "secular" or "humanist" morality) relies on persuading people to be moral on the basis, Ward thinks, of an

implausible claim about enlightened self-interest in this world or an unreliable appeal to universal human sympathies. *Agape*, by contrast reflects the sublime self-giving love that God has for us and that we ought to have for both God and for one another. Moreover, God's love for us, whatever its consequences for happiness here and now, is destined to issue in beatitude in life after death, not as reward but as consummation. The essence of this difference in motivation is that, unlike the ethic of general benevolence or sympathetic impartiality, an ethic of charity issues, not from detached ratiocination which is powerless to rebut a ruthlessly determined egoism, but from a passionate desire for, and attraction to what is perceived to be perfectly good and literally divine. Thus Ward writes:

> Faith is already a sort of love, the beginning of a love of God, by which God begins to disclose the supreme desirability of the divine life.[12]

He then goes on to say that a "faint analogy" is:

> [F]alling in love with a person whom one may have known for some time. But suddenly that person is seen in a new light, as irresistibly attractive and beautiful. Such a discernment evokes trust… and it involves personal commitment and loyalty that may go well beyond the evidence, and yet not be thought irrational"[13]

Earlier, in an important section dealing with "the love of the good" rather than the specific theological virtue of *agape*, Ward has made more robust use of the analogy of falling in love. As described in the first sub-heading of *MAG*, Ch 7, entitled "From the Platonic Good to a Personal God," he sees the love of the good as a stepping-stone on the way to divine love. However, Ward argues that even in its Platonic form and with the Kantian qualification that it must be love of the good "for its own sake," religious morality is superior, in rebutting egoism, to all forms of religionless ethics based on conceptions of human flourishing here and now. He tells us:

> There are things which many people think are more worthwhile than the continuation of their own existence or their own flourishing. Indeed, it is almost necessary for achieving happiness in a human life to believe that this is the case. The most obvious example is passionate love for another human being. Such love is capable of bringing the

[12] *MAG*, p. 198-99
[13] *Ibid*

> highest happiness,,.Love is centred on the object. It cares passionately about it, finds joy in it, admires it, cares for it and, if necessary, is prepared to die for it. In love, the self is centred on another, and thoughts of happiness recede into unimportance. It would be silly to ask why I should do what a loved one wants. If I understand what love is, I will see that serving another has become my goal, and if my love is deep, even at any cost.[14]

Nor is this the only analogy from human loving which dissolves the conflict between duty and desire and exposes the irrationality of egoism, understood as not caring about anything or anyone but oneself. Ward continues:

> There are many analogies in human life to this sort of love. There is loyalty to one's comrades in the army, loyalty to one's country, devotion to truth or art. These are all activities that subordinate the self to something beyond it, taken to be of great worth, to which a person may commit themselves, in response to something demanding, which makes life seem worthwhile.[15]

This association of Christian or divine love (*agape*) with ordinary interpersonal loving can be usefully elaborated to bring out what is perhaps *the* crucial difference between Christian and exclusive humanist ethics. This is the visionary character of ordinary human loving which reveals or transfigures our perception of those we love so that they appear to us as they would be if they were perfect. Ward himself suggests how such an elaboration might proceed in between the two passages quoted above. Here he tells us: "Knowledge of the other – the sort of knowledge that involves us passionately is intrinsically motivating. To see what the loved one is to me is to see why I may give my life for the one I love.[16]

Moreover, in his "faint analogy," cited above, he also emphasises coming to see the beloved in a quite different light. This suggests that all authentic human loving partakes of the character of a vision, a revelation or a transfiguration. This was the view of W,H. Auden in his 1964 Introduction to Shakespeare's *Sonnets*. The visionary apprehension of the beloved as transfigured into an image of perfection is what causes people to come to love another in the first place and it is this that distinguishes authentic love

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[14] *MAB*, p. 44
[15] Ibid
[16] *Ibid*

from simply being physically attracted to someone or finding them congenial. Indeed, it seems plausible to claim that experiencing the beloved as transfigured is what romantic love consists in. It is also a vision of what perfect happiness would, and to some extent already does, consist in, namely the experience of requited love. This is true paradigmatically of romantic love between couples and it is true not only of couples who are struck by the *coup de foudre* but also of those whose love matures more slowly. Here the origins of love are clearly erotic but the visionary element in love between spouses is no less important and striking as the basis for the fierce loyalty and deep mutual devotion of those who have sustained their love over a long period of time, through many changes, and when carnal desires have abated. Moreover, this visionary or transfiguring character of love is equally apparent in the love of parents for children and of children for parents. I believe it also underpins the deepest friendships and may subsist between human beings and other animals. In these cases it is clear that the sovereignty of love depends on the fact that, on the Christian account, love is the object of faith and hope and the means of securing what is believed in and hoped for. As Taylor puts it, "it is both path and destination." Less obviously, I shall argue, in seeking to refute Machiavelli, love is at the root of all passionate commitments to particular causes deemed to be good and to particular types of creative work which constitute a kind of anonymous loving which seeks requital in loving recognition by anonymous others.

Notoriously, but wrongly, love is said to be blind to the obvious empirical flaws in the beloved and the potential dangers of the relationship. In fact, love is typically hawk-eyed about these matters but sees beyond them. It is, however, true that not only do no earthly relationships of love achieve perfection, but also these flaws sometimes tragically sever the bonds of love or allow them to fall into desuetude. At all events, all our loves, however morally admirable, are destined to be terminated in death.

Parents, friends and spouses, whatever their beliefs are, at their best, realistic in recognising these moral and material limitations. However, there is again a crucial difference in the way believers and unbelievers regard the vison of perfection which love discloses. For Christians, at least, the vision of the transfigured beloved reveals what is ultimately and most importantly true about them. It reveals, as mundane perception cannot, what they are really like: that is to say images of the perfect goodness of God capable of growing into God's likeness since, for the Christian it is utterly false that "this is all there is." To the (regrettably limited) extent that we participate in this vision of the beloved as perfect and recollect it, genuine humility, penitence and gratitude, limitless

forgiveness, substantial self-sacrifice and even the loving of enemies become effortless and obviously right and rational practices for us to cultivate. For exclusive humanists, by contrast, the Christian vision of the beloved as potentially perfect is, like Christian faith and hope, delusional. But then it becomes very hard, on the basis of a secular ethic of mutual benevolence, to show that works of supererogation beyond mutual benevolence and easy rescue are not irrational. It also becomes very hard to sustain even ordinary virtues like honesty, kindness and unselfishness in the conduct of large swathes of our working lives, as Machiavelli has shown us.

Exclusive Humanist Analogues

One reason for thinking that exclusive humanism's resources for rebutting moral nihilism and amoralism are less adequate than those available to Christians is that many versions of exclusive humanist ethics find they cannot do without substitutes for Christian postulates about human nature and human destiny. Ward discusses Nietzsche, Marx and Sartre in *MAG* Chs 11-13. In all three there is a contemptuous and forceful rejection of alleged Christian responses to the challenges of moral nihilism and amoral egoism. More interestingly, they also reject the conventional humanist ethics which grew out of the Enlightenment and, in their view, issued in the personally repressive and politically oppressive ethics which dominated much of 19th century Europe. These ethics were allegedly equally pernicious whether they sought justification in traditional religion or in a purely rational humanism. However, these anti-Enlightenment atheists (-EEHs) all found that they could not do without substitutes for Christian accounts of sin, salvation and liberation from the tyranny of egoism.

For Nietzsche, the wretchedness of our present condition is due not to sin, but to weakness. This will be overcome by the glorious affirming of life by superhuman beings who transcend the tawdry egos of ordinary mortals. Such supermen will come triumphantly to exult in a universe where *everything* that has ever happened matters so much and so splendidly that it recurs eternally. These Nietzschean simulacra of sin, salvation and eternal life - if they are accorded the prominence usually accorded to them and if their inconsistency with much more attractive and persuasive moral doctrines found elsewhere in Nietzsche is ignored – are as repulsive as they are incredible.

For Marx, human beings are wretched because they are alienated from their work, their place in nature, their fellows and from themselves. This

is the consequence of ruthless conflict between economic classes which has so far culminated in the appalling brutalities of Capitalist domination.

However, Capitalism is destined to be overthrown and replaced with a utopian classless society. Consequently, what Marxian morality requires of us is that we sacrifice our individual and selfish interests in order to secure the revolutionary transformation and perfection of the whole world. Here the analogues are even clearer for Christian doctrines about sin and fallenness, a Kingdom of Heaven and the need for the radical and revolutionary transformation of human personality through a form of de-alientating *metanoia* (self-redirection or repentance).

Marx and Nietzsche also offer faith-like grounds for believing in the inevitability of their versions of the ultimate triumph of good over evil. For Nietzsche, it is the will to power which determines why everything is as it is and as it will become. For Marx it is historical inevitability. Interestingly, Sartre who sought in his Existentialist prime sought to do without either teleology or eschatology, found that he could give no coherent account of why, for example, resisting Nazism was a more authentic exercise of our freedom than working for it as a torturer. He only resolved this question when he became a Marxist and finally found peace.

Each of these philosophers owes their originality and influence to their elaboration of an ethic which is profoundly hostile to Enlightenment ethics in either its Christian or its classically religionless form. The older and currently more widespread version of religionless ethics is that associated with the champions of the Enlightenment (+EEHs). Here, the origins of evil in the world are ascribed not to sin but to ignorance. The hope for a remedy for the ills of the human condition was, therefore, to be placed, not in submission to the will of a supernatural being, but in the work of enlightened scientists and educators. The former would rid the world of physical miseries; the latter would extirpate all the cruelties and follies which characterise our currently vicious personal and political life. The great driving conviction of 18th century Enlightenment morality was a belief in the inevitability of progress brought about through the ever-accumulating triumphs of reason and culminating in utopia. Contemporary pro-Enlightenment atheists have been, as we have seen, compelled by actual history to abandon belief in the inevitability of progress but they retain a hope that the application of rationality in all areas of human life can lead to indefinite moral progress towards a better and better world for human beings and other animals. Berlin, Dennett and Parfit all share this hope but with varying degrees of doubt and foreboding.

It is also clear that they cannot dispense altogether with fundamental faith-like metaphysical beliefs comparable to belief in God in seeking to rebut moral nihilism and amoralism. For Berlin, it is the values like decency which "everybody knows" to be morally compelling; for Dennett it is his "sacred values"; for Parfit it is "irreducible moral norms." Of these three Parfit's religionless ethics is the most religion-like in its horror at the present state of the world, its hope for a near-paradisal state for billions of supra-human beings in the indefinite future which will be brought about by the conversion of everyone to rationalist, religionless ethics. This will make everyone willing to make the huge personal sacrifices which will be necessary to get humanity from where it is to where it could and should be.

The fact that exclusive humanism in all its forms seems unable to do without substitutes for the theological virtues in Christianity does not, of course, show that the metaphysics on which pro-Enlightenment Christian ethics is based is more rational than the metaphysics which underpins exclusive humanist attempts at rebutting moral nihilism and amoralism. But it does strongly suggest that without theological virtues or equally undemonstrable substitutes for them, it may after all be true that nothing really matters and we have no reason for making really substantial sacrifices of our own interests in accordance with whatever are alleged to be the requirements of morality. It may also be that the rational attitude to the human predicament is one of extreme pessimism.

Conclusion

I have little quarrel with Ward's account of the virtues of faith, hope and charity. They can be distilled into the assertions which correspond to belief in the triply transcendent nature of reality which, as we have seen at p. 21 above, is what for Charles Taylor differentiates what believers affirm and exclusive humanists deny. These are that the universe and each of us, individually, exist for the purpose that sublime goodness in the form of perfect love should flourish eternally and that that purpose will finally be realised in a life which extends indefinitely beyond death. Consequently, on the basis of experiences, - notably experiences of love, which furnish us with intimations of the divine character of the universe - we can reasonably hope that death is not the end, that no suffering will finally turn out to have been pointless and no failure, irremediable.

Given this faith and this hope, the answer to all ethical questions about how we should try to live, what moral principles we should adopt, what virtues and habits of mind we should cultivate, what kind of people we

should seek to become, and how we should act in particular situations – all these questions are to be answered with reference to God's perfectly benign purposing for the whole of creation. So it is false that nothing really matters: everything and everyone matters to the extent that they contribute to or frustrate the realising of God's purposes, which are that all things should evolve from a condition of nothingness into one of perfect beatitude. Consequently, we should live our lives in the here and now as the precise opposite of rational egoists, allowing ourselves to be liberated from the " fat, relentless ego"[17] and seeking to let "all that [we] do, be done in love" (1.Cor. IV.16). In this way, we will spontaneously live in accordance with all the other virtues associated with love in 1.Cor.XIII and indeed throughout the New Testament.

The theological virtues provide the metaphysical basis for the Christian rebuttal of moral nihilism and amoralism. They also tell us that answers to ethical questions are to be framed in terms of what we are called by God to be and to do. It must, however, be acknowledged that many Christians and many non-Christians manage to live lives of great goodness, while giving very little thought to the question of whether, perhaps, nothing really matters or whether there are any good reasons for deploring and trying eschew unadulterated egoism.

Certainly, the relation between metaphysics and morality comprehends, in Ward's writings and generally, many more issues than the refutation of moral nihilism and amoralism. Indeed, Ward himself does not seem to be much afflicted by Kierkegaardian dread of abysmal nothingness or Pascalian terror before the eternal silence of infinite space. He, no more than most exclusive humanists, seriously contemplates the possibility that Macbeth may be right and that life really is "a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing."

Nevertheless what he says about teleology, eschatology and the sovereignty of love does show just how much more forceful basic aspects of Christian metaphysics are in rebutting moral nihilism and amoralism by comparison with the attempts to achieve the same result on the metaphysical premises of exclusive humanists. In particular, exclusive humanists need a faith-like belief in the reality of good and evil, which for Christians is provided by belief in a God of love whose ascertainable will provides the ultimate reason for identifying what truly matters about how we should try to live. In this way, it enables us to distinguish rationally between morally good and bad choices and true and false moral

[17] *Loc Cit*.

judgments. Along with faith-like belief in the reality of good and evil, EHs also need grounds for hope that it is neither irrational nor futile to seek to do good and avoid evil. Otherwise, they have no means of distinguishing amongst possible objects of desire those which, on the one hand, are rationally worthy to be desired and whose realisation they can help to achieve and, on the other, those which are merely tempting dross or are unattainable. In Berlin's case morality is grounded in the palpable reality of many things, like decency, which "we all know" to be good. In Dennett's, these are the mainstream values of contemporary American academia which are held to be literally sacred and unquestionable. In Parfit's case they are irreducible normative truths which constitute necessary and eternal verities no more metaphysically "queer" than the truths of logic and arithmetic. These analogues for faith, however, seem to me flimsy in comparison with their Christian originals, as do all EH accounts of what we can reasonably hope for. As for love, which EHs, no less than Christians, typically regard as the supreme good of human life, the difference is that the vision of perfection which the transfigurative power of love reveals is for Christians revelatory of eternal verities. For EHs it is a tragic illusion.

CHAPTER EIGHT

CHRISTIAN ETHICS AND THE CONTEMPORARY SECULAR CHALLENGE: CHRISTIAN LIBERAL HUMANISM

Introduction

In this chapter, I shall consider, again mainly by building on the writings of Keith Ward, a Christian defence of liberal humanism which, I maintain, answers the particular challenges to morality generated by the secular character of contemporary (post-1960) Western societies as described by Taylor and discussed in Chapter Three above. In this way, the chapter mainly focuses on the first of my hypotheses about how extensive are the shared moral convictions of Christian and atheist ethicists. These concern the unique reasonableness of the values of liberal humanism in identifying what really matters and how consequently we should live, including why and when we should sometimes make substantial sacrifices to secure the good of others.

If we assume that what matters is not what people believe but how they behave we might conclude that the overwhelming convergence in Taylor's secular societies about basic moral values such as honesty, fairness and kindness, makes it irrelevant to ethics whether people do or do not believe in God and life after death. The convergence about values suggests, as I think is very often true, that the real debates in relation to individual and collective behaviour concern empirical questions about how best to implement the values that almost everyone shares and how to accommodate them on the comparatively rare occasions when they conflict. It might indeed be highly desirable to recast most ethical and especially political disagreements in terms of likely consequences in practice rather that as disputes about moral values between the righteous and the wicked. This would prevent the disputants from persuading themselves that their opponents are not just mistaken about matters of fact but actually vicious in their desires, while they themselves are not merely better-informed than those who disagree with them but palpably more virtuous.

My claims here, however, are more ambitious and much more contentious. I shall argue that liberal humanism is in fact the only rationally defensible ethical creed, not only in Taylor's secular societies of the West but universally. As such, in a highly plural world, its values ought to be foundational in the kind of global ethic which Ward himself endorses as an important objective for ethicists everywhere and to which he himself

has hoped to contribute. I shall be arguing, then, that a monist commitment to the values of liberal humanism is the only credible way of addressing the challenges of pluralism in the modern world in such a way as to avoid the twin evils of tyrannical totalitarian monism and "anything-goes" moral anarchy.

In the hope of abating some of the more obvious sources of contention, I am not claiming that this kind of humanist ethics is peculiar to Christian or "Western" culture. In this respect, moral truths are as culture-irrelevant as the truths of mathematics or medicine. Indeed, our understanding of them, as with our understanding of mathematics has, as a matter of fact, been enriched by ethicists, from many different cultures, past and present, and will, no doubt, continue to be so in the future. Nor does asserting that the foundational humanist moral obligations of reducing suffering and enhancing enjoyment are not culture-relative preclude the possibility that some other moral obligations, such as the practices of piety or patriotism or politeness, are culture-relative.

It must be conceded, however, that the liberal version of humanism, with its emphases on the fundamental values of individual liberty and political equality, was indeed most fully elaborated by the revolutionary thinkers of the European Enlightenment in the 17th and 18th centuries, their precursors and their inheritors in Europe itself and subsequently throughout much of the world, most conspicuously in North America and Australasia. It will therefore be an important question to what extent these liberal values are indeed universalisable or whether they are relevant only to a particular culture at a particular period in history which is now being transcended.

My claim in relation to this is that part of the justification for thinking that liberal societies are more humane than paternalist (parentalist) ones is that this is – or at least has now become - a largely justified empirical generalisation. It is also partly that there is a necessary connection between the pursuit of truth in ethics, science, history and philosophy and cultivating the intellectual virtues of honesty, courage, fair-mindedness and imagination, understood as a capacity for conceiving of the world other than it presently is or is commonly assumed to be. These virtues are, no doubt, characteristic of successful intellectual endeavour wherever it occurs but are certainly explicit in the scientific and moral revolutions which are associated with the Enlightenment. Finally, it seems to me, as it did to Kant, that liberal societies are ethically superior to paternalist ones because only in societies which grant individuals freedom to make mistakes in what they believe and how they consequently behave, are

human beings accorded the unique dignity which accrues to free moral agents. If these things are true it is to be hoped that liberal values can be incorporated into, and so enrich the evolution of other belief systems both religious and secular, in the East as well as in the West.

For all these reasons, the argument of this chapter will focus on some of the writings of Keith Ward which support the view that theological liberalism greatly fortifies the case for social and political liberalism and that the latter generates social and political arrangements which are most conducive to the flourishing of humanism, whether Christian or atheist.

In this chapter, therefore, I proceed by describing, first, the humanist component in Ward's liberal Christian humanism. Then I consider its liberalism. After that, I shall consider, further to what I have said in the last chapter, the distinctively Christian element of Ward's liberal humanism. Here I focus especially on the issue of moral motivation, adequate treatment of which Taylor identifies as the glaring omission in contemporary moral philosophy. I conclude that a version of Christian liberal humanism of the sort which Keith Ward (along with many other theologians) argues for extensively provides, with some qualifications, the best rebuttal of moral nihilism and amoralism to which the pluralism of the modern world may tempt us.

Humanism

It is clear that many of those who continue to believe the central tenets of Christian teaching identified above, like Ward and Taylor, also believe in the central moral and political doctrines which they have inherited from the Enlightenment, and seek to incorporate these within a liberal but still specifically Christian ethics. In particular, they meet the challenges of pluralism by accepting the essential Enlightenment doctrines of rationalism, liberalism and humanism, as applied to science, ethics, politics and theology itself.

Pro-Enlightenment Christians thus share some crucial elements of moral and political morality with exclusive humanists, many of whom accept the claims of Taylor and Ward that these Enlightenment principles and practices only became possible in 17th and 18th century Europe and America as the result of a progression of earlier reforms within Christian ethics itself. The disagreement between contemporary +ECEs and +EEHs is about whether the moral discoveries (as they both see them) of the Enlightenment have enriched and to some extent corrected earlier Christian orthodoxies, as +ECEs maintain, or whether, as +EEHs believe,

they have rendered the Christian underpinning of Enlightenment values otiose. This is a small disagreement compared with the substantial ethical issues on which +ECEs and +EEHs agree in respect of their shared humanism.

Humanism, as Taylor understands it, is a sustained and ever-expanding "celebration of ordinary life" here and now, so that ethics, even in an ultra-pluralist society, is centrally concerned with promoting whatever enhances, and removing whatever obstructs causes for such celebration. For Taylor this seems to entail a liberal tolerance and celebration of even extreme pluralism. Ward's liberal Christian ethics places similar emphasis on universal human flourishing, although his liberalism is both more explicit and more carefully qualified than Taylor's. Nevertheless, in respect of their humanism, Christian and exclusive humanists are indeed, as Taylor says, "brothers under the skin" and should make common cause in defending and propagating their version of humanism against the many attacks to which it is presently subject from many different directions.

I shall, therefore, be mainly concerned to show how and why, although they cannot agree about the perennial questions, Christian and atheist humanists can, should and often do agree about the unique reasonableness and importance of defending and propagating "humanist" or "personalist" convictions and commitments in contemporary and highly pluralist global contexts.

"Personalism" is the term Ward prefers to "humanism," since, like Parfit, he recognises that there may be non-human persons whose distinctive personal qualities we should value, though he also recognises duties towards non-personal beings like animals and even, perhaps, the non-sentient parts of creation. Further, because he wants to allow that what we ought to cherish is characteristic of a God who is, in relevant respects, personal, he prefers the phrases "Christian" or "transcendental personalism " to "Christian" or "religious humanism." He also contrasts "Christian personalism" with "secular humanism," using "secular" not in Taylor's complex sense but simply to mean "non-religious". My own preference has been for the phrase "pro-Enlightenment Ethics," whether Christian (+ECE) or exclusive humanist (+EEH). I have explained these terms in Chapter One, re-appropriating the term "humanism" so that it does not imply atheism, as it does in many uses, and only connotes a fundamental concern with human well-being now and in the future, whether religious or religionless. Of particular importance is the fact that my usages allow for the possibility that "Christian humanism" denotes a

coherent set of beliefs which may themselves be thought to be best promoted through either liberal or paternalist practices.
One central claim I have already adumbrated in discussing Parfit is that +ECEs and +EEHs do not need to agree on the existence of the Abrahamic God, life after death, and the truth about Jesus of Nazareth, in order to share a faith or quasi-faith in the objective reality of moral goodness. I described the difference between "Goodness requires" and "God commands (or wills)" as wafer thin. The most persuasive claim of ethical objectivists about what moral goodness requires, made by both +EECs and +EEHs, is a recognition that our most fundamental obligations consist in doing our utmost, individually and collectively, to relieve suffering and to promote human flourishing. This double injunction may be taken as a definition of humanist ethics. It seems very hard to deny or to dismiss it as merely a matter of opinion or taste or widely shared psychological dispositions. It is also not easily justified by appeals to enlightened self-interest in life before death.

This is Ward's view of the common humanist morality which atheists and Christians should cooperate to promote. Thus at the beginning of the Conclusion to *MAG*, he writes:

> It is a matter of importance to find a fully rational belief system about human nature in relation to the wider reality of which it is a part, to formulate a fully sympathetic morality that takes universal human fulfilment seriously, and to seek ways of overcoming human tendencies to violence and domination.[1]

At the end he tells us what he thinks such a fully sympathetic morality to consist in:

> It is…that the highest business of life is to live well in a just and compassionate society , and to see that living well consists in seeking the true, the good and beautiful for its own sake, in realizing as fully as possible our positive human potentialities and in working for a society and a world in which that is a real possibility for all without exception.[2]

Liberalism

[1] *MAB*,, p,213
[2] *MAB*,, p.215

The core principles of liberalism, in creating this kind of good society, are that all individuals should have maximum freedom to determine for themselves how it will be best for them to live. The requirement that individuals be *equally* free can be rewritten in terms of the principle that all individuals should enjoy maximum liberty to pursue happiness as seems best to them, provided only that they do not wrongfully harm others.

Whichever formulation is preferred this central principle of liberalism derives from the view that it is not the business of government, the Church or anyone else to compel people to live good lives and to secure "the removal of wickedness and vice."[3] Instead, it is the sole business of government to secure the fundamental rights of people – God-given or natural or both – to make their own decisions for better or worse about how they will exercise their capacity for making free choices in pursuit of what they conclude will be a life well lived. It is certainly the business of government to secure an environment in which individuals can make these choices, largely by promoting security and prosperity. However, it is mainly the business, not of legislators, but of educators of many kinds, including families, teachers and ministers, to help people to make wise choices.

Although there is endless debate about the possibility, scope and nature of individual free choice, it is clear that belief in its primal importance as a political ideal, together with that of the democratic or popular political institutions which are conducive to its exercise, are at the heart of liberal humanist values. Moreover, a liberal humanist will argue that to the extent that the values of liberty and equality are not adequately protected in any particular society, that society is to that extent morally defective. Conversely, the promotion of these values provides the best hope of preventing a pluralist society or a pluralist world from degenerating into ghettoism, aggressive nationalism, bitter clashes of culture, and ultimately war, however waged, and whether civil or international. A fundamental commitment to liberty and equality and all that they imply in practice thus constitutes the foundations of a liberal monist response to the challenge of pluralism.

Like Taylor and many other theologians as well as many atheists, Ward believes on empirical grounds that humanism is likely to flourish most widely and fully in societies which are committed to the Enlightenment values of individual liberty and political equality. These are the essential political values of liberalism. Pro-Enlightenment humanists thus also

[3] Prayer for the sovereign. *Book of Common Prayer* (1662)

agree that it is important to defend and propagate liberalism in the contemporary world because liberal values, properly understood, have universal application. This is also particularly important in plural societies because of the severe and diverse threats which they face from illiberalism.

Hostility to Liberalism

These threats are mainly related to the fact that liberalism first became the dominant political creed in societies which grew out of Latin Christendom via the Enlightenment. The core social and political values and institutions of these societies are consequently sometimes thought of as only appropriate to the societies which grew out of European Christendom.

One source of threats to liberal values depicts attempts to claim that they identify well-evidenced, universal truths as somehow a form of immoral cultural imperialism. If, however, they are conceived as being like the fruits of science, they can more properly be viewed as the best, albeit always provisional and improvable, theories in the human sciences which are currently available to everyone. Thus, the fact that a set of better moral beliefs, no less than advances in mathematics or the development of new useful technologies, were first discovered at a particular time and a particular place has no bearing on their current or future truth and usefulness in other times and places. And this, I maintain, applies to the beliefs which constitute liberal humanism.

Ward further and explicitly claims[4] that his Christian transcendental personalism offers a superior justification of the substantial values which liberal societies foster than any secular account, which must ultimately rely on a defence of some version of Mill's higher and distinctively human pleasures. This is because it locates the source of moral values and obligations in the supremely good purposes for which the universe and the persons who inhabit it exist. Moreover, when discussing Barthians – whom Ward thinks misread Barth on liberalism[5] – he agrees that Christians should indeed maintain that their "faith has the power to illuminate every area of human thought and activity." But he goes on to say:

> That requires, not a view that rejects liberalism, but a more careful analysis of the positive values of liberalism,

[4] *RTC*, loc. 3289
[5] *RTC*, *locs*. 3650-3672

> and of how liberalism is an instrumental but vital part of a contemporary commitment to Christian orthodoxy.[6]

This suggests the stronger conclusion that the humanism espoused by both +ECEs and +EEHs should also cause them to agree about liberalism. In particular, they should agree that societies whose political arrangements are liberal, i.e. grounded in respect for individual freedom and political equality, are *eo ipso* the societies in which the fundamental obligations of humanist morality - whether Christian or atheist - are most likely to be met. In this way, these liberal principles, properly understood, offer the best defence against the challenges of moral nihilism and amoralism posed in the ultra-pluralist circumstances of Taylor's secular age. +EECs and +EEHs should, therefore, unite to defend and propagate liberalism in theology, ethics and politics. I shall argue for this conclusion mainly by reviewing Ward's principal arguments for a similar conclusion and against various types of illiberalism. In doing so I shall also suggest some supplementary considerations, amendments and refinements.

As already to some extent indicated, and as I shall argue more explicitly in the next and final chapter dealing with Machiavellian amoralism, my own conclusion is more critical than Ward's of what contemporary ethicists, both atheist and Christian (and including Ward) have said or failed to say in rebuttal of moral nihilism and amoralism, whose plausibility they seem to me to have underestimated. My conclusion is also more drastic than Ward's. Ward thinks that liberal Christianity furnishes a better refutation of the case for moral nihilism and amoralism in the modern world than can be offered by exclusive humanists who are the inheritors of Mill and Kant. Its superiority consists in its more accurate account of human nature and its more realistic assessment of what the facts of experience should lead us to regard as probable and possible in respect of future human experience. This furnishes individuals with more cogent reasons and inspires more effective motivation to do what morality requires, especially when this requires a substantial sacrifice of legitimate self-interest in life before death. I agree with this but argue further and more radically that without something at least very closely akin to Christian faith in benign teleology and eschatology, no such refutation of moral nihilism and amoralism in the modern world is rationally defensible.

Ward's Liberal Christian Ethics

[6] *RTC*, loc. 3762

Ward addresses the role of liberal Christianity in the modern globalised world in the last three chapters of *Rethinking Christianity* (*RTC*, Chs 11-13). In the final chapter of *The Essential Keith* Ward (*EKW*, Ch 19) he addresses the issues given in the chapter's title, "Religion and the possibility of a Global ethics." He further addresses issues relating to a comparison of +EEH and +ECE in *MAG*, especially in Part Two.

At (*RTC*, loc. 3188) Ward claims that we are currently experiencing in the West what he calls "the moral crisis of liberalism". This consists in the fact that the credibility of the basic tenets of liberalism has been severely damaged by claims which are either based on misunderstandings or apparently supported by widespread but ill-founded criticisms by advocates of anti-liberal doctrines in theology, morals and politics. Many criticisms are based on both misunderstandings and on anti-liberal criticisms.

Ward hopes to contribute to the resolution of this crisis by articulating and defending a version of liberalism in theology, ethics and politics which is compatible with orthodox Christian teaching and indeed a natural and ongoing development of the whole history of Christianity from its inception to the present.

Ward himself in *RTC*, chapter 9, identifies six possible senses of, or strands within "liberal" theology. The first, which Ward identifies as the core doctrine of Protestantism, relates to religious freedom and asserts "the freedom to dissent, to follow one's own conscience and to practice one's own faith."[7] The second commits to an acceptance of the methods and findings of the natural and historical sciences for ascertaining truths about the nature of the world and what actually happened in the past, notably whenever these findings conflict with the biblical accounts as literally and/or traditionally understood (*RTC*, loc 2376). The third, associated mainly with 19th century German theologians accepts the first two understandings but focusses "liberal" theology on more restricted theological claims about Jesus and about the dogmas developed in the course of the Church's history from its earliest days. It identifies the primary importance of Jesus as consisting in his ethical teachings (*RTC*, loc.2535). It also claims that the Church's dogmas "belong to mythology constructed by human imagination in response to deep human needs but which a more scientific view of the universe renders obsolete."[8] Ward's fourth version of liberalism stresses the rejection of external authority in

[7] *RTC*, loc 2371
[8] *RTC*, *loc* 3037

morals[9] and the assertion of the autonomy of ethics as most emphatically propounded by Kant. The fifth sense of "liberal" Christian theology which Ward discusses is that associated with the German theologian and contemporary of Hegel, Friedrich Schleiermacher, who is often accounted, Ward tells us, "the father of liberal Protestantism." However, Ward also tells us:

> [i]n Schleiermacher a fifth sense of the term 'liberal' is found, quite different to the other four strands I have noted so far – namely the project of basing personal belief on personal experience. That is certainly one strand in liberal traditions in theology, but we must be careful not to assume that all liberals will agree with it.[10]

The sixth possible sense of "liberalism" has its origins, Ward thinks, in the emphasis on private religious experience characteristic of the Protestantism in which Schleiermacher was brought up. This is the doctrine that religion and politics should be kept separate.

Ward deals fully, succinctly and critically, in *RTC*, Ch 10, with each of these species of liberal theology, and makes clear in what sense he is and is not content to see his own theology as "liberal" (e.g. at *RTC*, loc. 4158). Roughly, he accepts with enthusiasm the first two senses relating to the religious freedom and the importance of pursuing the evidence from the natural and historical sciences wherever it leads – which is certainly not, he thinks, to the rejection of the central Christian claims about the Trinitarian God or life after death. He rejects the attempt of some 19th and 20th century German thinkers to eliminate all metaphysics from Christian belief leaving only the ethical component. But he also rejects the Hegelian attempt to translate the humanly concrete accounts of the persons of the Trinity into metaphysical abstractions. In respect of Schleiermacher, while he emphasises the enormous importance of individual (spiritual) experience in the development and sustenance of faith he does not see anything particularly liberal about this. Finally, he sees that at least an extreme doctrine of the separation of religion and politics is not really liberal at all to the extent that it undermines the liberal claim that all opinions should be available for critical evaluation to everyone, whatever their initial beliefs.

An implication of this, especially important for debate in Taylor's secular societies, although Ward himself does not draw it, is that education which

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[9] *RTC*, loc 2562
[10] *RTC*, loc 3042

does not afford children a fair opportunity to understand Christian beliefs is just as indoctrinational as one which exposes them only to Christian beliefs in the hope of getting them to accept these beliefs uncritically. The same indoctrination by omission is also to be regretted when it fails to furnish students with the means of critically evaluating diverse views about the social and political arrangements which are necessary or optimal for human/personal flourishing.

What is distinctive about all forms of liberalism is that they are opposed to all forms of absolute authority which claim immunity from criticism and seek to secure conformity of belief and behaviour by the suppression of argument and the employment of sanctions.

Ward critically analyses each of these six forms of theological liberalism in considerable detail. He also summarises in his introduction "six major slices" of the long history of development and adaptation in Christian theology, starting with the transformation of Christianity from a Jewish sect into a universal religion for gentiles and concluding with the advent of globalisation and its consequences for Christian belief. Discussion of these slices *seriatim* provides the structure for the whole book. On the basis of these discussions of different meanings of liberalism and the history of Chistian theology, Ward reaches a conclusion which is substantially the same as Taylor's Reform Master Narrative. This is:

> [t]hat Christian faith has developed throughout its history and that it must continue to do so. The general direction of development is clear – towards a pluralistic and critical faith, committed to the cause of human flourishing and centred on liberating apprehensions of transcendence.[11]

He further says in his introductory chapter:

> In the course of the book, I develop a positive Christian theology that is both liberal and orthodox. So the book can be seen as a modern defence of liberal Christianity, and a systematic presentation of my own views as a Christian theologian.[12]

Ward's Christian Orthodoxy

[11] *RTC*, loc. 59
[12] *RTC*, loc. 64

"The liberal challenge to the traditional views of the Catholic Church, and also of many Protestant groups is clear," Ward tells us, in discussing the fourfold Enlightenment attitude to Christian and any other faith. This is that:

> Every belief must be open to public criticism. No system of belief should be laid down as unrevisable in principle. No one system of belief should be made mandatory by any state. And there should be complete liberty of conscience in religion (compatible with the prevention of harm to others and the maintenance of social order).[13]

Ward endorses these principles of liberalism. They are, however, he insists compatible with, and strongly supported by the orthodox and often conservative components of traditional Christian theism. Liberal theology is only incompatible with "belief in an infallible and unrevisable source of unchallengeable doctrines, whether Pope, councils or Bible" (*RTC*, loc. 2188). Ward consequently sees no contradiction in accounting his theology both liberal and orthodox.

Indeed, he thinks the orthodox component is necessary to give moral substance to the liberal component. He writes:

> I agree that liberalism, in the sense simply of freedom of belief, enquiry and criticism is not enough, Taken on their own such freedoms leave you without any positive moral values or goals, except that of making your own mind up any way you like.[14]

As discussed in the last chapter, it is the Christian theological virtues which provide orthodox Christian ethics with decisive grounds for rebutting the perennial challenges of moral nihilism and amoralism. These derive from the apparent facts of pointless suffering, irredeemable failure and the ultimate annihilation in death of everything we cherish, and which atheists like Russell take to be undeniable.

However, Christian answers to these perennial metaphysical challenges also underpin answers to contemporary and localised ethical problems such as those of contemporary secularism. In particular, they provide a better answer than any EH can give to the problem of motivation, whose conspicuous absence from recent discussions by moral philosophers Taylor deplores, and which as we shall see more fully in the next chapter,

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[13] *RTC*, loc. 2182
[14] *RTC*, loc, 3530

he is right to deplore. The consistent burden of Ward's arguments here, expressed particularly clearly in the parts of his writing referenced above, is that on exclusive humanist accounts of the human condition and human destiny, such as Russell's, their conviction that "this is all there is" ought rationally to issue in despair, as Russell himself recognised, and in moral nihilism, as Parfit feared. On the Christian account, the claim that "this is all there is" – the denial of a benign transcendental purpose and destiny for everything – is false. For Christians the evidence from human experience about what more there is than "this" – i.e. about transcendent realities - has proved, and continues to prove to be sufficient to warrant their making specific decisions concerning the fundamental ethical questions about how to try to live and how to treat others. The experiences falsifying exclusive humanism, have been, according to Christianity:

- Awareness of the presence of divinity in many different circumstances by very many people, both dead and still living
- Encounters with divinity as revealed and exemplified in the life, death and afterlife of Jesus of Nazareth
- Operations of divinity in experiences of grace in the subsequent, ongoing and highly diverse moral and spiritual lives of many ordinary and extraordinary men and women.

These forms of confirmation of religious truth are, it is claimed, available to all who seek them, though of course many people simply do not so seek. Central to the metaphysics, which this evidence supports and in which Trinitarian Christian ethics is grounded, is the conviction that the universe, far from being indifferent or hostile to what human beings care about, is magnificently hospitable to the realisation of our deepest desires.

Our shallower desires, which exclusive humanists can indeed hope to satisfy if they are lucky, are that we should enjoy a reasonable amount of fairly mundane and imperfect love and associated good things of various sorts here and now. However, this is *all* that is possible if what we do and what happens to us from cradle to grave are all there is. Christians, however, assert - most emphatically through their claims about the resurrection of Jesus – that there is more, and the more that there is will be or, at least, could be as good as, and better than anything we can presently imagine. Death is not the end. The end – the ultimately attainable *telos,* the numinous apocalypse – will be the final triumph of good over evil and the conquest of death by love. This means that it is reasonable to believe that our very deepest desires are realisable. These are that love and associated forms of goodness should endure eternally, be enjoyed universally and grow continuously towards sublime and multiple

perfections. It is in this sense that moral judgments are most helpfully described as objective: they concern what it is most reasonable, on the evidence of experience, for us to account truly and supremely desirable as opposed to being no more than articulations of the transient and subjective impulses and appetites - no matter how complex - by which we are more or less consistently motivated.

These beliefs, about the relationship of the way the world is to what we most intensely yearn for, ground the answers to questions about what Christian ethics requires of us and why we should seek to practise what it prescribes. Thus, if it is true that the universe is hospitable to the realisation of our deepest desires, it would be irrational not to seek, through the deployment of our time, talents, energy and other resources, to bring about the future possible states of affairs in which those desires are maximally fulfilled.

Conversely, I would add, if the facts of failure, futility and death mean that our deepest desires are destined to be devastatingly thwarted, then it requires either a heroic but ultimately irrational effort to live as if things really do matter very much. Consequently, we will lack motivation to try to do more than make the most of whatever opportunities for subjective enjoyment are available to us, thanks to sheer luck, whether niggardly or generous. In practice, I suspect that the majority of unbelievers for much of the time behave more decently than is rationally required of them because they are largely indifferent to attempts at rational speculation about metaphysical issues and are content to trust their inbred intuitions. They live good lives, in short, in spite of this being irrational given what they claim to believe (when they think about it all) about the true nature of the human condition.

Be that as it may, it is clear that Ward has consistently endorsed these Christian claims about metaphysics and ethics, and would accord them a central place in the "orthodox" part of his Christian theology. For example, he writes of (part of) the mission of the Christian church that it is:

> [t]he keeper of the divine promise, founded on the resurrection of Jesus, that all evil will be overcome and all good will be held for ever in the mind and being of God…a witness to the ultimate nature of reality and the ultimate destiny of human life,[15]

[15] *RTC*, loc, 495

In the much earlier *EC* he claims:

> [t]he whole framework of the practice of the moral life will be different for a Christian and for a secular thinker. The Christian morality depends on certain factual assertions – that there is a God whose nature is holy love; that there is continuance of life after death which can be one of growth into the fulfilment of an adequate response to the reality of God begun, however imperfectly or even unconsciously, on earth; and that there is a power of grace and renewal which can reorient our basic human attitudes and establish us in the life of responsive love, here and now.[16]

In *MAG*, Ward has been much more concerned with how Christian metaphysics enriches and deepens what may seem to be the purely secular moral goal of living " a fulfilled and happy human life" and so overlaps with a great deal of secular morality. Nevertheless, he insists that the specifically Christian doctrine which brings about this enrichment and deepening is its account of a theistic morality in which:

> Moral goods and obligations are founded on a supremely good God on whom I completely depend for my existence and who has a good purpose for my life, which God can bring to fruition despite the many evils in the world and my own moral weaknesses. It would be irrational not to fulfil such obligations and it would be an expression of reverence, gratitude, trust and love to fulfil them.[17]

Human Dignity and Liberal Humanism

As already noted by Ward, liberalism understood as a rational and scientifically scrupulous refusal of all dogmatism needs to be complemented by the need for positive moral beliefs if it is to avoid the extreme relativist conclusion that there are no such things as better or worse opinions about moral issues. Better opinions will be those which constitute conclusions derived from valid arguments whose premises are based on honest and accurate interpretation of available evidence. As he puts it:

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[16] *EC,* p.273.

[17] *MAG,* p.212

> Liberal values… are largely instrumental to the creative pursuit of values that are truly intrinsic or worthwhile for their own sakes such as truth, beauty and friendship (*RTC*, loc. 3536).

I am not sure what elements of liberalism are *not* "largely instrumental" and so intrinsic or fundamental. I think Ward's case is strengthened if these are spelt out. I suspect that they are not only concern for the happiness of all sentient creatures but also respect for the unique dignity of every individual human being. This dignity, which is exclusively ascribable to persons, derives from their capacity and responsibility to choose for themselves, for better or worse, how they will live their own lives.

This concern for the dignity of human beings as genuine moral agents seems to be fundamental to Christian ethics. It is, I think, what is meant by the claim that liberal Christian ethics are individualistic. After all, "the hairs of our heads are numbered." The individuality in question is that of unique personalities, and it is what makes each individual person uniquely valuable and morally important. It is, is course, a view of individualism which is entirely compatible with the obvious claim that human beings are mutually dependent social animals and that they can only flourish in communities, held together by shared values, affections and loyalties which often require the subordination of individual interests to communal ones. The dichotomising of liberal individualism with "communitarianism" is thus seriously misleading, as many alleged communitarians such as MacIntyre have recognised, who has consequently repudiated the "communitarian" label.

Such a view of liberalism is also central to the account and defence of liberalism and liberal values consistently offered by the exclusive humanist, Ronald Dworkin, who frequently uses the phrase "equality of concern and respect" to identify the fundamental values of liberalism.[18] The "concern," I take it, is for the happiness of all sentient creatures but the "respect" is for the dignity of individual human beings as moral agents. This notion that human dignity is a function of our capacity for moral agency is also central to Sartre's atheistic Existentialism to which Ward devotes a chapter in *MAG*. Sartre's claim is that human freedom is a curse but that curse is the unique source of human dignity.[19]

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[18] For example, in an essay entitled "Liberalism" in Stuart Hampshire (Ed) (1978)"***Public and Private Morality***, (Cambridge University Press, 1978).

[19] Sartre, J-P (1943) *Being and Nothingness. Part Four. Chapter One*. See also his treatment, in the play *Les Mouches* ("The Flies") of the freedom and dignity which human beings can uniquely enjoy precisely because there is no God to cow us or dazzle us into submission to his will.

The essence of a liberal ethic and a liberal politics is that it allows people, provided they don't wrongfully harm others, to decide for themselves how they will live their lives, regardless of whether their choices are foolish or dangerous to themselves or thought to be wicked by others. Such liberalism, which affords people the right to be wrong, may or may not lead to the maximisation of happiness or virtue but it is the only way of treating others which is consonant with their dignity as morally autonomous human agents.

This seems to me to be the most telling argument in favour of liberalism. I also think it relates to the fundamental idea of freedom of conscience as deeply embedded in much biblical anthropology celebrating the heroism of prophets and martyrs - supremely Jesus himself - who defy political and/or ecclesiastical authority in order to do what they take to be the will of God. More fundamentally, Christianity teaches that we are, each of us individually, created in the image of God so that we may make our own unique contribution to the consummation of that loving-kindness, which is the final purpose for which we and the universe have been created. As such, every individual is potentially infinitely worthy to be loved by God who will not finally fail us or forsake us no matter how much we and others fail and forsake God. I do not think Ward would disagree.

Illiberalisms

However, much of his own enthusiasm for liberalism in theology, ethics and politics stems from a sustained determination to show how Christian personalism/humanism needs to resist and refute the widespread claims of enemies of Christian liberalism wherever they appear. The four most prominent objections to the kind of pro-Enlightenment Christian ethics of which Ward is an outstanding exponent and which he devotes a large part of his very extensive *oeuvre* to rebutting are:

1. Dogmatic and illiberal Christian fundamentalisms which justify their ethical views with reference to the allegedly unchanging and authoritative teaching of an ecclesiastical tradition and/or the alleged inerrancy of particular "literal" interpretations of the Bible
2. The claims of other major religions to answer, with equal inerrancy, fundamental questions about how we should live which take little if any cognisance of Christian claims and base their ethics on apparently very different metaphysical beliefs and/or sources of authority

3. The rise of ideological world-views, notably Marxism and Nationalism.
4. The spread of atheist humanism, usually unarticulated and taken for granted, amongst a large and growing number of relatively unreflective Westerners, but which, according to Taylor, is often vigorously expressed and/or treated as obviously and uniquely true by academics and those who have been taught by them. As such, it can be accepted uncritically by its adherents and legitimately propagated to the young as the only rational view of the world and how we should live in it. Dissenters can also be legitimately dismissed with scorn or mockery without any need to take their arguments seriously.[20]

All these views are hostile not only to Pro-Enlightenment versions of Christian and other religious ethics but also to the pro-Enlightenment or politically liberal component in contemporary religionless ethics.

I consider these briefly *seriatim*.

Fundamentalism

Ward rejects Christian fundamentalism on the now standard historical, scientific, logical and independently ethical grounds that neither the Bible itself not any of its interpreters can be taken to be infallible about matters of empirical fact and the requirements of morality in contexts quite different from those in which it was composed. That they cannot be infallible is demonstrated by the fact that they can all be shown to make claims which are demonstrably false or logically incompatible with other claims or equally susceptible of mutually exclusive interpretations. The whole of Part Four of *EKW* is devoted to "The Bible and Its Interpretation." He summarises his objections to all forms of fundamentalism by claiming that, though hospitable to many traditional conservative beliefs, no liberal (or rational) theology is
"compatible with belief in an infallible and unrevisable source of unchangeable doctrines, whether pope, councils or bible" (*RTC*. Loc. 2188).

[20] From an anti-religious point of view, Thomas Nagel has recently criticised contemptuous liberal atheist dogmatisms with considerable ferocity in his 2012 book, *Mind and Cosmos: Why the Materialist Neo-Darwinian Conception of Nature is Almost Certainly False.* (Oxford. OUP). It seems to me, however, that, while his critique is largely justified in respect of cosmology (though not, I think, of evolutionary biology) his arguments ought to lead him to revise his own anti-religious convictions.

He is also fairly forthright in thinking that the spread of Christian fundamentalism has done much to discredit Christianity both intellectually and morally.

It is to be noted that Ward also repudiates the claims of those who might be thought of as radical anti-fundamentalists who think that nothing of importance in the Bible is literally or historically true. These are people who typically still think of themselves as Christians like Paul Tillich, Paul Van Buren, Don Cupitt, Richard Braithwaite et al who, in different ways, wanted to take the factual content out of theology reducing religion to a series of edifying stories about ethics and politics or symbolic expressions of spiritual experience in the world of the here and now.[21] Religious claims, Ward maintains, must be to some extent claims about supernatural or transcendent realities, like the benign purposiveness of the universe and the belief that all shall finally be well. Ward thinks it is clear that Christianity does make such factual truth claims, notably about the existence of God and about life after death, and would lose most of its point if it did not.

Other Religions

He is much more cautious (and courteous) in his treatment of other religions. He believes strongly in interfaith dialogue and comparative religious studies. This is the subject of Part Five of *EKW* as well as of his book, *The Case for Religion* (2004). He is attentive to where the great world religions agree as well as where they differ. He is carefully critical of the view that they are all really saying the same thing. But he thinks it no longer sustainable, intellectually or morally, to endorse Christian exclusivism of the sort preached by e.g. Barth and Moltmann, which holds that no-one comes to the Father except through Christ. Indeed, he thinks in many cases, other religions may give a better account of what morality requires than traditional Christianity has – for example, Jains on the sacredness of all life (*RTC*, loc. 4887). On the other hand, he is aware that there are severe limits to how fully one can get inside a religious tradition other than one's own.

In reflecting on this. I find it helpful to think about laudable and honourable affection for, and allegiance to what is best - and despite what is worst - in one's own tradition on the analogy of affection for, and

[21] In Alasdair MacIntyre (1979)*: Against the Self-Images of the Age*. University of Notre Dame Press) Macintyre is less polite in his devastating essay showing that many then popular theological attempts by Tillich and his disciple John Robinson, Harry Williams. Paul Van Buren as well as by Don Cupitt (whom Ward also rebuts at length) are all unquestionably really atheists.

allegiance to one's family or country. One need not think one's own family or country is superior to anyone else's and one can recognise and study both similarities and differences. But one can rarely feel entirely at home in another religious tradition in the same way that one can rarely feel uniquely at home except in one's own family and country. In this way with respect to one's own religious tradition one has a special right and duty to criticise what one perceives as its failings and to remain fiercely loyal to defending what one takes to be its especial strengths. With other religions, it is usually but not always more appropriate to assume that one lacks the necessary intimate and experiential knowledge to warrant passing judgment.[22]

However, Ward is also clear, though less explicit, that anti-liberal fundamentalist authoritarianism, which preaches intolerance and forbids dissent is equally indefensible, theologically and morally, when it is asserted and enforced by other religions, no less than by various forms of illiberal atheism. If societies which profess loyalty to other religions – even the renunciatory ones – fail to respect individual freedom of conscience and the right to peaceful dissent, as well as practising oppression and mistreatment of individual members of groups on the basis of accidents of birth, they are to be condemned universally precisely for the illiberalism which renders any such society unjust, whatever its other merits and defects.

Ward's own position has developed from a more, though not entirely consistent, Christian exclusivist position in *EC*, as noted in the last chapter, to a more pluralist position in *RTC*, which he characterises as "soft pluralism." This does not deny either substantial ethical differences between and within world religions, for example in relation to the ideals of self-renunciation and self-fulfilment. Equally, he identifies and gratefully affirms fundamental areas of agreement about ethical questions, notably a commitment to the virtues and values of benevolence or compassion, liberty, truthfulness, and justice. This, however, need not dilute a Christian's commitment to the teachings of her own faith nor lead to insincerity. The sincere and committed Christian will, Ward thinks, study critically and constructively the beliefs of the tradition in which she has herself been nurtured. She will also attend carefully to what those who

[22] I do not really know, and doubt that I ever could really know what it is like to be a Muslim, though I can certainly applaud some of their claims and practices, e.g that God says "I am closer to you than your jugular vein" and the obligation on the laity to engage in periods of regular daily prayer. I can also condemn some of their mainstream claims and practices such as those relating to the denial of equal rights for women. Perhaps some people really are capable of espousing more than one major faith as Gandhi claimed to do, Also, Ninian Smart claimed to be a Theravada Buddhist Anglo-Catholic in his 1996 book, *Choosing a Faith*.(London. Bowerdean Press)

disagree with her may have to say, seeking to resolve disagreements where possible and agreeing charitably to differ where not. Ultimately, however, she will trust in her own personal experience so far of the presence and activity of God mediated, in some or other manner, by what she takes to be encounters with the Jesus of the Gospels and the Christ of spiritual experience. She will hope that such experience will continue to grow deeper in her life and she will always recognise that even her most cherished views may need to be revised in the light of new evidence from experience and argument about its proper interpretation.

None of this is possible, Ward argues, except in liberal societies. Ward's case against anti-liberal, authoritarian fundamentalisms - not only Christian ones - seems to me unanswerable and would have scarcely needed to be argued for by theologians 40 years ago. Certainly, recent attacks on Christian theism seem to be based on an account of what Christianity asserts which many Christians have long taken to be obviously false. Amongst these are claims about the literal truth of some parts of the bible, about some of its now repugnant moral prescriptions, e.g. endorsing genocide, and about its adoption not only of the doctrine of eternal damnation but also, in some historical contexts, the doctrine of double predestination.

Marxism.

Ward equally condemns on grounds of illiberalism the *de facto* violations of the principles of liberty and equality which are engendered by the abuse of force and fraud in the economic arrangements of societies which pride themselves on their liberalism. This is the essence of the Marxist critique of liberal free market economics.

Ward's discussions of Marxism are more sympathetic than his critiques of authoritarian fundamentalisms. In particular, he is sympathetic to the Marxist critique of the domination and exploitation of the poor by the rich. I think he would also accept that the Marxist accounts of alienation and false consciousness are similar to the Christian account of sin and indeed Kant's recognition that "out of the crooked timber of humanity, no straight thing was ever made." All such views, Ward thinks, show a deeper and more realistic understanding of human nature than more facile Enlightenment views to the effect that human wickedness can be eradicated by better government and better education.

Nevertheless, Ward repudiates the Marxist critique of political liberalism, asserting that authentic liberalism, especially Christian liberalism, is no

less opposed than Marxism to all forms of oppression, especially of the poor. Thus he writes:

> In theory liberal thought should apply to all persons without exception, and its association with bourgeois lifestyles is thus a practical shortcoming, not a theoretical necessity. Liberalism asks that all should have freedom of thought and access to informed criticism. It asks that all created persons should have the capacity to develop their God-given capacities in freedom. If that is only possible in a society in which all have enough to eat and are not oppressed by a privileged class or a tyrannical dictator, then theological liberalism requires a liberal society that values freedom, and that seeks to provide some sort of equality of opportunity for personal flourishing and protection against arbitrary whims of government.[23]

His objection to Marxism as opposed to liberalism concerns not ends but means, and he thinks Marxism legitimises unlimited and morally repugnant violence in pursuit of the ends of equal freedoms. In this, Ward's position is virtually identical to Isaiah Berlin's, as we have seen.

In connection with Marxism, it is worth noting that one highly influential (now again) Christian critic of the Enlightenment and what he takes to be the liberal politics which it espouses is Alasdair MacIntyre. But MacIntyre's critique is based on the 70% of his thinking which he tells us he still owes to Marx.[24] His Marxist criticism of "the Enlightenment project," however, is, like Marx's, highly convincing as a critique of the *corruption* of liberal values in practice rather than of liberal values themselves. Indeed Marxism can plausibly be seen as a project for reinstating the true values of freedom and equality by transforming the cruel and unjust economic circumstances which have allegedly made a mockery of Enlightenment values in self-proclaimed liberal democracies.[25] This failure of liberal societies is usually ascribed, as Ward and Berlin seem to concur, to the brutalities and inequities of free market economics. Such ascription is, I think , misplaced.

Ward does not discuss liberal economics but it seems to me to follow from his Christian understanding of liberalism that the evils of early industrial

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[23] *RTC*, loc. 3742

[24] See *A Short History of Ethics*, Preface to the Third Edition. (2002).

[25] Ward and I differ terminologically in our understanding of Marxism. He calls it genuinely "post-liberal." I see it as an attempt to decontaminate and bring to a culmination the Enlightenment project of a secular utopia, in which the quest for liberty, equality and fraternity are fully and finally realised. I doubt that this different way of describing Marxism constitutes a substantial difference in our views.

capitalism which Marx (and others) identified so extensively and heart-breakingly are again more accurately ascribed to the perversion of liberal economics rather than to the proper functioning of free markets. Prophylactics against such potential perversions were first devised by Hobbes and Locke (rather than by Adam Smith who nevertheless fully concurred).[26] Hobbes explicitly stated that economic activity should be free provided a strong government was capable of terrifying all parties into abjuring the abuse of force and fraud which otherwise wealthy monopolists and protectionists will exploit with impunity until they trigger civil war. He also thought that securing the quiet enjoyment of their prosperity by the rich was generally conducive to peace and the blessings of civilisation for which it is a pre-requisite. However, this will only be so, provided an all-powerful state ensures that the lot of the poor does not become so wretched that they feel they have nothing to lose by risking revolution. Locke's great and enduring contribution[27] to preventing egregious economic injustice was to insist that what people earn and own should be proportional to the value of the fruits of their labour, as determined by exchanges between willing buyers and willing sellers and must at least not curtail the capacity of others to prosper through the fruits of their labours.

In making these points I am endorsing, as does Ward, Christian liberalism's especial commitment to the poor but claiming that it is more likely to be successfully realised through the liberal policies made most famous by Adam Smith rather than through the Marxist economic policies which Ward criticises.[28] This is also Berlin's position.

Atheist liberal humanism

Much of what Ward has written is intended to show that Christian faith is not incompatible with the central values of exclusive humanism in its pro-Enlightenment forms. Thus, Christianity need not and should not be hostile either to science or to humanist concerns with personal flourishing and creative and fulfilling work in pursuit of various forms of happiness.

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[26] The case for thinking that capitalism's progenitors were the English revolutionary of the 17th century and the political theorists who reflected on them is convincingly made in Christopher Hill's still influential book, *The English Civil War*.

[27] Minimalist liberalism was fiercely re-defended, making extensive use of the sarguments of Hobbes and especially Locke, by Robert Nozick in *Anarchy, Utopia and the State* (1974, Blackwell, USA) in which he argued that justice requires free markets rather than the kind of redistributive social democracy defended by his colleague, Rawls.

[28] The evidence for this is the extraordinary and massive reduction in global poverty defined by consumption rather than income and its virtual elimination in the developed world. In the Far East great advances in per capita prosperity are so closely and consistently associated with the freeing up of markets and thereby incentivising creative economic entrepreneurship that it is quite unreasonable to deny causal connectedness.

He certainly does not think that atheists are *eo ipso* morally inferior people.

On the other hand, he recognises that the most powerful opponent of his Christian liberal humanism today is the form of atheism which Taylor calls "exclusive humanism." Ward is highly critical of the militantly authoritarian atheism of Richard Dawkins and devotes a whole book to refuting Dawkins arguments for atheism. This was perhaps necessary in view of the astonishing popularity of Dawkins's own *The God Delusion.* Nevertheless, Dawkins is a very soft target who attacks a straw God and who justifies his ignorance of theology on the grounds that he is also ignorant of leprechaunology. In fact, unlike Dennett, he hasn't read, let alone thought intelligently about much of what has been written about either theism or atheism. Such writings include not only the works of theologians and philosophers, past and present, but also those of poets and novelists who have possessed a profound religious faith. Eliot, Auden, Edwin Muir, Edward Thomas, Graham Greene, Evelyn Waugh, William Golding, Elisabeth Bowen are only some 20th century English creative writers who show up the extreme shallowness of Dawkins's views. The quality of his writing on religious matters is also poor, marred as it is by constant unfunny sarcasms, self-congratulatory hyperbole and gratuitous rudeness.[29]

Nor is Ward much impressed by the substance of much exclusive humanist morality. He "suspects" that:

> [t]he common ground is there because modern liberal humanism is living on borrowed capital of an overtly renounced theism. I also suspect that, having renounced its theistic basis, humanism becomes more like a very reasonable and not too demanding morality for comfortable members of a fairly secure and wealthy society.[30]

Towards a Global Ethic

Nevertheless, the bulk of Ward's work is overwhelmingly supportive of the substantial moral and political views of +EEHs. The last chapter of *EKW* is a reprint of a chapter he contributed to an earlier collection of

[29] I am told by some that Dawkins is personally a normally decent human being who gives generously to what he takes to be good causes. This I am quite prepared to believe without altering my view that his book on atheism is, by any objective critical standard, a poor one. In fact it is a very good illustration of Mill's dictum: "He who knows only his own side of a case knows little of that."

[30] *MAG*, p. 183

essays by divers hands and is entitled "Religion and the Possibility of a Global Ethics." I think he demonstrates that, from a liberal Christian point of view, a religiously or quasi-religiously based ethics is both a highly desirable goal and a realistic possibility. He identifies four principles which he thinks that "any rational sentient being has good reason to desire" (*EKW*, loc.4919).

First is benevolence. Every rational person, whatever their religious beliefs or lack of them, will wish that, other things being equal, everyone else as well as themselves should enjoy the ordinary good things of life. Secondly, the principle of liberty accepts that it would be bad for people to constrain our choices, and good for them to promote our opportunities to ascertain moral truths and to live as seems best to us in the circumstances in which we find ourselves. This entails that the good of liberty, other things being equal, should be equally available to all human beings. The goodness of liberty applies not only to the pursuit of happiness but also to the pursuit of truth. Truthfulness thus becomes a third component principle of a potentially global ethics. This asserts that every rational being has an interest in knowing the truth and not being mistaken or deceived about the world as it is and as it could be. This is true if our beliefs are to be instrumentally useful and it is not the exclusive concern of scientists who, some people (quite falsely) claim, are the only people who can ever tell us truths about how the world is and will be. A commitment to the pursuit of objective and rationally ascertainable truth is perhaps especially important for those who wish to avoid error in the domain of religion, whether the errors relate to matters of empirical fact or moral prescription. Fourthly and finally, there is the principle of justice. The more such liberty of thought and action is constrained and unequally distributed the greater the likelihood that society will collapse into the Scylla-and-Charybdis-like injustices of anarchy or tyranny.

In all this Ward agrees with +EEHs. However, like Taylor, he strongly disagrees with those versions of exclusive humanism which embrace a dogmatic metaphysical materialism and an epistemological scientism which claims that all real knowledge is "scientific" knowledge in the restricted sense of being confirmable by intersubjective, sensuous observation and repeatable experiment.[31] In Ward's "expanded naturalism," evidential experience includes subjective experience and this includes what are taken to be personal encounters with transcendental

[31] A particularly forthright defence of scientism id to be found in Chapter One of Ladyman, JAC and Ross, D (2012) *Every Thing Must Go.*(Oxford. Oxford University Press). The clarity of their exposition also has the merit of making perspicuous its obvious implausibility, particularly in uniquely identifying reasonable belief with whatever passes academic and scientific peer-reviewing processes.

realities. I would argue further that it also includes the experiences which spring from our emotional lives and our faculty for desiring, including our aesthetic and erotic as well as our religious experiences.
There is, of course, much scope for debating what the implementation of these principles requires in practice and what is to be done if they appear to conflict. The point is that the scope is for *debating* these matters and seeking to reach rationally defensible conclusions on the basis of logically valid arguments about premises which are well supported, and not contradicted, by experience of many different kinds. When religions deny these principles they cut themselves off from the possibility of contributing to a globally acceptable ethics and risk becoming ghettoes which offer either no escape for cradle believers or too easy an escape for refugees from the uncertainties of the wider world where ordinary humanity lives and moves and has its being.

However, I think Ward successfully makes the case that in every culture - theistic or atheist, past or present, and wherever geographically located - outstanding moral thinkers have endorsed, and contributed, from different perspectives, to an ethic of human flourishing. They accepted also that it is the business of government to facilitate human flourishing amongst the governed. Likewise, societies everywhere which have subjected Ward's universal moral principles to often horribly successful attack have attracted the moral obloquy of history and stand condemned in contemporary international fora, even where this condemnation is only the La Rouchefoucauldian tribute that vice pays to virtue.

Agreeing to Differ?

If people differ profoundly about metaphysical questions, and if accepting metaphysical truths is essential for accepting ethical truths, how can those who differ radically about metaphysics share the same rational ethics? Can they agree to differ about the former while agreeing about the latter?

This is one major theoretical problem about Ward's global liberal ethics, which he notices but does not, I think, do enough to address. Throughout his writings he argues forcefully and convincingly that ethics requires metaphysical foundations. He is equally clear that religious believers, especially Christians, and purely secularist humanists disagree profoundly about metaphysics. It is therefore difficult to see how +EEHs and +ECEs could really share the same ethical convictions. Even their shared ethical commitment to human flourishing will mean very different things and have very different practical consequences for those who believe in morally significant life after death, e.g. through the laws of *karma* or

because of the resurrection of the body, and those who do not. Ward does recognise the problem. From a liberal Christian point of view. He writes:

> Liberal Christians must accept that people are free to have different beliefs. A Christian world-view must be quite different in many respects from an atheist one, and there seems little prospect of obtaining agreement between them.[32]

These world-views are indeed about as different as it possible for such views to be. EHs believe that the universe exists for no purpose and nor do we, and yet most of them find this neither dismaying, nor a reason for thinking that nothing matters very much. They certainly deny that this fact deprives us of reasons to condemn on moral grounds those moral nihilists whose behaviour is consistently and ruthlessly egoistic but who see nothing objectively wrong with this. Christians further believe that they exist to participate in the fulfilment of God's will that love and other forms of goodness should flourish perfectly and eternally throughout creation in this life and in the life of the world to come. +EEHs believe that they have good reasons which have nothing to do with divine or other cosmic purposes for pursuing an ethic which involves much self-sacrificing love. Crucially, EHs believe that death is the end for us and everyone else, including all those whom we love. For Christians, death is not the end of anyone – or anything. On the basis of such radically incompatible metaphysical conviction can they both *really* share the same ethical commitments?

Ward recognises that it must be much harder to become powerfully and persistently motivated to make substantial sacrifices in the cause of trying to bring about some highly worthwhile future state of affairs when there is only at best an uncertain hope that one's efforts will be successful. Moreover, with most great causes, such as just wars, the contribution to ultimate success, made by the sacrifices of individuals, is often nugatory or even tragically pointless. Nor on EH assumptions – such as Marx's or Parfit's - will those who die for the cause be there to enjoy the manifold excellences of the final triumph: they will be dead. If the universe is indeed absurd in the Existentialist sense, then arguably Thomas Nagel[33] is right and logic requires that we should just laugh at it but such logic is unlikely to appeal to the parents of a child dying of meningitis.

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[32] *RTC*, loc 3587

[33] Thomas Nagel (2008): "The Absurd" in The Meaning of Life, eds. E.D Klemke and Stephen Cahn. (Oxford. Oxford University Press)

Ward also recognises that Christian ethics are supererogatory to what a purely humanist ethic requires. Christians try to live by the astonishing prescriptions of the Sermon of the Mount and are impossibly enjoined to be perfect. I take this impossible injunction to be in line with the numerous warnings in the New Testament against (pharasaical) moral complacency. Thus if we think we are (now) without sin we deceive ourselves. Nor is it enough if we wish to be saved that we do what ordinary duties require: we must go extra miles and forgive those who wrong us again and again and again. Perhaps, we may even have to give up all our worldly possessions or just much that we most naturally enjoy. Certainly, we are not in a position of such moral superiority to anyone else that we can afford to pass self-congratulatory moral judgment on them for falling so much further short than we do of divine perfection.

In respect of values which +EEHs and ECEs do share, the Christian understanding is grounded in transcendent metaphysics and is both more extensive and radical than what +EEHs propose. Thus for Christians, all are equal only in two important senses: we are all made in the image of God and therefore equally beloved of God; and we are all equally sinners who fall infinitely short of divine perfection. Similarly, Christian freedom requires much more than – though it includes - absence of coercion and availability of opportunity to pursue "our own good in our own way" as Mill puts it. Christian freedom also means we are free to choose, for example, between God and Mammon, to identify what, if anything, is so precious that it is worth giving up everything else for, or to decide how we shall respond to our flaws and failures – with denial and self-deception or with honesty and penitence. More generally, it makes a huge difference to moral attitudes if people see themselves as embarked on a pilgrimage towards a heavenly city in the course of which they will frequently stumble and need to be picked up. They may also at times sometimes succumb to the fear that the heavenly city is merely a figment of their imagination or feel that the rigours of the journey are just too much for them. Nevertheless, thinking of moral experience in terms of a pilgrimage is very different from thinking about it as wandering aimlessly in a sometimes pleasant, often horrible wilderness – which is why those who really believe this latter proposition try to avoid thinking about it all.

All this is important for the claim that Christians and exclusive humanists can agree on much about ethics while disagreeing irreconcilably about metaphysics. It is why my own view is that EHs do not just have an inferior answer to the challenges of moral nihilism and amoralism, as I think Ward believes. They have no convincing rational answer at all if they deny something like Christian teleology and eschatology. They are, I

think, in what Kierkegaard describes as unconscious despair and Marx thought of as the alienation and false consciousness of the oppressor classes whose true condition is hidden from them by their material comforts.

I realise that these accounts of the intellectual and moral inadequacies of EH are hotly disputed by most contemporary EHs and pointing them out is hardly conducive to the project of finding the common moral and political ground which +EEHs and +ECEs can and ought to defend in the circumstances of contemporary pluralism. This difference manifests itself with particular clarity, forcefulness and some poignancy when it occurs between friends or spouses or parents and children. As Taylor notes, fundamental religious disagreement amongst intimates is a common feature of contemporary pluralist societies. Here some people continue to regard the truth about religion as extremely important. For many others, however, such alleged truths are mostly unknowable, often unbelievable, sometimes morally unattractive or simply not relevant to the more obvious and tractable problems of living good and morally admirable lives in the here and now. The result of such profound disagreements, however, need not, I think be open or barely suppressed hostility or even banishment to the realm of the undiscussable. Constructive and charitable co-existence is, I believe, possible if both sides acknowledge the need for realistic humility in all our interpersonal endeavours – intellectual, as well as moral.

Intellectual Humility

My claim here is that we can resolve this conflict between metaphysical disagreement and ethical consensus by appealing to a certain kind of humility which is characteristic of both science and liberal theology. Such an appeal may enable us to preserve the ethically monist claim that +EEHs and +ECE are correct in claiming that a rationally defensible personal and political morality requires a unique and unconditional commitment to the liberal values of freedom and equality as well as to diverse forms of human flourishing here and now – Taylor's "celebration of ordinary life." Because these political values are uniquely rationally defensible as well as being necessary for any conception of human flourishing in any society, they are to be promoted without embarrassment wherever they are absent and defended staunchly wherever they come under intellectual and physical attack. Thus, the humility I am commending here does not lead to any kind of dilution in the sincerity and vigour with which liberal values, properly understood, are held and propagated.

Still, both atheists and Christians need to acknowledge that, however magnificent our discoveries in both science and ethics, the ultimate truths about the universe and our lives within it are largely incomprehensible. Scientists should recognise this in relation to the immensity of what we don't know about physics and psychology and perhaps to the possibility that we are so constructed that we can never penetrate the ultimate mysteries of both matter and mind. Theists need humility in respect of their very limited ability to know the will and purposes of God, as God points out rather forcefully at the end of the Book of Job.

Even if God did not directly intend that many different religions should evolve amongst humanity and that many people would turn out to be morally admirable atheists in the pluralist societies in which we now live, God must at least have foreseen this development and accounted it not incompatible with the realisation of ultimately salvific and beatific purposes. We do not need – and should not presume - to understand God's own reasoning on these matters and what God is consequently calling contemporary atheists to be and to become. It is enough for us to have assurance that what matters in morals and religion is not belief but behaviour and that it is by the fruits of our beliefs that we are to be judged.

This is a form of humility which is essential to liberalism itself: namely the recognition that, even in relation to my most passionately held and, as it seems to me, best-evidenced convictions I may still be wrong. So a Christian must concede, albeit with much fear and trembling, that there may be no God and no life after death, after all. The atheist must similarly concede that, after all, there may be both. More commonly, both will need to accept that their view is typically incomplete and may need to be revised in the light of new evidence or more refined conceptual considerations and new or reinvigorated counter-arguments. This is a position about intellectual humility for which Ward argues at various points in his work and which he exhibits throughout it.

Le Désir d'éternité

However, it remains important, as we saw in discussing Parfit, to ask how or why such radical disagreements about such fundamental matters arise in the first place. Here, I suggest that the difference between the religious and the religionless seems to be a matter of fundamental perspective or temperament. We have already noted a particularly telling articulation of this fundamental dichotomy in discussing Freud's debate with Romain Rolland who criticised Freud for failing to understand "le désir d'éternité".

Ward, himself, seems to identify the most fundamental difference in the religious and atheist world-views when he explicates and largely defends Schleiermacher's understanding of what is essential to the religious view of life. Schleiermacher, he tells us:

> [T]ried to define the essence of religion in general, and proposed that "religion is a sense and a taste for the infinite. It is an intuition of 'the whole', mediated through some particular experience…To be one in the midst of the finite and to be eternal in a moment, that is the immortality of religion."[34]

What is important to note for present purposes is that the significance or lack of it of things eternal, including personal life after death, may be the issue on which Christians and exclusive humanists must ultimately agree to differ with a wholly tolerant respect for one another's position which is only equalled by their mutual incomprehension. Once this fundamental area of disagreement is at least provisionally parked, Christians and exclusive humanists and indeed the adherents of other creeds can seek common ground in respect of social and political arrangements. This is itself a quest which the truth of liberalism obliges us all to embark upon.

Conclusion

I have argued that Ward is right to champion a Christian theology which is essentially liberal and to condemn illiberal theologies. I have also argued that he is right to think that such a theology both requires and reinforces acceptance of the central claims of political liberalism. Finally I have argued that, like Taylor, he is right to think that "transcendental personalism" or religious humanism is superior to its godless versions which affirm that life is objectively pointless and ends for ever in death. It is superior both in the moral calibre of the conduct it requires and in the motivation it affords to its adherent to try to live up to its demands for substantial self-sacrifice. It is also superior in that its sacramental resources, accessed through the virtues of piety, greatly assist in empowering individual believers to live up to these supererogatory moral demands.

In these ways, Ward's liberal Christian humanism meets the challenges of Taylorian pluralism and avoids both authoritarian exclusivism and a descent into relativism and moral nihilism.What Ward does not have much to say about – though somewhat more than most contemporary ethicists,

[34] *RTC*, loc. 3048

both Christian and atheist – is the ethics of ambition. In fact, however, this constitutes perhaps the greatest challenge to non-nihilist ethics because worldly success in zero-sum competitive activities is actually what most people in Taylor's secular societies value most highly, find a major source of personal fulfilment, and devote the greater part of their energies to achieving. The challenge here, as posed by Machiavelli, is his claim that few things matter and in pursuing what matters most in the real world of the here and now, people, in fact rarely do and never ought to allow themselves to be constrained by the alleged requirements of morality whether religious or religionless. To this most devastating and neglected challenge to non-nihilist morality I now turn.

CHAPTER TEN

CHRISTIAN ETHICS ANHD THE CHALLENGE FROM MACHIAVELLIAN AMORALISM: AN ETHICS OF VOCATIONS

Introduction

So far, so good for the project of seeing how both Christians and exclusive humanists, while agreeing to differ about how to rebut moral nihilism and amoralism in its perennial forms, can agree to endorse a universal ethic of liberal humanism in response to the challenges to non-nihilistic ethics from the extreme pluralism of Taylor's post-1960s, secular world. They can collaborate, as argued in the last chapter, in defending and propagating this monist ethic since it is based not on the assertion of uniquely authoritative moral knowledge, but on the recognition that nobody can possibly know all that there is to know about the universally recognised goods of reducing suffering and promoting enjoyment in the world. There remains, however, much on which, after intelligent deliberation, we can and do almost all agree - much more and at a much more important level - than is suggested by the noisiness of many of our public disagreements.

Now comes the hardest part. This is addressing Sidgwick's profoundest question in relation to the ethics of ambition and in relation to Machiavellian amoralism. Questions about the ethics of ambition arise extensively and acutely in contemporary secular societies where worldly success comes mainly from the work we do and typically involves striving for eminence and as much recognition, status, wealth and power or influence as possible in zero-sum competitive activities. It is in respect of these kinds of ambition that Machiavellianism counsels a thoroughgoing amoralism. Moreover, rebutting Machiavellianism is not only particularly hard: it is also particularly important for contemporary ethicists. This is because Machiavelli was only addressing his advice to people of exceptional ambition and ability seeking success in war and politics. Nowadays in Taylor's secular societies, because of the way work has evolved, there are many more careers available to many more people in which an ambition to become as eminent as possible in their line of work is realistic, attractive and not intrinsically dishonourable. The temptations to Machiavellianism are especially acute where ambition involves rising as far as one can in leadership hierarchies. Indeed, as Taylor stresses, the prosecution of a successful career has become a central ingredient in most

people's conception of a life well lived and, as such, something that most people very much want. But is it possible to have a really successful and satisfying career while fully conforming one's conduct to the prescriptions of either a religious or religionless ethics? In particular, will we not sometimes, perhaps often, in the pursuit of worldly success have to ignore the moral requirements of honesty, fair dealing, compassion and the kind of beneficence which leads people to make substantial sacrifices of their own interests in order to secure those of others?

It is in this area that Machiavelli's contextually amoralist advice to would-be successful political leaders remains even more disturbingly challenging today than it was five centuries ago. I have sought to explain, in chapter three, the nature of Machiavelli's amoralism and its contemporary relevance. In this chapter, I discuss what both atheist and Christian ethicists might convincingly say about the ethics of ambition in general.

In particular, I explore how they might effectively rebut the Machiavellian claim that in the pursuit of success through zero-sum competitive activities – paradigmatically war, politics and nowadays business - we operate in a Hobbesian state of nature where no moral rules apply and where reason requires that we become expert in the uses of force and fraud.[1] I conclude that in one way the real world of business, politics and war is morally worse than even Machiavelli realised, because it relies on widespread and collective self-deception. Nevertheless, I argue that CEs have a convincing answer to amoralism in these areas in an ethic grounded in the role of vocations in a life well lived. EHs have an analogue for such a concept in the same way that, and partly because they have analogues for benign teleology and eschatology.

Common Sense and the Ethics of Ambition

Of the three challenges to both atheist and Christian ethics which I have identified in respect of rebutting moral nihilism and amoralism, it is the Machiavellian challenge which is the hardest to dismiss on the grounds of some version of common sense. Common sense points to values which make life worth living, which ground our everyday ethics and which we

[1] Thomas Hobbes (1651) *Leviathan*. (Many Editions). Because Hobbes's sovereign is permitted to govern without being subject to moral rules insisted on by Churches or by popular opinion, he is sometimes thought to be making similar recommendations to those of Machiavelli. For Hobbes, however, the *summum bonum* is not glory but peace and the avoidance of constant and universal fear of sudden, violent death. This is the necessary condition for the successful securing of many other goods, including glory and all the other public and private benefits which come with prosperity. This is much closer to the liberal humanism discussed in the preceding chapter than to Machiavellian amoralism. Moreover, that the sovereign will rule in accordance with the requirements of morality is guaranteed because the sovereign is directly answerable to God. .

almost all share and understand. These shared values serve us well for the vast majority of decisions we need to make in trying to live good lives and in our dealings with others. Sure, there may be cases where people's values conflict and we may have to rely on judgment to resolve such conflicts as best we can. We also may not know what to make of the usually abstract and somewhat recondite arguments which philosophers make about the rational basis for our commonsense moral convictions, let alone how to refute claims that these convictions are misguided or irrational. Nevertheless, in our personal and communal relationships, the commonsense values which make up an ethic of decency, as Berlin Dennett and Parfit claim in different ways, may sensibly be taken to be obvious.

By contrast, in striving for success in our careers, where success mostly depends on outperforming others, individually or collectively, common sense tells most of us that obviously we should do whatever we can and whatever is necessary to achieve success for ourselves and for the organisations we work for. Regrettably, this will sometimes involve us in resorting to a certain amount of deceitfulness and to hardening our hearts to the various kinds of unhappiness we will often be compelled to cause others. In general, however, when conflicts arise in our careers between our own interests and those of others who are typically our competitors, obviously we must put our own interests first: you don't throw a boxing match because you don't want to hurt your opponent or because she needs the prize money more than you do.[2] Similarly, common sense tells us that, when necessary, we should put the interests of members of our own family before those of other people's families; the interests of the citizens of our own country before those of foreigners; and those of the organisations we work for above those of competitor organisations. Most of us take it for granted that it is right to put our own most fundamental interests and those of people with whom we have ties of allegiance and affection ahead of the interests of strangers and rivals. Moreover, if we worry about some of the more severe moral delinquencies which our pursuit of ambition may necessitate we can be consoled by the Machiavellian thought that this is how almost everyone, in fact, behaves in respect of pursuing their ambitions, even if they deny it and seek to conceal it.

In all of this, people are reasoning as Machiavelli reasoned and behaving as he recommended on the basis of a knowledge of history, extensive

[2] Of course, you may not wish to participate in boxing matches precisely because you find the business of competitive fighting objectionable, as Machiavelli recognised. However, on the Machiavellian view, refusing to engage in competitive activities where losers get hurt is, for most of us, neither possible nor desirable.

observation of contemporaries and considerable personal experience as a practising politician. They simply don't take Machiavelli's reasoning to its extreme, repugnant but apparently inexorable conclusions.

Rebutting Machiavellianism

To rebut Machiavellianism in the world of work I propose that all careers, including but not restricted to careers in business and politics, should be conceived of in the context of personal vocations. This means that the pursuit of ambition should always be subordinated to the moral objectives and the moral requirements of seeking faithfully to follow a vocation. An ethic of vocations can rebut Machiavellianism either by denying Machiavelli's claims about what, for the ambitious, is the *summum bonum* of human life or about the amoralism which is required in order to secure it, or both. The Christian version of vocational ethics, which I follow Ward in commending to atheists no less than to Christians, does both.

It denies that the supreme good, even for ambitious people, is glory which consists, above all in the admiration of others. Ideally, it consists in the enduring admiration of a large number of people, mainly now but also in the judgment of posterity. In contemporary contexts any ambition for eminence (stardom) or pre-eminence (superstardom) can be assimilated to "*gloria*" as understood by Machiavelli and in the Renaissance generally. It is easy to see that this conception of the object of ambition as celebrity could and has become widespread today in the pursuit of worldly success in many walks of life in addition those of war and politics.

An ethic of vocations, which does not deny any value at all to the pursuit of eminence in work, does deny that those who pursue eminence must be willing to do whatever is necessary to achieve it. It also denies that even for those who seek the kind of glory which comes from wielding power effectively as a leader, success will require them to resort, when necessary, to all the practices normally deemed morally repugnant, as commended by Machiavelli.

Both +EEHs and all CEs make precisely this double claim about both the end Machiavelli proposes for a life well lived and the means which he says are necessary to secure it. Instead, they seek to demonstrate the rationality of different less vainglorious and more fulfilling conceptions of a life well lived, and that, in order to live such a life, we need to practise the virtues of (at least) honesty, fairness, compassion, beneficence and sometimes substantial self-sacrifice. They prescribe these virtues, contrary to

Machiavelli's recommendations, even in the pursuit of goods, like fame and fortune, which are in limited supply and are vigorously competed for.

Ward and the Ethics of Vocations

The proposal here is that to rebut Machiavellianism in the world of work, all careers should be conceived of in the context of a set of personal vocations and the pursuit of ambition subordinated to the moral requirements of fulfilling vocations. I defend this view by again invoking what Keith Ward has said on this subject and some other literature. Here I make particular use of Ward's - as it seems to me - original treatment of vocations in his early *Ethics and Christianity* , which I believe deserves greater emphasis and elaboration in ethics than it has received in subsequent ethical writing, including Ward's own. The concept that ethics is vocational relates to another key and subsequently under-explored element in the system of ethics which Ward sets out in *EC*. This is the claim that much, at least, of what morality requires of us concerns attitudes rather than particular actions. That the concepts of vocation and attitude are closely related can be seen by considering the difference between performing a task which the agent sees as part of her vocation and performing it as an element in a career or simply as part of a job. This difference is largely a matter, not of performing specifically different actions, but of doing so with quite different attitudes. In discussing what Ward says about vocations and attitudes in *EC*, I somewhat expand and extrapolate from his treatments in order to bring out the way in which an ethic of vocations makes possible a convincing rebuttal of Machiavellianism.

The essence of the Christian rebuttal of Machiavellianism is a rejection of Machiavelli's conception of a life well lived and what you must do in order to live such a life. Thus, for Christians the *summum bonum* ("true joy") of human life consists not in the admiration of others, but in living as a God of love is calling them to live.[3] This will make their personal purpose in life a matter of trying to contribute to the gloriously divine purpose that goodness should flourish perfectly throughout creation. In that case, they will try to ensure that everything they do and refrain from doing – the various means they adopt to secure their ends - is "controlled by charity," as Ward helpfully puts it. The New Testament basis for such an ethic, I take it, pre-eminently includes Rom.12, I. Cor, 12 (esp. vv 12-27) where the analogy of the body is used for the different uses that people are called to make of their talents in serving the good of the whole body. The fundamental moral attitude required of Christians, I take to be given in 1. Cor. 16.14: "Let all that ye do be done in love" (RSV).

[3] See the collect for the fifth Sunday in Lent (BCP) for an articulation of the thought that responding to God's call is how "true joys are to be found".

In general, according to a Christian ethic of vocations, the role played by work in the achievement of "fullness" - the way *eudaimonia* is identified - will be quite different if the sense of fulfilment and enjoyment which work brings comes, not from the admiration of others, but from feeling that you are doing work which is, in itself, absorbing and worth doing, and that you are doing it well. This will be personally fulfilling because your work engages the talents, enthusiasms, energies and dispositions which make you the person you are. Certainly, you will hope to enjoy recognition and admiration from others for the work you are doing. But even if this only forthcoming in disappointingly small doses, the disappointment will be far outweighed by the sense that you are doing, in your work as in your personal relationships, what you are "meant" to be doing and what it feels as though you were put on this planet to do.

This will be especially so if you feel that the work you do is contributing, in however humble a way, to some worthy, even glorious cause which attracts and inspires you to pursue goals which transcend the satisfactions of your personal preferences and involve the securing of collective or communal goods. As such, it makes you want to resist the imperious demands of Iris Murdoch's "fat, relentless ego"[4] and so liberates you from their tyranny.

Seeing your life and your work in the context of such a cause gives you confidence that you and your life really matter: they are not just pointless no matter how small and inevitably short-lived your contribution to a greater good may seem to be. In this way "fullness" – the sense that your life is worth living and that you are living it as best you can – is available to everyone, not just to an exceptional and elite few, as in the Machiavellian conception of worldly success.

This is how, in general, an ethic of vocations rebuts moral nihilism and amoralism with respect to the ethics of ambition and the pursuit of worldly success. There are, however, a number of other particular ways in which an ethic of vocations resolves dilemmas in, enhances the credibility, and enriches the substance of any non-nihilist ethic. I shall identify these in support of my claim that atheist ethics can be greatly strengthened by attending to particular features of an essentially Christian ethics. I maintain that vocational ethics are distinctively Christian and that they have evolved so that they have an important role to play in the ethics of secular societies and indeed of global ethics.

[4] Iris Murdich (1999):

Vocations and Pluralism

An initial strength of an ethic of vocations is this. As part of its potential for grounding a credible and attractive (non-Machiavellian) ethics of ambition, the concept of vocations is also helpful in rebutting the challenges to non-nihilist ethics from contemporary pluralism.

As we have seen Machiavelli is credited by Berlin as having opened the way to contemporary pluralism by his claim that there are two radically different and incompatible ways of living well in this world. We can focus on the glittering prizes available to us in the life of the world to come, in which case we should withdraw from the pursuit of worldly success in the public domain. In that case, we must content ourselves with the satisfactions of a purely private life where, no doubt, it is harmless, and may be helpful, to practise Christian virtues of self-abnegation and piety, and the conventional virtues of benevolence, honesty and fairness.

Alternatively, we can be concerned with the glittering prizes which are available here and now, notably fame or glory and the wealth and power which the achievement of glory both requires and generates. If that is what we want, we must be willing to eschew moral restraints of all sorts whenever these threaten to frustrate our ambitions.

Keith Ward begins his discussion of vocations in chapter IX of *EC* by relating it to his discussion in the previous chapter about moral knowledge and the problem of the notorious diversity of moral values cherished by different individuals and peoples. This diversity can lead to disagreement which becomes "radical" (p.124) and "distressing" (p.127) if it seems there is no way of ever resolving the disagreements. Ward argues that the challenge from pluralism to the possibility of genuine moral knowledge, i.e. to the existence of propositions in ethics which are objectively true or false, can be met by noticing three features of moral experience.

First, discovering moral truths, like discovering truths in science, is often not easy: "knowing what ought to be done is the concluding state of a long and difficult process of cogitation" (p.129). Second, social, cultural and historical circumstances may alter cases. Ward tells us:

> [o]bjectivity in no way implies the universality of what is cognised… it may be the case that the realisation of all values at once is not possible...But one need not therefore say that one set of values must be better in all

> circumstances and for everyone than any of the others. It may even be true that different sets of values are objectively right for different sets of people precisely because of their different circumstances (*EC*, p. 131).

Third, Ward says:

> [w]hen we think of soldiers, scholars, manual labourers, and other kinds of workers, it is…obvious, on reflection, that the existence of [such] groups…is for the general good of society as a whole. But such diverse groups of [people] with very different temperaments and interests can hardly be expected to share precisely the same hierarchy of values (EC, p.132).

From these considerations he concludes:

> [people] have obligations to realize values; but their obligations are limited by the sorts of values that are available to them in their specific situations. One may well argue, in other words, that a plurality of values is both good and necessary, and in no way contradicts belief in moral objectivity.[5]

In these respects Ward's position on the justification of moral value judgments seems to be the same as that of Berlin which we have already examined. It is a doctrine of objective pluralism. It is not, however, on account of Ward's metaphysical presuppositions, open to the same relativist and subjectivist objections that we made in considering Berlin's pluralism. It may also anticipate the views of "ethical particularists," notably Jonathan Dancy,[6] who also support an objectivist pluralism, while denying the usefulness in ethics of looking for universal principles.

For Ward what is important about these considerations is that they not only do justice to the phenomena of moral diversity and disagreement and thereby rebut the challenges to ethics from the facts of Taylorian pluralism; they also prepare the ground for his account of vocations.

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[5] Ibid

[6] See Jonathan Dancy (2005) *Particularism* in the *Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*.If particularism is the doctrine that at least sometimes it may be true that A ought to do x rather than y but B, *in identical material and psychological circumstances*, may not be morally obligated to do the same, then it seems to me to be false. Fortunately, it is not necessary to take a view on particularism versus universalism in ethics, to see the need for, and cogency of an ethics of vocations. In the final paragraph of *EC*, chapter XVIII Ward summarises his own views on this issue.

***Individualism*.**

In my and, I suspect, Ward's view only a vocational ethic can do justice to the Christian conception of every human being as a unique individual created and cherished by God and destined, whatever such individuals may enjoy or endure here and now, for ultimate beatitude in a life beyond death.

Certainly, Christians are called to follow Jesus but this does not mean that we are all required to imitate Christ in the details of Jesus's life as recorded in the Gospels in respect of his assumed self-denial in matters of money, sex and physical aggression. Some people may be called to a life of such asceticism and their callings may be, Ward says - though I would add may also not be - superior to those called to practise their Christianity in the secular world rather than by withdrawing from it. It is clear, however, that Christian ethics cannot realistically require such asceticism of everyone. On the contrary, "it is in fact a peculiar emphasis of the Christian conception of the moral life that each [person] has his [or her] own individual vocation (*EC*, p.142)." Still more emphatically, Ward goes on to claim:

> The Christian emphasis on particularity and on the ultimate value of the individual is in fact radically antagonistic to any conception of morality as the mere following of universal moral rules. Part of the importance of the doctrine of the Incarnation is that it shows God as concerned with an individual human being rather than with men in general; and the doctrine can be readily extended to all so that each man is seen as having his own particular vocation for which he is responsible.[7]

This individualism, however, is not vulnerable to the charges of promoting egoism commonly levelled against it by people with a (usually rather nebulous) political perspective and agenda – socialist, nationalist or "communitarian." For one thing, as Ward makes clear, we share a vocation to do God's will in particular ways with our fellow workers in the various vineyards in which we labour. We also share it in the particular contexts in which we answer Taylor's question: "Whom should we love?" Here the answer is usually given in relation to families and friends as well as to the societies and polities of which we are members. In all these cases the

[7] Ibid

people we are called to care about and the good we are called upon to do is usually largely determined by accidents of birth, upbringing and circumstamce.

Creatureliness.

Further, our vocations are calls to us made in our capacity as creatures of God who has wholly benign purposes for the whole of creation, including ourselves as unique centres of consciousness. We share a common humanity and, indeed, animality with the rest of the created universe, both known and unknown. This means that our vocations entail obligations to do good, as the creatures we ourselves actually are, to our fellow creatures as they are. In this way an ethic of vocations can fortify doctrines of obligations and corresponding rights for humanity as a whole, towards animals, towards the natural world and towards future generations. These obligations, ultimately derived from the will of God - and credibly derivable, as far as I can see, only from this or an analogous source - generate the legitimate rights which feature prominently, if not always productively, in moral and political discourse.

Beneficence.

Thus, there is nothing egoistic about vocational ethic. On the contrary, vocations are always in some way calls to beneficence: one cannot have a vocation to do evil. One may have a talent and taste for evil and one may be incited by the devil or by wicked people to engage in doing evil. But in ordinary language, one cannot have a vocation to do evil: all vocations purport to be callings to do things which are accounted good. This semantic point is not trivial. It derives from the theistic origins of the notion of vocation which is always to do what is taken to be a call to do the will of God. Since the will of God is for the perfection of all creation, calls to individuals are always calls to exercise what Ward usually calls "self-giving love" (i.e. charity) and thereby to contribute to making the world in some way, however apparently minuscule, a better place. This will be central to the refutation of Machiavelli argued for below.

Identity and Meaningfulness.

On the other hand, an important psychological point about people who have a vocation is that they have a clear sense of identity - of who they are as individuals. They also have a strong sense of what makes their lives meaningful, of why they matter as the people they are and are called to become, and of what is uniquely important about them and how they

choose to live. Because they have a sense of what they are meant to be doing, they will feel good about themselves when they are doing it and doing it as well as they can, and bad when they are failing to live up to, or even betraying their vocation. In this sense they will in fact have a happier life than those who have no sense of who they are, of what and whom they are meant to care about and, therefore of how they should try to live. In this way, a life dedicated to following vocations is likely to be agreeable and fulfilling, and may often incidentally lead to worldly success. However, this will not be what motivates those who conscientiously seek to do the things they are called to do. Indeed, if being obedient to the demands of vocations is undertaken as part of the deliberate pursuit of personal gratification it is likely to be counter-productive as well as counterfeit.

Creativity.

In an ethic of vocations, as Ward stresses throughout his work, what God calls us to do always involves work which is creative. The particular kind of creative work, which our vocations call upon us to undertake, not only identifies our particular moral obligations but is also a major source of fulfilment and satisfaction within our lives. That we are capable of creativity is one fundamental way in which we can plausibly be described as made in the image of God.

However, whereas divinity creates *ex nihilo*, our creativity consists in the transformation of raw materials. This is clearly the case with physical resources found in nature. In the creation of literature, music and the visual arts the materials consist of our own experience and understanding and the means available to us for expressing them. In creating new scientific knowledge the raw materials are our observations and imaginings about the world as we find it and as we can contrive to shape it. Very importantly, however, and too little noticed, we are creative when we use our ingenuity to discover (or rediscover) better ways of providing goods and services which are valued by others. This means that creativity has a central role to play in the conduct of commerce and government. This is particularly important for the claim that people in business and politics should adopt an ethic of vocations rather than Machiavellian amoralism. This means that ambition should be the servant, not the master of vocation in the prosecution of a career.

It also means that the satisfactions of a vocation creatively pursued are abundantly available to all those whose work is not (or ought not to be) motivated by the kind of ambition appropriate to a successful career –

parents, home-makers, pastors, healers, teachers and many others. For these people fame and fortune are rarely primary motivators and are incidental to the profound satisfactions of feeling engaged in works of love which are intrinsically worth doing and which elicit the best of their talents and enthusiasms. By contrast, the satisfactions of being absorbed in creative work are typically not the primary motivators of those engaged in the direct pursuit of fame and fortune. What typically motivates such people is the (vaulting) ambition to be promoted ever higher into the ranks of those who exercise power. Thus they are concerned not with what they can usefully accomplish but with where what they do will get them. Since this involves being more concerned with how they are perceived than with what they actually achieve, these are the people most likely to be lured into Machiavellian amoralism.

Limited Resources

It is further worth noting that an ethic of vocations also solves the problem of limited moral resources which we saw vividly expounded by Dennett.

Our resources for doing good are limited by our time, aptitudes, knowledge, endowments, dispositions and the particular circumstances in which we find ourselves. In an ethic of vocations, we are only called to discern and follow such manners of living well as are consonant with our limited abilities, energies and (to some extent) interests. This is what makes work satisfying or fulfilling when it is seen as vocational so that living well in the sense of living virtuously is conducive to, rather than in conflict with living well in the sense of enjoying one's life. On the other hand, there is so much more that is worth doing in the course of our lives than we can actually do, that it is consoling to accept that we are only called to do those good things that we can realistically hope to accomplish with our finite material and psychological resources.

In the same way, no doubt, we have an obligation to care in principle about everyone's well-being equally, as God does. In practice, however, we can only care about a limited numbers of individuals and with varying degrees of commitment. These include not only those close to us but also the strangers in trouble whom we happen to come across in the course of going about our daily lives. By the same token, we can only support a limited number of good causes to varying degrees and, in these circumstances, it is morally helpful to think about which causes, given everything that makes us the individuals we are, we are especially called upon to try to further.

Of particular importance for our present concern is the relation of vocations to the requirements that Christian ethics requires us to seek to "follow Christ." Ward is helpful about this. He tells us:

> though some [people] are called to follow Christ in the detail of his life – in its poverty, self-sacrifice and martyrdom - most [people] will find their vocation in very different spheres of life - in the affluence and competitiveness of an industrial society, for example. One can hardly say that Christian faith has nothing to say to such [people], or that it precludes them from following their particular occupations (*EC*, p.145).

From all this we may conclude that an ethic of vocations is no less illuminating about how people should think about, and conduct themselves in relation to work in the world of commerce than it is in relation to other kinds of work and in personal relationships.

Attitudes

There is a final aspect of this account of vocational ethics which relates to Ward's Christian ethics and is, I think original and important, especially in *EC.* of Ward's account of Christian ethics which I take to be original and important, This is his emphasis on the attitudinal nature of morality (esp. *EC* Chapter V) which, I take to be very useful in the task of trying to refute Machiavellian amoralism in relation to worldly ambition and the ethics of competitive work.

Ward tells us, that according to Christian ethics everyone is called to "adopt a specific set of attitudes… which are exemplified in the life of Jesus"[8] and to aspire to the ideal of a life of "total self-abandonment to others, as that of Jesus was."[9] Christian ethics, then, is not just, or primarily concerned with our actions and principles when it calls us to live as God wants us to live and as has been revealed to us in the exemplary life of Jesus. Christian ethics also requires us to cultivate certain kinds of attitude to God, to our neighbours, to our enemies, to ourselves and to the whole of creation. Importantly, attitudes are about our feelings before they are about our deeds. As such, they are, like dispositions, a function of the psychological characteristics with which we are endowed, of the cultures in which we are nurtured and of the particular circumstances in which we

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[8] *EC*, p.141

[9] Ibid

confront choices about what it is best to do. But attitudes can also be deliberately cultivated, reinforced, modified, and even abandoned altogether. The diligent and conscientious establishment of good attitudes ought, consequently, to be a central feature of all ethics and of all moral education and attempts at self-improvement.

Having stable attitudes is less a matter of how one behaves than of the frame of mind in which one approaches one's work, one's colleagues, one's rivals, oneself and one's situation in the world. This is typically a complex matter and requires thoughtfulness and realism (or, for a Christian, prayerfulness) to dissolve bad attitudes like self-importance and resentfulness, and to fortify good ones like gratitude and forgiveness. It is, however, our attitudes rather than our actions which Ward thinks, rightly in my view, define the kind of person we become and to what extent that person is the person God is calling us to become.

In this respect, moral attitudes are what Michael Oakeshott calls "adverbial."[10] They relate to the manner of doing (and saying) things rather than to the matter of what is being done (or said). The good is similarly conceived in terms of relationships rather than particular activities or goals, as usually understood. In these respects, it is not surprising that the New Testament does not supply clear answers to questions of contemporary public policy, or of the conduct of commercial enterprises, or the legitimate pursuit of pleasure in relation to sex, drugs and other entertainments. However, given the sovereignty of love in Christian ethics, what a morality based on the New Testament emphatically and repeatedly does prescribe is the attitude summarised in the command quoted above: "let all that ye do be done in love."

Piety

But how do we cultivate such attitudes? The short Christian answer is by practising the virtues of piety. Ward gives the title, "The Theistic Attitude," to the title of Chapter XII of *EC*. Here he focuses on the roles of reverence, contrition and thankfulness in Christian ethics.

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[10] Michael Oakeshott (1983): *On History and Other Essays*. (Oxford. Basil Blackwell). In his (I think somewhat flawed) *magnum opus*, *On Human Conduct* (1970) Oakeshott discusses religion between pp. 81-86 and argues that it is precisely the function of religion to enable us to rebut, and so dissipate the fear of nihilism in all its forms. Though, after his earliest publications which were often reviews of books about Christianity, he wrote little about specifically Christian matters thereafter, he remained himself a Christian by conviction and deplored the dilutions and dissipations of faith before what he saw as the onslaught of a shallow and misleading technocratic rationalism.

I find this helpful as a way of approaching the problem that arises for vocational ethics which arises from the fact that vocations are multiple and complex. What they require in particular circumstances is often difficult to discern and hard to implement. This is why it is necessary for following our vocations as well as we can, in our working lives as in our personal relationships, to seek enlightenment and fortification through the practices of piety which, for Christians, means praying in aid the gracious power and wisdom of God.

Prayer, broadly understood, is the most obvious activity in which religious believers engage and unbelievers do not. Its point is not what it is often caricatured as being by the more aggressive and theologically ignorant atheists,[11] i.e. to get God to do what we want. The point of prayer is to help us to do what God wants. This requires, first of all, the kind of worship which gets our present preoccupations into proper perspective and reminds us of what truly matters and what is truly most worth desiring.

It also requires thinking hard about how we have erred and strayed (like lost sheep) in what we have done and what we have left undone. It requires - on the other side of the ledger, as it were - literally counting our blessings.

This is by no means a banal activity, as popular injunctions to do this sometimes seem to suggest. Instead, the cultivation of habits of gratitude, no less than those of penitence, generate a profound realism which requires both honesty and humility. Finally, nourishing our vocational effectiveness through prayer requires clarity about what we are being specifically called upon to do, in our present circumstances to fulfil the obligations of our vocations towards those we are called to love and the work we are called to undertake. These are, of course, the constituent components of traditional Christian religious services, which atheists suppose to be a waste of time and an indulgence in fantasies. Christians, however, see the practices of piety as necessary and very powerful aids to the cumulative dissipation of self-deception, which, in turn, is indispensable for being as true as we can be to our several vocations.

+EEHs and Machiavellianism

It is through an ethics of vocations that Christians rebut Machiavellian amoralism in the pursuit of worldly success. We now need to consider

[11] Some such ignorami, cited with approval by Richard Dawkins (2010) have even expended precious scientific research resources on trying to ascertain whether people who are prayed for when sick are or are not more likely to recover. The only excuse for such foolishness on the part of atheists, like Dawkins and even Dennett, is, as Ward greatly regrets, that too many Christians clearly do believe that this is how prayer works. In this they have been failed by their theologians and pastors.

what +EEHs can credibly say about the ethics of ambition and work more generally and about how to rebut Machiavelli's contextual amoralism.

Contemporary +EEHs seldom take on Machiavelli directly and even anti-Enlightenment, "post-modern" exclusive humanists tend to shun his (and Nietzsche's) apparent countenancing of extreme cruelty and inequality. They also say disappointingly little about the ethics of ambition in people's working lives here and now.[12] It turns out, however, that they do hold views about work which are remarkably similar to the Christian ethics of vocations as expounded above.

Charles Taylor, as we have seen, very plausibly ascribes to them a view which most EHs would, if pressed, endorse and which some do endorse, more or less explicitly[13] and implicitly. Taylor, as discussed, describes a typical EH conception of "fullness" (*eudaimonia*) as "living happily with spouse and family" and "practising a vocation which we find fulfilling and also which constitutes an obvious contribution to human welfare." (*SA*, p. 6-7). This is what constitutes what he calls the "threefold scenario" for living a good life here and now, which precisely is not enough for believers but is enough for unbelievers to meet the yearnings for a sense that their lives are good and meaningful. EHs tell us: "This is all there is" and "[t]his is the goal. Living this well and fully is what human life is about."[14]

The role of fulfilling and obviously worthwhile work is, thus, central to EH beliefs about what really matters in life and forms a central plank in their rebuttal of moral nihilism and amoralism. As such, it raises important questions about the nature of the fulfilment and worthwhileness. It also raises questions about what specifically moral, rather than legal or prudential imperatives and constraints should apply to individuals in the conduct of their working lives. These are ethical questions in the broad sense we have been employing throughout this study. They bear on questions, not just about what people actually desire but about what are

12 An exception to this is given in the very late work of Derek Parfit. Shortly before his death in 2017. Parfit, to his credit, was working on an important issue in the ethics of work, which is expected to appear in a posthumous Volume Four of *On What Matters*. Having adopted the supremely worthy cause of radically reducing the misery of the world's poor, and noted that many young people share his passionate moral commitment to this cause, Parfit asks whether it is morally better for a young person to join an organisation such as "Doctors Without Borders" and give immediate succour to the suffering, or whether they should devote themselves to amassing a large fortune in business and then use it to make a much greater contribution to the relief of suffering amongst the poor. Interestingly, he thought they would have more enjoyable lives if they chose the former over the latter, though that consideration didn't settle the ethical issue.

13 The dictum ascribed to Freud that mental health is the ability to work and to love is the perhaps the most famous version of this view,

14 *SA*, p.7

the truly worthy objects of human desiring - the *desideranda*, not just the *desiderata* of human striving. They also bear on the question of what virtues we need to cultivate, and what vices to avoid in order to live the best possible life of which we are capable.

Although Taylor uses the word "vocation" here I suspect he is using it in the debased sense where it is simply a synonym for "profession" or "line of work" without any essentially religious reference to something a person has been called to engage in by God. Nevertheless, I think he is right that EHs do indeed attach a great deal of importance to finding their work fulfilling. I take this to mean, though Taylor doesn't spell this out, something like the fact that they not only find their work interesting and enjoyable but also that it confers on them a sense that they are making use of their particular talents and enthusiasms in a particularly appropriate way. In this way, their work is an important part of who they are, and what makes them special.

However to achieve Taylorian fullness, it is not enough that they believe they are special – a somebody rather than an (alienated or anomic) nobody: they also need to believe that their work is worthwhile in that it contributes in however limited a way to making the world a somewhat better place than it would have been otherwise. This means that the work which leads to fullness must be beneficent. The supreme good, in relation to achieving fullness through work for EHs is not Machiavellian glory which ultimately consists in the pleasures of applause – the longer, louder, more universal and enduring, the better. For Taylor's contemporary EHs the supreme good in relation to work is a sense of achievement – the feeling that this work is worth doing and I have done it to the best of my particular abilities. Here the goal is not the admiration of others though that, of course, is a nice-to-have: it is self-respect or, in a literal and moral sense, feeling good about oneself. At its most satisfying, the sense of "fullness" to be achieved through work which involves a sense that this is work that I was put on this earth to do and I am doing it well. In a similar way, Taylorian "fullness" in relation to "living happily with spouse and family" commonly involves a reciprocated feeling that these are the people whom I am "meant" to care about and to love.

If fulfilling and worthwhile work needs to be benevolent in intention and as beneficent as possible in its effects, this places severe restraints on the possible ends which people may work for, as part of seeking the fullness of a life well lived. "Fulfilling and worthwhile work" could not consist in seeking to increase the total volume of misery in the world. Nor, less obviously and more realistically could it involve the mere accumulation

of large and personally unspendable amounts of money, regardless of the purposes the money is eventually used for.

In fact, the sense of being engaged in fulfilling and worthwhile work very frequently involves, in addition to whatever one does to earn a living, commitment to one or more causes, political or broadly humanitarian, believed to be morally important. Working for a cause may seem to provide a much stronger sense of self-worth through "making an obvious contribution to human welfare" than, say serving diligently, helpfully, intelligently and cheerfully in a shop. This sense, however, may be misplaced and more likely to be vitiated by an exaggerated conception of one's own virtuousness and importance.

In this connection, it should be noted that people can be profoundly mistaken about the ends which are truly worth working for. Given human fallibility, it is easy to be radically mistaken and misled about the goodness of the cause one is working for and the moral legitimacy of the means one thinks are required to further it. It is one thing to wish to rid the world of lethal viruses: it is quite another to wish to exterminate whole categories of human beings, by engineering a famine or a genocide, and on the grounds that such human beings are, in fact, vermin or simply surplus to requirements. In general, it seems that the grander and more all-encompassing the cause and the greater the feelings of certainty and righteousness which it engenders in its adherents, the greater the dangers that it will turn them not into moral heroes but into moral monsters who collectively inflict unimaginable sufferings on their fellow human-being and indeed other animals. The only kind of all-encompassing causes which have inflicted greater evils on humanity than those grounded in Christian and other religious faiths have been those grounded in religionless faiths. This I have suggested is the great practical lesson to be learned above all from Isaiah Berlin.

Conversely, an ethic of vocations prescribes the manner and the means with which ends may be morally pursued. Thus largely inglorious jobs or even those that elicit much revulsion such as that of an executioner, can be undertaken in more or less humane and honourable ways; and most jobs can become worthwhile as a result of the manner in which they are carried out and the opportunities for comradeship and collegiality they afford. On the other hand, few ends, of which one may be that of maximising control over others in circumstances of exceptional danger, remain morally admirable if the means whereby power is obtained,

retained and expanded involve the systematic extirpation of feelings of compassion or compunction in the powerful.[15]

The EH conception of fulfilling and worthwhile work thus places severe restraints both on the states of affairs which it may be legitimately accounted good to try to bring about, and on the manner in which these ends may be pursued. As such, it rebuts Machiavellian amoralism both by rejecting personal glory (celebrity, pre-eminence) as the supreme goal of a life well lived and by rejecting thoroughgoing ruthlessness as the necessary means for attaining it.

Problems for EHs and the ethics of ambition

In this area, it is perhaps clearer than in any other that EHs are dependent on borrowing and trying to secularise ideas which have long been fundamental and largely peculiar to Christian ethics, especially since the Reformation. There are, however, a number of difficulties in the +EEH secularised version of an ethic of vocations which are considerably graver than the Christian originals.

First, perhaps the greatest of these is that it may be very difficult for people to believe that they ought to undertake particular beneficent work because they feel that this is what they were put on this planet to do, if they are also convinced that there is no-one to do the putting. Similarly it is harder for people to believe that they should contribute to human welfare in specific ways because this is the contribution they feel they are meant or called to make if they also believe that there is no-one there to do the meaning and calling. In this respect, the Christian conception of God's call out-narrates atheist analogues. God's call, unlike the calls of history or destiny, can actually be listened for and heard. It also needs to be interpreted with care and discernment – not to say fear and trembling.

Atheist analogues for a God of love who calls us include the call of history or of progress or of my station and its duties or of some inner voice which tells me what it is for me to live authentically. However, the moral claims based on these analogues seem both epistemologically very flimsy and likely to lead to the kind of self-deception which issues in moral wickedness rather than goodness. Atheist ethicists thus lack agreed criteria for judging the authenticity and authority of whatever it is we feel we are

[15] This point is especially well made in Alfred de Vigny's *Servitude et Grandeur Militaires* usually translated as T*he Military Condition*. Vigny argues that a central component in the ethics of soldiering is compunction or reluctance. Machiavelli's own account of the disgracefulness of Agathocles's life suggests that he might concede this point.

meant to do. Hence the interminability problem in contemporary ethical debates.

A Christian ethic of vocations does have such a criterion. This is because God's calls always requires us to emulate divine love in particular situations, where divine love is understood to have been exemplified in the life and work of Jesus as recorded in the New Testament. This does not dissolve many problems about what precisely God's call is asking us to do. But, on the Christian account, the specifics of God's call in particular situations can be listened for and apparently heard, quite literally, in a variety of different contexts. This is paradigmatically the case with the still, small voice of private prayer. Discerning aright the meanings of what God calls us to do (our vocations) typically requires much honest intellection about our experience and is often greatly aided by the spiritual direction made available to us by pastors and theologians, living and dead. Nevertheless, at the end of the day, prayerful believers need to come to conclusions, with all due care and circumspection and aware of their ineliminable proneness to make many kinds of mistake, about just what it is that God wants them to do.

In this way an ethic of vocations also provides us with the strongest possible reason to try to live as God wants us to live – something which, as we have seen, is acknowledged, to his credit, by Parfit. It also enables us, in a healthy sense, to feel good about ourselves to the extent that we are trying, as best we can, albeit always inadequately, actually to be good. The alternative for most atheists, as Taylor suggests is often to rely on a (usually inflated) conception of their own moral courage, clear-sightedness and self-reliance, combined with little sense of the depth of their own propensity to moral failure and indeed the extent of their helplessness.

These latter constitute the Christian notion of sin for which a remedy is supplied by practices of penitence. Christians also recognise that in seeking to live good lives they need the assistance of grace which they typically seek and find in many forms of prayer, and which some businesses are now trying to obtain through encouraging the practices of "mindfulness" which is really only another name for meditation.

Secondly, given their Russellian certainties about the finality of death and the ultimate annihilation of everything, EHs will find it hard to persuade people to make substantial sacrifices of their current this-worldly interests, as all vocations will sometimes require, in order to help create a better world in the future. On the annihilationist hypothesis, there is little chance

that what individuals and groups do will really make the world a significantly better place. Certainly, there is virtually no chance that they will live to dwell in the Promised Land of the future, as conceived by Condorcet or Marx or Parfit and which, EHs claim, can be progressively brought about by unaided human effort. On the contrary, on atheist premises they are more like to reach the nihilist conclusion, quoted above, of Shelley's Ozymandias.

Thirdly, we should note that the account of fullness achieved through fulfilling and worthwhile work is unjustly elitist. It overwhelmingly applies to the kind of middle class jobs with good remuneration, high status and good prospects of advancement as a career progresses. Everyone else is tacitly consigned to drudgery in order to survive and feed their families. Unsurprisingly, the kind of working life which, in part, makes life worth living for e.g. confident atheist academics and journalists, is unavailable to the poor in their own affluent societies, let alone to the poor in "developing" counties. In fact, what EHs have to offer in relation to achieving fullness through prosecuting a successful career is not only still a wholly alien concept to most of the world's citizenry: it also leads to great disappointments even amongst those fortunate enough to embark on such a career. They are constantly anxious about getting the (Machiavellian) recognition which makes their work fulfilling. Not uncommonly, they lose interest in their professional work and may even come to the conclusion that they have wasted or are wasting their lives by devoting so much time and energy to their careers which come to seem pretty futile. As Taylor notes the same vulnerability to disappointment, frustration and failure affects personal relationships of love and friendship.

Fourthly, there is Machiavelli's empirical claim that, as a matter of fact, being told by ethicists how they ought to behave makes no difference to how they do behave – only to the nature of the hypocrisy they practise. Many people in pursuit of worldly success clearly do ignore ethical demands, will frequently cheat, and so embrace at least a substantial degree of Machiavellian amoralism. This often assists and does not necessarily frustrate their pursuit of power, riches and glory.

Finally, there is the claim which Machiavelli does not make about the capacities necessary for worldly success but which seems to me to be importantly true on the basis of my own limited participant observation of leaders in the worlds of politics and business. This is that such leaders are often greatly assisted by a powerful capacity for self-deception. They manage to convince themselves that what's good for them is good for their

organisation and what's good for their organisation is good for the world. In this way, they are able to justify to themselves financial rewards (euphemistically called "compensation") out of all proportion to the Lockean value of the fruits of their labours. Similarly, they are able to believe that the work they have performed in pursuit of their own interests really deserves to be honoured as morally exceptional.

Conclusion

In sum, therefore, I conclude that +EEH answers to the Machiavellian amoralism I have described are feeble and unconvincing, and this is a particularly acute problem for them in relation to the ethics of ambition. Conceivably, this is, in part, why those who teach and write about ethics in relation to the conduct of politics and business pay little or no attention to moral questions about ambition.

It is possible that the same morally benign effects of a belief that one is following a vocation can be obtained if people simply try, through their relationships and their work, to leave the world a somewhat better place than they found it. Many people undoubtedly do indeed lead lives largely driven by goodwill without taking any interest in matters religious. There seems to me to be nothing in principle wrong with that from a moral point of view, though such lives may be poorer for lacking any sense of, or aspiration towards the sublime. In practice, however, I see little evidence that +EEHs have succeeded, or show signs of being likely to succeed, in closing John E Hare's "Moral Gap" between our obligations and our capacity to live up to them. In particular, I see little prospect of eliminating careerist amoralism from commercial or public life if jobs are seen solely or mainly as stepping stones to the acquisition of wealth and prestige.

In respect of the ethics of ambition in our working lives and the pursuit of worldly success, what EHs really rely on is the enjoyment of a successful career rather than the satisfactions of following a constantly evolving set of vocations. But a career-based working life has substantial drawbacks in comparison with one grounded in vocations. For one thing, careers in Taylor's secular societies reach apogees but then typically decline and come to an end in retirement. Notoriously, in politics and business at least, they usually end in at least some degree of failure and disappointment. Vocations never come to an end and cannot be compared with one another in relation to their "success"; only with respect to their nature and the faithfulness with which they are followed. Relatedly, careers typically involve competition and trying to out-perform colleagues and rivals: one can get to the top of a profession or reach the climax of a career, but not

the top or the climax of a vocation. This is why thinking about what to do in relation to furthering one's career typically involves no reflection about what is morally right or wrong except in so far as acting in accordance with what morality requires may be an obstacle or an aid to doing what will be best for your career. Thinking about what your vocation requires is all about thinking as deeply as possible about moral issues: about what you are really trying to achieve, about what you are getting right and wrong in following your vocation, about how you can discern more accurately what its requirements really are and how you can do better in the future. Finally, realising ambitions for glory or power or wealth is always to a large extent a matter of luck. Following a vocation requires not luck but cultivated receptiveness to grace.

These considerations relate to Machiavelli's understanding of the ends of a life well lived. There are also important differences between careers and vocations in relation to the "virtues" he thinks we need to cultivate and practice in order to achieve these ends. Success in a career typically requires high levels of energy and instrumental intelligence. It may also require boldness as well as considerable cunning. It seems frequently to require an iron determination to succeed and a willingness, as necessary, to disregard the consequences of ones actions for the well-being of others. Also important is an ability to charm and the careful cultivation and management of a reputation for being a morally impressive and honourable human being. By contrast what is important in following vocations are virtues like faithfulness, diligence, wisdom, integrity, humility, and the kind of self- giving devotion to the good of others which Christian ethics applauds and which is the antithesis of both amoralism and of a ruthless Machiavellian egoism.

Following a vocation also requires the kind of self-knowledge which makes possible accurate discernment of what the ends of your life at different stages should be and how you should pursue them, given the resources of time, talent, energy and other endowments which are uniquely available to you and make you the person you uniquely are. As I have commented, in the prosecution of a successful career self-deception may serve you better than self-knowledge. It will not, however, serve you if you believe that what is important is that you be "true to your calling" and "true to yourself." This is central, whatever you take your "callings' to be to living authentically – something which Taylor claims is now commonly thought essential to lasting psychological well-being and as foundational to whatever way of life people choose to adopt.

In short, everything that Machiavelli says about morality seems to be unrebuttable if all that people seek in their working lives is a successful career. My conclusion, however, is not that people ought to eschew the pursuit of worldly success through their careers. This would be wholly unrealistic and collectively undesirable. It is rather that they should make choices in their careers in relation to what they perceive to be their vocations in life, even if they only understand "vocations" in a metaphorical or "as-if" sense. In particular, this means that they should select and engage in their careers as if they were continually seeking to discover, given their particular endowments, enthusiasms and circumstances, what it is they are "meant" to do with their lives and what consequently they should be doing now.

To do this, they will need to identify, and be helped by their educators and counsellors to identify, the best ways in which they can make creative contributions to the promotion of human happiness which will give them a sense that their lives are worthwhile, meaningful and have a purpose. Making these contributions will constitute their vocations. It offers them hope of fulfilment as individuals and may also give them a sense that they are valued members of a team or community which is working for some higher good than their own individual preference-satisfaction. This sense typically produces profound satisfactions of its own by considerably reinforcing people's sense that their lives are useful and worth living, and of why their existence matters in the world.

Amongst the vocational contributions that may be made in this way are obviously those which seek to help particular individuals and classes of individuals such as the poor, the sick, the young and the old. Such contributions also obviously include those of people who become expert in satisfying particular human desires, for example, for aesthetic enjoyment or intellectual understanding. Moreover, some people will make their contribution by attending to the best political arrangements under which everyone in society can contribute to the flourishing of goodness in the world, and by doing so can flourish personally as the unique individuals they are. Of particular importance for the ethics of business are that people can only truly flourish as human beings if their work in commerce is seen as a vocation to increase communal and not just personal prosperity - prosperity, like security, being a condition for all communal human flourishing, and an important ingredient in the personal happiness of most people.

Prosperity may well be best achieved, for individuals and societies through participating creatively in competitive commercial activity.

Doing business, consequently, can and should be seen as a matter of vocation and an opportunity for beneficent creativity. However, the pursuit of prosperity or any other good through competitive activity will not be unconstrained by moral considerations. In particular, such considerations will include rules for co-operation and, as such, exclude recourse to all forms of force and fraud, even if one is able to have recourse to these and other practices which wrongfully harm others with complete impunity.

Ultimately, it is an empirical claim that a working life conceived and practised in terms of following a vocation rather than simply pursuing advancement in a career will be more humanly fulfilling, satisfying, and *eudaimonistic*. However, it is a claim that is intuitively plausible, fairly well supported in the literature on management theory as summarised by Lee Hardy, and often widely acknowledged by many people, including many working in business and politics. This is good enough reason to teach those who are ambitious for worldly success through zero-sum competitive activities that they should not follow Machiavelli's advice but rather should behave, in all the work they undertake, as if they were following a vocation.

CHAPTER 11

CONCLUSION

I began with two hypotheses. First, if atheist and Christian ethicists both broadly endorse the moral convictions of the Enlightenment, they are in, Charles Taylor's phrase, "brothers under the skin" and should collaborate to defend and propagate a universal morality which can ground personal and political decision-making both in secular societies and globally. Second, if atheism is to provide a rationally credible and powerfully inspiring rebuttal of moral nihilism, it requires substitutes for faith in Christian teleology and eschatology in respect of the realities of the human condition. In respect of amoralism it needs to endorse, if only metaphorically, an ethic of vocations.

With respect to the first hypothesis, I have argued that it is broadly confirmed. The ethics of humanism, I have claimed, should ground rational decision-making about what are the truly worthy objects of human desiring in all societies and for all individuals, as well as the attitudes and dispositions which are necessary for realising these human goods. Indeed, I believe that the basic humanist tenet of this ethic is indeed perennial and fundamental to all systems of morality, past and present, and in all cultures, both theistic and atheistic. This is simply that pointless suffering is always bad and its abatement good. Conversely, it is always good to promote the capacity of sentient beings to enjoy their lives.

That such universal humanism nowadays needs to be qualified as "liberal" is a more recent doctrine in ethics and politics. Like the scientific revolutions which originated in Renaissance Europe, liberalism was originally a revolutionary doctrine. Like the revolution in thinking about the natural world, the revolution in thinking about how we ought to live, individually and communally, is grounded in the claim that no-one possesses a final and authoritative monopoly on truth. Truth must be discovered, not by the interpretation of pronouncements taken to be canonical, but by the collaborative investigation of experience. Hence, the essential liberal conviction that individuals must be free to think for themselves about what to believe about the nature of reality and how it is best to live in relation to it.

In the sciences this commitment to treating all beliefs revisable and refinable, to taking seriously the views of those who disagree, and to

acknowledging the extent of our ignorance, has achieved something close to universal acceptance as a method and a wide degree of global consensus about the best answers to a huge range of questions. This is, no doubt because of the spectacular success of science in devising ways of promoting the fundamental goals of humanist ethics.

In ethics and politics, a liberal commitment to free inquiry has so far failed to achieve universal acceptance. Here, the view is still widely accepted amongst majorities throughout the world, including the West, that, in matters of morals, people must be encouraged or coerced into living in accordance with the deliverances of unchallengable authority. Such authority may be religious or secular and conformity may be secured through is placed in legislation, education or social ostracism and similar pressures.

On the other hand, there has been a considerable increase, throughout the West and globally, in appreciation of the diversity of truly worthy objects of human desiring amongst different individuals and cultures, especially between East and West. There has also been a huge enrichment of the opportunities, for both absolute and proportionate numbers of human beings, to live much more fulfilling lives than was possible in the past. This has been a consequence mainly of the astounding increase in our capacity to create wealth, largely thanks to the unshackling of human ingenuity and its harnessing to promoting human well-being.

The increasingly universal material conditions of the contemporary world has unsurprisingly been accompanied by a diversity of conceptions about what a truly fulfilling life consists in and to different responses to global economic and political developments by individuals from within the traditional values of the particular families, countries, religious convictions and political cultures in which they have been nurtured.[1]

These contemporary developments, together with the history of the last 400, and especially the last 100 years, have made it clear that without the cultural and political institutions which protect individual liberty and political equality, not only will prosperity itself be undermined. The security which is a pre-requisite for all decent human living will also be threatened.

There remains much controversy about whether the world as a whole has made moral as well as material progress, as anticipated with much

[1] The dilemmas to which these developments give rise and an account of the ethical perspective from which they may best be viewed is found in Nigel Biggar (2014): *Between Kin and Cosmopolis*.

optimism by the thinkers of the Enlightenment. What is certain is that there remains a great deal of wickedness in the world. The lust for domination, which Augustine identified as the besetting sin of the Roman Empire, remains very much in evidence in politics everywhere as political entrepreneurs exploit the resources of cruelty and deceit on a scale which would have been unavailable to earlier Machiavellian prince.

Moreover, such political entrepreneurs usually adopt monist religious or atheist ideologies to justify their rejection of the disciplines of liberalism by claiming that these are merely rationalisations of the interests of a bourgeoisie or a cover for the godless vices of a decadent "West" or the pernicious legacies of an exploitative colonialism. In the parallel world of business commercial entrepreneurs justify their perversions of liberal values by claiming to be defending "Western" values in the name of something which they misleadingly call "capitalism."[2] They then deceive themselves into believing that what is merely greed, which can typically only be satisfied by resort to coercive monopolies and extensive fraud is really the just reward for their exceptional abilities. Finally these twin evils of political tyranny and economic greed become indistinguishable as political power is exploited to plunder the poor and money is used to buy political power.

It is, I think, an original contribution to the defence of a monist and universalisable liberal humanism to suggest that it be based, not primarily or mainly on an assertion of its superior moral and material achievements, but rather on a humble acknowledgment of how much we all, whatever we believe, still have to learn and to do in ethics, no less than in science. I think, further, that it is especially helpful, as I have argued, to think of the answers to ethical questions, about how ***we,*** individually and collectively, ought to try to live and what we ought to do, as a matter of discerning what our several vocations require of us. This way of looking at the matter means that all ethics becomes vocational ethics and as such defangs the arguments for moral nihilism and Machiavellian amoralism more effectively than any of the available alternatives.

For these reasons, the need for a convincing universal morality is urgent. The kind of liberal humanism, commended by all the ethicists I have studied, both atheist and Christian has the potential to furnish precisely

[2] A particularly persuasive account of economic policy which addresses the need to combine prosperity for all and individual freedom for all, and which exposes the misleading language of both "capitalist" not "socialist" economics is Van Parijs, Philippe (2003): *Real Freedom for All; What, if anything can justify capitalism?* (Oxford University Press)

because it is not based on an assertion of anyone's claim to a monopoly of authoritative moral knowledge. Instead, it relies on a grateful recognition of the contributions of many individuals in many cultures in expanding our moral knowledge and on a humble acknowledgment of the limitations of everyone's moral knowledge, including our own. Such an ethic will tolerate a high degree of diversity in the pursuit of a life well lived and will be open to learning from many different sources and traditions in our ultra-pluralist world. More contentiously, perhaps, I do not see how anyone could rationally avoid endorsing, and seeking to collaborate in promoting, such Rawlsian[3] primary goods as security, freedom, justice and prosperity for all the inhabitants of the planet, in the face of threats to humanity as a whole. At the very least, this is an intellectual and moral project on which atheists and Christians, as well as other religious believers, can agree and should collaborate.

With respect to the second hypothesis, I have argued that, on Christian convictions about divinely benign teleology and eschatology, as well as about personal vocations, it is clearly rational to live according to an ethic of self-giving love which sometimes, in the here and now, demands substantial sacrifices of our own interests and of those close to us in order to secure the interests of others.

Atheists, by contrast, have no such convictions. They are convinced that our lives are literally pointless *sub specie aeternitatis* and end for ever in death. This, as far as I can see, makes it much harder to give cogent reasons for an ethic which sometimes demands real and substantial sacrifices of our own interests here and now in the service of others. This is because on atheist premises such sacrifices are permanent and uncompensatable. Further, as both atheists and Christians agree, a high degree of *non*-reciprocal altruism such as Parfit's ethics require – as opposed to a mere ethic of reciprocal altruism based on supposedly enlightened self-interest here and now - does not come naturally, at least to many of us. We need to be given good reasons for acting so as to make our own lives considerably worse overall in order to make other people's lives significantly better. We are especially disinclined to follow the requirements of such an ethic if the others for whom we are told we should make the sacrifices are strangers to us, or competitors with us for scarce resources, including money and esteem, or don't yet, and may never exist. It becomes harder still to practise an ethic of self-giving love if the good we think our substantial sacrifices may do for others appears to be small, uncertain, diffuse and remote in time.

[3] These are, according to Rawls, goods that we could not rationally wish society to possess less of rather than more of. See Rawls, John (1971): *A Theory of Justice*. p.62

In these ways it is much harder for +EEHs than for +ECEs to rebut moral nihilism and amoralism. However, +EEHs do reject these doctrines, typically relying on what amount to secular equivalents for fundamental faith-based moral convictions. These are basic values which neither admit of, nor - so it is alleged - need further justification. Examples we have considered are Berlin's decency, Dennett's democracy, and Parfit's irreducible normative truth that we should prevent or relieve suffering if we can. They also tend to rely on good causes, focussed on bringing about a better future for others, to persuade people to resist the imperious demands of self-interest. At the least, these ways of rebutting moral nihilism and amoralism are vulnerable to all the perversions of Christian ethics. They are also at least as likely to elicit mere lip-service or simple indifference, if not (largely unspoken) defiance in practice,

The faith-based convictions of Christian ethics, however, unlike their atheist analogues are based on profound personal experiences of many kinds: one's own and those recorded by others. These can be reflected upon, discussed with others, refined, repeated and deepened within a framework of confidence that this is not all there is, that it is not all pointless and that all shall finally be well. This confidence may be misplaced but so may the atheist's lack of it. Meanwhile the atheist, who has only intuitions about the desirability of impartial unselfishness in a morally indifferent world, has nothing to say, and can do nothing about a thoroughgoing but brilliantly hypocritical amoralist who thinks (but does not say): "Sorry but I just don't share your intuitions."

In practice, I think most unbelievers most of the time behave much more honestly, fair-mindedly and benevolently than it is objectively rational for them to do. Thank God – or goodness! On the other hand, they are hobbled if they aspire to rise above moral mediocrity because they lack the habit of moral self-examination which invites them to consider to what extent they fall prey, for example, to the seven deadly sins.

In these ways, it seems to me that agapeistic Christian ethics out-narrates atheist ethics in theory and, on average – as Dennett admits[4] – in practice too. I, therefore, offer as an original or at least an unusual[5] contribution to constructive debate between atheist and Christian ethicists the thought that Christians are able to defend the liberal humanist values which most atheists champion with more compelling rational arguments than atheists themselves are able to muster.

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[4] Breaking the Spell, p.287

[5] "Unusual" though not unique. See, for example Camosy, Charles (2012) *Peter Singer and Christian Ethics*. (Cambridge University Press)

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