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FEEDING THE SOUL

Three lectures on Strengthening Moral Courage in Public Life

Lecture Two: Moral Perception

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My lords, ladies and gentlemen.

A busy, morally alert king, anxious to make the world a better place and to secure his seat in heaven, consulted his priest. ‘What should I do to advance my spiritual development?’ he asked. ‘Sleep for as long as possible,’ came the swift reply from his priest. ‘What good will that do?’ replied the king, rather hurt. Pause... ‘None at all,’ she said. ‘But it will give the rest of us a break from you.’

Last week I offered a framework for moral thinking, drawn from the western philosophical canon, of goal-based, duty-based, and right-based approaches to a proposed action. Goal-based morality considers whether the outcome of an action, its consequences, are good. Duty-based morality considers the content of the action itself, whether it accords with moral principles for ethical behaviour. Right-based morality considers the views and wishes of those most affected by the action. I suggested that moral strength in thinking entailed applying all three approaches, and then making a clear-sighted choice if the different moral demands competed in any way. As much as anything, the point was about clarity - seeing clearly - which takes courage. I have provided a sheet with the key quotations from last week as a revision sheet or a brief introduction for those of you who were unable to be here. The other sheet gives the quotations I will be offering tonight.

This week I want to move us on to a different plane altogether. We have thought very hard; now I want us to stop thinking, if that’s possible, and move back in our perceptions to a place of quiet feeling. For a little while, no one is going to be asking anything of us, so we can simply enter into a space of not worrying about making up our minds about anything, deciding anything, meeting anyone’s demands. We are going to try the opposite of the king’s wish: we are going to try not to interfere, but simply to look at the world around us, in order to understand better how to serve it. An early warning: this lecture will be more religious than last week’s.

This quotation from Simone Weil about attending on the needs of another is a good place to start, I suggest. Prayer, she said, was attention, and attention:

... consists of suspending our thought, leaving it detached ... and ready to be penetrated by the object... Above all our thought should be empty, waiting, not seeking anything, but ready to receive in its naked truth the object that is to penetrate it... The love of our neighbour in all its fullness simply means being able to say to him: 'What are you going through?' ... This way of looking is first of all attentive. The soul empties itself of all its own contents in order to receive into itself the being it is looking at, just as he is, in all his truth.ⁱ

We are stepping back from the completely natural but also addictive human desire to 'pass everything through our hands' as the Orthodox theologian John Zizioulas writesⁱⁱ. To mess around with the creation, turn it into things we can use, like clothes and books and televisions and great big Abbey churches; helping elderly people across roads they may not want to traverse; changing policies and rearranging citizens' lives in order to feel that we are doing something useful, or at any rate doing something; and so on.

So tonight we are concerned with perception, attitude, empathy. I want to share four ways of looking at or feeling about the world taken from the treasury of the Judeo-Christian tradition. If they do to you what they did to me, they will shift perceptions in such a way that we can feel towards each other and the whole of the world and the earth such a connection, and ultimately such a feeling of love that our behaviour naturally follows a moral course, one that comes out of love. But as with last week, my aim is not to tell anyone what is the right thing to do. I want to show that how we feel towards something makes all the difference in the world to the way we treat it.

The four perceptions are: the covenant with creation; the sacrament of creation; the priesthood of humanity and the Sabbath feast of enoughnessⁱⁱⁱ. I am indebted to the Bishop of London, Dr Richard Chartres, for drawing my attention to these perceptions. They were used when I was supporting him in his role as the Church of England's 'lead bishop' on the environment, and this will become evident as I describe them. However, please do not regard what I am about to say as an environmental manifesto. The perceptions provide an emotional atmosphere, an ethos within which robust moral decision-making can happen. In drawing back from the quotidian, we gain perspective. By seeing the size of the challenges to humanity, our daily dilemmas seem less significant - which is not at all the same as saying that they disappear. The famous philosophical puzzle applies: how do you make a line shorter without touching it? You make a line shorter by drawing a longer line next to it.

The first perception is called the *covenant with creation*. This is the one God is said to have made after the flood, the *berith'olam*, as it's called in Hebrew, the eternal covenant made, not just with Noah and all humans, but with all creatures. This is a wondrous myth. The word for covenant *berith* shares a root with the Hebrew word used exclusively for divine creativity in Genesis, *bara*. *Bara* conveys a sense of a web of interdependence, all things related to all

things. Imagine a three dimensional spider's web. Cut a thread here, and a thread there, and the web survives. Cut several threads all at once, and the whole web collapses, not just a part of it. Hildegard of Bingen, a thirteenth century mystic, doctor of the church and musician wrote: 'God has made all things in the world in consideration of everything else'. Evelyn Underhill, a 20th century mystic, wrote this exercise in her book *Practical Mysticism*, and we can try it as we read:

Stretch out by a distinct act of loving will towards one of the myriad manifestations of life that surround you: and which, in an ordinary way, you hardly notice unless you happen to need them. Pour yourself out towards it, do not draw its image towards you... As to the object of contemplation, it matters little. From Alp to insect, anything will do, provided that your attitude be right: for all things in this world towards which you are stretching out are linked together, and one truly apprehended will be the gateway to the rest... A subtle interpenetration of your spirit with the spirit of those 'unseen existences' now so deeply and thrillingly felt by you, will take place. Old barriers will vanish: and you will become aware that St Francis was accurate as well as charming when he spoke of Brother Wind and Sister Water.^{iv}

Twelve or so centuries after the Noah story of the Hebrew scriptures, the evolutionary biologist EO Wilson wrote of the extraordinary riot of biological diversity that makes up the complex ecosystems upon which all life depends.

Pull out [a] flower from its crannied retreat, shake the soil from the roots into [your] cupped hand, magnify it for close examination. The black earth is alive with a riot of algae, fungi, nematodes, mites, springtails, enchytraeid worms, thousands of species of bacteria. The handful may be only a tiny fragment of one ecosystem, but because of the genetic codes of its residents it holds more order than can be found on the surface of all the planets combined. It is a sample of the living force that runs the earth...^v

It is diversity that makes all life possible: not just this or that species, but the glorious extensive mix. Just as a diversity of species is needed to maintain life on the planet in response to various batterings, so a diversity of human responses is also needed to ensure the health of human communities. Cultural diversity is conducive to health and survival, its contrary to disease and withering. As with a field whose soil goes sterile if the same crop is planted year after year, so with a community that never refreshes itself with the welcome addition of the stranger.

James Lovelock provided a controversial paradigm, controversial both to scientists and religious people, when he suggested his Gaia hypothesis, in which we imagine the earth, including humans, as a single living entity, with all its parts dependent upon each other. Although we see the different parts of the earth, and certainly ourselves, as separate from each other, it's not difficult to make this shift in our perception if we think of our own bodies by analogy. First think of the air around us that we breathe in and out. Then the head, torso,

arms and legs; hair, eyelashes, finger nails and toe nails; skin; muscle and flesh under the skin, tendons, ligaments and the skeleton to give structure; organs and fatty substance around them to protect them. Now think of the earth as a body. I draw on the writing of JR McNeill for this description^{vi}. Think of the atmosphere around the earth, at its outer edge receiving and reflecting the all-important sun's rays; at its lowest altitudes exchanging heat, moisture and gases with soil, water and living things. Think now of the pedosphere, the soil that lies on the outer crust of the earth, like skin on flesh, about half a metre thick, made of sand, clay, silt and organic matter, acting as a cleansing and protecting membrane between the lithosphere and the atmosphere. Now picture the lithosphere, the outer crust of the earth, which is about 120 kilometres thick, rock floating on molten rock. On average the earth's rocks have eroded, deposited on ocean floors as sediment, consolidated into rock again, and been thrust up above sea level again, 25 times in the history of the earth. And think of the hydrosphere, the plumbing of this blue planet which, like our bodies, is mostly water. Water flows in the rainfall, in rivers and oceans, in watersheds, in our drinking, our washing and our tears. And finally the biosphere, the sum of all the habitats in which species live, including every home in every part of the world, from the bubbling sea floor vents teeming with bacteria to glaciers at dizzy heights where the occasional beetle may be found, and everything inbetween. Images from outer space show us the exquisite beauty of this single entity. Once one has begun to think in this way, seeing the undeniable dependence of everything upon everything else, it becomes harder to treat matter as inert and under the control of humans. The pre-lapsarian command to Adam was to 'till and keep' the garden - to serve and conserve - and few farmers would now claim that they have control over the land that grows our crops. We ignore the rhythms of nature at our peril. There is no such thing as a post-agrarian society - look at Easter Island - and, as someone once said:

Humanity, despite its artistic pretensions, its sophistication and its many accomplishments, owes its existence to a six inch layer of topsoil and the fact that it rains.^{vii}

That, then, is the perception of ourselves and the whole creation as bound together in a web of interdependence. We need beetles as much as we need Bishops. more so!

The *sacrament of creation* is a way of expressing the intrinsic value of every nanometre, every minute movement in the world and of it. In the Christian tradition we would say that God sees and loves every part, and so we too cannot simply dismiss any part, or anyone, as 'other'. There is nowhere called - away - where we can throw things, none we can call - other - to treat merely as a means to our own ends.

Descartes' famous and influential separation of mind and matter led to a profoundly held idea that, as he put it, humans are 'masters and possessors of the universe' [ref] and the universe is there for our use only. A Victorian explorer, a clergyman, expressed astonishment at discovering an exquisite orchid deep in the heart of the rainforest where no human, so far as he knew, had ever penetrated. Why on earth had God put it there? he wondered. Of course the Cartesian degrading of matter and the gloriously self-confident and arrogant attitude of

our Victorian forebears made the Industrial Revolution possible, and who among us can deny the benefits that we all still know from that? But we and the earth are paying some heavy prices now and it's my contention that without an equally profound re-orientation of our perceptions away from the idea that the earth is a tool for human use we will not find any lasting solution to the environmental crisis we now face. It's not just environmental but human as well. The concepts of covenant and sacrament move us away from thinking there's work to do for the good of humanity, and different work to do for the good of the natural world, and when they compete, since we're humans we must obviously prioritise the good of humanity, sawing off the branch we are sitting on, as it were, because we need fuel.

There has never been anyone like you, audience member A, before, and there will never be anyone like you ever again. You are and always will be unique. The same is true of every blade of grass. EO Wilson contends that we should value species as much as we value works of art because they are both kinds of miracles, born of a long, long history of development and struggle against the odds. Moreover it is a shared history. Humans evolved along with everything else. Humans are not temporary tenants on an earth that is simply a backdrop for our merely human dramas, or a bottomless larder of good things. We did not land here from elsewhere and adapt. The rocks and we are as we are because we evolved together, which is why the idea, born of a continued Cartesian technological arrogance, that we can simply move to another planet when we've finished trashing this one, is such a nonsense. It also explains why, for most of us, the natural world is experienced as restorative.

The appreciation of the whole of creation as sacred is only really possible when one is not in a hurry. There's a wonderful analogy of the Cross given by Evelyn Underhill in which she writes of the horizontal bar being the journey through life, and the vertical bar being the present moment, always now, deeply now, in this place. Every footfall is now, and when one isn't in a hurry one notices things. When rushing from A to B, whatever falls in one's path is an obstacle. When not rushing, it or they can become matters of great interest and respect.

The *priesthood of humanity* considers the role of humans. In this worldview we are developing, which includes the whole riot of life, we could easily conclude, as some commentators have, that it were much better that the human race had never evolved, since we seem, wherever we live, to have a destructive effect on biological diversity and the general health of the earth.

But we - are - here. And given that we are here, and that we care about each other, we should consider *how* we should be here. Let us, therefore, see ourselves neither as the summit of creation nor as better off dead, but part of its interdependent web of life. Mary Oliver wrote:

You do not have to be good.
You do not have to walk on your knees
for a hundred miles through the desert, repenting.
You only have to let the soft animal of your body love what it loves.
Tell me about despair, yours, and I will tell you mine.

Meanwhile the world goes on.
Meanwhile the sun and the clear pebbles of the rain
are moving across the landscapes,
over the prairies and the deep trees,
the mountains and the rivers.
Meanwhile the wild geese, high in the clean blue air,
are heading home again.
Whoever you are, no matter how lonely,
the world offers itself to your imagination,
calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting—
over and over announcing your place in the family of things.^{viii}

What is our place? The Hebrew scriptures, echoed by Christology, speak of the human as prophet, priest and king. The *prophet* is the seer. I enjoyed John Grey's rant in his *Straw Dogs*^{ix} in which he accuses Christianity first and then humanism for giving humans the notion that we are special, and points out all the trouble that has caused, and suggests that our greatest gift to the universe, the part we should be playing, given all our talents and abilities, is 'simply to see'. James Lovelock agrees. In his anthropomorphising account of the earth as Gaia, he points out that with the advent of the human species she, Gaia, has at last been able to hold up a mirror to her face and see her own beauty - in the astonishing images we have of the earth from outer space. Humans, in James Lovelock's account, are the brain of Gaia.

We should not underestimate the power of simply attending. This was Dame Cecily Saunders' great insight into treatment at the end of life: when there was nothing to be done and a life was simply ebbing away, accompanying a person on that journey was the greatest service one could offer, and indeed a great privilege to perform.

When asked what he was doing in a place, a monk simply said, 'Keeping it'.^x

The *priest* acts. The priest in the Christian tradition takes things of the earth and through God's grace transforms them into the means of salvation. The offertory prayer in the eucharist says this:

Blessed are you, Lord God of all creation, through your goodness we have this bread to set before you, which earth has given and human hands have made. It will become for us the bread of life.

The eucharist gives a paradigm for humanity living rightly: as guests at a feast, receiving gifts. Not as rapacious bipeds claiming our right to satisfy our voracious appetites at the top of the food chain. Adam, we remember, in his pre-lapsarian state, was commanded to 'till and keep' the earth, which in Hebrew carries the sense of 'serve and conserve'. The icon writer sees him or herself as taking the things of the earth: wood, egg tempura, gold, lapis lazuli, and transforming them into songs of praise of God. It's a worthwhile thought, I would suggest, to explore how our actions might be performed in a way that treats things and people

with the utmost respect, wasting nothing, trying to leave things better than when we found them and if we can't, leaving them alone. I think that this perception of humanity as priests in the web of life makes us stand straighter, look more directly, and join forces as a single species with a single planet to share and therefore care for. Where does human conflict fit in this perception? If we have a bigger challenge - climate change - surely we would all be best served putting down our weapons and working out how to prevent desertification or flooding of much-needed land? How much madder looks the madness of the scraps over scraps of land, whether in the Middle East, Eurasia, or China and Japan, when we think of the global challenges the whole of humanity and the rest of the living world is facing.

The human as *king*. What does the king do? Some terrible consequences have come from the misuse, in my view, of the biblical idea of dominion, with our Victorian forebears thinking it was their God-given duty to exploit the creation which had been created for them to dominate - that's what it says in the first creation account in Genesis, after all - and the perception fits with the Cartesian notion of being masters and possessors. In the Christian *mythos*, counter-culturally, the king is defenceless, vulnerable and ultimately lets himself be killed, confounding any notion of domination.

And the fourth and final perception I want to share with you this evening: is the *Sabbath feast of enoughness*. Despite that dominion word, humanity was not the crown of creation in the first creation myth in Genesis. The sabbath was; the seventh day, when God himself took a rest, and we do not imagine he did so because he was tired. Such a rest is to be offered not only to humans but to all creation. Leaving land fallow, forgiving debts and returning goods are all part of the jubilee call to stop awhile and be still. In the roaring voracity of desire that can so consume our waking hours and even our sleep in dreams, our we are to different cultures call us to stop. Completely, properly, for a period of time. Not just to pause for breath before carrying on consuming, but to take a deep dive into God's peace. DH Lawrence wrote 'I have been dipped again in God and new-created'.^{xi} In the Hebrew scriptures, sabbath is associated with atonement - at - one - ment.^{xii} In stopping properly one has time to notice that one's actions have consequences, and be suitably penitent for any harm done, intended or, mostly, unintended.

So to sum up, four perceptions have been offered from the Judeo-Christian treasury: the covenant of interdependence of all creation; the sacredness of all creation; the priesthood of humanity and the sabbath feast of enoughness. The covenant perception wakens in us a realisation of our mutual dependence in a complex three dimensional living web of interconnectedness; the sacrament perception dissolves the Cartesian notion of separation from and domination of an inert earth: we experience every footfall as being on sacred ground, we see no one we can dismiss as other and nowhere called away where we can throw things; the priesthood perception makes us consider how, in the light of our interconnectedness, we humans could be and live in the world; and the Sabbath perception gives us permission to rest and simply see, but in that seeing to become aware of the damage we have been involved in, just by virtue of being part of the human family ignorantly plundering each other and the planet. Then comes penitence, atonement, and restoration.

And while we are quietly sitting and navel-gazing, the earth has a rest from our endless meddling.

As I said, these perceptions effected a kind of conversion on me. In my work on environmental ethics they proved far more powerful than any injunction to act to save the planet: why change lightbulbs, particularly if it is expensive to do so, when one doesn't really see what difference it makes? Better to see or rather feel our interconnectedness and then to act from that perception.

But these are not merely a good set of feelings to evoke to make human beings behave better towards the environment. They change our human interactions as well, by raising our gaze above and beyond the horizon and placing those interactions in a much bigger context.

Moral courage in our emotions is the surrendering of a Cartesian idea of being 'masters and possessors of the universe' and instead, as Mary Oliver put it 'taking our place in the family of things' and bringing all our talent and wisdom and perception and love and enthusiasm and skill and science to addressing the global challenges of the day, not as godlike solvers but with an attempt at atonement and restoration, so we leave things better than we found them, knowing more fully what 'better than' should look like and for whom. This kind of moral courage in emotion allows for joined-up thinking, the mindset to address the global challenges of climate change, sustainable development, trade and finance which are all connected. Then the three approaches of goal-based, duty-based and right-based thinking can be brought into play, but in a much bigger, more joined-up world than we had been aware of hitherto, and our diligence in thinking clearly and acting decisively is greater because we have emotional endurance.

Moral courage in our emotions, which expands our world view and makes us not only notice the global context of our decision-making but also prevents us from ignoring the globe because we have fallen in love with it and feel deeply connected to it, is challenging. If you are responsible for public service of just one country, you may argue, that is quite big enough, and one's protection of interests has to stop there. That is self-evidently true of any national government: of course its role is to look after the interests of the citizens of that country. But increasingly the leadership that is needed goes beyond countries to climate change, sustainable development, the movement of peoples, trade and finance. And whom do we have but our national leaders to address these problems?

I think we can learn from national leaders in the past who have not only transcended national self-interest but also, crucially, inspired their citizens to share their international vision. Jeffery Sachs has written recently about the speech that JF Kennedy made after the Cuban Missile Crisis, showing how he shifted from being on the brink of blowing up the planet in 1962 to the Test Ban Treaty of 1963^{xiii}. In the speech, JF Kennedy speaks of common humanity and human beings' moral responsibility for each other. He sets a vision beyond the fixed horizons of the US people; and shows the way to get there; so the vision is not just motherhood and apple pie, and people are both morally uplifted and given hope because they

see the path to that place they in their heart of hearts long to reach. More recently, Christine Lagarde inspired her audience with a vision of human co-operation in the face of global challenges in the 2014 Dimpleby lecture^{xiv}.

I see that now our public servants need to lift their gaze beyond national self-interest and show leadership in addressing the needs of the whole of humanity and the whole of the planet, they need to inspire hope in others by describing the paths to meeting those needs, and they need moral courage in starting along them. That journey, ladies and gentlemen, is the subject of my next lecture.

This week I should like to leave you with the image of the three dimensional spider's web of interconnectedness, in which every living thing participates. Cut a thread here and a thread there, the web survives. Cut too many threads at once, the whole web collapses.

Often, it is artists who show us the way. Silenced by the impossibility of the task, full of doubt and uncertainty, unable to return to a smaller existence but unable as yet to see how to function in this bigger world we have fallen in love with, we do well to listen to the artists, and so I leave you with this poem by Pablo Neruda, Keeping Quiet:

Now we will count to twelve
and we will all keep still

For once on the face of the Earth
let's not speak in any language,
let's stop for one second,
and not move our arms so much.

It would be an exotic moment
without rush, without engines,
we would all be together
in a sudden strangeness.

Fishermen in the cold sea
would not harm whales
and the man gathering salt
would look at his hurt hands.

Those who prepare green wars
wars with gas, wars with fire,
victory with no survivors,
would put on clean clothes
and walk about with their brothers
in the shade, doing nothing.

What I want should not be confused
with total inactivity.
Life is what it is all about;
I want no truck with death.

If we were not so single-minded
about keeping our lives moving
and for once could do nothing,
perhaps a huge silence
might interrupt this sadness
of never understanding ourselves
and of threatening ourselves with death.

Perhaps the Earth can teach us
as when everything seems dead
and later proves to be alive.

Now I'll count up to twelve
and you keep quiet and I will go.^{xv}

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- ⁱ Simone Weil, *Waiting for God*, 2001 (London: Perennial Classics) p 62
- ⁱⁱ John Zizioulas, 'Preserving God's Creation III: three lectures on theology and ecology, 1990 In *King's Theological Review XIII*. 1 Spring 1990, p 4
- ⁱⁱⁱ Lambeth, *Transformation and Renewal: the official report of the Lambeth Conference*, 1998 (London: Morehouse Publishing) pp 86-92. I am indebted to Bishop Richard Chartres for drawing my attention to these foundational principles.
- ^{iv} Evelyn Underhill, *Practical Mysticism*. 2000 (London: General Publishing Co Ltd) pp 48-9
- ^v EO Wilson *The Diversity of Life*, 2001 (London: Penguin Books) p 328
- ^{vi} JR McNeill, *Something New Under the Sun: an environmental history of the twentieth-century world*, 2000 (New York, London: WW Morton and Company)
- ^{vii} Anon. quoted in *Resurgence*, 227, May/June 2004
- ^{viii} Mary Oliver, 'Wild Geese'
- ^{ix} John Gray, *Straw Dogs*, 2002 (London: Granta Books)
- ^x John Chryssavgis, *Cosmic Grace: Humble Prayer: the ecological vision of the Green Patriarch Bartholemew I*. 2003 (Cubao, Philippines: Wm B Eerdmans Publishing Co) p 33
- ^{xi} DH Lawrence, 'Shadows'
- ^{xii} Leviticus 27
- ^{xiii} Jeffery Sachs, *To Move the World: JFK's Quest for Peace*, 2013 (New York: Random House)
- ^{xiv} Christine Lagarde, 'A New Multilateralism for the 21st Century: The Richard Dimpleby Lecture', February 2014
- ^{xv} Pablo Neruda, 'Keeping Quiet' quoted in *Resurgence*, 233, November/December 2005