

THE CHALLENGE OF HUMANIST ETHICS

A GUIDE FOR ENQUIRERS

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CONTENTS

PART ONE THE NATURE OF THE CHALLENGE

- 1 THINK FOR YOURSELF**
- 2. THE PURSUIT OF WISDOM**

PART TWO DOUBT, REASON AND HUMANITY

- 1. THE ROLE OF REASON**
- 2. THE ROLE OF DOUBT**
- 3. MITIGATED SCEPTICISM**
- 4. MODERATION AND BALANCE**
- 5 THE ROLE OF HUMANITY**

PART THREE APPLYING THE PRINCIPLES

- | | |
|------------------------------|---------------------------|
| 1. PERSONAL ETHICS | SELF-CREATION |
| 2. SOCIAL ETHICS | CONCERN FOR OTHERS |
| 3. PLANETARY HUMANISM | CULTURAL EVOLUTION |

PART FOUR A MORAL CONTENT FOR SCIENCE

THE CHALLENGE OF HUMANIST ETHICS

PART ONE THE NATURE OF THE CHALLENGE

The booklet '*The Challenge of Secular Humanism*, by Professor Eric Matthews, describes the challenge which Humanism makes to Christianity as taking three related forms; a challenge to beliefs, to values and to ways of dealing with problems, each of which it discusses in detail. In the present booklet, the challenge is presented, not specifically to Christians, but to anyone who is wondering how to make sense of life and is not convinced by the traditional stories and commands presented by any of the main religions in their holy books.

This challenge starts with the invitation to 'think for yourself'. Then it goes on to suggest ways in which such reflection and study can lead gradually to a personal view of what life is about, of how we can be good people, and how we can help the young to grow up as good people.

1. Think for yourself.

It may require courage to think for yourself, because it is often discouraged, or even punished, by priests and teachers in many religious hierarchies, but the consequences are always rewarding. Indeed they may well lead to a genuine feeling of liberation as the burdens of superstition and indoctrination are cast aside.

When it becomes evident that there is no supernatural power watching over us as humans, the threat of divine punishment, in this world or some other world, is removed.

When it becomes evident that the traditional religions were imaginative ways of trying to explain the mysteries of nature without adequate evidence, the authority of the holy writ is challenged and the power of the priests who exercise that authority is undermined.

However, when it becomes evident that the moralities preached by the main religions are human programmes for social control and personal discipline, it would be unwise and irresponsible to discard such controls without replacing them with alternative guidelines for belief and action.

3.

2. The Pursuit of Wisdom

The first requirement for those who take up the challenge is an open mind, combined with a readiness to learn by reading books from the local library on philosophy and psychology and by consulting the Internet. It is on the basis of our own reading and reflection, of discussions with friends, that we can begin to formulate our own beliefs in the light of our personal life experiences in family, education and work.

This reflective process will show that there can be no convincing picture of ourselves or of nature or of human culture, that remains static and unchangeable. The discovery that everything we study has a history, has evolved and is continuing to evolve is the beginning of wisdom.

Reflection will show us that we are born into a particular society at a particular time. Our thinking is therefore biased by the customs, laws, social conventions and institutions of the community in which we live. This must make us cautious about trying to generalise and globalise our own life-experiences and views. We begin to appreciate the diversity of different cultures and the need to discover what they have in common, which will facilitate international understanding. .

***PART TWO* DOUBT, REASON AND HUMANITY**

1. The role of reason

Secular humanists seek to base their beliefs, opinions, views and commitments on the best evidence available at the time. By the application of reason and reflection it becomes possible to distinguish in general terms between rational and irrational beliefs. Irrational beliefs and superstitions seem to shrivel up in the light of knowledge and experience.

The application of reason and reflection can also help us to gauge the extent to which our emotional reactions are rational or irrational. Although the Scots philosopher David Hume famously demoted reason to ‘slave of the passions’, .he recognised the influence which the slave exercised over its master. This interplay between feelings and reflection led Daniel Goleman to coin the term ‘emotional intelligence’ as a measure of the extent to which we are able to use our intelligence to examine our own motivations and those of other people. By these means we are able to improve our self-awareness, impulse control, empathy and

4.

social skills. If it is within our power, as we mature and gain experience, to develop higher levels of emotional intelligence, we have an obligation, to ourselves and others, to pursue this form of excellence.

The ethical concept of ‘excellence’, which was the subject of much debate by the ancient Greek philosophers, has played a significant role in the thinking of philosophers world-wide. Excellence, whether in the arts, the sciences, or in personal and social relationships, results from the application of effort and courage to our natural talents. A related ethical concept is that of ‘virtue’, which is itself linked to what we think of as ‘good’ and ‘goodness’. Pursuit of excellence, virtue and goodness is one of the foundation stones of Humanist ethics.

2. **The role of doubt**

There would have been no progress in science or in religion if the human brain were not capable of casting doubt on the credibility of conventional beliefs. The ability and the readiness to doubt lies at the root of Humanist beliefs and Humanist ethics. David Hume was in his teens when he first had the courage to doubt the tenets of the Christian Calvinism which had sought to strangle free thought in Scotland. A mere thirty years before Hume came from the Borders to study in Edinburgh, a young divinity student, Thomas Aitkenhead, had been publicly hanged in Edinburgh for doubting the divinity of Jesus..

It was no coincidence that the library in France where Hume chose to continue his studies was the library in the Jesuit seminary in *La Fleche* where the great French philosopher, Rene Descartes, had developed his revolutionary method of critical doubt. His doubting did not lead Descartes as far as the philosophical position known loosely as scepticism. Hume, on the other hand, became convinced that much of what conventional wisdom holds to be true is incapable of proof and might one day be disproved. But he rejected what he called ‘the cavils of total scepticism’, because ‘nature has determined us to judge as well as to breathe and feel’. This pragmatic position is now referred to as ‘mitigated scepticism’.

Mitigated scepticism.

This cautious approach to truth enables the freethinker to avoid several of the pitfalls which lie in the path of much of our day-to-day debates on

5.

ethical issues. These include sweeping generalisations, stereotyping, polarisation and false dichotomy.

Stereotyping and sweeping generalisations

These occur frequently between people of different classes, different professions, different religions and so on. They are judgements based on insufficient experience and with hostile intent. Their effect is to widen existing divisions in society. Comedians use these devices to raise laughs.

Polarisation and false dichotomies

Religious people are particularly prone to polarise good and evil, saved or damned, for us or against us. This type of black/white contrast is referred to as dichotomy, i.e. cutting in two. Most dichotomies turn out to be false, in the sense that there are alternative descriptions of differences which suit the facts better. Their effect, once again, is divisive.

Moderation and balance

Social institutions have to strive to keep a balance between conflicting religious and political interests in order to maintain social cohesion. Moderation and tolerance have become the yardsticks of a democratic society. The ancient philosophers, both in Greece and China, recognised the social dangers inherent in the pursuit of extreme ideas. They advocated the search for a middle way between extremes, in philosophy, ethics, politics and personal orientation.

3. The role of humanity

Secular humanists are sometimes accused of being arrogant, of playing God and of worshipping humankind. In the light of the sections above on the role of doubt in humanist thinking and the humanist commitment to forming opinions on the basis of the best available evidence, these accusations fall wide of their target.

David Hume was one of several great philosophers in the 17th and 18th centuries who regarded the study of human nature as an essential basis for all ethical enquiry. His first work, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, comprised three parts: the first was on the limitations of human knowledge, the second on human psychology and the third on ethics. At a later stage of his life, he revised some aspects of his thesis, but he never ceased to claim that a humanist ethic must be derived from reliable knowledge in the human sciences.

6.

Hume and his colleagues in the Scottish Enlightenment attached first importance to the knowledge that comes from our five senses - sight, hearing, smell, taste and touch. These senses provide the raw material for all the sciences. But from their studies of human nature, they felt justified in speaking of two further senses, a moral sense and an aesthetic sense, which furnish us with the potential for judging what is good and what is beautiful. As a result of the amazing advances in recent years in our understanding of how the brain works, the terminology of the moral sense now looks dated, but neuroscientists have no doubt about the potential in the brain for making moral judgements on the basis of the continuous interplay between the senses, the memory, the emotions and reason.

By seeking a balance between the role of doubt and the role of humanity, the secular humanist can construct a framework of beliefs and values which is capable of enabling rational choices to be made in everyday life. In the next part, we shall examine how this framework can influence the decisions we take, first in our personal development, then in our orientation to society, and finally in the way we feel and act in regard to the planet which we share with other forms of life.

PART THREE APPLYING THE PRINCIPLES

1. Personal ethics

The key to personal ethics is 'self-creation'. This term is used by the Oxford philosopher Jonathan Glover to encapsulate the process by which we gradually construct a system of beliefs as we mature as humans. Secular humanists can find no evidence for the traditional view that we have immaterial souls which leave the body when we die. Nor is there any evidence that there is a special part of the brain where something we might call a self resides. David Hume told us this two hundred years before scientists were able to confirm it.

Thus what we call the self is no more than the picture we have of how we look and think and feel and act. We can only put meaning into our lives if this picture is accurate. If we deceive ourselves by denying our real motives, we cannot become integrated personalities.

Neuroscientists tell us that the brain with which the human baby is born will develop faster in the first three years than at any time later. And the way in which it will develop will depend as much on the sensory input which it receives as on its genetic programme. So the child psychologists

7.

were right to tell us that parental love and parental bonding in the early years will lay firm foundations for happy personal relationships later in life.

Neuroscientists claim also to be able to measure the strength of the communications between different parts of the brain. As a result, we shall be able to understand better the differences between the typical brains of males and females. We shall also gain a better understanding of how the balance is achieved between the cognitive and the emotional areas. Neuroscientist Joseph LeDoux raises the possibility that the evolution of cultural practices, especially within the family, could facilitate the process of self-creation and lead to a more ethically-conscious type of human being.

The process of self-creation becomes most active in adolescence. It is a time of expanding self-awareness and willingness to challenge conventions. It is a time when we begin to think about personal autonomy and about our natural rights within a relatively free community. We then have to recognise that rights are matched by responsibilities, first for our own welfare, then for our family and community. Most young people also develop a sense of responsibility for non-human animals and recognise cruelty of all kinds to be wrong.

What we call ‘conscience’ is that part of the process of self-creation which commits us to our responsibilities and tries to balance our personal desires against our obligations to others. The psychiatrist Erich Fromm found it useful to regard the conscience as harbouring both male and female values. ‘There is a voice which tells us to do our duty and a voice which tells us to love and forgive’.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child makes it clear that the right which parents have to nurture and educate their children is never absolute and becomes progressively more limited as their children become more mature. The Convention also affirms the rights of children, wherever possible, to know and live with their parents, as an essential element in the establishment of a moral identity.

2. Social Ethics

The key to social ethics is ‘sympathy’, in the classical sense in which David Hume used it. Today, as in *The Student’s Guide to Secular Humanism*, we would say ‘concern for others’, or, following Daniel

8.

Goleman, 'emotional intelligence'. In Hume's analysis, sympathy and cooperation are 'natural virtues'. Although instinctively altruistic, they also bring material benefits. The 'partition of employments' increases productivity, and 'mutual succour' 'reduces exposure to misfortune and accidents'. To this he adds the perceptive observation that 'every pleasure languishes when enjoyed apart from company, and every pain becomes more cruel and intolerable'.

Hume distinguished natural virtues from 'artificial virtues', which are positive outcomes resulting from laws and conventions which require citizens not to steal, or break promises, or inflict injury.

Thinking on similar lines to Hume, the creative contemporary humanist philosopher, Paul Kurtz, sees the foundation of social ethics as observance of 'the common moral decencies'. Outstanding among the list of such decencies are fairness, trustworthiness and benevolence. In their discussions on the meaning of justice, both David Hume and Adam Smith concluded that law-makers and philosophers had an obligation to be 'impartial observers' and to be guided by concern for 'the party of mankind'. Impartiality is no doubt an impossible goal to achieve, but it remains a vital element in social ethics.

Inter-personal relations

Rules about personal and social behaviour differ widely between cultures according to the historical circumstances in which they have evolved. Secular humanists believe that such rules, including rules about sexual behaviour, need to be reviewed as cultures evolve and brought into line with the human needs of present-day populations and the growing international consensus on basic ethical principles.

Sexual morality and the laws of marriage are complex issues which need to be drawn away from the influence of religious texts and reconsidered in the light of the growing international consensus on the rights of women. The rights of children require even greater attention, because they are not able to stand up for their rights themselves. In law, the interests of the child will usually prevail over those of adults.

We are fortunate in Britain to have the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority to assist the law-makers to react wisely to the

medical issues which frequently arise with continuous advances in science and technology

The Ten Commandments are so much steeped in Jewish history that they are now an anachronism. The Golden Rule, to treat others as you would have them treat you, is more universal and still of value. Also of value in this context is the maxim coined by the European Enlightenment philosopher Immanuel Kant, never to treat others as means to an end.

3. Planetary Humanism

The key to planetary humanism is cultural evolution. We have to change the way we think about nature.

Published at the close of the last millennium, *Humanist Manifesto 2000* marked a courageous expansion of humanist ethics. It was subtitled ‘ a plan for peace, dignity and freedom in the global human family : a call for a new planetary humanism’.

Also at the turn of the millennium, the United Nations University for Peace in Costa Rica issued a global policy declaration with the title *The Earth Charter*. This is a 16-point declaration, finalised after a ten-year process of world-wide consultation, and intended ‘to establish a sound ethical foundation for the emerging global society’. It contains four sections :

- 1) Respect and care for the community of life.
- 2) Ecological integrity.
- 3) Social and economic justice.
- 4) Democracy, non-violence and peace.

This section contains recommendations on the prevention of cruelty to animals, both in captivity and in the wild.

The Earth Charter concludes with the demand that the nations of the world must renew their commitment to the United Nations, fulfil their obligations under existing international agreements and support the implementation of Earth Charter principles.

These are the values of the 21st century They clearly differ substantially from any list of values which would have been compiled a hundred years ago. The world is changing rapidly. Instinctively we love our children and grandchildren and wish them to lead happy and healthy lives. We therefore have a moral obligation to protect their interests and not to mortgage the future for immediate gain. Humanists should commit

themselves, when they can, to supporting and encouraging the many idealistic civil society groups who working, against heavy odds, for a more peaceful and co-operative future for humankind.

For Humanists, it is not sufficient to rely on the discovery of ‘shared principles’ in dialogue with the leaders of the main world religions. This is to look backward for wisdom and values. We have reached a phase in human evolution when the future cannot be safeguarded unless we proclaim a forward-looking wisdom, a planetary ethic.

PART FOUR A MORAL CONTENT FOR SCIENCE

Humanist ethics have developed, and are developing, in the life-affirming tradition of the ancient Greeks in the five centuries before the Christian era, the European Enlightenment of the 17th and 18th centuries, and the Darwinian revolution of the 19th century. Secular humanism has tried, and is trying, to provide ‘a framework of orientation and commitment’, in the useful phrase coined by Erich Fromm, which makes sense to anyone who recognises that no supreme being exists who sends down messages to his prophets.

In his book *Godless Morality*, Richard Holloway observes that religious ideas and practices have evolved over time as a result of periodic challenges to the established orthodoxy (the priests) from outspoken and gifted reformers (the prophets). We can see this dialectic process at work in the history of Western civilisation. The evolution of cultures, like natural evolution itself, can proceed either by gradual change or by sudden leaps, either by steady reform or by violent revolution.

In a humanist ethic, violence is only permissible as a genuinely last resort and in self-defence. In this century, one of the most urgent tasks for reformers will be to supersede a culture of war with a culture of diplomacy. We have to consider seriously what we should mean by ‘civilisation’. Are we to judge it merely by rising standards of living regardless of the quality of life? Or shall we judge it by the growth of the institutions of civil society and voluntary organisations, and by the extent to which the needs of all humanity achieve priority over the dominance currently exerted by powerful economic, political, military and religious leaders?

Within every human culture, there is constant overlap between ethics and politics. In humanist eyes, it is important that ethics should be

acknowledged to be the senior partner and the ultimate arbiter in situations of conflict.

If ethics is to be the senior partner, political and religious influences over the school curriculum should be neutered. Any indoctrination of the young is an affront to their autonomy. It is their right to be taught up-to-date knowledge about the natural world, of which they are a part.

Ethics has an essential role to play, not only in politics and education, but also in science. The key to the predominance of humans over the rest of the animal kingdom is the phenomenal expansion of the human brain and the development of language. Only in this generation are we able to begin to understand how our brains actually function and the extent both of their potential and of their limitations. The scientist/philosopher Kenan Malik claims that this new knowledge allows us a clearer view not only of what we are capable of knowing objectively, but also of our human subjective abilities. Subjectively, we can assess our own personalities and those of other people, we can study cultural differences and we can think in moral terms.

The fact that science and technology are advancing so rapidly, especially in biology, neuroscience and medicine, means that the traditional theories of ethics enshrined in the moral philosophy syllabus are steadily losing relevance for the evolving moral problems of today. It may well be that Kenan Malik is right in claiming that ‘ Humanism provides the moral content for science – it invests science with meaning and purpose’.