

A HUMANISTIC EDUCATION

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Fifty-one years ago, I began my undergraduate studies at Cambridge in the United Kingdom. The college I joined, like many others at Cambridge, had a religious name. Founded originally as “God’s House”, it had long been called “Christ’s” – and I was proud that it had been the college of Milton and Darwin.

Both names recalled an older time, one in which those who attended Cambridge colleges – as well as the other great universities of Europe – formed religious communities. The studies those young men pursued – they *were* all men – were bound together not only by religious faith but also by a religious purpose. Their exertions were directed towards steeping themselves in inherited wisdom, and using the understanding they gained *Ad majorem gloriam Dei*, to the greater glory of God.

By the swinging sixties, of course, that kind of community and shared purpose had long disappeared. What bound us together? No obvious common goal that lent significance to our various studies. Some of us surely wanted a good job, others hoped to contribute to society, yet others to pursue interests, about which they were often passionate. I learned an immense amount from friends I made then, among them people who bring me joy and enlightenment to this day. Yet I don’t recall any of us raising questions about what the point of our education might be. Moreover,

I'm pretty sure that, if we had raised them, we wouldn't have been able to provide satisfactory answers.

Today I *do* want to pose such questions. To ask in particular: What is the goal (or what are the goals) of higher education when a deity is no longer there to anchor its purposes? Most contemporary universities (and most of their students) are content to leave that question unaddressed. But, perhaps, here, that question may seem an obvious one. Particularly because, as I shall suggest, humanism provides a very strong answer to it.

Let me begin slowly, with an exploration of humanism and of its relations to the religions of the world. Like Professor Duyndam, to whom I am most grateful for the invitation to speak to you, I understand humanism as a positive position. Secular humanists, like me, dislike characterizing ourselves as atheists, since we want to offer something more than a negative reaction. We also recognize that there are religious humanists, with whom we share important ideas and themes, and some of us are alarmed by the zeal with which some unbelievers want to see all religious tendencies as noxious rubbish, to be cleared away as speedily as possible.

Consider, for a moment, my predecessors in Cambridge, the young Catholics of the late fifteenth century who attended God's House. Reflecting on the alternative religions they knew, the Orthodox Christianity of the eastern Mediterranean, Judaism, and Islam, they were as firm as any contemporary atheist. Important doctrines of these faiths they saw as certainly false, heretical, sinful - and thus to be eradicated from the face of the Earth. We can easily imagine how they would have reacted to Protestantism or to the (as yet unknown) religions of South and East Asia. As David Hume wittily remarked, they, like so many who are

gripped by religious dogma, were *incomplete* atheists - unbelievers in the gods of all religions except one.

The attitudes of these young men were, I strongly suspect, incompatible with humanism. They would probably have been prepared to do inhumane things in the service of their faith, to torture, to mutilate, and to burn. In later centuries, however, they have been succeeded by people with different attitudes, ecumenical Christians - and ecumenical Jews and Muslims and Hindus and Buddhists. Many of these people retain firm belief in some central doctrine - the divinity and resurrection of Christ, for example - but they withdraw the ferocious moral adjectives and the behavior that sometimes follows. The doctrinal errors of other religious folk can be forgiven. An aspect of the message common to all five main world religions comes to the fore. Part of the divine purpose is to behave justly, mercifully, and benevolently to other human beings, to welcome the migrant family fleeing oppression and persecution, to sustain the poor and the downtrodden. With this step, humanism begins.

Yet, to my mind, merely ecumenical religious humanism occupies an odd middle ground, continuing to insist on the correctness of its central doctrines and on the errors of other believers, while treating their mistakes as pardonable. Shouldn't the faithful reflect on the fact that, if they had grown up in some other culture - among Australian aborigines, say - they would have believed very different things, with the same firmness and on the same kinds of evidential bases? As they learn the enormous amount now known about the origins of different religions and about the histories through which those religions have developed, shouldn't they come to wonder about their previously confident declarations? Can they be so sure that they are right and everyone else is wrong? Once these questions arise, as they should, the

way is opened for a further progressive development in religious attitudes: ecumenical religions give way to what I call “refined religion.”

The champion of refined religion understands that all the world’s religions (or all the principal ones, at least) are on a par. None of them is superior to others. None of them offers doctrines that are literally true. What inspires all of them is the sense of something significant beyond the physical, organic, human, world. Religious expressions are to be understood as metaphors, allegories, poems – gesturing toward a transcendent realm that will always defy literal human description. Refined religious believers take the provision of these gestures as significant features of human lives, helping them to focus on the central ethical task of working together to aid one another, and deepening a sense of the importance of that ethical work. This is a form of humanism deserving intellectual respect. Moreover, it provides ideas from which secularists like myself can learn. Indeed, I take myself to have learned much from it – for this form of human-centered liberal religion was another movement that flourished in the British sixties.

Nevertheless, even refined religion takes one step – adds one thought – too many. Why is any detour through an indescribable transcendent realm needed to ground, or to reinforce, our commitments to the well-being of our fellow humans? Why does the importance of other people depend on seeing us all as children of a common parent? A more consistent humanism cuts out the middleman, the intermediary between person and person. The cosmos contains no mysterious second tier. We are all parts of the physical, organic, human world. And we matter. That is the essence of secular humanism.

When that option is presented, religious people of many kinds rise up in protest. “You can’t have mattering or meaning, even any form of ethical life, without

something beyond the merely human.” So at least, they frequently say. Some of them, like Dostoyevsky, offer a moving vision of the plight of the godless – for Ivan Karamazov, God’s departure makes everything permitted. Others, like William James, will think of secular people as partially deaf, incapable of hearing the deeper notes in the cosmic symphony. A corollary of this, one guiding John Henry Newman as he founded, in the middle of the nineteenth century, University College Dublin, is the impossibility of any purposeful education, even a humanistic education, without a religious underpinning.

These are serious charges, and the answer to my original question depends on addressing them. The first part of a response is to throw a question back at the religious questioner: How exactly does a deity, or a literally indescribable transcendent realm, help to support ethics and human meaningfulness? Long ago, Plato’s Socrates posed that question in a sharp dilemma. Are good things good just because god wills them? Or does god will them because they are independently good, good prior to any act of willing on his part? To take the first option is to make the good entirely arbitrary, and thus to undercut the significance of our ethical life and all our values. To take the second would introduce an independent source of goodness, rendering divine approval unnecessary. Two millennia after Plato, Immanuel Kant deepened the point. Why should we conform our conduct to the precepts announced in the scriptures? Not simply because our favorite religious texts embody the word of an extremely powerful being. Kant already knew, and the twentieth century offered vivid reminders, that obeying the orders of the powerful should sometimes be resisted. If we are to take the words of a book as the guide of our lives, it should be because we recognize it as expressing the will of a being who is not only powerful but also *good*. And for that we have to be able to use some available prior standard of goodness.

There is a reply to these arguments, one offered by William James. He sees the problem as stemming from taking religion too literally, from not adopting the stance of refined religion. Think of the transcendent realm as being, or containing, a moral order, to which our beliefs and actions ought to conform. A similar picture is popular with many people. It is defended for instance by the eminent legal theorist Ronald Dworkin in his (posthumous) book, *Religion Without God*.

To my mind the thought of a realm – other-worldly? higher-worldly? – in which values reside seems utterly mysterious. How do we gain access to it, and thereby gain the ethical advice we need? I prefer to bring our ethical life down to earth, to view ethical values as human constructions. My ethical approach is humanist not so much in focusing on our species and only on us – I would, in fact, want to make room for duties to sentient non-human animals – but because I regard ethics as a thoroughly human construction.

I've written about this at some length, and today I can't hope to give you the details. But a sketch may enable you to see what I have in mind, and perhaps to settle some of your concerns about it. It's useful to start with a question: Where has our ethical life – with its acts of praise and blame, its rules and its patterns for living – come from? Surely there was a stage in our ancestry, almost certainly less than two hundred thousand years ago, when our forebears were in the same pre-ethical state as our evolutionary cousins, the chimpanzees and bonobos. How did we get from there to here? Was there a moment in our species' history when our predecessors became able to discern the features of some independent moral order? And, if there was, just how and why did it lead them to modify their ways? I find these questions probing: they seem to undercut the view of values that James, Dworkin, and many other philosophers share.

There's a better way to think about how we got from there to here, one elaborated recently by people from a number of fields of inquiry, from primatology and archeology and anthropology and neuroscience and psychology and philosophy. My own version starts from insights of the great contemporary primatologist, Frans De Waal, whom I know this university has honored in the past. De Waal recognizes what he calls the "building blocks of morality" in our evolutionary cousins. Chimps and bonobos have a capacity for responding to one another. Sometimes they see what one of their fellows is after, and modify their own behavior so as to help in achieving the goal. It by no means happens all the time. Responsiveness is limited. Because of its limits, chimpanzee societies are vulnerable to social tension. Animals who helped yesterday fail to respond today, and the peace has to be made up by time-consuming acts of reassurance - all that huddling and mutual grooming.

I build on these important results of De Waal. That type of limited capacity was originally ours too. We were trapped in the same cul-de-sac. Because we have *some* capacity to respond to other human beings, we can live together. Because that capacity is *limited* and *variable*, we cannot live *smoothly* together.

But we've escaped the dead end. We probably started to do so between a hundred thousand and fifty thousand years ago, when we began what I call "the ethical project." Starting the project involved recognizing the claims of the people with whom we interacted. Our ancestors probably chose the most obvious method of doing so. They sat down, as contemporary hunter-gatherers still do, in "the cool hour", solving the problems that divided them by listening to one another and finding rules with which everyone could live. Practices of sharing and non-aggression were born; later they were joined by an emphasis on sincere exchanges of information and on keeping promises. Through a long sequence of trials, carried

out by human groups, “experiments of living” as John Stuart Mill called them, the ethical codes of the historical period have emerged, first visible five thousand years ago in the earliest written documents we have. Those documents reveal the complexity of the rules, concepts and patterns of conduct our ancestors had produced over tens of thousands of years – a growing ethical practice that had enabled them to live together on a far larger scale, to cooperate on projects of hitherto unimaginable scope, to develop forms of relationship unprecedented in life on our planet, to feel emotions and to develop conceptions of themselves quite beyond the horizons of those who made the first tentative steps into ethical life. Alfred North Whitehead famously characterized all philosophy as “footnotes to Plato.” I invert the compliment. Plato is a footnote to tens of thousands of years of ethical life.

This ethical project has made us who we are. It is a deep response to a central human problem, the problem of our limited responsiveness to one another. We are social beings, drawn together. Yet our psychological adaptations provide only a partial ability to carry on that life. Our solution – our brilliant solution – has been to develop an amplifier of our natural responsiveness. The patterns and rules of ethical life expand the limits of what was once for us, as for the chimps, a restricted capacity.

Seen from this angle, there is no mystery to how we work out our values. The most straightforward way to do so is to emulate the simple strategy of the ethical pioneers. Gather those affected by a problem, let them express their points of view and their claims, accumulate the best available factual information – and then engage with one another, commit themselves to finding a solution with which everyone can live. At the heart of this is the idea, central to all the great world religions, of fostering love for our fellow human beings. The Christian second commandment,

like its counterpart in other faiths, is simply the reverse side of the generic problem: our limited responsiveness to one another.

But no general precept can serve as the be-all and end-all of ethics. The disciple Peter was right to raise his question: Who is my neighbor? The answer to that question, and of what our neighbor needs, and why it is needed are matters that prove constantly different. Contrary to what so many philosophers and religious people have thought, ethics is never finished. No complete list of principles engraved on stone tablets; no comprehensive moral order enshrined in some transcendent realm. New versions of old problems continually arise, awaiting our efforts to make further ethical progress. As John Dewey rightly proposed, the main task of ethical philosophy is to understand what ethical progress is, so that we may make more progress, more systematically and more adequately than we have.

So I offer you an answer to concerns about ethics without God. It is a this-worldly answer, one centered on our human nature and our human attempts to cope with it. And, at its core is the humanist directive to open our minds and our hearts to one another.

That only takes up half of the challenge I posed. What of worries about whether human lives matter? When gods disappear, does life lose all potential for meaning?

Again, it's worth beginning by asking how gods help. Whether or not there is a deity, your life and mine will end some day, as will the lives of all the people we have ever known. Eventually, human life on our planet will cease. My existence - and yours - can make no *permanent* difference to the universe. Unless, of course, our small doings contribute, in some way or other, to the purposes of a being much larger than ourselves, a creator who is eternal and who has a cosmic plan. Religion projects us beyond the finite - the merely human - and into the infinite, the cosmic.

So that's how gods help. They answer the demand for permanent significance. A beautiful poem by George Herbert expresses this attitude. It begins:

Teach me, my God and King,
In all things thee to see,
That what I do in anything
I do it as for thee.

But, while I admire Herbert's humility, as well as his trust in purposes he can only dimly comprehend, I cannot see this blind commitment as giving significance to my life. The plan is, after all, unknown to me. Indeed, it is probably beyond my comprehension. My situation, apparently, is that of a tiny cog in a truly vast machine, one whose functions I could never recognize. And the fact that I have dumbly, mechanically, turned my minute fraction is supposed to reassure me about the meaning of who I am and what I do?

Furthermore, the religious answer just considered requires a very special set of religious doctrines to be true. There must be an eternal, powerful, supremely good God, with a suitably impressive cosmic plan. Refined religion cannot view matters that way. It sees such descriptions as metaphors, not as literal truth. The religious choice, then, wavers between a precarious "I'm-right-and-all-others-are-wrong" literalism, and a retreat to an indescribable transcendent, incapable of revealing human significance.

I think secular thinkers can do better by taking a clue from the religious answer. It is correct to see our lives as given meaning by something larger than ourselves. The trouble comes with over-ambition. The larger something does not have to be infinite. I want to make this thought the cornerstone of a view of the good, or the meaningful, life.

What is it to live well? I follow John Stuart Mill in a famous remark about liberty: he takes "the only freedom worthy of the name" to be that of choosing our

own good and pursuing it in our own way. Throughout the history of our species, the overwhelming majority of people have had the shapes of their lives thrust upon them; they have been assigned to roles, shaped and confined by sex and class and caste. Today for you, as already for me half a century ago, a significant number of people in the affluent parts of the world have the opportunity to work out their own goals, to find their own good, and to pursue it with some reasonable chances of success.

Would *any* choice be OK? So long as you chose freely and achieved a fair number of your ends, would that be enough to live well? Mill's only condition on your project for your life is that you should not interfere with the similar choices of others. That, I suggest, is too weak. Suppose you freely decided that the most important thing in life is to take photographs of yourself with as many Dutch tulips as possible. Even if you were extraordinarily energetic and racked up selfies beyond your wildest dreams, your life would not thereby become meaningful. In fact, it would seem a sad waste, a pathetic obsession that touched nothing of enduring significance.

Precisely because it would touch no other human life in any positive way. A stronger condition on your choice is needed. The good you choose should be one aimed at advancing the lives of others. Perhaps you might think ambitiously, of writing for the ages or making some fundamental scientific discovery or overturning a pervasive form of injustice. Virtually all of us fall far short when we are measured on so vast a scale. If we live well it is because of far smaller efforts to teach and nurture and heal and sustain. Our successes, *great* successes, come in what William Wordsworth movingly called "our little, nameless, unremembered acts/Of kindness and of love."

The teacher or the counselor inspires and helps others who will outlive her and her efforts. The effects are like the ripples left after a stone is thrown into a pond. They last for a while after the stone has sunk, but they eventually fade away. All human impact is thoroughly finite. As individuals and as a species we are transient, not permanent. But as each of us becomes entwined with something larger than our own lives, it matters that we have been.

The ethical project is thus also part of something more inclusive. I'll call it "the human project." For two hundred thousand years, at least, members of our species have sometimes acted to improve the lives of those who came after them, creating new and better forms of society, as well as richer ideals for human living. Each generation is heir to the achievements – as well as the shortcomings – of its predecessors. Each generation has the opportunity, and the responsibility, to overcome some of the shortcomings, and to add to the list of accomplishments.

To live a meaningful life is to discover your own way to participate in this project, and to make your own positive contribution to it.

Finally, we can turn to my promise to answer the question I originally posed. And, if you accept the steps I have taken, you'll see that the answer is easy. Your education here, and higher education everywhere, should prepare you for finding your own way of advancing the human project.

What exactly does that mean? First, it's important to recognize that your education began long before you arrived here, and it will continue for the rest of your life. It is a process that extends beyond the classrooms in which you sit and beyond the formal studies in which you engage. If that process goes well, you will make an autonomous decision about the shape of your life. You will recognize a range of options for yourself, coming to know enough about your talents and your

aspirations to decide which direction – or sequence of directions – would suit you best.

Making that kind of autonomy possible is far from easy. You will need to survey many ways of living and scrutinize many potential ideals. But, as I have emphasized, that kind of careful reflection needs to be supplemented by an appreciation of the possibilities of living in community with others. How will the various possibilities you consider for yourself bear on the lives of the people with whom you interact? Through fellowship with others as you attempt to decide on the pattern of your life, you will open up the lines along which your own contributions to the human project will flow.

And on this point, you, like most people in the affluent, contemporary world, are at a disadvantage. For, in our atomistic societies, dominated by an economics of competition and a tendency to reduce all values to a monetary scale, community is in short supply. Some of the world's religions continue to supply structures for genuine fellowship. Rites and rituals focus attention on important human questions. Religious meeting places provide sites at which the faithful can discuss with one another, and where they can plan collective projects, aimed at human well-being. Outside the churches, the temples, the synagogues and the mosques, however, there are few such possibilities. Universities stand out among the exceptions.

I hope the next four years will bring you, through formal structures and informal conversations, many opportunities to develop skills – skills at community-formation and community-sustaining that you carry forward into your lives. Humanists lack the established rituals and institutions that the major world religions have adapted and improved over more than a millennium of experiments. We must invent – or perhaps borrow. The idea of humanist chaplaincy strikes me as a fruitful borrowing. You may benefit from it while you are here – and you may grow into the

role and carry it with you into the world. Perhaps that kind of work will play a part, large or small, in your own contributions to the human project. For, as I have said, a materialistic world, in which many people come to feel like replaceable cogs in a vast machine, could well use an army of chaplains, founding communities on human values.

I end as I began, with the young men of “God’s House.” They came for a while, found fellowship with one another, and departed to bring their faith to others. At their best, they sustained the communities they entered, and, maybe, left them better than they found them. You are freed from the intolerance of their zeal, and from the distracting falsehoods of their doctrines. But you have a greater challenge, and a greater opportunity. For the world in which we live has immense need of humane values and of human community. And it is far from obvious how we should meet that need.

Towards the end of his short book, *A Common Faith*, Dewey sums up the point eloquently.

We who now live are parts of a humanity that extends into the remote past, a humanity that has interacted with nature. The things in civilization we most prize are not of ourselves. They exist by grace of the doings and sufferings of the continuous human community in which we are a link. Ours is the responsibility of conserving, transmitting, rectifying and expanding the heritage of values we have received that those who come after us may receive it more solid and secure, more widely accessible and more generously shared than we have received it.

So far, Dewey. I add a thought of my own. A humanistic education, in its content and in its community, is our best hope of discharging that responsibility.