

REITH LECTURES 1967: A Runaway World

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Lecture 4: Men and Morality

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Those who dread the future are said to be demoralised. But the connection between fear and morality is complicated. A British clergyman, a Canon of Southwark Cathedral, told us the other day: ‘Britain is dying for lack of cause, poverty of spirit, inferior work, inferior lives, and inferior ideas.’ That is certainly a thoroughly demoralised kind of statement, but self-righteousness of this sort springs from an excess of morality, not the lack of it.

In all these talks so far I have been trying to show how fear of the future is tied in with nonparticipation. The intellectual scientific attitude which is characteristic of our 20th century sets us apart from what is going on. We behave as critics of the play, not as actors. Here I want to consider how far this difficulty is simply a problem of morality. There are two sides to this. First, there is the fact that all moral rules are conservative. Whenever we adapt ourselves to a new situation we are always behaving abnormally—that is to say ‘immorally’—compared with what we did before. So in a changing world moral rules make all our difficulties seem that much worse.

But, secondly, there is the problem I began to raise in the first of these talks. Science has given us quite unprecedented, almost god-like, powers to alter the state of the world; what sort of moral principles should guide our use of these powers? To take a single case: our ordinary morality says that we must kill our neighbour if the state orders us to do so—that is to say, as a soldier in war or an executioner in the course of his duty—but in every other case we must try to save life. But what do we mean by that? Would a headless human trunk that was still breathing be alive? And if you think that is just a fanciful question—what about a body that has sustained irreparable brain damage but can still be kept functioning by the ingenuity of modern science? It isn’t so easy.

But what do we mean by morality anyway? I don’t want to get hogged down in complex definitions. Moral rules are those which distinguish between good and bad behaviour, and the first point I want to make is that these rules are variable. Morality is specified by culture; what you ought to do depends on who you are and where you are.

The rules are most explicit about what is bad; the good is then residual. Some times the law supports morality: for example, it is not only wrong to steal, it is also a crime. But very often morality has to stand on its own. For a good Christian, sexual intercourse is always immoral unless it takes place between husband and wife, but in England, provided the partners are old enough and of appropriate sex and not too closely related, the law is not interested. In general, then, the enforcement of morality must depend upon emotion rather than policemen. In childhood we are taught to do right by the threat that mother will withdraw her love if we do wrong, but as we get

older, our anxiety about parental disapproval gets transformed into a generalised fear of supernatural disaster. Retribution is inevitable: if punishment does not catch up with the sinner in this life, it will meet him in the next.

The content of moral prohibitions varies wildly, not only as between one society and another, but even within the same society as between one social class and another or between one historical period and another. Breathing apart, it is difficult to think of any kind of human activity which has not, at one time or another, been considered wrong. The Jams of India say that it is a sin to kill mosquitoes; the Jews think it wrong to eat pork; in England it is indecent to describe the sexual act in one syllable instead of three. It is wrong to wear outdoor shoes in w mosque; in some Catholic churches it is wrong for a woman to bare her head. The wrongness of such acts differs in intensity, but there is no fundamental difference in kind between local conventions of manners and fashion and those which bear the deeper stamp of morality and religious duty, and the common belief that our more deeply felt moral constraints are shared by all humanity is simply a delusion. I don't think that anyone has yet met with a society in which it is considered proper for a man to have sex relations with his own mother, but universal morality gets no further than that. That being so, we are bound to ask: what is it all for? Since moral rules vary drastically from place to place and from time to time, they cannot have any long-term adaptive advantage, either for the human species as a whole or for any incipient sub-species. Why do we feel that they are so important?

Well, let us consider: just what do moral attitudes do? Let me remind you of what I was saying two weeks ago. All our experiences and all our thinking are processes which take place inside our heads. We pick up signals from the outside world through our various senses and then we respond to these signals in a mechanical way which resembles in some respects the operations of a man-made computer. The sensory signals tell us how things can be distinguished, how they react on each other and on ourselves; we infer what things are by observing how they work, and how they are mutually arranged. This applies also to relations with our fellow human beings. We observe how our neighbours behave, what they wear, how they talk, how other people behave towards them, what names they are given; and from all this we infer what they are and hence how we should behave towards them. But since our brains are computer-like machines of a particular kind, they can only digest this information in a particular way.

There is a great deal about this process which still seems very mysterious, but we can learn quite a lot by studying the structure of spoken languages and by experiments in visual perception. In some fields the receptor mechanisms of the brain are quite definitely digital and binary: that is to say, they can only give answers of the yes/no kind, with nothing in between. Draw a picture of a hollow cube with the sides all equal; what you have actually drawn is just a pattern of lines on a flat surface, but if you have had a normal European education you will always recognise this pattern as just one of two things —a cube sticking out from the paper or a cube receding into the paper. You can flick from one interpretation to the other instantaneously, but you can't stop in the middle at the 'reality'.

The basic point is this. in order that my brain may interpret a signal that is fed into it through my eyes or ears it must first of all discriminate: it must decide whether a

particular line is going inwards or outwards; it is only when these either/or choices have been made that the interpretation process can start working. But notice how this act of discrimination calls for repression. We choose to see or hear a particular signal as either x or y , but to do this we must refuse to recognise all 'in between' shapes and noises. The in-between' shapes and noises strike us as wrong'. I shall come back to that presently, but bear it in mind. I am going to argue that when we say that a particular behaviour is wrong' in a moral sense, it is because it struck us in the first place as an 'in-between' kind of behaviour. It introduces confusion into our clear-cut categories and we try to get out of the difficulty either by putting it into a special box labelled 'bad things' or else by repressing it from our consciousness altogether.

But first let me pursue this matter of repression a little further. Our eyes and ears are designed to recognise contrast, and they convey information because our brains can be programmed to decode these contrasts. A remarkable example of this is the way we can manage to decipher nearly illegible hand-writing. The eye must first of all distinguish the shape of the message material itself: to do this it must repress any consciousness of random background marks on the paper. Then the various squiggles of the message material are 'recognised' as forming sequences of separate letters and separate words. Just how we do this I don't know, but somehow or other, by distorting the actual patterns on the paper and suppressing our awareness of various bits we don't want to use, we can decide what the patterns are 'meant to be'. It is only when we have thus corrected our visual image that we can begin to extract a meaning by seeing how the patterns are arranged. It is the combination of rectified shapes on the paper which adds up to a message, not the actual shapes in isolation.

But what on earth has all this got to do with morality? Well, what I'm getting at is this: When we observe other people's behaviour we are faced with the same kind of interpretation problem as when we read a hand-written letter. Before we can decode the message we have to rectify the signals: we have to fit what we actually observe to a model of what we have been taught to expect. And moral attitudes help us to do this. My morality gives me a model of how things are 'meant to be'. What the other fellow is really doing may be quite chaotic '—like a scribble on a piece of paper—but, with the model to help me, I begin to see it as orderly and meaningful. As long as we think we can recognise what the pattern is 'meant to be' most of us are quite willing to tolerate even quite wildly unorthodox behaviour in other people; but there always comes a point when the deviation gets too great. Then we become confused: we don't know what is going on. However, by reclassifying the deviant behaviour as 'wrong' or 'immoral', we can push it aside and even remove it from our consciousness altogether. In this way we restore our confidence in an orderly world.

One striking example of what I am saying is to be seen in Charles Dickens's portrayal of low life in mid-19th-century London. Dickens's descriptions read as if they were copied from real life, until we notice that, in their sexual lives, all his characters accept the prudish conventions of Victorian orthodoxy. For a fallen woman, the rewards of sin are inescapable. Little Emily, rescued at last from suicide and a fate worse than death, has to be shipped off to Australia to escape the unforgiving reproaches of society! Now the contemporary sociologist, Henry Mayhew, records that in the London of that period because they were classed as immoral they became socially quite invisible.

History offers us the same sort of warning. Great reformers, who feel themselves to be motivated by 'the very highest ideals, may appear in retrospect as major criminals. This seems to be because the immediate consequences of a great man's actions may be so far removed from his avowed moral intentions that he and his followers can deny their existence altogether. The tortures of the Spanish inquisition fail under this head as well as the endless massacres of countless religious wars. And we need to remember that even in our own day both Stalin and Hitler were regarded as saints by millions of their countrymen even in the midst of the holocaust. In the Thirties, the Russian and German peoples simply 'refused to know' what was going on right under their noses.

I think that we can learn something from such examples of self-imposed ignorance. The question I am asking is: can the scientists and politicians who have acquired god-like power to alter our way of life be restrained by the application of moral principles? If so, what moral principles? And the sort of answer that seems to be coming up is this: 'Beware of moral principles. A zeal to do right leads to the segregation of saints from sinners, and the sinners can then be shut away out of sight and subjected to violence. Other creatures and other people besides ourselves have a right to exist, and we must somehow or other try to see where they fit in.' It is like that problem of the cube drawn on a fiat piece of paper. So long as we allow our perception to be guided by morality we shall see evil where there is none, or shining virtue even when evil is staring us in the face, but what we find impossible is to see the facts as they really are.

But why can't we see the facts as they really are? What is this reality which seems to get out of focus as soon as we try to bring moral judgment to bear? The trouble is that moral judgments are about social relations, and relations which have no material existence. We can only 'observe' social relations indirectly by interpreting other people's behaviour, and we can only do this if we first invent an artificial code which attaches social meaning to cultural facts. Thus we all take it for granted that holders of high office will wear special uniforms and be addressed by special titles, and that special noises—like drum-beats and trumpet calls—and even special smells—like incense—will be used to indicate the approach of exalted persons and so on. But the interpretations which we put on such signals are arbitrary. We interpret the code in the way we have been taught; there is nothing intrinsic about it. A European widow wears black, a Chinese widow wears white. Until we know the code, the 'facts as they really are' don't carry any message at all. But once we do know the code we can fit what we see or hear or smell to our expectations. The signals which get us into an emotional muddle are always the borderline cases in which the messages are inconsistent. Let's take an imaginary and improbable case. Suppose that you were to attend the funeral of a close friend of yours who had been a devout and rather conventional member of the Church of England. You would have quite definite expectations and in the particular context of a funeral you would find it especially difficult to tolerate deviation. Certainly if you found that all the near relatives had turned up in beach clothes and that the daughter was playing a transistor radio, you would feel shocked and indignant. But there would be nothing wrong about the clothes and the music in themselves: they become wrong only because they are out of place, they are inconsistent with what you expect.

When we evaluate other people's behaviour we do so according to a code which we have been taught. The code is arbitrary. It changes as we move across the map from

one place to another, or through time from one generation to another. The code tends to be binary. That is to say, it offers at each stage of interpretation only two alternatives: yes/no: right/wrong. Generally speaking, we are able to make sense out of our observations by refusing to notice events which don't fit our expectations. But there is always a certain amount of marginal stuff which we are not sure about: is it right, or is it wrong? And this gets us worried. When social conditions are changing fast, this area of uncertainty gets larger. The old start to denounce the young for their immorality because the code is changing and they can no longer interpret the signals. But it is still all a question of interpretation; there is no way of saying what the facts really are. In their own estimation the psychedelic hippies with their marijuana and their LSD are primitive Christians proclaiming the brotherhood of man; in the eyes of many of their seniors their activities are a close approximation to witchcraft and the Black Mass. Either might be right.

But let me go back to my earlier point: moral judgments are about social relations. In a formal sense a social relationship is the link between a pair of opposed roles. For example, if you take a series of paired terms such as father/son, husband/wife, doctor/patient, employer/employee, then morality specifies what is the 'correct' behaviour of each party towards the other. There is always an element of exchange; each party has rights, each party has obligations, and the fulfilment of these mutual services is morally coercive. Whenever I accept any kind of gift, whether it is in the form of goods or money or services or simply words, I feel myself under an obligation to respond—that is, to give something back in return.. It is this moral network of obligations to repay indebtedness which constitutes the structure of society, and if we try to dislocate it we are likely to generate a great deal of emotional distress on all sides. But there is a converse to this. When I give gifts to other people I expect them to respond in predictable ways. The response need not be exactly predictable, but it must be near enough to rate as 'correct'. As long as that condition is satisfied I shall feel that I am in control of the situation and that the receivers of my gifts are good people. But if the response is totally unexpected, then I am beset by fear and I shall interpret the situation as morally evil.

One consequence of this coercive feedback is that we are led to put a conservative moral pressure on all those who provide social services. If you call a man a 'scientist' or a 'research worker', you expect him to be enterprising. Scientists are expected to explore the unknown, make discoveries, create innovations, experiment—so long as you yourself are not part of the experiment. But if you call a man a 'doctor' or a 'schoolmaster', you immediately imply the existence of 'patients' and 'pupils' and you have strong moral feelings about how patients and pupils ought to be treated. Doctors and schoolmasters ought to be 'up to date', but they mustn't experiment—not with my family anyway. Nobody wants to be treated like a laboratory guinea pig. So although it must be perfectly obvious that medical and educational knowledge could only advance if there were a great deal of straightforward experiment with human subjects, these facts are 'blacked out', like the Regent Street courtesans of 1850.

This is a serious matter. If there is a discrepancy between how we think human subjects ought to be treated—in schools, in hospitals, in laboratories, in prisons—and how they are actually treated, then there ought to be reasoned discussion of the possible consequences. But, in practice, many of the ethical problems which crop up

in these areas are so hedged about with moral reticence that we never really tackle them at all—not out in the open. How often have you asked yourself straight out: Is it really the doctor's duty to save human life in all circumstances? Anyway, what does the question mean? The ethics of this problem are enormously complicated but they belong to that deeply tabooed area of immorality which most people reject from their consciousness.

Some of the facts that need to be considered are these... Modern medicine has given the doctor almost unbelievable powers to preserve alive creatures that nature would previously have destroyed, power to change the life prospects of children still in the womb, to alter the personality of the living, and to extend the life span of the senile. But if these powers of preservation are exercised in uninhibited fashion while, at the same time, we try to tackle the population explosion by reducing the birth-rate, then the outcome will be a very decrepit conservative society in which all the political and economic advantages lie with the very old. Most people will dodder on until they are nearly 100 and half the adult population will be well past retiring age. I don't believe that that sort of society would be tolerable to anybody, but what is the alternative? The trouble arises from our moral inconsistencies—we fail to follow through the logical connection between this and that. We can all see that unlimited population growth must ultimately lead to the disappearance of human society as we now know it, and most people have come round to admitting that this gives ethical justification to the limitation of life through contraception or abortion, but the vast majority are still deeply shocked at the mere idea that a doctor should ever of his own initiative wilfully terminate the life of anyone who has already acquired a human personality by the fact of being born.

There are deep problems here which are of great consequence for all of us, and it seems to me that the only way out is to have a long period of public discussion so that, in the end, we, or our successors, may come to put a different valuation on the preservation of life as an end in itself. At present, our moral reticence—our ability to 'refuse to notice' anything we think ought not to be there—makes it extraordinarily difficult to face up to such ethical revaluations. Moral reticence supports the orthodox intellectual attitude of scientific detachment; it encourages us not to get ourselves contaminated with the beastly facts of practical reality.

I can't offer any solution, but let me try to explain the kind of ethical revaluation which I have in mind. Let's go back to this question of the population explosion. What is the background? All species of living things, including men, have been endowed with a capacity to reproduce themselves in enormous numbers but, ordinarily, this superabundant fecundity is self-balancing. Animals and plants and bacteria are interdependent: they supply each other with food, but they also interact so as to limit each other's population. But our human position has now become altogether exceptional. We have learnt how the 'balance of nature' works but, simultaneously, we have also learnt how to frustrate its operation, and because, at this particular point in history, the whole civilised world is dominated by our ethnocentric Christian ethic which puts such stress on the fostering of individual human life regardless of circumstances, we are for ever tampering with nature in such a way as to favour the increase of human populations at the expense of everything else. In the end, the hungry bitter end, human interference will be self-correcting, but it would surely be odd if in the meantime our Christian morality should lead us to avoid having

children so as to have sufficient resources to preserve the lives of the maimed, the senile and the half-witted?

It is hard to say such things, and I repeat: I myself have no solution. But it seems to me that at some point we may need a new religious attitude. In some forms of Hinduism the three prime aspects of deity are thought of as the consorts of God the Father. There is Parvati the Creator, Durga the Preserver and Kali the Destroyer, and the greatest of these is Kali. Our Christian ethic stresses only Creation and Preservation, so we stand in fear of death. Men have become like gods, but we must remember that although gods create they also destroy: gods are the source of good, but also the source of evil. We too must accept our dual responsibility and come to terms with the fact that the total elimination of disease would be an entirely intolerable blessing.