

Chancellor's Lectures 2010

Human nature, hope, and how to live now

Lecture One, Tuesday 20 April

Welcome to the first of this year's Chancellor's lectures: *Human nature, hope, and how to live now*. My title is a little unwieldy, and I struggled to come up with a sound bite to match last year's *God's Storytellers*. But perhaps that's a reflection of the scale of my subject matter, nothing less than what it means to be human. One of the books I've consulted for this series is entitled, *Ten Theories of Human Nature*, being an updated version of *Seven Theories of Human Nature*. In his revised preface, Leslie Stevenson of the University of St Andrews writes: 'The subject is infinite, the task is daunting, and my knowledge and abilities are finite.'

I certainly feel daunted, and my knowledge and abilities are far more 'finite' than Stevenson's. I also know that whenever I speak about anything in the Cathedral, there will be a number of people present who know far more about the subject than I do. This is even more likely to be the case this time, as in the publicity for my lectures I've rashly committed myself to saying something about scientific and literary perspectives on human nature, as well as the biblical and theological. So even more than usual I do not stand here as an expert; rather as a learner; someone seeking to explore an important subject and wanting to learn from a variety of disciplines and subject areas.

These days academics stray outside their specialist areas at their peril. This strikes me as a pity, as long as when they do stray they maintain some humility. For otherwise we end up with a number of closed worlds; separated disciplines and traditions never speaking to one another in a creative way. And all of us, academics or not, can't help but hear all manner of perspectives and opinions on key issues relating to human nature – and will have our own views, perplexities, and theories. Whether or not we've ever read anything on the subject, television, film and fiction are constantly exploring themes about being human, from makeover programmes showing people seeking to change their appearance, their relationship, or their weight; to soap operas and dramas exploring the high and lows of human life; to programmes such as *Doctor Who* and *Being Human* (the title says it all) exploring what is unique about humanity in relation to extra-terrestrial life or, in the case of the latter, a were-wolf, a vampire and a ghost!

What was your reaction, I wonder, when the Children's Commissioner Maggie Atkinson recently argued that the age of criminal responsibility should be raised

from ten to twelve? (it's seven in Switzerland, and eighteen in Belgium and most of America). Dr Atkinson was speaking just after Jon Venables, one of the killers of Jamie Bulger, was returned to prison. And what do you make of the human propensity for violence, of which the Bulger case is but one of innumerable examples from every age? Is violence 'written into our genes' or is there another explanation?

Or how about questions relating to gender? Do you think that boys and girls, men and women, are fundamentally different, or are apparent differences simply explained by cultural conditioning? And do you consider that sexual orientation is a matter of free choice, or genetically determined? Why, do you reckon, are New Year's resolutions likely to end in failure? If you are trying to win an election, are appeals to self-interest on the one hand, or to serving the greater good on the other, more likely to succeed? And finally, what is the essential difference (if any) between human beings and animals?

I could go on, but I hope my point is becoming clear: that our implicit or explicit understanding of human nature is not incidental but highly significant. It shapes how we relate to other people, bring up children, and form policies on economics, law and crime. It shapes how we try to change ourselves and change others, from dieting techniques, to strategies for evangelism, to effecting regime change in Iraq.

There is substantial secular and scientific thinking on these topics, and I intend to draw on it in this series. I can't hope to answer all the questions I've raised, but I'll attempt some of them, and hope to suggest a line of approach of wider application. In my first two lectures I will explore different perspectives on human nature, mainly religious today, mainly secular next week – also considering the extent to which these different perspectives are mutually contradictory or mutually illuminating

In my third lecture, I will seek to apply what has been learnt to ethical issues – in particular the difficult issues of abuse and violence, taking seriously secular ways of exploring these, but trying to show also what the Christian perspective brings to the table.

My final lecture will tackle arguably the toughest subject of all - how, given what has been said about human nature from various perspectives, we might live both realistically *and* hopefully, achieving positive change for ourselves and our world – from dieting and new years resolutions to environmental sustainability and world peace! There is also a fifth Tuesday, for the really brave, for asking questions and

making comments. Finally, if anyone wants a copy of my text, the lectures will go on the Cathedral web-site, with hard-copy available from the Cathedral office.

One of my exemplars for this series is the third century biblical scholar Origen. Origen engaged with the best non-Christian thinkers of his time, who happened to be the Platonist and Stoic philosophers. Rather than dismissing them outright, as some of his fellow Christians would have liked him to do, he studied their writings at great length. He found much of value, even though he concluded that they unjustly neglected the kind of evidence that can only be revealed by God through the Church and the Scriptures.

It is a sad comment on our culture that the prospect of scientists taking into account scriptural wisdom on human nature seems so unlikely. It has to be admitted, though, that most Christian reflection on the nature of humanity takes no notice of the relevant science! I would love to see a creative dialogue here, and even offer an amateurish attempt at it in these lectures.

I do not, of course, remotely have the time or erudition to offer an exhaustive account of every theory of human nature. All I hope to do is give some representative examples. The majority of today's lecture is about Christian perspectives, but I must at least briefly say something about the Greeks, Plato in particular, as the beginnings of Western thought are usually ascribed to ancient Greece nearly two and half thousand years ago.

Plato's dates are 427-347 BC, and his extensive writings are still basic to any philosophy course. Perhaps most widely studied is the *Republic*, which sets out Plato's views on the ideal human society. Any work on such a subject will need to explore what human beings are actually like, if the posited ideal society is to have any basis in reality. And indeed Plato does give us his understanding of the human condition in the *Republic*, most famously with his suggestive allegory of the cave. Human beings, writes Plato, can be compared to a group of prisoners, chained up and facing the inner wall of a cave. Their only way of finding out about the outside world is through the shadows cast on the cave wall, as objects pass in front of a fire. Human beings, on this account, see very little of what the world is really like; their starting point is ignorance. They struggle to interpret the flickering images they see, and make sense of what is really going on in the world.

For Plato it is possible, however, for the human mind to come to an understanding of ultimate reality, particularly if you are a philosopher like him! He used the rather esoteric language of 'Forms' to describe this reality, of which the images on the cave wall are only a representation. It's beyond the scope of this lecture to further

explore what Plato meant by ‘Forms’; except for one key point – the ‘Forms’ cannot be known by the senses, but only through the exercise of reason. For Plato, then, reason, the human intellect, is the fundamental thing that distinguishes us from animals. Aristotle, interestingly, had the complementary view that man is a *zoon logon echon*, that is a language animal, uniquely possessing and indeed being possessed by language.

To return to Plato, who argued that if we are to moderate our emotions and desires and attain the ideal society he proposes, the sovereignty of human reason is essential. His view of human nature was dualist; he believed that at the point of death the soul was released from the limitations of the body. For our purposes, however, this is less important than Plato’s tri-partite view of the soul. For those uneasy with the language of the ‘soul’ (and that includes many Christians, who see the notion as an unwelcome Greek import compromising the Hebraic basis of their faith) it is perfectly plausible to see Plato as describing three different aspects of human nature. These three aspects he calls, ‘Appetite’, ‘Reason’ and ‘Spirit.’

‘Appetite’ includes all physical needs, such as hunger, thirst, and sexual desire. These needs, he pointed out, sometimes cause internal conflict with our ‘Reason’. We know that over or under eating are unhealthy, but it’s all too easy to fall into destructive habits – whatever our *reason* may be telling us (habitual patterns of behaviour, by the way, are a theme to which I’ll return a number of times in these lectures).

It may be that if we have, against our better judgement, over-indulged our physical ‘Appetites’ (the possibilities here are legion) we subsequently experience disgust or shame. Here we are in the realm of what Plato calls ‘Spirit’, the realm of the emotions. Feelings such as guilt, indignation, love, anger, etc, are different in kind from either bodily desires, or rational judgements, although they may be informed by both.

For Plato, children show ‘Spirit’ before they show ‘Reason’; witness their high spirits, stubbornness and aggression. Just when he thought ‘Reason’ kicked in is not clear, although his answer might have helped us with that tricky question of the age of criminal responsibility.

Whether or not we judge Appetite, Reason and Spirit to be an adequate summation of the human condition, Plato is clearly seeking to capture the complexity of what it is to be human. We are conflicted beings, pulled in different directions, by feelings and emotions we know to be unreasonable, and affected by physical appetites in destructive ways. We can imagine, if we haven’t experienced it ourselves, that it is

possible for a young or not so young person to be pulled in different directions by lust, romantic love, and reasoned judgement about who is the best lifelong partner.

Intriguingly, Plato doesn't identify the human *will* as a key constituent of our humanity. As we will see later in this lecture, the role of willpower becomes a key battleground within the Christian tradition, to which I now turn.

I'm not going to start in the place you might expect, with the book of Genesis, and its opening chapters about the creation of the world, human beings made in God's image, and then perhaps the most recognized scene of the Old Testament, Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. I will come to these, but only after discussing the significance of Jesus Christ.

The reason for this is that while Jews and Christians both have the book of Genesis in their canon of Scripture, they interpret it in contrasting ways. Christians, for example, have a highly developed doctrine of the 'fall of man' very different from anything in Judaism. This is because Christians interpret the Hebrew Bible, which they call the Old Testament, through the lens of Christ.

So what kind of 'lens' is this? And what kind of perspective on human nature does it reveal? There are three overlapping dimensions to a Christological 'way of seeing':

- First, Jesus' specific teachings about human nature.
- Second, the way in which Jesus himself embodied a vision of the ideal human life.
- Third, what the overall structure and narrative of the Gospels tells us about human beings and indeed about God.

Specific teachings first, and here as will often be the case I can only give an indication rather than the whole story. Two themes in particular seem to me of central of importance: seeing and failing to see, and the nature of the human heart.

Jesus had a gift for the striking image. 'Why do you see the speck in your neighbour's eye,' he asked, 'but do not notice the log in your own eye?' (Matthew 7.3) The context for this is a series of warnings to the disciples about the dangers of judging others. And I would have thought that people of any faith or none could recognize that human beings tend to be far better at seeing faults in other people than noticing their own. There is a lot in the Gospels about seeing and failing to see, about blindness both physical and spiritual, and the sometimes terrible consequences of faulty vision, usually when blame and fault are wrongly attributed wholly to the

other person or community.

There is also a lot in the Gospels about the heart: 'For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come' (Mark 7.21) 'Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.' (Matthew 6.21) In biblical psychology, the heart is the central and unifying organ of human life, the source from which flow all physical, emotional and intellectual energy. So the seat of the emotions, yes, as we customarily use the word today, but also the seat of the intellect, the seat of the will and the moral life. Finally, the heart is the point of contact between human beings and God: 'one believes with the heart' writes Paul to the Romans (10.10).

In summary, according to Jesus both human sight, and the human heart, are deeply impaired. While human beings are capable of deep insight and generous compassion, their lives are disfigured by faulty, self-serving judgments, and evil thoughts and actions.

What about Jesus as embodying the ideal human life? 'In him was life,' John's Gospel says, 'and the life was the light of all people.' (1.4) The New Testament is lit up by this personality, and yet we never learn a single thing about what he looked like. What we do learn is that shared his table with disreputables, taught with eloquence, demonstrated extraordinary compassion and healing, and would not be swayed from following the path he'd set himself even when faced with violence and death. At every point he believed he was living in obedience to God his Father, and although experiencing the full range of human emotion, from anger, fear and grief to love and joy, he was nonetheless 'tempted as we are, yet without sin.'

To understand the significance of this life, we need to attend to the overall structure of the Gospel narratives. As Philip Pullman said in a recent interview, 'nothing like them seems to exist anywhere else. Their form is unique'. If history is usually written by the winners, here is a story told from the perspective of the victim, a story that plumbs the heights and depths of the human condition. Nobody seems to know what to make of a life given up to sacrificial love. The disciples want status in the new kingdom Jesus proclaims. The crowds want healing and liberation. The Roman authorities want to keep order. The religious leaders are envious and threatened. Finally, they all abandon him or turn on him, and he is tortured and executed.

If such is the fate of somebody whose life is so suffused with love and wisdom, human beings really are in a sorry state: 'He was in the world... yet the world did not know him' (John 1.10). And yet after the crucifixion, the disciples unexpectedly encounter Jesus as risen from the dead. The victim has returned as judge, and yet

even as he shows them his wounds he offers grace and forgiveness. He offers the possibility of seeing clearly, and healing the heart, not only to his followers but to all people. And a frightened, disparate group is transformed into the seed corn of the Church, the first Christian community. When that community met together for worship and the study of scripture, they read that scripture with new eyes – through the lens of the crucified and resurrected Christ.

And so now I turn to where I might have begun, with the first three chapters of the book of Genesis. Here are the key texts used to back up the two key assertions usually made when Christians reflect on human nature through the lens of Christ – first, that human beings are created in the image of God, and second, that human beings are fallen creatures in need of redemption.

1. So, what does it mean to say that human beings are created in the ‘image of God’? (Genesis 1.26-27). Some theologians have interpreted this ‘image’ as mainly to do with humans having a number of *capacities* that reflect the nature of God. The focus here is on what people can do (such as exercise rationality, demonstrate free will, construct and invent things, or express themselves in language.) And it is certainly true that in Genesis God gives Adam things to do, such as responsibility for naming the animals, and tilling and keeping the ground. Others have seen ‘image’ as more to do with *relationship* (that is, human existence is essentially social, both in relation to other people and ultimately with God). And it is also true that in Genesis chapter two, humanity is seen as incomplete until there is both man *and* woman, conversing with one another and with God. It is part of the created order that humans are social, sexual beings. The human ‘I’ always has a human ‘you’. In the documents of the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) of the Roman Catholic Church, *Gaudium et Spes* offers the following paradox ‘... by his innermost nature man is a social being...’. We cannot separate what is most ‘inward’ about ourselves from our being in relation to others

While there are many Christian thinkers who have explored such topics, I am particularly going to refer this evening to a great North African bishop of the fourth and early fifth century, Augustine of Hippo. Augustine wrote of the ‘image’ of God in humanity in such a way that the distinction between *capacities* and *relationship* is seen as a false one. Like Plato (and indeed many other later thinkers such as Freud) he saw human nature as threefold. In Augustine’s case this is because human beings bear the imprint of God as trinity, and they do so in their *memory*, their *intelligence*, and their *will*. He called these three ‘vestiges’ of the divine trinity, and showed that remembering, understanding and willing are distinguishable from one another, and yet also interrelated. Note that only one of the three is the same as Plato, that is intelligence, or reason.

Augustine believed this threefold image of God in human beings only truly reflects God, when it is consciously turned towards God. Human beings are created to be remembering, understanding and willing creatures, mindful of God as their memory enables them to link past and present, knowing God as they make sense of the world through intelligence, and loving God in all that they decide to do. Insofar as this does not happen, the image is radically diminished, although it can never be entirely destroyed.

2. Secondly, what does it mean to say that human beings are fallen creatures who have been redeemed by Jesus Christ? The word 'Fall' refers to the process by which human beings have deviated from their original goodness into a state of partial corruption or impairment. Theologians have differed about the extent to which the image of God has been distorted, damaged or corrupted through this process. The final section of tonight's lecture will deal with a dispute, an argument, that hinges on two very different understandings of the Fall.

The third Chapter of Genesis is a story of disobedience, as Adam and Eve eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil despite God's instructions not to do so. You do not have to be a card carrying Christian to appreciate the power of this story. John Gray, Professor of European Thought at the *London School of Economics*, scourge of both Christians and humanists, writes as follows: 'The biblical myth of the Fall of Man contains the forbidden truth. Knowledge does not make us free. It leaves us as we have always been, prey to every kind of folly'.¹

Augustine used the story of Adam and Eve to articulate the doctrine of 'Original Sin'. It isn't necessary to accept a literal Garden of Eden, or deny evolution, in order to see the force of what this doctrine asserts – that all human beings are born into a sinful and flawed world, and so from day one cannot help but be shaped by the context in which they grow up, both for better and for worse. Let me give you a contemporary example, from Shane O' Doherty's book *The Volunteer – a former IRA man's true story*. In it O' Doherty tells how as a ten year old boy (the same age, incidentally, as Bulger's killers) he'd written in a schoolbook, 'When I grow up, I want to fight, and if necessary, die for Ireland's freedom.'

In his book he explains how he came to write like that, beginning with his birth. For, he writes, 'there is nothing democratic about procreation. The child, for his part, must not merely accept his parents as they are, warts and all, but also the historical time and place into which they introduce him. He must suffer the

¹ John Gray (2003) *Straw Dogs*, London: Granta p xiv

nationality and religion, culture and names which are foisted upon him...'. And so it was that O' Doherty's life was orientated from birth, towards the moment when he wrote of fighting and dieing for Ireland. For Augustine, sin is an internal disorientation, affecting human beings at every level, not just in terms of what they do but what they want, and how they think, see, and talk. This is hard for us moderns to get hold of, because if we think about sin at all, we tend to associate it with a misuse of our freedom in wrongful acts, rather than as built into the very structure of our being.

But I want to suggest that we should at least give Augustine the time of day, and consider if there might not be something in what he says. And consider if the perspective of original sin might not help us to explore contemporary human experience in all its highs and lows: from compassion to cruelty, sacrificial love to selfishness.

As I said earlier, for the final part of tonight's lecture I'm going to explore a key dispute that took place early in the fifth century – a dispute conducted between two religious geniuses, raising issues of perennial significance. Between them the British layman Pelagius and the Augustine of Hippo we've already been discussing, clearly articulated opposing positions out of a mass of previously rather hazy ideas, attitudes and assumptions. As Peter Brown has written, 'their disagreement, far from being a purely academic wrangle, was a crisis in which the spiritual landscape of Western Christendom can be clearly seen for the first time.'²

So who were the combatants? Pelagius was a large man; 'weighed down by Scottish porridge' was how Jerome described him. He was by no means a glutton, however, rather a religious ascetic and apologist who'd travelled from Britain to Rome in the 380s, the late fourth century. Persuasive in speech and gifted with the pen, he is the earliest writer from these shores whose texts survive. At around the same time, a precocious young man from North Africa, Augustine by name, arrived in Italy, seeking to make a career for himself. He travelled with a concubine who he loved and bore him a son, famously praying to God, 'Make me chaste... but not yet.' Within four years he had converted to Christianity, and returned to his native land. He wanted to be a monk, dedicating his life to study and prayer, but on a visit to the port of Hippo Regius he was press-ganged into the priesthood. That was in 391, and within a few years he was bishop.

Pelagius stayed on in Rome, gradually gaining in influence and support. It was a full twenty years later that his dispute with Augustine kicked into action. In 413

² Peter Brown *Augustine of Hippo* p368

Pelagius wrote a letter to Demetrias, a young woman who felt called to the religious life. While ostensibly a private letter, it was clearly written with a wider audience in mind, and is lengthy, fluent, and cogently argued. It contains a line that stands as a summary of the Pelagian position: ‘since perfection is possible for man, it is obligatory.’ In his letter, Pelagius argued fervently that human nature had been created by God precisely for achieving perfection: ‘Whenever I have to speak of laying down rules for behaviour and the conduct of a holy life, I always point out... the power and functioning of human nature, and show what it is capable of doing... lest I should seem to be wasting my time, by calling on people to embark on a course which they consider impossible to achieve.’

Pelagius’ argued that human nature was reliable and unchanging. It was created by God, and although it was affected by the waywardness of society at large, this was only superficial. Ignorance, convention, unhelpful patterns of behaviour that had become habitual – all these ran only ‘skin deep’ and the solution was easy to come by. When an adult was converted and baptized into the Christian faith, there was a fresh start and the immediate beginning of a life of holiness and action.

Like Pelagius, Augustine was eloquent and articulate. He was charitable enough to say that his opponent’s pronouncements were ‘well written and straight to the point’. But those who packed the churches for Augustine’s sermons heard a rather different story. Even the baptized Christian, they were told, must remain an invalid. Human beings are like the wounded man found by the roadside in the parable of the Good Samaritan. They have found the opportunity for healing within the ‘Inn’ of the Church, but their convalescence will be lifelong. For Augustine, as we’ve heard, human nature was fundamentally impaired, not superficially wounded. Every human person was caught up in this impairment at a level far deeper than that of conscious choice. Habits of sinfulness ran far deeper than Pelagius realized.

In the history of Christianity, Pelagius has been labeled a heretic, with Augustine the proponent of orthodoxy. I suspect that this is likely to win Pelagius a fair bit of sympathy nowadays, and that when this is combined with his emphasis on freedom, willpower and choice, he cuts a figure far more in tune with contemporary sensibility than Augustine. In my view, however, Augustine is subtler and more truthful, pointing out that our freedom and choices are not some kind of sin-free zone, but are themselves shaped by our internal conflicts and disorientation.

It’s significant that Augustine wrote and preached from a deep sense of the nature of human evil. Pelagius’ letter to Demetrias argued that wrong choices could rust the pure metal of human nature, but a choice can always be reversed. Self-control was therefore the key to achieving the good life.

Augustine, on the other hand, sensed that human imperfection is more profound and intractable than this. He told his congregation that self-control was indeed laudable; indeed we heard earlier that the human ‘will’ was a key part of the image of God. But well before Freud, Augustine had a sense of unconscious desires; that we often don’t understand why we act in the way we do. Willpower is most effective where there is absolute clarity about what needs to be done, and as Jesus observed, we are usually better at seeing what other people ought to be doing than self-diagnosis.

Augustine’s insights are those of a man with much experience of human imperfection; his own and other people’s. The Bishop of Hippo was approaching sixty when Pelagius wrote to Demetrias, and twenty years earlier might have had more sympathy with the perfectionism and optimism of his British opponent. After all, to say to a new convert that the Christian life is that of an invalid, and of enduring tensions and contradictions never fully resolved in this life, might sound less than inspiring.

But what Augustine saw as lacking in Pelagius was not born of a gloomy distaste for optimism. Rather he thought Pelagius had an inadequate understanding of the complexities of human nature and human motivation.

Pelagius and his followers aspired to be good citizens, responsible people who obeyed the law. As Peter Brown puts it, ‘[Pelagius] God is an Enlightened Despot; and the Christians are well provided for by His copious legislation.’ Pelagius himself puts it like this: ‘After so many notices drawing your attention to virtue; after the giving of the Law, after the Prophets, after the Gospels, after the Apostles, I just do not know how God can show indulgence to you, if you wish to commit a crime.’ And it is Pelagius rather than Augustine who goes on about the terrors of judgement, if human beings fail to achieve the perfection within their grasp. To this rather cold streak in the Pelagian movement Augustine simply said this: ‘a man who is afraid of sinning because of Hell-fire, is afraid, not of sinning, but of burning.’

Augustine considered his most effective critique of Pelagius to be *On the Spirit and the Letter*. In this late work he dismissed the Pelagian method of enabling human beings to be good – a clear code of laws enforced by sanctions. Such an environment, Augustine argued, will not work by itself because a key ingredient is missing. This is the heart of the matter for Augustine: if human beings are to overcome their flaws, they have to develop the capacity to love goodness for itself. ‘You enumerate many ways in which God helps us,’ he writes to Pelagius, ‘the commands of Scriptures, blessings, healings, chastenings, excitations and inspirations; but that He gives us *love* and helps us in this way, this you do not say.’

Augustine is *not* saying that laws and codes are unnecessary, but he is saying that being fully human is about more than acting and choosing correctly within legal boundaries. The healing process at the heart of the Church is about uniting knowledge and feeling. It is about human beings who no longer have to choose, that is make an effort to do the right thing, because they are drawn to act out of sheer delight in the love of God: ‘Give me a man in love: he knows what I mean’, wrote Augustine, ‘Give me one who yearns; give me one who is hungry; give me one far away in this desert, who is thirsty and sighs for the spring of the Eternal country. Give me that sort of man: he knows what I mean. But if I speak to a cold man, he just does not know what I am talking about...’³

You may be feeling by now that you’ve had quite enough Augustine. Well, next week, by contrast, I will explore *literary* perspectives on human nature, with particular reference to William Golding’s *Lord of the Flies*. I will also tackle the impact of Darwin’s theory of evolution, surely the dominant way of approaching human nature in contemporary society, not least through the popularization of Richard Dawkins and Stephen Pinker. Philosophy will get a look in too, by way of John Gray, author of *Straw Dogs – thoughts on humans and other animals*. I appreciate that one of my flaws as a lecturer is be over-ambitious, but I hope that if you do return, at least you won’t find it dull.

Finally, many thanks for your attendance, and your attention.

³ Homilies on John 26.4