

Towards A Tough Humanism

Oh, for a sacred text! Oh, for a direct line to an all-knowing Father (or Mother for that matter of course) who sees all and tells me what to do!

Then I could justify what I do, whatever I do, whatever damage it may do to others, however it may disrupt or destroy them or their works: I could justify what I do whenever I am moved by the true spirit.

Then I would not have to face that it is me making those choices, it is me taking those actions. Actually me.

I don't call myself an atheist. I'm not interested in getting into that kind of argument. 'Do you believe in God?' That's a question often asked. If anyone asks me, I say, I don't have conversations with God, nor do I ask for intervention or favours on my behalf from a deity.

When I was a ten-year-old and a pupil at one of the 'progressive schools' of the time, a group of us approached a teacher (a fine man, Frank Lea, a conscientious objector in the Second World War, also the author of a book on Nietzsche) and we asked him, in a rather priggish way, I call it priggish because at this school the general consensus was a sort of anti- (or at least non)- religious correctness: we asked him 'Do you believe in God?' And in my memory I can recall the exact wording of his answer, and the exact manner of slightly supercilious condescension with which he answered. 'No. But I'm not such a fool as to despise those who do.'

Well, let's face it, there's a lot of good to be found in most religions. The religions do have sets of moral precepts which are often challenging, positive, inspiring. And stories which are illuminating and also inspiring. And images which are invigorating. And they have communities, communal gatherings, often giving solace and support to people who need them.

I call myself a humanist. And my aim here is to define, to articulate, not just humanism, but a tough humanism.

So, by tough, I don't mean I'm going to put forward arguments about the existence of God, or attack religions. As I've said, I'm just not interested in those kinds of argument. I find them boring and counter-productive.

Actually, that isn't really true. I found Richard Dawkin's book *The God Delusion* hugely stimulating and informative, often provocative, mostly in a positive, sometimes in a negative way, and sometimes downright silly, as when he says that the existence of God is a hypothesis that eventually may be susceptible to scientific proof or disproof. I think this is daft, because we are talking about two different languages here. But actually I don't want to argue with Richard Dawkins either.

It will inevitably happen that in the course of this article I will criticise certain views held by certain people and certain groups. But anyone who surveys the field of religions and religious beliefs, and religious believers, will see that within any religion, as indeed within humanism, there are various positions. I consider many of the religions to have ethical precepts to which I would wholeheartedly subscribe. Some of these have much in common with humanism, and may well have been the historical origin for some of its aspects.

Indeed, it is my belief that there is some kind of universality of belief among human beings: which I, as a humanist, would claim as a basis for humanism. I will expand on this belief in due course.

No. By tough, I mean a discourse quite other than a dispute with religions or religious people.

What I mean is this: the clear articulation of humanist ethical precepts: and the taking of these humanist ethical precepts as a basis for defining a stand on moral issues. Which of course includes also, a basis on which it is possible to take a stand on the issues which surround us in our lives - what we could call the political consequences of these precepts. This would be the basis for the principles of a secular society.

This is a long road. I intend to take these in turn - or some of them, I may well not get far along this road! But I shall start with ethical precepts.

So, if we suppose that there were such a thing as a sacred humanist text, there were such a direct line to a superior Being who told me what to do: what would I read, what would I hear? If I could imagine a set of humanist precepts: what would they be?

First, though, what is a humanist? What is 'me'?

My definition (as that of many others) is that a humanist is someone who believes that our values come from our being human.

And further, that 'me' as a human being is an entity which (or who, as I shall say from now on) can see what is going on, who can see a world around; that this world includes 'me' as part of it; who can make judgements about it; who is capable of imagining and identifying with the 'mes' of other people; who can comprehend and register consequences, and has, as an attribute that may (or at times may not) be exercised, the need to do so; who can conceive of honesty and of truth; and who is capable of acknowledging and integrating the conflicting impulses that come up from inside.

That's a long list. And I want to say all that again, piece by piece.

'I' am an entity: who can see what is going on, who can see a world around me.

This world I can see includes 'me' as part of it.

I can make judgements about this world.

I am capable of imagining and identifying with the 'mes' of other people (and gosh, that's an unfamiliar word, 'mes!').

I can comprehend and register consequences.

I have an attribute, the *need* to register consequences.

That this attribute may, or may not, be exercised.

That conflicting impulses come up, often, from inside me.

And that I am capable of acknowledging and integrating the conflicting impulses that come up from inside.

All of which qualities can be marshalled in the service of a better life for the mass of 'mes' which make 'us'.

Well, of course that list begs a great many questions. They are questions which are, and have been through many centuries and probably ever since being human became

a matter of becoming conscious (which begs questions in itself): they are questions which have become, many of them, sources of classic philosophical conundrums and points of dispute. And my purpose is not to be so hubristic as to attempt to offer solutions to these conundrums: but, again, rather to try to articulate a set of precepts.

I call it tough humanism because in my view humanism is not at all a soggy option, not at all a wishy-washy position, not at all a relativistic stance. Humanism requires resilience and courage and consistency. As I hope I've already made clear, I do not call it tough humanism with any purpose of identifying with the standpoint that humanism has to be tough in order to fight religion, that the humanist has to be tough to speak against others.

My desire is to take a tough position so that humanism can speak of itself from a position of strength, with assertiveness and clarity. Also, perhaps dare I say it, with faith, hope and charity.

further notes. I hope to expand in the course of time!

'Love thine enemy.' Well, that is really amazing.

give examples of Judaic, Muslim, Sikh, Hindu and Buddhist precepts.

...and in philosophical terms, there is evolution. The flaw in ethical philosophy has throughout its history been that virtue is said to come from reason. But passion will always win over reason. It is an earlier evolutionary feature. And rationality always includes emotion. This position is clearly delineated by the neurologist Antonio Damasio; and supported by the philosopher Daniel Dennet. (*Seek others*)

We also have to understand the way DNA works. Genes and combinations of genes are activated by circumstances. See Tooby and Cosmides, as quoted in Matt Ridley's *Nature Via Nurture*, p 247.

I went to a seminar (a small lecture) given by a philosopher whose central interest was how we know what we know, including how we know what we know about others. I asked him (afterwards, not in the seminar itself, because I had an intuition...) what he thought of mirror neurons. He hadn't heard of them!

I am frequently amazed by the separation of disciplines, the ignorance among philosophers for example, of work in neuroscience. This seems to me ridiculous.

Now a piece, which fits somewhere, about 'acting'!

The Ethics Of Acting - this is now a written article, which I have put in the section 'Destination'. And here a summary of how it ends:

How to relate all this to an ethical understanding, to an ethical system, to the value system of a particular society? This was my starting point, and this here is my ultimate interest in looking at this issue in acting.

In Claire Tomalin's wonderful biography of Nelly Ternan "The Invisible Woman", she

devotes the first couple of chapters to describing the attitude with which the theatrical profession, and actresses in particular, were regarded by what we could call respectable society: or in other words, the image that 'official', 'formal' society wants to have of itself.

The way acting, and actresses, are now regarded has changed rather radically since those days. And I think this change gives us some insights into the way our society has changed, and also into some values that can be articulated from a secular, humanist position.

What is so especially interesting (to me) in Tomalin's account is how the life of the theatre, the people who worked in it, their attitudes, gives it the feel of an alternative society, a counterculture, with positive values of its own - comparable in this sense to the countercultures closer to our own time.

An early example - the community based on a village near Ascona in Switzerland in the years around 1912. It called itself 'Mountain of Truth', actually 'Mons Veritas', using the Latin - because they believed they were following a truthful approach to life and to self-knowledge.

Martin Green

communities of 70s. Christiania

Self-directed learning communities.

What were their values?

What were the values of the theatre community in Victorian times?

Others considered actresses capable of faking.

Acting now has changed since Stanislavsky and the 'Method'.

consider 'fake' then, now 'genuine', 'convincing', 'authentic'.

Relate to a fundamental change in our society.