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Morally awake? Admiration & resolution in the light of Christian faith.

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Lecture 2 – Admiring

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In his second lecture Professor Oliver O'Donovan focussed on Admiring - admiring what is good. He argued that moral attentiveness to the world is a task of affective intelligence, of "admiration", not merely of "cognition".

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In describing the core of the moral point of view in a biblical metaphor as "wakefulness", we have observed that our moral thinking makes a journey from observation to obligation, from the goodness of the world to the rightness of some action that is available to us to do. The *good*, which is the reason presupposed in any purposeful action, is given to us in the world. There are goods to be known and loved there, a material content for our moral reflection. The *right*, which is the particular purpose projected in reasonable action, is given to us in the moment of time available to us. The good belongs to the realm of *reality*; it is what is there already before our eyes when we first attend to the world. The right belongs to the realm of *possibility*; it is what opens up before us as awake to the time we have. The good is realised, the right unrealised. To reflect this contrast in the attitudes we bring to them I have called on the two verbs, "admiring" and "resolving". Admiring finds its proper object in the good, and terminates there. The good is real, and there is nothing "beyond" the good to attend to. "God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good," we are told at the conclusion of the first creation narrative (Gen. 1:31); we, too, may see the world in that light, with a pale reflection of that satisfaction. Resolving finds its proper object in the right; but it cannot terminate there, for the right exists only in possibility, and our resolution must therefore leap beyond its object into action.

Why "admiration"? In admiration knowledge and affection are perfectly identified. We love as we know, and we know as we love. Admiration is not an exertion or a motion. To admire is not to act, nor even to think about acting. It is to rest, as God rested on the seventh day, seeing that what he had made was very good. In this respect admiration is like all knowledge. It is an important gain in philosophical ethics that the emotions are spoken of not merely as *feelings* but as *forms of knowledge*. And the new "moral realism" in philosophy will speak, in a way that would have been thought not long ago quite insupportable, about objective goods to be known, rather than simply of interests or preferences to be asserted. This defies that miserly Ockhamist caution that continually urges greater economy of ontological outlay, but it is right to do so. In ontology, as in certain other matters, a generosity of outlay is essential if we are ever to get anything back. This change of mood brings moral philosophy much closer to a theology that has always known of the objective goodness of the created world. Morality is not merely a way of experiencing *ourselves*, our wills, our preferences, our inclinations. It is an experience of objective, real and, believers will add, "creaturely" goodness.

But I want to make an assumption that goes beyond this common ground theology shares with the new moral realism - a bold assumption, but a traditional one. It is this: the cognitive affection I call admiration is the *fundamental* form in which we experience the world. Whatever we know, we know as good; and whatever we do not know as good, we do not know. Our moral experience begins right back where our experience of the world begins. It does not begin *after* we know the world, asserting a new active principle, “the will”, to impose ourselves and our preferences on the known world. Neither does it begin *half way through* our knowledge of the world, as though the known world separated itself into various kinds of entities, and one kind emerged, “values”, which needed to be loved as well as known. Love is there, with knowledge, at the beginning. God saw *everything* that he had made, and behold, it was very good. God did not see evil things; God did not see indifferent or value-neutral things.

It is, as I said, by no means necessary that moral realism should make this additional assumption. To make it, indeed, raises the difficult question, why there are not real evils and things really indifferent, as well as real goods? To do justice to that question would take us very far from our course, but neither can we pass it by. So let the following observations suffice in lieu of a full discussion.

The nub of the difficulty is, as I would see it, the status of so-called “bare facts”. Facts are “bare” when they are devoid of significance for one who knows them, value-neutral units of information that acquire meaning only as they are attached to larger complexes. It would seem undeniable that we know bare facts. But if we do, there is the “fact-value divide” beloved of an older generation of philosophers; and if there is a fact-value divide, moral knowledge sees its empire divided and taken from it, left with a segment of reality at best, at worst with no reality at all. But is the knowledge of bare facts true knowledge? What if facts are elements of reality that we do not yet know *how* to know, phenomena that we have, as it were, registered without digesting, in process of being taken up into a knowledge of the world. Facts are like jigsaw-puzzle pieces: we know their shape, colour and dimensions, but what we don’t know is where they fit, and until we know that we do not know what they are. We gather these pieces up especially through techniques of experimental investigation that exclude the relations of the subject to the object; we hold back the construction of an integrated picture of the object in order to allow its various features to emerge in their own time and way.

There is a mistake it is all too easy to make about the knowledge of bare facts. We may think of it as the most perfect form of knowing. Knowledge, we may suppose, has been refined by empirical observation, purged of all those confusing “subjective” judgments that merely mislead us as to what is the case. But what our techniques of observation have achieved is simply to winkle out those phenomena that do not lie on the surface, and this technique can only be sustained under special conditions for limited periods and in relation to limited enquiries. There remains, when all is done, the task of “knowing” what has been found out. The sophisticated investigator has to “return to” the world. The white coat is hung up at the end of the day, the laboratory locked for the night, and the investigator pops into the pub to reflect quietly on what the findings of the day really mean - how they are to be integrated into the same world as the beer and steak pie which he now experiences in the only manner capable of appreciating those things, subjective enjoyment.

Moral knowledge, then, is not knowledge of bare facts, for that is not knowledge in the full sense at all; but neither is it an unselfconscious objective knowledge, in which the subject simply disappears from view, absorbed in what it observes. Moral knowledge is reflective. That is to say, it is aware not only of the known and loved good, but of itself knowing and loving. The self becomes a co-object with the object loved. Augustine liked to say that love implies “love of one’s love”, *dilectio dilectionis suae*. And this reflectivity is the basic condition of moral experience. A wholly unreflective experience of the world is tied to the circumstances of our own existence, the processes of which we happen to be a part. It cannot look out on the world except through the window that our circumstances happen to allow us. We can never take wing and place ourselves imaginatively somewhere else, asking, “What does it look like from *that* point of view?” And this limitation has an ominous aspect; for we may still be aware that something is hidden from us, something lies beyond the view available from our window. Of this unknown something we are not absolutely ignorant, but we are substantially ignorant. It is a kind of shadow on the border of our known and loved world, a consciousness of something inaccessible to knowledge and love. So our immanent affective knowledge takes on a secondary affection: dread. Dread is not fundamental to knowledge, as love is fundamental, since we dread only what we do not know, but dread can follow knowledge and love. (This double affect is often evident in children, for whom to love one thing naturally seems to imply hating another.)

Here we see how it is possible, notwithstanding the truth that we love and know only the good, also in a sense to love evil. We love evil by *resting in* the pattern of loves and dreads that comes immediately to us, treating our dreads as though they were equally real with the goods we love. We love evil by refusing the reflective point of view. This is perfectly expressed in the traditional Christian doctrine of original sin, described memorably by Martin Luther as an *incurvatus in se*, a self-enclosure. In sin we divide the good world God has made into two “worlds”, one good and the other evil, and we make our own contingent perspectives the criterion for the division. And this gives a new, negative sense to the term “world”, which we have hitherto spoken of positively as God’s creation. This negative sense is characteristic of the New Testament, and points to the reality a *constructed* world, a world of our own imagination, pitched over against the created world and in opposition to it.

To escape this self-enclosure we must adopt a different way of relating to ourselves, which I have called “reflection”. The theological tradition has a stronger term for it, which is “repentance”. What that word adds is the recognition that our progression from unreflective to reflective knowledge is not a smooth and effortless. In coming to know ourselves, we must come to know also that we *have* been self-enclosed, bound in sin. Repentance is a reflective knowledge of our unreflective knowledge. To come to repentance is to pass a judgment on our own loves and dreads which frees us from them. It is the first moment, but not the whole, of what Christians have understood by “conversion”, the perfection of our love, which, the apostle tells us, “casts out dread”.

Christian moral theory has historically been dominated by a paradox about the relation to the self. A time-honoured assertion has maintained that all true love of reality - love of God, supremely, and love of the neighbour - is founded on “right self-love”. Augustine was especially fond of repeating this commonplace: “First see whether you have learned to love yourself; then I will trust you with your neighbour to love as yourself. If you have not learned how to love yourself, I am afraid you will cheat your

neighbour as yourself!”¹ The meaning of this is that our love of God and neighbour must be self-aware, not simply absent-minded. Precisely because this self-awareness is the foundation of all other love, it does not put the self in competition with the neighbour, with God or with anything else. We are not invited to love ourselves “as much as” God or neighbour, but to love God “with all our heart, soul, mind and strength.” As soon as we begin to think or speak of the self as a *special* claimant on our own interest, alongside neighbour or God, we must put ourselves on guard against disproportionate attention to the self, or perhaps even try to banish the self from our love altogether. It is possible to use the term “self-love” in this way, too, of a special self-interest. But however much on guard we need to be against selfishness, the self cannot simply be excluded from our moral thinking. Consciousness of the self is an essential element of the moral point of view on the world. Reflective self-love, the foundation of other loves, is the polar opposite of an unreflective pre-moral self-absorption, a self-complacency which consists in a *failure* to grasp the concreteness of the self, and so leaves us at the centre of our own universe without any bearings upon the reality of others. This, too, can be called self-love; and of course the multiple use of the term has been the source of much confusion, though it does also have a rhetorical virtue, which is to draw attention to a truth about conversion, that it involves a change in our relation to ourselves, one that opens us up to the reality of the world, the neighbour and God.

Christian tradition also speaks of the “ordering” of our knowledge and love. The created world is good; but the contents of the created world are many and various. How, then, are we to think of the world’s variety in relation to the love it demands from us? By perceiving it not as a mere aggregation of things, but as an ordered set of relations. But that supposes, Christians have argued, that the attentive mind must participate in some way in the moral order it grasps, forming a kind of reflection of it. Now, this suggestion is hardly self-evident. It is easy to see why the old Platonic idea that knowledge was a kind of replication of reality within the mind became discredited. Suppose I am informed that the indigenous population of Australia has been on this continent for 42,000 years, but the population of European extraction for only 219. I can understand this information dimensionlessly, without having to *reproduce* the proportion 42000:219 in my thoughts. I do not need to form an idea of indigenous inhabitation which, in some sense, is one hundred and ninety two times bigger than my idea of European inhabitation. The proportion is, as we might say, “zipped up” in the proposition I understand, and does not need to be unzipped. But that is merely a formal piece of information taken from an encyclopedia. If there is something about Australia that I need to know fully, *in experience*, then my mind is going to have to stretch further to encompass it. Suppose I am told that S-E Australia has a climate something like Southern Europe, an urban environment like North America and a popular culture that blends British, Irish and Asian influences, I can only digest this information by forming dispositions appropriate to those aspects of Australian existence: I shall pack cool clothes and sublock cream, review my repertoire of Irish dance tunes, acquire a smattering of information about cricket, and so on. If I am to get to know the way things are in Australia, I need to develop a set of ordered affective orientations. My admiration must be structured to encounter the structured reality. It is not enough to say “Wow!” as each new thing happens to catch my notice. I must learn to value most

¹ *Sermo* 128.3.5.

what most deserves valuing. Ordered love is a formed and ordered reflection of a formed and ordered world, the way the world is known in its variety and interconnexions, in its likenesses and unlikenesses, in its causes and effects.

And the ordered knowledge of an ordered world must lead to an ordered knowledge of myself. For in looking at the world comprehensively, I stumble over myself. The pair of eyes through which I see the world are initially of no concern; they are wholly absorbed in seeing. I see cities and mountains and water and people, but I do not see my own eyes. But when I interrogate each thing as to how it is connected to each other thing, I must come to interrogate the eyes through which I look. How are these eyes like other eyes, and what is it like to be eyes? How did these particular eyes get where they are, and where exactly is it that they are? What, being there and not somewhere else, do they see, and not see? I discover that I can myself be understood, and not only understand. And from this there follows another step: there are others *like* myself. For to understand a thing is to see it as one of its kind. And so there emerges into view the neighbour, always the self's companion, always, from the beginning "your neighbour as yourself". An amusing episode in Mark Twain's *Tom Sawyer* tells how the truant boys, after a dangerous adventure trapped in a system of caves, return home to find their own funeral service in progress. Watching and listening unobserved, they find the minister's funeral eulogy so touching that they dissolve into tears. For whom, we wonder, are these tears shed? For themselves, of course, but for themselves as others see them and as they have never seen themselves before, as things-in-the-world, mortal creatures, other people's other people.

The self and the neighbour alongside the self, to be loved as the self; the things of the world below the self and the neighbour, to be used and loved for the self and the neighbour's sake; the things of the world to be used for the self and the neighbour's sake, but not loved, things indifferent of themselves. That is the schematic picture of the created world as an object of ordered love as St. Augustine presents it to us. But there is, of course, something else in this picture: at the pinnacle is the supreme good, that "for the sake of which" all else is to be loved. We spoke last time of wakefulness to world, self and time. Should we not have added wakefulness to God?

But there is a problem about mentioning God in the same breath as the other three. World, self and time are the parameters within which we encounter creation; it is with creation that morality has its primary business. Yet world, self and time are not self-contained and self-explanatory: the world is not fully grasped except as *God's* creation and as God's *new* creation; our selves are not fully understood except as awakened selves, born again from the dead to live to God; our time is not fully understood save as the time of God's patience holding the future open for us. As creator God is the source of our awaking; as redeemer he is the end to which we shall awake; but in between the source and the end, within the framework of the created world, God is not the direct object of our wakefulness, except, we must add, as he engages with creation on its own terms, through the Incarnation and through the Spirit which speaks prophetically of his doings.

John Donne wrote, on the death of his wife, "Here the admyring her my mind did whett to seeke thee, God; so streames do shew their head." How can we understand God as the source from which our admiration of worldly goods derives? How can our love trace the stream back to its head?

Let us approach this question by way of gratitude. Gratitude is a reflection upon my own relation to the good, a “love of my own love”. In gratitude I admit that what is good as such is good for me, too. That addition, “for me”, far from narrowing or restricting my view of the world’s good, actually broadens it. I realise that I belong to this world in which the good is good, that I am indebted to the goodness of the good, and I cease to pretend indifference. In gratitude my acknowledgment of the goodness of things achieves an existential depth. But gratitude stay put with that “for me”. Good, it has seen, is a communication. What can gratitude say of the source of the communication? We experience the world’s good as a gift. What can gratitude say of its giver? We express gratitude in thanks and praise. To whom is the thanks and praise to be addressed? Having been caught out in gratitude, we cannot think of the supreme good purely immanently, as a kind of mathematical point, a notional final cause of all things. We are driven to address the supreme good as the “father of all goodness”.²

Can we not simply say that good things are what there is, and they are all that there is? Can we not dispense with the thought of a supreme good? Clearly it is possible to enjoy goods without ever *facing* the question of who or what stands behind their goodness. Equally it is possible to interrupt the train of thought with an arbitrary “so far and no further”, *refusing* the thought of a supreme good. But any serious attempt to *elucidate* what is implied in calling good things good seems to be drawn into an irresistible gravitational field: it begins to resemble an improvised theology, reinvesting the objects of our admiration with the appurtenances of divinity. It is not clear that this is one whit more economical (in ontological terms) or clear (in evaluative terms) than a frankly theological account of God as the “good who does good.”³

However, the converse is also true. As we cannot think through the idea of objective goodness without reference to the supreme good, so the idea of divine goodness is something we cannot think without reference to creation. We must say, of course, that God is good “in himself”, and not only in his gifts of creation and redemption; but that predication is, like the statement that God exists before time, made anagogically. It would be as preposterous to suppose that we could *grasp* the content of God’s goodness apart from the goodness of creation and redemption as it would be to suppose that we could comprehend God’s pre-eternity without leaning on the crutches of a notion of time. Talk of the love of God, then, is an extension of talk of the love of created goods, and the love of God is present in Christian ethics as a horizon, which we approach necessarily but always hesitantly and with a consciousness of inadequacy: “Lord, it is my chief complaint that my love is weak and faint. Yet I love thee and adore: o for grace to love thee more!”⁴

We have followed the observational knowledge of the good on an upward course, beginning from the world and extending to the self, the neighbour, and finally to God. So we have connected two of the three points of the triangle which we identified in the first lecture. It remains to include the element of time. In experiencing good as a communication, we experience it as an event, with a past, a present and a future. In Jewish and Christian faith, with the sense of God as first agent of good, history becomes

² “Sei Lob und Ehr dem höchsten Gut, dem Vater aller Güte”, the Lutheran paraphrase of Psa. 103.

³ Psa. 119:68, “Good art thou, and doest good; teach me thy statutes.”

⁴ William Cowper, “Hark, my soul! It is the Lord!”

the primary form in which God's goodness is made known to us. Creation itself is narrated in Scripture as a story, a primal history. From which we should not conclude, as some unwarily have done, that change and transformation are all that matters. What constitutes the world as our objective framework for existence is regularity and consistency; it is simply that we must see these regularities and consistencies, too, as a gift of grace, originating in the creator's good will to us.

But the goodness of God is not only an achieved reality but a promise; it is not only a gift once given in the past, but a promise. In admiring the good, we anticipate. In grasping the good as it is given, we grasp also that it is to be perfected. And this step is all-important for the journey of moral thought into action. For it is as we see ourselves placed before a good that is present and yet to be perfected that we first conceive hope: *I believe that I shall see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living*, said the Psalmist.

The object of hope, as the apostle reminds us, is what we do not see. It has in view a future only implicitly or indirectly anticipated by the world as we encounter it. But, the apostle goes on, if we *hope*, then we also *expect* and *endure*. Hope evokes within us the possibility of a practical disposition; it holds before us a future that is our good. It holds it before us at a distance, where we cannot discern its details or do anything to produce it; but it holds it *before* us, so that we reach forward, engaging with the future that is available to us, the future aspect of the present. The hope of a future disclosure of the good opens up for us that space of available time into which we ourselves may act. So there are two levels of anticipation, the one evoking the other. St. Augustine draws attention to these two in his reading of another passage of St. Paul, the one where he speaks of his ambition, "forgetting the things that are behind, pressing forward to what lies ahead". Seizing on a philological point in his Latin translation, Augustine marks the correlation between the ultimate and the immediate anticipation with two verbs, to *intend* and to *extend*. We may be *intent on what lies ahead*, he tells us, because we are *extended to the future that will come into being*. As we are given the future to extend us temporally in hope, we are given the present "ahead" to intend, to act into.

There is a negative and a positive aspect to this. Negatively we are incomplete and imperfect, positively we are the recipients of a promise. Negatively, we are not what we are called to be. The form of this judgment belongs to what has normally been called, in Christian ethics, "conscience". Conscience is reflective. It arises from knowledge of the self as an active self, and of the incongruities between the performance of the self and the world in which it is set. Conscience is the accuser, the discovery of sin which follows upon the discovery of self's disunity with self's active life. It belongs to the historicity of our reflection, from the fact that when we take notice of ourself, it is a self to which we have ceased, with the lapse of time, to be entirely identical, a self slipping out of the present into the past. Ceasing to be wholly present to one's performance, we make the performance an object of criticism. We become alien to it, aligned with the view of others, for the conscience is constituted by a meeting of social pressure and individual responsibility. Conscience is not, as it was called, "the voice of God"; that doctrine was, of course, purely deist. Conscience is a reflective self-judgment that is purely human, and may, of course, be mistaken, or if truthful, may be ignorant of the only context in which its judgment is sustainable, the context of divine forgiveness and grace. So the recognition of our failure, which stands

on the frontier of observational reason before it crosses over into practical reason, may also be the decisive barrier that prevents it doing so. For conscience may sap away the hope of God's final good will and the faith that it is possible to please him.

Positively, we are promised that we *shall* be as God *calls* us to be. Our active lives are given a future. And there is a special form which this promise takes, which we call the *virtues*. To recognise virtues is to recognise forms of goodness actually realised in lived reality around us, an indication of what human action has it in itself to be. Talk about virtue is, in the first instance, third-person talk, concerned with other people's achievements, and it is talk about achievements that are seen, not about what is unseen. They are ways of living, manifest in others' lives, that demonstrate what God has done in overcoming sin and proposes to do. Virtues are not a law, not an "ideal", they are not any form of deliberative norm. They are not direct commands. What *we* should be or do is not shown to us in what our *neighbour* has been given to be or do. To treat our neighbour's virtue wrongly is to make a tyrant out of it every bit as oppressive as an uninstructed conscience. And so the virtuous are not to be imitated, but simply to be loved for what they are, and to be taken as material for understanding what kinds of things God accomplishes in human action and lives. R.M. Adams has observed wisely: "Virtue is best understood as a kind of goodness rather than rightness". But precisely as we recognise the context of the grace of God common to them and to us, other people's moral achievements lead us to faith. Virtues are our neighbours' service to us, communicating the promise of a perfection we know we lack. From there on it will be the task for faith, which grasps the reality of things unseen, to see the possibilities open to our own lives and circumstances. From there on we have to think practically.