

New College Lecture Series 2007

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

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Lecture 3 - Resolving

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In his third lecture Professor Oliver O'Donovan considered "Resolving" - resolving to do what is right. He asks how can we make the transition of reason from what is the case to what we are to do? How may we intelligently "frame" an action to perform without arbitrariness?

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When we ask about the world's repertoire of good things, good relations, good events, good promises, we can go into much specialised detail without ceasing to speak in general terms. Each area of our experience of the world has its own tract of moral discussion: bioethics, discussing whether the human embryo is a person; political ethics, discussing when and how war qualifies as an act of judgment; economic ethics discussing the criteria for a just wage, and so on. When we ask about decisions, on the other hand, the only details we can go into are particulars. Before the event or after it, we ask about the historical situation: should Churchill have ordered the bombing of Dresden? Should we, if we fail to conceive a child next year, seek the help offered by a fertility clinic? The focus is the particular decision, and there is little to say of that in general terms which is not of a rather formal character: have we considered all the options? Have we examined our own motives? Have we rightly interpreted the moral rules that govern the situation? etc. etc. The object of practical thinking is, by definition, undetermined. To borrow a phrase from the Epistle to the Ephesians, it is the "good works prepared beforehand that we should walk in them". Prepared, that is, *before us*, i.e. ahead of us, in our available future. The object of practical thought cannot be described, as the world and its goods may be described. It can only be resolved upon.

Yet this does not mean that all the serious moral discussion belongs to the descriptive stage of moral thinking, and that what we can say about making decisions is morally inconsequential. Consider, for example, a theory to which Friedrich Schleiermacher devoted some attention, that the point of moral thinking is to resolve conflicts of duty. Schleiermacher was less than comfortable with this theory. It ran counter to his view of Christian ethics as a description of the shape of the Christian life rather than an aid to decision. Schleiermacher was typical of those romantic theologians who prized unreflective instinct and held in disdain the precise and discriminating casuistry of the seventeenth century baroque. And yet he could not bring himself to deny that ethics had any practical function at all. So he accepted the proposition that "its usefulness in life begins when something is in dispute, and the morality of an individual cannot determine itself." That is to say, moral thought comes to our aid only when moral instinct fails us, and instinct fails us when it points us in two directions simultaneously.

But how, when we are caught in the grip of a dilemma, can thinking aid us? Schleiermacher's answer to this question is of great interest. The role of thought, he

suggests, is to *make the conflict disappear*, to show that it was all the time unreal, a mere trick of the light. The problem may be “conceptual”; which is to say, we have not understood the meaning of our obligations, so that we suppose them incompatible when they are not. My boss requires me to tell a lie to a client; my sense of honesty revolts, but I recognise his authority to run his business; yet if I really understood the nature of my boss’s authority, I would realise that it did not extend to requiring lies of employees, or if I really understood what was being asked of me, I would realise it wasn’t lying in the straightforwardly vicious sense. Alternatively the problem may be “momentary” or “temporal”. While it is perfectly possible for me to care for my ailing mother and discharge my professional duties at the same time in normal circumstances, just at this moment, when a critical decision has to be made in the office, the sudden summons to my mother’s bedside is horribly inconvenient. But this conflict, too can be made to disappear, since “each moment,” Schleiermacher declares, “includes the whole of morality” - an opaque dictum which seems to mean that any demands *actually* made on me by family or work are determined by the *actual* possibilities; and there are no others. Within the terms of the moment, then, I may satisfy all claims; if I have to be at my mother’s bedside, it is not required that I be in the office. And to this he adds, “every moment contains a conflict”. Since I can always construct a dilemma mentally by dreaming up hypothetical claims that might override even the most obvious requirements, no conflicts can be real conflicts in the last analysis. The confrontation of alternatives is merely a clarificatory device that focusses the question in need of an answer.

Schleiermacher’s desire to describe the ordinary course of the moral life apart from thinking was characteristic of romantic theology; but it was a mistake. The leading of the Holy Spirit ought not to be separated from the operations of reason; neither ought reason to be narrowed down to mere problem-solving. But his readiness to hold up the notion of conflict to sceptical scrutiny is of great value. It is, in fact, simply a radicalisation of the older casuistic tradition. Where that school offered help in resolving conflicts of duty, Schleiermacher treats resolving as dissolving, hoping in this way to banish those aspects of casuistic moral thought which, in common with many romantic Protestants, he found disturbing. His concerns were echoed in the late twentieth century by moralists more or less influenced by a revival of Aristotelianism, who attacked what they called “decisionism”, *i.e.* a tendency to construe ethics in terms of dilemmas, “as if,” in James McClendon’s memorable phrase, “being divided against itself were the soul’s main business.”

Yet even in that naming of the problem we can see a danger of throwing out the baby with the bathwater. For to sever moral thinking from decision would be to sever it from action. Decision does not consist in resolving dilemmas. Decision is thinking brought to the point of action; and practical thought *must* come to the point of action, otherwise it cannot be practical. Decision is the term to which practical thinking tends, the step of thought that immediately gives on to performance. “Decision” means cutting-short; but what is cut short in decision is simply the indeterminacy of thinking. What we decide in the normal course of events is not which of two alternative courses of action to take, but simply to take some course of action. But decision cannot occur in a rational vacuum. It must be shaped by a train of thought which has resolved upon a course of action to take. I use the term “resolving” not in the sense of solving a dilemma, but in the sense of resolving indeterminacy into determinacy, as in harmony a

discord is resolved in a concord, producing a harmonious cadence. The common name for practical reason on offer within philosophical vocabulary, “deliberation”, imports a metaphor of weighing things in scales which leaves me uncomfortable, since it puts too much emphasis on proportionate calculation, which is a part, but only a part, of what we do when we resolve upon a course of action. The role of reason as resolution is to clarify our view of the work God has prepared before us for us to walk in, to the point where we are free to step out in a decision and engage in action.

The great poetic climax of St. Paul’s most extended and intellectually intense theological exposition, the Epistle to the Romans, is followed by some well-known words: “I appeal to you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice...” This summons to practical commitment – for that is the significance of the word “bodies” – is far-reaching; but the specification Paul then adds does not take the form of identifying what his readers should do and not do. It talks about how they should think. The role of the mind is not at an end after the wondering account of the works of God that has occupied the eleven previous chapters. Thought does not end where admiration ends, with only a sudden jerk into activity to follow. Thought must go further, and make the journey to practical reasoning. So this is the moment for him to speak of a “renewal of the mind” that will “distinguish what it is God wills”. Whereupon the apostle continues, happily unaware of generations of later editors and commentators who will interrupt the flow of his thought with a paragraph break or a new analytic heading, to repeat the same point more forcibly with the full authority of his apostolic office, demanding that they should think about how to think “judiciously”.

It is worth lingering over this passage which gives a remarkably clear view of the phase of moral thought to which we have attached the name, “resolving”. Paul’s own verb, *phronein*, chosen from a number of other possible verbs meaning “to think” and constantly repeated in this passage, is specific to practical thought and interestingly echoes Aristotle’s term for practical reason, *phronêsis*. Paul is interested especially in how his Christian readers are to reach judgments particular to each of them. These are not the value-judgments with which we were concerned in the last lecture, the estimative and appreciative perceptions of the true worth of things; they are the concrete determinations that enable them to act. This interest is shown clearly in the elaboration that directly follows, referring to the variety of gifts and offices within the community. Judicious thinking will be differentiated in the light of the “faith” God has given to each, as suggested by his simile of the body and its members. The complex variety of functions in the life of the church requires a differentiated “measure”: prophecy, service, teaching, encouragement, charitable giving and so on. Each person must confidently exercise a specific gift, evidencing in practical service a faith precisely proportioned to the gift he or she has been given. The simile is not uncommon in Paul, but it is used here with a distinctive emphasis: each is to follow a practical course different from others; the renewal of the mind consists in not being “conformed to the shape of this age”, *i.e.* fitting in with some generally accepted pattern, but in “discerning what God’s will is”, *i.e.* concretely for this person.

This practical thinking is not immediate and intuitive; it is extended and leads to a conclusion, as is indicated by two parallel phrases constructed with the preposition “to” or “towards”. The mind is renewed “towards” the discernment of God’s will; they are to “think towards thinking judiciously”. This process of thought risks being aborted

before it reaches its conclusion. Not breaking free of the commonplaces of “this age” is one way that can happen; the other is something Paul calls “overthinking” - perhaps we may paraphrase, “thinking over the top”. Translators and commentators have interpreted this “overthinking” as an exaggerated opinion of the self and its capacities; but it makes better contextual sense to see it as an inflated conception of the practical task. With another intriguing echo of Aristotle’s doctrine of the mean, Paul calls on each person to exercise faith in relation to a specific task, appropriating precisely that service that God has assigned him or her, neither judging it by the commonplace expectations of the age nor misjudging it by an insufficiently self-aware consciousness of vocation, so that too much is attempted, too little achieved.

Faith, I suggested at the end of the first lecture, is the distinctively theological answer to the question of how moral thinking travels from observation to decision. Faith in its aspect of belief, *fides quae creditur*, is a focussed knowledge of the self as dependent on, and answerable to, God; faith in its aspect of trust, *fides qua creditur*, is the practical imagination that grasps the possibilities for appropriate action which the moment presents. On the one side faith participates in love, on the other in hope. In both aspects faith is intimately connected with a sense of self, the self as valued by and humbled before God, the self as freed to launch hopefully into action. With its face turned towards hope the role of faith is to clarify the particular thing, whatever it is, that demands to be done by us here and now. It involves an exercise of the imagination. Yet that term needs some care; for imagination can go wrong not only by being too dull but by being too inventive, by “thinking over the top”. There are practical conceptions never properly conceived, without concrete practical shape, left hanging in the airy realm of ideals.

Ideals are goods imagined negatively, as possibilities for realisation. Real goods are subject to the dimension of time; they are known *historically* by their emergence as communications. And the historical dimension clears the space for imagination to project them as *not* realised, and so still awaiting realisation. This turn from actuality to possibility, from love to hope, is a dangerous business. By focussing on possibility moral imagination can easily lose sight of reality. The power to admire and worship may be dissipated in empty yearning for what is not to hand. But the danger is one we cannot avoid. If we are actors in the world, we cannot be always admiring and adoring, but must deal in possibilities. And if we are wise actors, we shall learn to conceive possibility as an aspect of reality; or to put it theologically, we shall learn to frame our hope in response to the promise. Then we shall see our own action in the right light, as the *service* of created good, not an invention or a construction.

We have to pass through the door of unrealised possibility to discern the space available to our agency. Let us consider a literary illustration of this. The poet of Psalm 139, after adoring the all-knowing providence of God in lyrical tones for eighteen verses (*Lord, thou hast searched me out and known me. Thou knowest my downsitting and mine uprising...*) suddenly, and with a violence that has evoked dismay from worshippers and commentators in every age, announces his dissatisfaction with the social world as he finds it, and calls on God to overcome the dissonance between social disorder and the perfect order of providence: *O that thou wouldst slay the wicked, o God, and that men of blood would depart from me.* The unexpected negativity of this wish is, of course, a deliberate literary device, like the electric shock administered by its near neighbour in the Psalter, Psalm 137, when it passes from representing the grief of

the Babylonian exiles in aesthetic images to a bloodcurdling curse that reveals the harsh reality of their feelings. The transition from positivity to negativity is necessary. In order to reach the sober, self-aware prayer for God's moral probing, *Search me, o God, and know my heart! Try me and know my thoughts!* the poet's gaze must first move from the perfect works of God to the black night of their absence.

But the imagination of goods as possibilities does not imply that they are realisable goals, whether as ends of actions or as aims of life. From among the universe of unrealised possibilities I am presented with one good that I can realise now, before lunch, and one life that I can live now, before death. I may refuse this one available good, simply because I am enchanted by unrealised possibilities that I cannot bring about. I may, as it were, fall in love with what is not the case: a world free of misunderstanding and suspicion, a world free of strife and conflict, a world where nobody goes to bed hungry, marvellous worlds which I am incapable of bringing to pass. I cannot let this beautiful imagination go, not even for the sake of finding one concretely constructive action to perform. I may pretend to others or to myself that by clinging to these abstract ideals I am somehow being of use; but in this I deceive and am deceived.

I may, of course, hope for things I cannot pursue. Deep changes in the world can and, as Christians believe, will come about; the lion will lie down with the lamb. The horizon of hope makes possible our practical search for less far-reaching reconciliations. It is important to distinguish an object of hope from a practical ideal. Loose theologians' talk about "bringing in the Kingdom of God" is a foolish effervescence, combining the highest possible tension of impatience with the vaguest possible sense of direction. There are, as we have seen, two types of question a moral doctrine may answer: what are the goods we may know within the world? And, what goods are appropriate to forming the right ends-of-action here and now? The kingdom of God is among the answers to the first of these questions. God has shown us his ultimate purpose in Jesus Christ, and will bring in the Kingdom of his Son. But what I have to discern is the concrete thing that is given to me to do in the light of that hope. And when somebody invites me to join in creating a new world free of misunderstanding and suspicion - just sign the petition here! - I know that he or she is bleary-eyed with moral hyperventilation. "Not everything that should be done, should by us be done," said Paul Ramsey, articulating a basic principle of discriminating action.

That remark, made back in the nineteen sixties, was originally addressed to the need for a responsible foreign policy on the part of the United States. This reminds us that the bad idealist is not always a dreamy and ineffective poet, but can be dangerous. If my bewitchment with an ideal is combined with a great deal of practical energy, the negativity of the ideal will be the hallmark all that I do. Of such mental stuff is ideological tyranny constructed. Ideals must be focussed into practical and concrete conceptions of how we may do good. If a sense of the negative is a precondition for imagination, a sense of the positive reality of God's good providence is a precondition for turning imagination into action. I ought not to linger among the yawning absences, but press on to the reality of what God does, and makes available to me to do.

This raises in its turn the question of "compromise". Compromises are the decisions, explicit or implicit, that render ideals practicable. We compromise when we discard certain aspirations as unrealisable – either *absolutely* or simply in the circumstances.

In such decisions we recognise constraints on our freedom to do whatever we can imagine - whether constraints of circumstance, endowment, or simply of finitude. As a model of good compromise we may take *lawgiving*, which is the fashioning of a community norm that enables a multitude to live together in a disciplined manner to the fullest extent it is collectively capable of. If not everything that should be done should by us be done, neither should everything that should by us be done, by law be done. An idealistic law is a vicious law, that requires too much; it has not compromised sufficiently with the practicalities of conformity and enforcement. A demoralised law, on the other hand, has required too little; it has not exploited the ways in which law can help the multitude live better. The well-framed law follows the very difficult line on which sustained attempts to hold one another to what we ought to do are fruitful and effective.

But there can be bad compromises as well as bad ideals, and not every difficulty ought to put us off. A compromise is bad when it means giving in to the general opinion of other people against our own convictions, of being “conformed to this age”. It is an aspect of moral maturity to be able to stand our ground in disagreement. Where bad compromise weakens our agency, good compromise strengthens it. It focusses our attention on what is most important, stops us trying to have our cake and eat it. The judgment about what is possible is often far from straightforward, and especially in great enterprises we need courage and daring, not only cool-headed caution. “To defy power which seems omnipotent; to love, and bear; to hope till hope creates from its own wreck the thing it contemplates...” urged Shelley. But even daring needs a ground in reality. In speaking of action as the work of faith, we point both to the reality undergirding it and to the risk involved. For we can dare to undertake actions that risk failure, if we have the confidence that even in failing to achieve their ends they will achieve the most important end, which is to witness to the unfailing purposes of God.

Good ideals and good compromises, we conclude, belong together. Good ideals are embodied in good compromises, and good compromises protect and serve good ideals. They converge upon practical possibility. For a good ideal is a possible ideal, while a good compromise concentrates the mind on where the precise possibility lies. Yet as it stands this is not a sufficiently clear way of defining the focus of resolution. We might, after all, understand it to mean, as some have been minded to do in the cause of scientific research, that whatever we *can* do, we *should* do. If we agree to that, it must follow that whatever we *may possibly be able to do*, we should *at least try* to do. Practical possibility is proved by experiment; if a scientist clones a sheep, it is possible to clone a sheep. And that seems to do away with the distinction between good and practical ideals and bad and impractical ones.

But when we speak of a practically possible ideal, we are speaking of conceiving a *good* to be done. The question is not, can we clone a sheep? The question is, can we do good by cloning a sheep? All ideals are conceptions of the good, but many of our conceptions of the good are hazy and ill-focussed, so we must ask how the deed which lies to our hand is going to serve the good we vaguely aspire to. When a scientist proposes that we should try to do whatever we may be able to do, what is meant, if we think seriously about it, is “whatever we may be able to do *while leaving in place the essential structure of the world and human experience as we know and appreciate it* – without, that is, destroying our welfare as we understand it.” Most apologists for the freedom of experiment do not advocate destroying the world in a nuclear explosion

simply because it is technically possible! The question about a proposed intervention into the course of nature is whether it can ever be a coherent pursuit of a good.

And this is where our description of the world and its reality is going to shape the way our decisions proceed. An ideal is formed out of a conception of the good; it will be as good or as bad as the conception that gave rise to it is true or false. When we convert our understanding of the world into regulative principles, we have what we call moral rules. Rules are simply *formulations of generic obligation by which the moral order is brought to bear on decisions*. The authority of rules is that they are founded in reality. They do not claim to be obeyed just because they are directive, but because they tell the truth about reality in a directive form. Rules are not given in nature; they are not phenomena we can “discover”, like a new continent; but neither are they simply devices made up as a fictional plot is made up. It is harmless enough to say that rules are “constructed”, as diagrams, arguments and formulae are constructed, provided we understand that their construction has to do with their *formal* presentation as norms, not their substantial content. We could say, what theories are for description, rules are for decision. They are responsible to reality, open to refutation and disproof; but they secure the wisdom attained by reflection within a tradition of practical direction.

The key point here is that rule-governed practice is by no means a matter of course. Many people make their decisions on a moment by moment basis. This may leave them exposed to criticism for inconsistency; it may make them, or show them to be, persons of vacillating and irresolute character. But these are perfectly possible things to be. If we urge ourselves to adopt good rules and stick by them, if we value action on principle more than we value action on momentary inspiration, that is because the indeterminacy which affects the object of our resolution from the beginning also affects its form. Though we will do *something* with ourselves, what has yet to be decided is not only *what*, concretely, we shall do, but *what kind of doing* we shall accomplish. To urge upon ourselves regulated and rule-governed conduct, then, is not a mere waste of breath, as though the mere fact of our acting would ensure that we conformed to some rule or other. It is itself a substantial moral principle, grounded in the regularity of the world. When we say that practical reason terminates in action, the word “action” actually encompasses a whole range of things that we may resolve upon or not. It encompasses *particular* deeds, of course; it also encompasses *courses* of action that must be begun and carried through; it encompasses *abstentions* from action. And it also encompasses longer-term *policies for* acting and abstaining from action in certain ways in future circumstances, and so on. Human action is built up of units of varying sizes and shapes, all of them the fruit of moral thinking and resolution. We may decide to pull out a gun and fire; but we may equally decide never to carry a weapon.

Among the policies we may reasonably adopt is the policy of acting *with* other people, in concert and not in isolation. And this allows us, in concluding, to carry our reflections on the triad of faith, hope and love through to the end of St. Paul’s most famous observation: *Faith, hope and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love*. How are we to understand the thought that a process of thought *beginning* with love and proceeding, through hope, to faith, must then reach love once again as its climax? Or, to put the question in terms native to St. John, how is the command of love both “an old command, which you had at the beginning”, and “a new command”?

Our individual action is never less than a contribution to an ongoing history of common action. My action may be admirably bold, but if there is no way that others can build upon my boldness, then I am wrapped up in a self-enclosed narcissism. The boldest of all actions, and the most fruitless, is the act which leaves the world entirely helpless to respond to me, suicide. But the perfection of our moral wakefulness is to *awake together*. Admiration is made perfect when faith and hope lead us beyond the limits of the seen world to the love of God; resolution is made perfect when faith and hope lead us beyond individual decision to a common service of God pursued in love for one another. Resolving that we will act together as a community is not a matter of course. Although, or perhaps because, the principle of acting together is foundational for politics, it is still sometimes imagined that the purest forms of action are those in which an individual breaks free of everyone else and gives untrammelled expression to his own convictions. The present Archbishop of Canterbury, a figure who I suspect is not as well understood at this great distance as he is by some of us at home, has devoted his whole ministry in that office to reminding the Anglican churches of this single point. Explaining it in the course of an interview on the BBC, he was rather brusquely challenged by the interviewer with the words, "That is a very *political* answer, if I may say so!" To which he replied, "That was a very political question!" To the political all combinations are political, all compromised, all savouring of deals cut in smoke-filled rooms. But to the spiritual, there is a combination of the Spirit, a practical reasoning done together, *to hen phronountes, sumpsuchoi*, as Paul says, "with one purpose and acting as one."

Let us close by returning to St. Paul and pursuing this passage from the Epistle to the Philippians to its climax, one in which the verb *phronein*, once again, has a very significant role. It goes on, according to the older English translations, "Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus", and speaks of the self-emptying of the heavenly Christ in his incarnation and death. What exactly is it that Paul commends for our imitation in Christ's disposition? It is none of the obvious moral virtues: he is not commended because he is merciful or kind. It is that he accepted service, and demonstrated obedience. To what? To the purposes of God. The practical disposition of one who was in the form of God was to bind himself to a moral policy framed in the mind of God. And in so binding himself - in a memorable phrase - "he did not consider equality with God a thing to be grasped at". The proposition that the Son is wholly equal to the Father is a proposition for doctrinal reflection. But the corresponding practical proposition is that the Son must be *wholly absorbed in* the Father's purposes. Maintaining his equality is not any part of his practical purposes. And this principle is extended to Paul's Philippian readers: each should not pursue his own concerns but the concerns of others, and even more markedly, that they should give others priority over themselves. Again, there is no ontological ground for everyone thinking others better than themselves, which would be mutually contradictory. Paul assumes, as they assume, that they are equal to one another as Christ is equal to God. But asserting that equality is not part of their project. Their project, since they *do not have to* assert their equality, is to give others priority as they give priority to us, so that actions lie on a convergent path.