

New College Lecture Series 2007

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

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Lecture 1 – Waking

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In his first lecture Professor Oliver O'Donovan used the metaphor of “wakefulness” - the mind alert to shape decisions and actions, to consider what it means for humans to make right choices based on what is “good” and “right”.

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You have invited me to make the long journey from Europe to Australia. In return I am inviting you to consider a very short journey - a journey of the mind so short it can be accomplished in a moment, yet amazingly difficult to map. A moral thought – any moral thought, however trivial – involves this journey of the mind. A moral thought is not a simple proposition about the way things are, like “Australia is in the Southern hemisphere”; it is not a simple practical proposition, like “Let’s go to Australia!” It is a movement *from* a proposition of the one kind *to* a proposition of the other kind: “*Since* Australia is in the Southern hemisphere, *let us go* there in September, when it is not too hot.” *Practical thinking* suggests what is to be done; it directs our lives like a manager, it does not report them like a journalist. *Moral thinking* supports our practical thinking with reasons; but reasons for doing things are found only in what is already the case. So moral thinking takes us on a journey from what *is* the case to what *is not yet* the case; from what is settled to what remains to be settled.

This distinctive journey involved in moral reasoning was first clearly pointed out in 1739 by Edinburgh’s philosopher, David Hume, in a famous paragraph observing how moral philosophers tended to start out using the verb “is” and suddenly, without explanation, changed to the verb “ought”. He urged writers on moral topics to account for this gear-change, and insinuated, with a rather premature confidence, that he himself had successfully done so. Now, one common interpretation of this paragraph, which I regard as mistaken, holds that Hume here identified the so-called “fact-value divide”, “is” representing bare value-free facts, “ought” representing ungrounded assertions of value, which by definition could not be deduced from bare facts. Hume’s recommendation that the logical connexion should be displayed is then taken to be ironic, since there really is no connexion to display. There are, of course, such things as bare facts that do not determine value-judgments; we shall have something to say about their status next time. But there are a great number of other truths about the world, expressed with the verb “is”, which do determine our value-judgments. The right way, I believe, to understand the movement of thought that Hume observed is not in terms of “fact” and “value”, but in terms of the “good” and the “right”, where “good” points to something real about the world which we appreciate, “right” points to something we are to do. I have tried to capture this understanding of the journey with two verbs I have taken as titles for the second and third of these lectures, “admiring” and “resolving”. We admire what is good; we resolve on what it is right to do. And

the mind engaged with morality moves from one to the other. How can we map that movement?

I have posed the question, then, by beginning from a philosophers' discussion of everyday moral thinking. What interest, you may ask, has a theologian in this discussion? Theology, we must answer, is concerned both with the content and the form of morality. Moral thinking - not only *what* is thought, but also *how* it is thought - is an aspect of mankind's created nature and of mankind's ultimate destiny. God is author and judge of our moral relations; and the vision of God is the completion of a life well-lived, a life pleasing to him. So theology will challenge conceptions of morality which presume it can be closed off against the transcendent, or can be grounded in the exercise of arbitrary will. The methods of theology are, of course, not the same as those of philosophy; theology recognises an authoritative text which illumines and corrects moral concepts, as it does all other constructs of thought. But neither are the methods of theology and philosophy incompatible, for Scriptural exposition is a work of interpretation, and thus gives scope for conceptual exploration. Yet in taking up the conceptual questions of philosophy, theology brings also a question of its own. It has to do with what is called, in St. Paul's Greek, *phronêma sarkos* and *phronêma Pneumatos*. We shall have more to say about that Greek word *phronêma*. For the moment, let us speak of it simply as "practical reason", and practical reason may be either bounded within materialistic horizons ("the mind of the flesh") or opened up to spiritual horizons ("the mind of the Spirit"). Christian theology is concerned with how moral experience can be open to our final calling. It asks about "the renewing of the mind", to use another Pauline phrase, or, in a common shorthand, about *conversion*.

A question every cultural tradition has to wrestle with is how to conceive of morality, *i.e.* the thinking which furnishes our decisions and actions with reasons. There are many metaphors in circulation to depict what we do when we contemplate good and evil, distinguish right from wrong, pursue trains of thought leading to decision, and form policies for behaviour. We hear people talk of "constructing" morality, like a kind of building-operation. We hear moral thinking described as "insight" or "vision". We refer to it as "weighing up" alternatives, even, implausibly enough, as "making choices". And for many purposes we can afford to be eclectic with our metaphors, switching from one to the other as the poetry of the moment or the play of light upon the situation may prompt. But there are points at which the choice of a metaphor can determine everything, and it is pressingly important that we test our metaphors for their adequacy. And here the authoritative conceptual repertoire of Scripture and the tradition of expounding Scripture comes to our aid. There is one metaphor in Scripture that seems to me to capture the dynamic of moral thinking, and that is "wakefulness". The metaphor of wakefulness draws our attention to the fact that moral attention faces in more than one direction: to reality as it is, to possibility as it has yet to be realised, and to ourselves as actors. It brings together attentiveness and alertness: attentiveness to the realities that present themselves, alertness in responding to them. So it captures the nuclear core of our moral experience, the sense of being so situated in the world that certain practical dispositions are elicited from us. At the same time it forces us to look from our routine moral experience to the ultimate question of our final destiny.

Let me say a word or two about this metaphor in its Scriptural context, before proceeding to some provisional explorations of the work it can do. It is present in both

in the Old Testament and the New, but not, we must note, as a *noun* but as a *verb*, and especially as a verb in the imperative mood: “Wake!”, “Watch!” In the poetic literature of the Hebrew Scriptures the cry “Awake!” summons an agent, human or divine, to action – military, judicial, even artistic. Characteristically the cry, “Awake!” is addressed to God. The contrast between Old and New Testaments at this point is striking. Nowhere in the New Testament is God called on to awake. One might say, God is there presented as having already awoken, already acted. When the call to wake is addressed to human beings in the New Testament, furthermore, it is not a general call to action. Two passages in the synoptic Gospels lie behind a great number of its appearances elsewhere, and in both of them it occurs on the lips of Jesus himself. The so-called synoptic apocalypse, in the first place, contains two brief parables which introduce it. One tells of a traveller returning home at night, who has ordered the gate-keeper to stay awake to let him in; the other tells of a householder who would have stayed awake if he had known of certain intentions on the part of a certain housebreaker. In conjunction with these two stories we find a moral: “Stay awake, then, for you do not know the hour!” These two parables serve as a background to two striking calls to wakefulness in the Apocalypse of St John, both placed on the lips of the glorified Lord. But here the two parables are conflated: the thief who will come in the night and the householder who will return in the night are now one and the same, and are, in fact, Jesus himself, who says, “I will come as a thief!” In the second place, there is the narrative of the agony of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, where he commands his disciples to stay awake while he goes forward to pray alone.

The New Testament word about wakefulness is only occasionally a direct summons to conversion: “Awake, sleeper, rise from the dead, and Christ shall shine upon you!” There is, indeed, a pervasive eschatological context, pointing forward to the end of all things. Yet for the most part talk of wakefulness is about *staying* awake, being attentive, conducting ourselves with a high degree of alertness. This does not mean that wakefulness is an achieved state, something we can assume, rather as we assume that we are awake as we go about our daily business. In such a presumption, it warns us, there lies unwariness and inattentiveness. One must attend carefully to being attentive. The call to wakefulness prevents us from thinking of the present as an acquired position; since it is open to the future of Christ’s coming, we must be open to the immediate future which forms the horizon of our present as we lived through it.

To be wakeful is to be attentive. To what, then, are we bidden to attend? What is the focus of our wakefulness? (a) In the first place, it is *the world*.

When we say “world”, we speak of many things; but we speak at least of one thing: the contextual frame that surrounds our own existence. The world is an order of things which existed prior to my existing, which was an object of attention to God, angels and men before it could ever be an object of attention to me. The world is an order of things that will, in all probability, persist after I am gone. To that order of things, as it was and as it will be, I have no direct access. I have access only to the order in which I now stand, “my world”. My world is all around me, it interacts with me, conditions me and responds to me. Yet my world is not *another* world, different from the world that was before me and that will be after me. “My world” has its past and its future in a world which was not and will not be mine, which did not and will not surround me, interact with me, condition and respond to me. This paradoxical constitution of “mine”

and “not mine” is what we mean by the *objectivity* of the world. Objectivity is the foundation of all moral obligation. For obligation is the demand that the world lays upon my inner self, but without it’s being my inner self. To be morally obliged is, as some philosophers like to say, to be “invested” or “taken over” by a reality from beyond myself.

It is possible, we may suppose, to drift through the world half-attentive to it, asking no questions and telling no lies, treating it merely as a kind of screen on which to project ourselves, careless of its independent logic, careless of the distinctions that give it size and scope and the connexions that give it coherence, never troubling to think about its order, as a whole or in its parts. It is possible to attend to the world momentarily and in fragments, now to this aspect and now to that, without pulling these moments of attention together. It is not a matter of course that we will attend to the world. It is there without our constructing it; it will determine our fate whether we attend to it or not. We bump into it, knock up against it, without ever having to imagine it. Yet if we are to be more than idle visitors to the world’s trade-fair, sampling the wares on one stall and turning on to the next, we shall need focussed and resolute attention. Which is to say, we shall have to reckon not only with the fact *that there is* a world, but with what that world is like, where it has come from, where it is going and how it holds together. These are not questions that answer themselves. Much moral reasoning, much conscientious doubt turns on how things really are with the world, how its parts are rightly to be conceived and described. Is humankind an ensemble of selfish genes or the lord of creation? Is the human embryo a child, or a mere piece of tissue? Is our behaviour conditioned, or is it chosen? Such questions of description are the essential stuff of moral debate; they determine all our practical attitudes.

At the core of commonsense morality is the conviction that we must act “reasonably”, by which we mean, quite simply, that we must take things as they are, not try to impose our fancies on them. Famously, this commonsense conviction was challenged by the young David Hume, who argued that since reason could affect moral judgment only by representing facts and relations, it could not account for moral responsibility. Errors of description, he pleaded, are simple misfortunes. “I am more to be lamented than blamed... No one can ever regard such errors as a defect in my moral character.” Somewhat arbitrarily for one who scorned the very idea of free will, he here joined company with a long minority tradition of radical voluntarism, which sprang in the scholastic age from Peter Abelard’s ground-breaking thesis that nobody commits a sin unless he or she is consciously defying God. Ignorance was a complete excuse for acts that were objectively wrong. Even Christ’s persecutors, who knew not what they did, Abelard contended, were innocent.

Later scholastics responded to this challenge with a distinction. There is, to be sure, an ignorance of bare contingent fact which excuses our mistakes: “I did not know it was the high priest,” Paul famously excused himself. But there is also culpable ignorance, which is inattention to the world; and this does not excuse us, but rather incriminates us. This response put the scholastics in line not only with Aristotle but with Augustine, who had proposed two complementary and contrasting accounts of the origin of sin: the fall of Satan and the deception of Adam. The fall of Satan was heavenly angelic sin, sin with the eyes open. The deception of Adam was sin with the eyes closed. The heavenly sin is the more fundamental, in that it shows up with decisive clarity that

deviance of will that lies at the root of sin of every kind. But Adam's sin was the type of human sin, sin *within* the world. For men and women the will is not disengaged from cognition. We know the rebellious will by its cognitive effects. We know what moral failure is by losing our way, as in Dante's famous image, as we journey through the forest of the world. Inattention to the way things are is, for the human sinner, the universal form that sin takes.

If we were to answer Hume directly, we should have to confess that we have, in fact, a rather limited capacity to "lament" those who fall victim to misconstructions of the world. Those who persistently believe their friends are betraying them, those who are convinced that Jewish bankers are conspiring to undermine civilisation, and so on, cannot be treated as good souls unfortunately misinformed. We are more likely to feel some sympathy for those of generally sound principles who succumb to moments of weakness. But suppose we confine ourselves to those factual errors in which it is possible for good people to be deceived. To take an example: in 2002 it was widely, almost universally, believed by Western leaders of government, on the basis of information their security services afforded them, that the dictator of Iraq possessed, and was ready to use, weapons of mass destruction, and this proved to be false. It is certainly possible to commiserate with the difficult and risk-laden factual judgment they had to make; it is possible to commiserate with the error they collectively fell into. But our commiseration hardly excuses them from responsibility. "Believe me, king of shadows, I mistook!" cries Puck.¹ Is that an excuse, or is it a confession? In fact, it is both. It disavows the "wilful knaveries" with which Oberon is minded to charge his underling, yet it acknowledges "negligence". To excuse himself on the one side, Puck must accept blame on the other, for his failure of attention. "I mistook" is a confession, and if it is not the most profound confession imaginable, it is perhaps the most typical. Mistakes may not be the high peaks of the mountain-range of guilt, but neither do they belong on the flat plain of innocence. We differentiate "mere" mistakes from bad intentions, vices of character, and so on, in an ascending scale of seriousness - seriousness, that is, for our agency. Yet behind them all is the loss of attention to reality. And what is less serious for ourselves may not be less serious for others. The old French cynic who coined the phrase "worse than a crime, a blunder!" – as good an epitaph for the invasion of Iraq as could be wished for - knew something of what failure of responsibility amounted to.²

This brings us back, then, to the nature of moral thinking. If we are to distinguish moral reason from theoretical reason, it clearly cannot be done by saying that the one is *prescriptive*, the other *descriptive*. Moral reason has a vast stake in description. It describes particular things, describes their relations and purposes, describes the way the world as a whole fits together. Without description moral reason would not be reason at all. And it cannot simply be, as Hume claimed, that "reason is the servant of the passions". It cannot be, that is, that morality begins with a simple practical impulse, an undetermined will, which then calls on knowledge of true and false to shape it and plan the execution of its project. Description belongs "on the ground floor", as they say, of

¹ *A Midsummer Night's Dream* III.2: "O: This is thy negligence: still thou mistak'st, Or else committ'st thy knaveries wilfully. P: Believe me, king of shadows, I mistook."

² Attributed in the *Oxford Dictionary of Quotations* (3rd ed., 1979, p.90) to Antoine Boulay de la Meurthe (1761-1840): *C'est pire qu'une crime, c'est une faute!*

practical reason. All description of reality has moral implications of some kind; every resolution of the will presupposes some description of reality. Only so can we think our way through the world.

(b) But it is *our way* that we must think. To be wakeful is to be aware, in the second place, of *ourselves*. If attentiveness means bringing the world into view, it means bringing ourselves into view together with the world. One might imagine abstractly what it would be to “observe” the world without attending to oneself, simply looking out at the world, as it were, through unblinking eyes. Such an abstraction forms the ideal horizon of experimental method itself, which is a discipline of self-abnegation on the part of the observer. But self-abnegation only makes sense on the basis of self-attention. Experimental disciplines have to be constructed by careful attention to the fact that the observer is, in fact, persistently present in the world as observed. To attend to one’s self in the world means becoming aware of one’s point of view, identifying oneself as an observation-point and recognising that one’s point of observation is only one such possible point. And since attention is not mere passivity, but an active turning towards an object, to be aware of oneself as attentive is to be aware of oneself as active, to know that one is not merely a creature of impersonal forces, but a force in one’s own right.

The summons to wakefulness, then, is a summons to *attention to one’s own action*. I find myself in the world, attending to it, taking initiatives in respect of it, responsible for those initiatives. I find myself a *distinct* agent, one among many, not universally responsible for everything but responsible for some things in particular. And this distinct agent, I find, is exactly what *I am*, so that my responsibility is decisive for what shall become of me for good or ill. I find myself poised between the saving and the losing of my soul. The summons to wakefulness confronts me with the peril of dissolution. “Awake!” it tells me, “Keep hold of your clothes!”.

“Self” is a reflexive term, grammatically speaking, and to attend to oneself is to perform an act of reflection. (The French have a most convenient convention for distinguishing “le moi” from “le soi”. Unfortunately that convention is not intelligible in English, so we have to blunder on, doing the best that our poor language allows, with that curiously artificial term, “the self”.) The self is constituted by its own reflexive attention. Before there was any self-attention, of course, there already existed the one whom God created when he created me, the one who occupied the place I occupied. This one existed before it ever said “myself”; it existed when I was in my mother’s womb, as the Psalmist recalls, and its existence was my existence. But though angels and men knew of my existence then, I did not know of it. Whether in some limited sense I knew of the world may be debated, but if I did, my knowledge was not enough to afford me a relation to myself. Even when cognitive access to the world was granted me, access to myself lagged behind. Robert Spaemann likes to point out how small children refer to themselves in the third person before they learn to say “I”.³ This situation of selflessness and worldlessness may, of course, recur in adult life - under sedation, in a coma, or even quite normally when asleep. Selflessness without worldlessness may recur when we are so absorbed in some object of attention that we forget ourselves, or, more disturbingly, when we have suffered a loss of continuity in consciousness and

³ *Persons*, Oxford University Press, 2006, p.23(G).

have to struggle to pick up the threads of our identity. Perhaps some pathologies like autism, even gender-dysphoria, may be understood as an unusual difficulty experienced in grasping oneself. On that I cannot pronounce.

These liminal phenomena, however, are not what we are concerned with here. We are concerned with something more common, the *moral* failure to attend to the self. Gene Outka has written of the duty “to honour our own agential powers”; failure in this duty he connects perceptively with the vice traditionally numbered among the seven capital sins as “sloth”.⁴ Depression may present us with the temptation to sloth in a very acute form: to withdraw from the agential self, to attempt to inhabit an abstract state where the world impinges on us but not we on the world, gazing out at it with unreacting and emotionless eyes. In the apocalyptic visions of the Old and New Testaments, we recall, there are those who cry to the hills “Fall on us!” Yet under-attentiveness may also have a careless, rather than a despairing aspect. We may be only half-aware of ourselves, not attentive to *all* we are and especially not attentive to our agency. In a flurry of disorganisation I drop and break some fragile object. I turn in exasperation to my nearest and dearest. “Now look what you have made me do!” I exclaim. I have a sense of myself in the world, but only as a sufferer, not as an agent.

(c) In the third place, to be wakeful is to be aware of *time*. For the world had its past without me, and it will have its future without me. I interact with it as an agent only in a moment, “the present”, which is determinative for morality.

“How shall a young man guard his way from corruption?” asked the Psalmist (119:9) to whom we owe some of the profoundest articulations of the nature of moral existence to come out of the ancient world. It is in the person of a *young* man that he puts that question, someone standing on the threshold of a life, waking up to the task of living. Time lies before him; his way through the world lies before him. The time that lies before him is not determined. No history of his future written in some book of prediction or fantasy can tell him what he shall be. Nor could such a predicted or imagined future be of interest to him, since he must engage in thought as to how he may guard his way. His future has no extension, no depth, no narrative. It has come close up, right to the margin of his present; it consists of an *available moment* into which he may venture his living and his acting. This moment defines his field of action. It is his focussed possibility of doing and being, the time immediately available to move into and through.

There are vast tracts of time past, and quite possibly also of time future; but the only time available to me is this future, the future that attaches to the present moment of wakefulness. It is available to me, because I may act into it. Because I may act into it, I may think towards it. It limits and determines my actual responsibility. Of no other time but this moment is that true. There are other futures than the available moment: there is the future that *will in fact transpire* in days to come, the future that will constitute history for our successors. This is a real future, but we have no access to it, apart from occasional manifestations of prophecy. There is the future we project in our imaginations, as we are driven by fear or hope, or are seduced by the thought that

⁴ Gene Outka, “Faith”, in *The Oxford Handbook of Theological Ethics*, ed. Gilbert Meilaender, William Werpehowski. Oxford University Press, 2005. pp. 279-82.

processes we observe around us must repeat and extend themselves *ad infinitum*. Imagined futures are easy to conceive, but lacking reality they make little claim on our belief. Then there is the absolute future, beyond the world and beyond imagination, which will wind up all history in the appearing of Christ and the judgment of God.

We must be clear that our moral responsibility is not for any of these other futures, real or imaginary, any more than it is for the past. We do not attend to them, as we do not attend to the past, *intentionally*, *i.e.* with a view to determining them. I may reflect, but cannot deliberate, on what I ought to have done last week. I may imagine, but cannot deliberate, about what my life will be like several years hence. I may hope for, but not plan, the coming of the Kingdom of God. Reflections on things remembered, anticipations of things projected, these may indeed feed my moral thinking, sometimes usefully. Prudence makes use of projected outcomes, and prudence has a place in moral thinking. But active existence is not foresight, moral thinking is not soothsaying. The focus of morality is the future available to action, the horizon of possibility which the present now offers. (I remark with constant surprised how late capitalism has reinvented augury, and markets predictions based on statistical trends at astonishingly high prices! There are those who think moral thinkers ought to be in that business, equipped with predictions of what is going to happen. But the moralist has no business with a crystal ball. "I am no prophet nor a prophet's son!" is a motto for the desktop of every moralist, professional and amateur.) Not even of God can we meaningfully say, as poor Arminius tried to, that he *first* foreknows and *then* decides. The price of our being privy to the determinate future hidden in God's foreknowledge would be an inability to act; and then we would indeed be where Nietzsche imagined us, "beyond good and evil", which means beyond appreciation, beyond decision, beyond action. Conversely, the price of acting in the present is to know the future only as possibility, so that even the Son, through whom God acts in history, does not know the day and hour of his own future coming. "The kingdom of God comes not by watching," we are told. The predicted future, whether dreary with anxiety or buoyant with hopes, needs to be kept at bay if we are to use the available moment to do something - something worthwhile and responsible, however modest, something that can endure before the throne of judgment, something it will have been worth living in order to do.

Moral wakefulness, then, unites *self*-attentiveness with *world*-attentiveness and attentiveness to *time*. The major mistakes that befall the theories of ethics can all be seen as failures of attention to one or more of these three objects. Attending to the world without a sense of self is to bring an observational mode of reason to bear on our actions, so that ethics is replaced by social science. Social science has its proper place among the sciences, but it is not the place of moral thought. Of its own logic it cannot indicate one single action to be done or not done. To attend to one's powers of agency without locating them in the real world is to conceive ethics as transcendence of the conditions of nature. Here is the "technological imperative" as criticised by Jacques Ellul, the conception of ends as serving means rather than means serving ends. And, thirdly, there is the classic error of idealism, to conceive the world and our agency together, but apart from the moment of available time, designing Utopias for other times and other places rather than good deeds to be done in this time and in this place.

In the remaining two lectures we shall see how this triad of objects of wakefulness shapes the journey of moral reason: the *world*, the medium in which we admire the

goods of creation; *time*, the medium in which we resolve upon the right action; and moving between the two, admiring and resolving, the self. With this sketch of the ground I hope to cover I draw this first lecture in this series of New College Lectures to a close, but not without a brief hint at how this triangular pattern leads us back to a familiar theme in the New Testament, the three so-called “theological virtues” of faith, hope and love. For it is love that renews our awareness of the world: its inhabitants – intelligent, foolish, tiresome, delightful, dangerous as they may severally be – its natural framework, its course of history, the conditions it sets for our own life, need not appear horrific or appalling; but we can admire them appreciatively and affirm them for what they have been given to be. *Hope* in the promise of God’s reign renews our awareness of time and its possibility, of “works prepared beforehand for us to walk in”. *Faith*, finally, renews our awareness of ourself and our agency; for our action is timid and uncertain until, renouncing the disorderliness of our spontaneous impulses, we believe in God’s creating and redeeming work for us and through us.

We began from David Hume’s invitation to those who write about morality to display the logic of the journey of moral reason from the “is” to the “ought”. To that invitation the theologian has a distinctive response: the logic of this journey is *faith*, the God-given and God-renewed capacity of the human mind to see the world in the light of its origin and purpose, and to determine itself as a living, active participant in what it sees. To this we shall return.