HUMANIST PHILOSOPHY AND ETHICS

DEFINITIONS

Religion ('relegare'? or 'religare'?)
Wide and narrow meanings. Reflection on life/ binding force, or belief in a supernatural realm?

God
The God of the philosophers (theoretical) v the God of the Bible/Koran/Talmud etc ('human').

ARGUMENTS (SOMETIMES CALLED 'PROOFS')

1. Ontological Argument

First put forward by St Anselm in his Proslogium in the 11th century. God is a being than which nothing greater can be conceived; things which exist in the mind could exist in reality; things that exist in reality must be greater than things which exist in the mind; therefore God exists in reality and in the mind.
But:
(a) We cannot prove a fact by a priori or internal reasoning David (Hume, 1711-76); and (b) Existence is not a predicate (property or quality) but a matter of empirical evidence (Immanuel Kant, 1724-1804).

2. Cosmological Argument

The world is unintelligible without God. One formulation: everything has a cause (principle of universal causation); therefore the universe has a cause, which is God. But, applying Occam's Razor (William of Ockham was a 14th century Franciscan friar who argued that the best solution to a problem is often the simplest one: "It is futile to do with more what can be done with fewer."), is it not easier to assume that the universe is self-caused rather than that it is caused by a god who is self-caused? To say that a god is the prime mover explains little. We still need to ask: why did He/She/It create a universe?

3. Teleological Argument

The universe displays design; therefore it has a designer. Nature displays such order, complexity and beauty that it must have been purposely designed in this way. Just as a watch requires a watchmaker (William Paley), an eye requires an eye-maker. The universe looks like a put-up job, and the Goldilocks Zone (where the temperature is neither too hold nor too cold and so water can remain liquid) suggests it. But are we really alone? 30 billion planets in our galaxy and 100 billion galaxies in the universe with no life? Also, a watch requires many designers. And nature is far from perfect. The human body is a classic example. Again, Darwinism suggests that it

is we who adopted to the environment, not the opposite. And who designed the designer?

4. Moral Argument

Without a God there would be no objective moral values and there would be no binding duty to do good. But if we say that God commands what is good, then we are implying a tautology that God commands what God commands and that if his divine whim orders us to kill, burn or rape, then we should do it, which is precisely what the Hebrews in the Old Testament believed.

5. Argument from Religious Experience

If people experience God, then there must be a God. But how do we distinguish genuine experiences from illusions? Hallucinations can be caused by physical factors, like migraine, hypoxia or temporal lobe epilepsy. Also, why do only Catholics have visions of the Virgin Mary? Why do Protestants not have visions of the female Hindu deity Lakshmi, goddess of light? (in Christianity God is male).

RELIGION: GOOD AND BAD

Religion has many good qualities:
• it gives meaning and purpose to many people's lives;
• it provides resources and comfort to people in time of need – charities, illness, death etc;
• it provides a social community,
• it inspires art, literature, music, etc.

• On the other hand:
• It promotes the power of the few over the many (priests instil fear in followers; political/economic uses: passivity – "religion is the opium of the masses" – Marx; "Religion is considered by the common people as true, by the wise as false and by the rulers as useful" – Seneca.
• It promotes tribalism and hatred (Sunnis v Shias; Israelis v Palestinians; Buddhists v Muslims in Myanmar; Hindus v Muslims in India; Catholics v Protestants in NI;
• When fused with nationalism it often leads to violence and war;
• In its fundamentalist form, it discourages tolerance and compromise;
• It traps believers in primitive ideas (earth is 6,000 years old; homosexuality is a sin; women are inferior to men);
• It promotes faith and belief and denigrates reason, evidence, scepticism, critical thinking and science.

ATHEISM AND AGNOSTICISM

Atheism is absence or lack of belief in a god. It focuses on criticising religion and its influence on society. Agnosticism (literally, 'not knowing') is less dogmatic but also criticises religion.

FREETHOUGHT

A philosophical viewpoint that is unrestrained by deference to authority, tradition, revelation or established belief, especially in matters of religion and politics. It holds that positions regarding truth should be formed on the basis of fact, logic, reason, and empirical evidence, not these other extraneous factors. It is a "broader umbrella" than atheism because it covers a wide spectrum of unorthodoxy, religious dissent, skepticism, and unconventional thinking on a range of matters, religious, political, aesthetic, etc.

"What makes a freethinker is not his beliefs but the way in which he holds them. If he holds them because his elders told him they were true when he was young, or if he holds them because if he did not he would be unhappy, his thought is not free; but if he holds them because, after careful thought he finds a balance of evidence in their favour, then his thought is free, however odd his conclusions may seem" (Bertrand Russell, 'The Value of Free Thought').

HUMANISM

Emphasises human interests. Humanism starts from the basis of atheism, agnosticism and/or freethinking but then proceeds to focus on the positive alternatives to religious belief. There is no Humanist party line. Humanism is very much a work in progress, not a settled ideology. In general terms, it is a philosophy of life that encourages us to be more humane. To be anti-humanist is to be inhumane. It attempt to build a humane world where the humanity of every child will be totally respected.

The basis of morality is human nature and human needs. David Hume's distinction between facts and values is quite correct. We cannot derive an 'ought' from an 'is'. Facts are facts, morals are morals. How do we link the two? We can only do it by assuming certain values. For example, we value the truth, we value one another, we think that knowledge will enhance our lives because life is worth living and enjoying, and so on. In other words, we make assumptions about what is valuable to us. Yes, of course this is subjective. Hume said that "tis not contrary to reason to prefer the destruction of the whole world to the scratchng of my finger". So reason is not enough: we need to add other values. These values derive from our human nature as social animals, and that has two aspects: good and bad. So if we want to live together in peace, love and compassion etc, rather than constantly killing, hurting and exploiting others, we seek to enhance the good aspects and minimise the bad aspects.

THE MORAL MIX

Our world has inherited fragments of conflicting ethical traditions and our moral code is usually a hodge-podge in which we switch from one to the other depending on the circumstances. Two theories predominate: the deontological and the utilitarian or consequentialist. The latter argues that we do what produces the best or most useful results. The former claims that certain acts are inherently wrong and cannot be justified, no matter what the consequences are. So murder is wrong and subject to severe punishment because it negates a categorical imperative affirming personal autonomy but, for a consequentialist, killing in war may be worth a medal because it affirms the utilitarian principle of 'the greater good' (Voltaire said: "It is forbidden to kill; therefore all murderers are punished unless they kill in large numbers and to the sound of trumpets").

Deontological modified. Since Humanist values are humane, civilised and universal, then we have to start with Kantian principles of universality and of humanity. The categorical imperative and the golden rule. 'Don't kill', and 'keep promises'. Kant was right about these basic rules of moral behaviour. We might add more, such as: 'don't rape', 'don't torture' and 'don't mentally or physically abuse'. When conflicts occur between duties, our actual duty becomes what 'intuitive judgment' discerns as the right thing to do (e.g. lying to save the life of an innocent person). We weigh up, as well as we can, the risks involved in ignoring either, and choose 'the lesser of two evils'. Thus, while the principles may be deontological in nature, a resolution of conflicts of principles could appeal to probable consequences.

Situation ethics is an extreme form of consequentialism. It is very common in America where it was developed by philosophers such as John Dewey and especially Joseph Fletcher, who wrote *Situation Ethics* in 1966. Basically, each situation should be treated on its own merits, with the only criterion of rightness being love. This is, however, not as simple as it sounds. Suppose there are two conjoined twins. An operation to separate them will result in the certain death of one. What is the right thing to do?

Many religious bodies, e.g. the Catholic Church, would say that it is wrong to kill, so the operation should not take place. But you as the father might think: if one survives we can love it and give it our love". So that is okay, then? Suppose, however, you as the mother says: "I love both of them now. I cannot kill one to save the other". Is the mother right? There is no easy answer here.

Take another example. On a larger scale, there is love of one's country and one's people. So actions may determined by policies which protect and strengthen that love. For example, torture may be considered justified to save other American lives if you love America. The film *Zero Dark Thirty* has a lot of torture in it and it is never questioned, even though the evidence shows that it is counterproductive and leads to false confessions anyway. Nor does it show much love to the victim of the torture. Again, suppose you were a Jew in Nazi Germany (or a Catholic in an Orange state). You were not loved by millions of Germans. You were not treated by them as part of their 'people'. In other words, there can be love of some and hatred of others not in the loving group. And that can have disastrous consequences, as we know only too well in NI. So love by itself is not enough. It needs to be accompanied by other values such as reason, tolerance and compromise.

Compromise was the basis of the 1998 Belfast Agreement. For example, it removed a 'hard' border and allowed people here to consider themselves as British or Irish while establishing that NI would remain within the UK as long as the majority wished it.

Or take abortion. There are two extreme positions: total right of the woman and total right of the foetus. Many philosophers would argue that, for a healthy foetus, up to viability the woman has priority, but after viability the foetus has priority. As a humanist, that seems to me to be a good compromise.

BOOKS

Humanism: A Very Short introduction (S. Law)
Humanism: Peter Cave
Humanist Handbook (B McClinton) (Irish Freeethinkers website)
Agnosticism: A Very Short Introduction (R. Le Poidevin)
Atheism: A Very Short Introduction (J Baggini)
T*he God Argumen*t (A C Grayling)
The Young Atheist's Handbook (A Shaha)
The God Delusion (R Dawkins)
God is not Great (C Hitchens)
The End of Faith (Sam Harris)
Clerical Errors (Bob Rees) (Irish Freethinkers website)
The True Believer (E Hoffer)
Why I am not a Christian (B Russell)
The Value of Free Thought (B Russell) – online at: http://collections.mun.ca/PDFs/radical/TheValueOfFreeThought.pdf
'Freethought and Official Propaganda'; in *Sceptical Essays* (B Russell)

WEBSITES

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