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FACTS MATTER, BUT THEY AREN'T ENOUGH: SCIENCE, FAITH AND THE MEANING IN LIFE

PROFESSOR ALISTER MCGRATH

This is my final Gresham Lecture, and I want to begin by saying how much I have enjoyed the privilege of serving as the Gresham Professor of Divinity for the last three years. I thought that in this lecture, I would bring together some themes which I have explored during the last three years. I want to reflect on the importance of facts – that is, statements that we regard as reliable and incontestable. In this lecture I will be suggesting that facts are important; yet we feel we need more than these to lead meaningful and fulfilled lives.

To help get our thinking started, let me present three statements that are factually correct. They are all true, and can be proved to be true. Yet while they might be interesting, none of them probably make the slightest difference to most of us.

1. The annual rainfall in the English city of Durham in 1870 was 604.8 mm.
2. Queen Victoria died in 1901.
3. C. S. Lewis proposed J. R. R. Tolkien for the 1961 Nobel Prize in Literature (but he didn't get it).

Facts matter, but they aren't enough. We want more than this. One of the more memorable characters created by Charles Dickens was Mr Thomas Gradgrind, a dour schoolteacher who features prominently in *Hard Times* (1854). Gradgrind's educational philosophy was simple.

Now, what I want is, Facts. Teach these boys and girls nothing but Facts. Facts alone are wanted in life. Plant nothing else, and root out everything else. You can only form the minds of reasoning animals upon Facts: nothing else will ever be of any service to them.

For Gradgrind, human emotion and imagination were useless distractions to the business of number crunching. Facts alone gave rise to intellectual certainty. Yet if we were mad enough to follow Gradgrind's philosophy, we would simply end up being deluged with information, while failing to find wisdom. Mr Gradgrind was only concerned with facts; he does not seem to have grasped that what we really need lies beyond them – even if it includes them. Gradgrind's joyless rational world consists of cold facts which marginalizes – if not totally excludes – the imagination and emotions.

Dickens nicely brings out the utter lifelessness of this factual world through his narrative account of Gradgrind's daughter, Louisa. She is portrayed as having a "starved imagination", inclined to view everything from the standpoint of "reason and calculation". Such an impressive knowledge of facts does not equip her to live out a joyful life. She needed something deeper to bring stability and joy to her life. Having been indoctrinated into her father's creed of the all-sufficiency of cold, hard facts, Louisa finds herself trapped in a loveless world, unable to find happiness and security.

Facts are useful. But we need more to live meaningful lives. Let's move from Dickens to a more recent writer - Jeanette Winterson. In her brilliantly-titled autobiographical memoir, *Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal?*, Winterson wrote these words: "We cannot simply eat, sleep, hunt and reproduce – we are meaning-seeking creatures." It's a brilliant and succinct summary of what psychologists tell us is a universal human characteristic.



Facts aren't enough; we want to go deeper and explore what things mean. Now many of you here this afternoon will rightly want to know what this word "Meaning" is all about. Here's how one psychologist explains this idea. The social psychologist Michael Steger argues that the notion of "meaning" in life could be defined as:

The extent to which people comprehend, make sense of, or see significance in their lives, accompanied by the degree to which they perceive themselves to have a purpose, mission, or overarching aim in life.

I think Steger gives us a good starting point, thoroughly rooted in empirical research, although I also think that there is more that needs to be said. We need to feel that we can make a difference to things, and to take control of our lives; we need a sense of identity and purpose, if we are to cope with traumatic experiences in life, and our awareness of our own mortality. Basically, human beings actively seek for systems of meaning which embrace an understanding of the world, our personal significance, and our capacity to transcend our limits and locations, as we sense we are part of something bigger and greater.

Research on this idea of "meaning" suggests that it is helpful to draw a distinction between "global" and "situational" meaning. *Global* meaning systems weave together beliefs, goals, and subjective feelings of meaning or purpose in life to give a "big picture" of reality. Yet we use this overarching global framework of beliefs, goals, and sense of purpose to our structure lives and to assign meanings to specific experiences – in other words, to determine *situational* meaning. The "big picture" thus frames our experiences, and helps us work out what they mean. Psychology can't tell us what life means; after all, that's not an empirical question. It does, however, make it clear how enormously important this notion is for human beings, and the difference that it makes to human flourishing and wellbeing.

So let's be clear: facts matter. They are the building-blocks of the "big pictures" which give life meaning, purpose, and joy. Yet what really matters in life is not a wearisome accumulation of facts, but the discovery of the greater reality that lies behind them. Facts just aren't enough. They are the raw material of knowledge; but they need to be interpreted and understood. The great Renaissance philosopher of science Francis Bacon made this point back in 1620.

The men of experiment are like the ant, they only collect and use; the reasoners resemble spiders, who make cobwebs out of their own substance. But the bee takes the middle course: it gathers its material from the flowers of the garden and field, but transforms and digests it by a power of its own.

You might like to know that the word "scientist" seems to have been invented in the 1830s; that's why Bacon uses that phrase "men of experiment" to refer to what we would now think of as scientists. Some thinkers, he suggested, were like ants – they just accumulated things. Others, however, were like bees, who gathered material from the "flowers of the garden and of the field", but transformed it into honey. Bacon's point was simple: science is about understanding the significance of facts, and trying to discern the bigger picture which lies behind them. It is about the development of *theories* – ways of seeing reality, which make sense of our factual observations, while going beyond them. And it is these theories, these bigger pictures of our world and ourselves, which generate moral values and a sense of meaning.

As we have seen, meaning is about the way in which people make sense of the world, see significance in their lives, and come to perceive themselves as having purpose in life. While meaning can derive from many sources, it is widely recognized that religion can provide people with a comprehensive and integrated framework of meaning which both helps to make sense of their observations and experiences, while at the same time providing a way of helping them to transcend their own limited experience and situation, and connect up with something greater. Here's how the philosopher Keith Yandell describes this characteristic explanatory or sense-making aspect of religion:

A religion is a conceptual system that provides an interpretation of the world and the place of human beings in it, bases an account of how life should be lived given that interpretation, and expresses this interpretation and lifestyle in a set of rituals, institutions and practices.



Now such a capacity to generate meaning may be *characteristic* of religion, but it isn't necessarily a *distinctive* feature of religion. Let's be clear immediately that some philosophies also engage these questions – for example, we might think of Marxism or Stoicism.

So let me explore how religion helps us think about generating meaning, and inhabiting a world that we perceive as being meaningful. As you would expect, I will focus on Christianity, which is my own faith, and the religious tradition I know best. Some of you will agree with its basic ideas, but I appreciate that some of you will not – but that you are still interested in thinking about how meaning works, and how religion plays into this issue.

Christianity offers a “big picture” of reality, which weaves together leading themes from both the Old and New Testaments, while focussing on the historical specificity of Jesus of Nazareth as the embodiment of God in time and space. The central Christian idea of the incarnation, which plays a very significant role in the Christian making of meaning, emphasises that the “God of the Christians” (to use a phrase from the third-century theologian, Tertullian) chose to enter into the place of human habitation. “The Word became flesh, and dwelt among us” (John 1:14). In doing so, God affirmed the importance of the created order; disclosed God's compassion and care for both the world and humanity; and made possible a transformation of the human situation which allowed those who embraced this new way of existence to live in hope – an idea traditionally expressed as “salvation”.

For Christians, the term “faith” designated not so much formal assent to a belief, but rather an act of trust and commitment to a way of seeing our world, and exploring its implications for thought and action. In its first phase, Christianity did not see itself as a “religion”, as we would now use that word, with a set of beliefs to which we assent, but as a trustworthy and reliable way of thinking and way of living which we are invited to enter. The well-known Christian writer C. S. Lewis captures this aspect of faith well when he summarised his own understanding of his faith: “I believe in Christianity as I believe that the Sun has risen, not only because I see it, but because by it I see everything else.”

So how does Lewis's programmatic invitation to see everything through the illuminating lens of Christianity work out in terms of the human quest for meaning? In what follows, I will tease out how leading Christian writers explored some core themes that would now be grouped together under the general framework of the “human quest for meaning”.

1. *Fulfilment*

Like many people, I've often been struck by a phrase from the writings of Sir Peter Medawar, a biologist who championed the public engagement of science: “Only humans find their way by a light that illuminates more than the patch of ground they stand on”. Human beings seem to possess some desire to reach beyond the mechanics of engagement with our world, looking for deeper patterns of significance and meaning. This does not mean, of course, that such patterns exist for that reason! Yet there seems to be something about human identity that involves a quest for something deeper. I hesitate to attempt a distillation of the large body of research literature on this topic, but it seems that we cope better with our complex and messy world if we feel that we can discern meaning and value within our own lives, and in the greater order of things around us.

Many people regard the search for personal and communal authenticity and fulfilment as being of central and critical importance. The core belief that Christianity both articulates and enables such a fulfilment was present from its outset. The New Testament, for example, presents Christianity as the fulfilment of the hopes of Judaism. Christianity thus did not present itself as the enemy of Judaism (within which it initially emerged), but as representing its climax and fulfilment. Christ's declaration in the Sermon on the Mount was widely seen as a manifesto of this position: “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfil them” (Matthew 5:17).

Yet Christianity rapidly established itself in Roman and Greek culture, so that its relationship with Judaism gradually came to be seen as of diminishing relevance. Many early Christian writers presented Christianity as the fulfilment of the classic human quest for wisdom, and highlighted the way in which Christianity resonated with



themes in the writings of philosophers such as Plato and Plotinus. Other early Christian writers located the significance of Christianity at a more existential level. For Augustine of Hippo, Christianity offered a vision of a God who was able to fulfil the deepest longings of the human heart. This is expressed in his famous prayer: “You have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it finds its rest in you.”

For Augustine, this idea is partly descriptive, and partly prescriptive. The fundamental theme here is that human beings have some inbuilt longing to relate to God (an idea often articulated in terms of bearing the “image of God”), so that finding and embracing God is thus about becoming what we are meant to be, and finding joy and peace in doing so. In this sense, it is perfectly reasonable to speak of a “Christian humanism” – as opposed to, for example, a secular humanism, which holds that religion is an improper and dysfunctional imposition upon humanity.

Meaning is partly about finding this sense of fulfilment – a feeling that we belong somewhere, or that we have found what we are looking for, or at least something that comes close to this. I’ve already noted how religion can play into this quest for fulfilment, but there are other voices worth listening to. One of the most interesting is the movement now known as “Positive Psychology”. Professor Martin Seligman of the Department of Psychology at the University of Pennsylvania is one of the leading representatives of this movement. He argued that the happiest life is the one in which a true sense of meaning has emerged. For Seligman, the pursuit of pleasure or acquisition of possessions on their own did not seem to increase happiness; it is rather the pursuit of meaning itself which seems to be one of the most important factors in increasing life satisfaction.

2. *A Coherent World*

The physicist Steven Weinberg once commented that “the more the universe seems comprehensible, the more it seems pointless.” Nothing seems to fit together. There is no big picture. So do new scientific ideas destroy any idea of a meaningful reality? The English poet John Donne expressed this fear in the early seventeenth century, as new scientific discoveries seemed to erode any sense of connectedness and continuity within the world. “’Tis all in pieces, all coherence gone.”

The New Testament, however, speaks of all things “holding together” or being “knit together” in Christ (Colossians 1:17). Christianity provides a framework which allows the affirmation of the *coherence of reality* – that however fragmented our world of experience may seem, there is a half-glimpsed “bigger picture” which holds things together, its threads connecting together in a web of meaning what might otherwise seem incoherent and pointless. This is a major theme in one of the finest Christian literary classics – Dante’s *Divine Comedy*. As the poem draws to its close, Dante catches a glimpse of the unity of the cosmos, in which its aspects and levels are seen to converge into a single whole. This insight, of course, is tantalizingly denied to him from his perspective on earth; yet once glimpsed, this perspective enables him to see his work in a new light. There is a hidden web of meaning and connectedness behind the ephemeral and seemingly incoherent world that we experience.

This way of seeing things engages what is perhaps the greatest threat to any perception of meaningfulness in life or in our world – its seeming disorder and incoherence. Yet there is a deeper issue here. The American philosopher John Dewey (1859-1952) declared that the “deepest problem of modern life” was our collective and individual failure to integrate our “thoughts about the world” with our thoughts about “value and purpose”. If not an incoherence, there is certainly a disconnection between the realm of understanding the cognitive issue of how we and our world *function*, and the deeper existential question of what we and our world *mean*. Christianity offers a “big picture” of reality which values and respects the natural sciences, while insisting that there is more that needs to be said about deeper questions of value and meaning. For Karl Popper, such “ultimate questions” lay beyond the scope of the scientific method, yet were clearly seen as important by many human beings.

Perhaps the greatest threat to any sense of coherence to reality is posed by the existence of pain and suffering. Christianity provides a series of possible mental maps which position illness and suffering in such a manner as to allow them to be seen as coherent, meaningful and potentially positive, allowing them to foster personal growth and development. Some of these maps – such as those offered by Augustine of Hippo, Ignatius Loyola and Edith Stein – portray illness as something that is not part of God’s intentions for humanity, but which can



nevertheless be used as means of growth; others, such as that offered by Martin Luther, tend to see suffering as something which is intended by God, with the objective of stripping away illusions of immortality and confronting human beings with the harsh reality of their frailty and transiency.

This provision of frameworks of meaning encourages a positive expectation that something may be learned and gained through illness and suffering. It discloses the true human situation; it makes available new ways of thinking about life; and it catalyses the emergence of more mature judgements and attitudes. Although this consideration has clear implications for attitudes to illness and their outcomes, it is increasingly being recognized as being of significance in coping with ageing – an increasingly important phenomenon in western culture.

The philosopher Iris Murdoch is one of many writers to emphasise the “calming” and “healing” effect of ways of looking at the world that suggest it is rational and meaningful. Christian theologians have, since the earliest times, argued that such seeming irrationalities as the presence of suffering in the world does not constitute a challenge to the notions of meaning and purpose that are embedded within the Christian faith. Augustine of Hippo for example, set out an approach to the presence of evil within the world which affirmed the original integrity, goodness and rationality of the world. Evil and suffering arose from a misuse of freedom, the effects of which are being remedied and transformed through redemption. Augustine argues that the believer is enabled to make sense of the enigmas of suffering and evil in the world by recalling its original goodness, and looking forward to its final renewal and restoration in heaven.

3. *A Sense of Self-Worth*

In his “Late Fragment”, the American poet Raymond Carver (1938-88) spoke movingly of his longing “to know myself beloved, to feel myself beloved on the earth.” It is a very human (and very natural) yearning, which helps us appreciate why so many regard personal relationships as being of such significance, and find their sense of self-worth affirmed and validated through them. Yet it is a thought that is constantly subverted by reflecting on the apparent insignificance of humanity, when seen in its broader cosmic context.

Sigmund Freud famously argued that scientific advance has led to a radical re-evaluation of the place and significance of humanity in the universe, deflating human pretensions to grandeur and uniqueness. Before Copernicus, we thought we stood at the centre of all things. Before Darwin, we thought we were utterly distinct from every other living species. Before Freud, we thought that we were masters of our own limited realm; now, we have to come to terms with being the prisoner of hidden unconscious forces, subtly influencing our thinking and behaviour. And as our knowledge of our universe expands, we realize how many galaxies lie beyond our own. The human lifespan is insignificant in comparison with the immense age of the universe. We can easily be overwhelmed by a sense of our own insignificance, when we see ourselves against this vast cosmic backdrop.

So what answers might be given to this? Is our self-worth subverted, if not destroyed, by these reflections? Some would argue that we need to face up to our situation, whether in a bold act of intellectual defiance, or a gracious resignation to a “bleak emptiness” (Ursula Goodenough) as we contemplate our limited role in the greater scheme of things.

Christian writers regularly engage these questions, often speaking of the transvaluation of human life through being “touched” by God – a theme that is found, for example, throughout the poetic writings of George Herbert. Herbert likens the graceful “touch” of God as being like the fabled “philosopher’s stone” of medieval alchemy. Just as the philosopher’s stone transmuted base metal into gold, so God transforms the value of individuals through grace:

This is that famous stone
That turneth all to gold:
For that which God doth touch and own
Cannot for less be told.



We come to see ourselves, as the medieval writer Julian of Norwich famously put it, as being enfolded in the love of Christ, which brings us a new security, identity, and value. Our self-worth is grounded in being loved by God.

Earlier, I noted the importance of personal relationships in affirming a human sense of self-worth. Perhaps this helps us understand why the Christian idea of a personal God who loves individual human beings, and demonstrates that love through the acts of incarnation and atonement, is seen as so important by many spiritual writers. God is one who relates to us, and thence transforms our sense of value and significance precisely through this privilege of relationship. We matter to God.

Yet this notion of a personal relationship between a believer and the living God is also integral to another aspect of the human quest for meaning – our longing to know who we really are. What is the ultimate basis of our identity? Our DNA? Some suggest that our identity is defined, determined, or informed by our genetic makeup, by our social location, and by countless other scientific parameters. We can be defined by our race, our nationality, our weight, and our gender. Yet all too often, identity is simply reduced to the categories we happen to occupy. So is there a better way of framing our identity? Part of the Christian answer to this question focusses on a relationship with God which affirms that, whatever else we are, we are loved by God, and known by name. We find identity, meaning and value within the context of this relationship.

4. *Coping with Trauma*

In recent years, there has been growing interest in the way in which the specific features of the Christian faith relate to traumatic experience, and establish a framework for posttraumatic growth. Psychological accounts of trauma generally place an emphasis upon the psychological and existential threats that trauma poses to human wellbeing. Not only does the experience of trauma pose a threat to human wellbeing and survival; it also calls into question core positive beliefs about the world or the individual through the shattering of personal assumptions that relate to the meaning of life and the value of self.

The central Christian narrative of the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ provides what is, in effect, an exemplary metanarrative of posttraumatic growth, with the potential to illuminate and transform the human situation. While Christianity shares a belief in a single God with Judaism and Islam, it offers a distinctive understanding of the nature of that God which sets it apart from the other Abrahamic religions. Knowledge of God is held to be linked to (and shaped by) the crucifixion of Christ. The gospel narratives depict this act of violence and brutality against Christ as leading to distress, incomprehension, and hopelessness on the part of the disciples, accompanied by radical questioning of existing ways of thinking that are now held to be inadequate in the wake of events.

The New Testament shows how this traumatic development shattered certain existing ways of thinking, particularly concerning the way in which God acts in history and in personal experience. Yet this questioning of existing modes of understanding leads to reconstruction and renewal, enabling people to make more sense of things, and cope with the paradoxes of experience. The resurrection of Christ is depicted as initially engendering fear, partly on account of its unexpectedness, but partly also on account of the challenge that this event poses to existing mental maps of reality (or “schemas”). Both the gospels and some of the epistles of the New Testament speak of the radical changes in thinking that are required in response to this event, and the challenges to “wisdom” that it brings.

The distinctive Christian capacity to cope with suffering and trauma is ultimately grounded in the historical origins of the church in a traumatic paradigmatic context. In the aftermath of the shattering of certain unrealistic expectations arose a new way of thinking, which enabled Christians to face the paradoxes of suffering in a new light and with a new confidence. Given the importance of trauma in contemporary western culture, and its implications for healthcare professionals on the one hand and the fabric of society at large, it is clear that such a spirituality has potential to encourage post-traumatic growth. Although grounded in (and ultimately dependent upon) a specifically Christian metanarrative, this approach clearly has wider potential. If it is true that growth occurs when the trauma assumes a central place in the life story, then the Christian community’s constant



recollection and celebration of the trauma of the crucifixion in its regular rehearsal of the narrative of Christ's death in the liturgy of the eucharist must be considered to generate a potentially therapeutic community for those now affected by such trauma.

Now I need to make it clear that Christianity is a complex phenomenon, not easily or convincingly reduced to simple categories of description. Yet whatever else it may be, it is unquestionably concerned with the meaningful inhabitation of our world, and offers a developed and nuanced understanding of what that meaning might be and how it plays out in real life. Perhaps the capacity of Christianity to create a system of meaning is more easily appreciated through reading the autobiographies of reflective Christians than more academic works of Christian theology. C. S. Lewis's *Surprised by Joy*, Augustine's *Confessions*, and Paul Kalanithi's recent bestseller *When Breath Becomes Air* all explore how real individual lives are changed through the discovery of meaning. Each of these writers *embodies* a distinctively Christian understanding of meaning, allowing it to be seen as a personal lived reality, rather than as an impersonal set of principles or ideas. One of the reasons why many find religious belief so engaging and relevant is its existential traction. We are offered a "big picture" of things which possesses existential depth, and not merely cognitive functionality. It is a way of seeing things which enables us, not simply to *exist*, but to *live*.

Thus far, I have explored something of the way in which religion – or at least one specific religion – can engage this question of meaning. But what of science? Many of you would rightly expect that I should consider this important area of our culture. As some of you know, I began my life as an academic career as a natural scientist, initially studying chemistry at Oxford, and then doing research in a more biological field. In my view, science is one of humanity's most significant and most deeply satisfying achievements. Yet though I loved science as a young man, I had a sense that it wasn't complete. Science helps us to understand how things worked. But what do they *mean*?

The question is whether the natural sciences can help us engage with these deeper issues, which the philosopher Karl Popper famously termed "ultimate questions". For Popper, these were existentially significant questions, rooted in the depths of our being, yet which transcended the capacity of the natural sciences to answer. Now Popper isn't on his own here. The Spanish philosopher José Ortega (1883-1955), one of Spain's greatest philosophers, argued that we need more than the partial account of reality that science offers. We need a "big picture", an "integral idea of the universe" which possesses existential depth, and not merely cognitive functionality. Science has a wonderful capacity to explain, while nevertheless failing to satisfy the deeper longings and questions of humanity.

For Ortega, the great intellectual virtue of science is that it knows its limits, which are determined by its methods. It only answers questions that it knows it can answer on the basis of the evidence. But human curiosity wants to go further. We feel that we need answers to the deeper questions that we cannot avoid asking. Human beings want to press beyond the point at which science declares that it must stop. As Ortega rightly observed, human beings – whether scientists or not – cannot live without answering them, even in a provisional way. "We are given no escape from ultimate questions. In one way or another they are in us, whether we like it or not. Scientific truth is exact, but it is incomplete."

Yet perhaps novelists offer us some of the best insights into the human situation. I hope that some of you will share my fondness for the Irish writer John Banville, whose book *The Sea* won the Man Booker Prize in 2005. My own favourite among his works is his "Revolutions Trilogy", consisting of the historical and scientific novels *Dr Copernicus*, *Kepler*, and *The Newton Letter*. For Banville, scientists such as Copernicus, Kepler, and Newton sought to impose order on the world, and then tried to live in accordance with this. "I saw a certain kind of pathetic beauty in their obsessive search for a way to be in the world, in their existentialist search for something that would be authentic."

Yet gradually that vision faded, confronted with the fragility and provisionality of human knowledge. The cultural investment in science as a tool of discernment of meaning proved to be a misjudgement. As its failure became more widely appreciated, western culture experienced a transition from "Cartesian certainty to Wittgensteinian despair", in which the early hope of finding the Enlightenment's Holy Grail, the crystalline clarity of rationalist certainties, gradually gave way to a realization of the irreducible complexity of the world.



Banville chronicles this slow and seemingly irreversible transition from rational certainty to existential despair and cynicism with an elegance that I cannot hope to match, leaving us wondering whether we discern meaning within our world, or simply invent it.

Both those views are well represented today. Where C. S. Lewis argued that “we are not reading rationality into an irrational universe, but responding to a rationality with which the universe has always been saturated,” the philosopher Nancy Cartwright holds that we are imposing an order or rationality when there may be none – or, indeed, there may be a variety of orderings, requiring multiple accounts of the natural world and its structures. For Lewis, we are responding to the universe as it actually is; for Cartwright, we invent our own universe. Some of you will have encountered this view through the writings of the American pragmatist philosopher Richard Rorty:

There is nothing deep down inside us except what we have put there ourselves, no criterion that we have not created in the course of creating a practice, no standard of rationality that is not an appeal to such a criterion, no rigorous argumentation that is not obedience to our own conventions.

For Rorty, we invent meaning – including our ideas of identity, purpose, and value. The basic problem here is that Rorty’s approach is not capable of offering a criterion that stands above human practice, by which rival visions of meaning or morality could be judged. If we invent notions of meaning, then these competing concepts of truth, goodness, and purpose in life still require evaluation. Yet if there is no external or objective vantage point from which this can be done, we can only make those judgements on the basis of subjective perceptions or prevailing social consensus within the group that we consider to be normative.

Let’s get back to the question of science and religion. Although some scientific and religious people will tell you that we need to choose between science and religion, my view is that they can both be integrated into a deeper and wider vision of reality. They represent different takes on our world, using different methods, and with different goals in mind. Yet difference does not imply warfare or even inconsistency; it can equally point towards the need for establishing interconnections and correlations, through developing a deeper way of thinking or visualizing our world. The philosopher Mary Midgley is a leading defender of what she terms a “multiple maps” approach to grasping the depths and detail of reality. Midgley argues that we need “many maps, many windows” if we are to represent the complexity of reality, reflecting the fact that “there are many independent forms and sources of knowledge”. Scientific and religious maps are different, yet they can help us build up an understanding of ourselves and our world which transcends the limits of each discipline. We need to find a way of overlaying these multiple maps of meaning, and try to discern the deeper patterns of meaning and significance that they disclose.

So let me wrap up this lecture – and, indeed, my three years as Gresham Professor of Divinity – by considering where this takes us. I’d like to emphasise the importance of humility in the face of a complex world and a multiplicity of ways of making sense of it. Surely our proper attitude to the universe is that of *humility* – a respectful appreciation of its spatial and temporal vastness, in the face of which we seem insignificant. We can only have a partial and incomplete grasp of our universe. This does not lead to a relativist anarchy, in which all views are held to be equally good. Our beliefs about the universe need to be warranted – that is to say, there must be reasons for believing that they are right. Yet as the progress of science itself over the last few centuries makes clear, what one generation regarded as correct is discarded by another generation as false or inadequate.

We have to learn to live with unresolved questions. I know that many of us long for certainty and clarity – as, for example, in the Enlightenment’s quest for clear and certain ideas. Sadly, this seems to have proved impossible to attain, save in the limited realms of logic and mathematics. It has simply not proved possible to rescue the Enlightenment’s rational ideals from the sustained criticisms of philosophers such as Martin Heidegger, the later Wittgenstein, and Hans-Georg Gadamer. This means that we need to learn to live with unresolved questions, hoping to find answers that may be trusted, yet so often cannot be proved to be true.

Given that life’s great questions remain frustratingly and tantalizingly open, we need to be generous towards those whose answers do not coincide with our own. Sir Isaiah Berlin famously argued that ultimate human



values – such as questions of justice or the God-question – cannot be reconciled or resolved by philosophy, which Berlin was inclined to think incapable of solving anything of ultimate importance to us as human beings. We have to live with what Berlin styles “value pluralism,” given that the divergence of opinions and values in human thought is not ultimately a mark of mental fragility or malfunction, but of the intractable nature of the world within which we live and think. Where reality is too complex to enable agreement, we might at least be civil to each other, as we try to make sense of things as best we can.

And that’s why I value the work of Gresham College so much – in giving us all space to think and talk about these complex questions. I count it a great privilege to have been able to open up – though not resolve! – some of these great questions. So it just remains for me to thank you for your company and your patience, and wish you and the College well for the future. Thank you so much for listening!

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