

A Sermon

Preached
in the Chapel

of

ALL SOULS COLLEGE

by

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on

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Contingency, Reason and Tradition

1.

Each of us finds himself already in the world. And not just in the world, but in a particular place and time within the world: a particular language, a particular culture, a particular community, a particular family. Everything we believe, everything we hold dear, we do because of these accidents of birth. This is what Heidegger meant when he said that we suffer from *thrownness* into the world, *Geworfenheit*. If things had been different, each of us would have been different; if things had been different enough, we might not have even been ourselves.

What are we to make of this? How could my beliefs be justified if I have them only because of my particular history? What reason do I have for thinking that *my* beliefs are true, if I could so easily have held contrary ones? Of course my beliefs *seem* true to me, my values *seem* genuinely valuable; they are, after all, my beliefs and my values. But wouldn't my beliefs also seem true to me even if I believed the opposite? If I believed in the inferiority of women, wouldn't I do so with just as much conviction as I in fact believe in sexual equality? If I thought of the world not in terms of *justice* and *rights* but in the more ancient terms of *honour*, *shame* and *pride*, would I not feel that *these* concepts are the ones that get at the deep structure of morality?

What am I supposed to do with this other me, this shadow me, this me who believes the opposite of everything I believe, who values what I disvalue, who articulates the world in terms of concepts that are alien to

my own? What if she is the right one, and I am the shadow?

2.

If I had been born in a Christian household rather than a Hindu one, I would likely have begun life as a believer in Christ. And even if I ended up as an atheist, as I somewhat grudgingly call myself today, I probably wouldn't have found the Christ story as strange as I did growing up. Despite my enculturation in the West, I always found the Christ story absurd. By *absurd* I don't mean *untrue*, or *implausible*, but rather simply recalcitrant to my understanding. I couldn't make sense of it, even as a myth. In Hinduism, of course, we have incarnation, indeed many of them. God becomes not only a man but a fish, a boar, a turtle. These Hindu stories of incarnation, I was taught, are symbolic reminders that the world is nothing *but* an incarnation of the divine.

But in Christ God incarnates himself only once. God reveals himself not to be everything, but to be *this* man. This man, with a particular shade of skin, tone of voice, way of walking, his own idiosyncratic likes and dislikes. We may not know whether Jesus liked figs, or preferred sunsets to sunrises, or sang well, but if he existed, then there is a fact of the matter about these things. Through Christ, the necessary ground of everything becomes utterly contingent.

I'm trying to explain what I find absurd in the Christ story, but at the same time I'm trying to explain the sense I now see in it. It is absurd to think that the infinite divine would incarnate himself in a particular man. But it is

equally absurd that we humans, with our lust for the infinite, our demand for transcendence, our aspirations to universal reason, are born as *we* are, into our particular times and places, with our particular likes and dislikes, our own utterly contingent lives. The absurdity of the Christ story is no more than the absurdity of our own human lot.

3.

But again, what are we to make of this human lot? What answer can we give to the sceptic who thinks that holding *any* belief, *any* value, is unjustified, once we come to see how historically or culturally conditioned our worldviews are?

I want to outline two kinds of response – not perhaps responses that will satisfy the sceptic, but responses that might give *us* some comfort, some bulwark against nihilism.

The first response comes from the figure in philosophy known as the *externalist*. The externalist grants that our worldviews are shaped by contingency, but he denies that all contingency is created equal. In particular he thinks that some people are *luckier* than others. Some people are lucky enough to be born in the *right* time and place. These people get to have the right values, and are endowed with the *right* concepts – the concepts that carve the world, as philosophers like to say, ‘at its joints’. Unsurprisingly, the externalist usually thinks of himself as being one of the lucky few. The externalist who finds himself an heir to Western, Enlightenment culture typically thinks that this is more or less the best place to be.

According to the externalist, most people are

condemned to *unluckiness*. Most people who have been born were born in the wrong time or the wrong place, and as a result had inferior concepts and false beliefs. Of course the externalist will say that these people aren't *blameworthy* for their ignorance. They are, after all, *unlucky*. But you might still think there is something morally suspect about consigning the majority of the people who have ever lived to a box labelled 'tough luck'.

The second response to the problem of radical contingency comes from the *internalist*. The internalist insists that we cannot think of ourselves as standing on one side of a line, with all possible beliefs, concepts and values ranged along the other side, like items in a supermarket ready for our selection. Instead, we must realise that each of us is *constituted* by the things we value and the concepts we use. We can no more ask ourselves whether we should jettison our worldviews than a fish can ask itself whether it should try breathing out of water.

This internalist answer was the one that Bernard Williams gave to the question I have posed today. In his most famous late essay, "Philosophy as a Humanistic Discipline", Williams wrote:

Precisely because we are not unencumbered intelligences selecting in principle among all possible outlooks, we can accept that this outlook is ours just because of the history that has made it ours; or, more precisely, has both made us, and made the outlook as something that is ours.

In other words, when faced with the sceptic who points to the contingency of all we hold dear, we should say: these

things I value and these concepts I use constitute who I am, and I cannot unmake myself. For better or for worse, I must carry on as I have gone before.

4.

The answer Williams gave to my question seems only appropriate for a man who spent so much time in institutions with deeply entrenched traditions, All Souls not least. If we were designing All Souls from scratch today, I suspect it would look quite different from the institution as it is now. Rituals and practices that we take for granted would not survive the scrutiny of pure reason. But we are not an institution of pure reason. This college was created by a particular history, of which we are only the most recent inheritors. If we were faced with a sceptic at our gates – and assuming they didn't arrive armed with a pitchfork – we might find ourselves saying: this is the place we have come from, and this is what we are, and so we carry on.

Williams' internalism, then, offers us a way to justify ourselves in the face of our own contingency. But we might worry that his answer is somewhat too easy, too comforting. In December 1978, Warden Neill sent a notice of motion to the fellows that the second sentence of statute I be deleted. This, of course, was the sentence that prohibited women from becoming fellows. Several fellows wrote letters in response to the Warden's motion, the majority of them in opposition. What is striking in these letters is that, with one exception, all those who opposed the motion did so on the grounds of *tradition*. Little attempt was made to argue in *principle* that women were not worthy

of fellowship. Instead, it was argued that the particular character of All Souls, with its particular history, was sufficient grounds for continued exclusion.

The philosopher Michael Dummett was among the minority of fellows who wrote in favour of the motion. Dummett did not pretend that the admission of women would leave All Souls unchanged. But tradition must give way, he argued, to what is right. 'The fundamental ground for repealing our Statute excluding women' he wrote,

rests on the requirements of justice . . . It is possible that the change in atmosphere of the College will be for the worse; more likely, some will dislike it and some think it an improvement. But the College has undergone many changes since it was founded to pray for the souls of the departed: the Reformation, the admission of non-Anglicans, and the abolition of the bar on married Fellows...And yet the College, though no doubt radically different as a result of these changes, has not become the intolerable place which many at the time probably felt certain that it would.

I hope we can all agree now that the admission of women to All Souls has not made it an intolerable place. Indeed, we might go further and say that the inclusion of women was inevitable, that this development was contained, though unseen by its founders and many of its members, in its very inception as a place of learning and prayer.

If we do say this we will, as Hegel said, be giving contingency the form of necessity. We will be detecting in the chancy and sometimes ugly history of this institution

the impulse towards justice. And in so doing, Hegel would say, we make it so. This, Hegel thought, was the true task of Reason: not merely to apply abstract principles to particular cases, but to *transform* the particulars through our interpretation of them, to make things that just happen into things that are *done*.

Looking back at our own contingent history, we might ask ourselves: what other changes, now met with such anxiety, could be in the future of this college? To what unforeseen place might Reason take us, an unforeseen place where, all along, we were meant to be?