

The Best Way to Live

Kenneth Masong and Jesus Principe

Grayling, A.C. *What is Good?
The Search for the Best Way to Live.*
London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 2003. xiii + 241 pp.

Goethe once wisely remarked, in conversation with J. P. Eckermann (1825), “[a] great deal may be done by severity, more by love, but most by clear discernment and impartial justice.” Grayling’s new contribution to the popularization of philosophy, in this respect with regard to ethics, has achieved much by way of lowering to the rank and file, the wisdom of philosophical reflections in this moving, straightforward and lucidly argumentative book. However, much space in the severity and passion of the text leaves ample room for improvement, better yet, enhancement, not so much by approaching his subjects with love as by treating the topics with impartiality.

It is said, at least in philosophy, that questions outlive their answers. In this book, Grayling exactly deals with one of the perennial questions from antiquity: “what values should we live by in order to live the genuinely good life?” (ix). The whole of history is dotted with people forwarding ideas in answer to this question, one to contradict a view, the other to refine, and a third to introduce something altogether different; but all appeared a few rungs wanting for the coveted definitive answer (if such does exist). Although Grayling is a tough-minded English philosopher, he does have a knack for making more intelligible the minute intricacies of academic philosophy, reflected in the list of books he contributed amongst fairly many volumes recently published that fall under “Popular Philosophy” (books which far better populate the philosophy section of bookstores which know not where to place *feng shui*, yoga and New Age). As such, this book, though a fruit of intense academic

research with a long history of personal philosophical reflection, is written with the general public in mind.

The basic contention of Grayling is that in the (Western) history of thought, a number of (competing) ideas have been forwarded to answer what is the best way to live a good life. All of these ideas he categorized under two headings: the religious transcendental approach and the secular humanistic approach. Though such categories do have their antecedents, to lump all possible approaches to the question under *only* two headings may accrue some methodological weaknesses, if not betray easily the author's partiality to the issues involved. In the case of Grayling's book, both appear to apply.

Digging into the archaeology of ideas, Grayling locates his historical treatment beginning in ancient Greece, where we find the "classical conception of the good life", reflected among the early Greek philosophers, notably the triumvirate Socrates, Plato and Aristotle. Grayling notes that the seeds, which bore fruit in the Humanism of the 17th century and the Enlightenment of the 18th century, are strewn in the fertile grown of ancient Greek way of life. Hence, he refers to the intellectual spirit that dominates this phase as the first enlightenment and first humanism. In this phase, dominated by relative peace and political security, the concern for the good life is equated with the concern for *eudaimonia*, or 'happiness' more broadly conceived. However, in the period after Aristotle, and before Christianity's conquest of the Western world, referred to as the Hellenistic age, Grayling identifies three competing 'schools' of thought. Their approaches reflect the political instability on which the ancient Roman Empire found itself and with it, a change of perspective on what the good life is, now concerned with *ataraxia* or 'peace of mind'. These three competing schools (Cynicism, Epicureanism, and Stoicism) are the philosophical ideals dominating the Hellenistic period, soon to be abruptly eclipsed in the conquest of the Roman Empire by Christianity. According to Grayling, Christianity imposed "a deliberate hegemony over thought" (34) with an ethics accordingly rooted in 'divine command'. And for him, any reasoning that appeals to authority commits the logical fallacy of the *argumentum ad baculum*.

Though Grayling started with two attitudes to the good life – the religious and the secular – the methodological flaw emerges

immediately in the number of pages he devotes to treat these two attitudes fairly. The whole book contains only nine chapters inclusive of the introduction. Of all the remaining eight chapters, Grayling devotes only one chapter on the religious transcendental attitude (and it is not even the longest chapter!). The last chapter does contain a few more treatment on this attitude, with the idea being summarized in the chapter heading “Laying the Ghosts”. In the rest of the chapters, the transcendental attitude is pitted against his thorough treatment of the secular humanist. Grayling’s methodological approach does not betray any hidden intention since even in the book’s preface, he remarks that “the point I make is a partisan one” (x).

As a reviewer, honesty demands the explicit statement that Grayling’s own (un-)fair treatment of religion in general, and Christianity in particular, reflects some truths that any discerning believer or at least thoughtful sympathizer of religion cannot fail but see. Reading the book and comparing it with another one by Bertrand Russell, *Why I Am Not a Christian* (1927), Grayling appears more nuanced and well informed; albeit his dogged conviction, surely a fruit of his own reflection on the matters at hand, seems to leave no room for reconsideration. The departure of religion lies in the fact that it tries to ground the value of nature and human activity outside human subject and unto the divine command of god (the whole book deliberately has no god with a capital “G”). For Grayling, affirming the intrinsic value of things and persons necessarily negates the god-postulate of (theistic) religion and/or any form of transcendental attitude that locates the value of things and persons external to them. Chapter Four, on “The Ordinances of God”, is a heavily forceful chapter where the searing tension between the humanist and religious attitudes emerges, to which the reviewer invites the reader for a quick peak through its thirty pages, not so much for its conclusions as for the arguments pitted against the postulates of religion in general and Christianity in particular. By way of a summary of this chapter: deities of religion are human creation (cf. 59); “religion is precisely the wrong resource for thinking about moral issues in the contemporary world, and indeed subverts moral debate” (69); and lastly Grayling’s interesting fourth reason why religion exists (and will always exist): “the natural ignorance, stupidity, superstitiousness and gullibility of mankind” (74).

Hopefully for Grayling, after centuries of Western Europe's 'Gothic past' (87), a rebirth of humanistic ideals sprang roughly starting in the 13th century: the advent of Renaissance humanism. After almost nine centuries of dark Middle Ages, the second Enlightenment dawned. The Renaissance was a rebirth of the intellectual spirit that animated classical antiquity. There was a careful and deliberate introduction of outlook concerning the dignity of man that runs opposite to the prevailing Christian *contemptus mundi* attitude (91): the glorification of reason and the praise of the human body, fomented by the discovery and editing of ancient texts, especially by Cicero, Tacitus and Lucretius. The second Enlightenment, which found its peak in the 17th century, flowered into the Third Enlightenment of the 18th century, buttressed by the rise of scientific revolution. For Grayling, alluding to Diderot's *Les Bijoux Indiscrets*, the third (and definitive?) Enlightenment, with the pursuit of scientific and empirical inquiry independent of external (religious) authority, gave "a mighty blow" to religion "whose pillars soar upwards into a fog", shattering it "to the ground" (112). "*Écrasez l'infâme,*" as Voltaire would briefly have it.

If there is a singular word that identifies the 18th century Enlightenment, it is *autonomy*, specifically autonomy from religious hegemony. And if "the aim of enlightenment is to think for oneself and choose for oneself – this autonomy conceived as essential to the life worth living – then it is essential that one should be equipped to think fruitfully and to choose wisely" (118). Hence results the conception of the *Encyclopédie*, "a work of education, designed as a tool for the illumination and thus liberation of the mind" (ibid.). This autonomy of thinking underlies the 'enlightened' reasoning of the two foremost philosophers, among the French *philosophers*, of the 18th century: the Scottish empiricist Hume and the German idealist Kant; the one conceiving the morally good life as free from "the superstition of religion and enthusiasm of philosophy", the other grounding duty not on the command of some deity but on what he called 'categorical imperative'.

With the preceding centuries' shifting the grounds on which ideas about humanity, freedom and values are founded, the future holds a canvass of opportunity to paint a new portrait of reality, now stripped of the superstition of religion and the tyranny of priestcraft (to which

Grayling later on added the autocracy of Monarchy). As such, the 19th century was “a fertile age for a new breed of prophet” (141). Luminaries of this century include Darwin and his reinvention of humanity with the theory of evolution; Bentham and Mill with their notion of utility and liberty; and Nietzsche and his revaluation of values. All these fomented in a “crisis of outlook” from where Grayling draws his insistence that the public and political sphere needs to be totally and radically secularized if there be prospects of good life for mankind.

Grayling characteristically called the 20th century, not surprisingly, as ‘shameful’ (163). The human atrocities of this century that left millions dead, and the remaining almost disillusioned found a way for a “rediscovery of ethics”. In this section of the book, we find Grayling, almost apologetically, dishing out arguments to show, if not prove, that philosophical ideas of the humanist persuasion continue to have much bearing in the present century’s ethical concerns, from economic to environmental, to even animal rights. In order to more fully hit the nail on the head, Grayling zeroes in on the issue about the “right to die”. Not surprisingly, given his intellectual patrimony, he argues in favor of it, introducing his arguments with a calm recollection that in ancient Imperial Rome, “[s]uicide and assisted suicide were commonplaces” (177). I leave to the reader the judgment on whether his arguments are convincing, if not reasonable. If we gather autonomy as the byword of the preceding century, in the “shameful” 20th century, it is tolerance. For Grayling, surprisingly, the more varying and competing opinions there are (especially about human nature, freedom and value), “the more chance [one] has of expanding his understanding, refining his sympathies, and considering his options” (202).

In concluding the book, Grayling argues that we need to be enthused by the humanistic secular spirit that had its root in classical antiquity nominating “individual liberty, the pursuit of knowledge, the cultivation of pleasures that do not harm others, the satisfaction of art, personal relationships, and a sense of belonging to the human community, as the elements of the good life” (203). For Grayling, such elements are undermined by the religious transcendental attitude; and religions actually encourage the opposite of these as the ideal kind of human life.

Indeed, contemporary times seem to find religion in a bad light, with the religiously motivated political conflict in the Middle East, Islam as fomenting a terrorist fundamentalism, and the general disagreement among religions themselves. The critique of Grayling against religion is not without merits, and indeed, there are very few books one encounters where the author blatantly but insightfully says the obvious that our sympathies try to hide. For any reader sympathetic of religion, Grayling's book is worth a ponder, especially on how he appears to convincingly paint that religion in general, and Christianity in particular, seemed to have failed in giving a viable answer to the question of the good life; a notion of good life that though finding culmination in the life here after never undermines and deprecates the life here now.

Finishing the book, one wonders about the actual merits of a book that once again pits religion and science/humanistic ideas against each other. Though mounting historical facts may truly put the two in clear opposition, perhaps a breath of fresh air may come with a deliberate "crisis of outlook" that tries to see science and religion, the humanistic and transcendental attitudes in less opposing, if not complimentary, terms. Hans Küng, in much of his recent publications does argue that "there can be no world peace without peace among religions" (cf. his *Global Responsibility: In Search of a New World Ethic* [1993]). Both Küng and Grayling implicitly or explicitly accept that there will always be religion (regardless of whatever reasons given), and science and the humanistic values are likewise here to stay; perhaps the more tenable approach lies in the conjunction and not in the disjunction. Admittedly, Grayling already intuitively feels that each approach dominates its own sphere, and towards the end of the book, he insists on keeping the public domain of politics and morality free from religious intrusions (relegating religion in the purely private and personal domain). This would naturally be problematic since at least the so-called 'religions of the book' themselves are inherently public in character and orientation. In the end, the ultimate question that may be raised is: does *only* one attitude have a valid monopoly of the public sphere? For Grayling, yes, and it is the humanistic and secular attitude. On this respect, Alfred North Whitehead offers a refreshing insight in his *Science and the Modern World* (1925). For him, the word that characterizes the relationship between science and

religion is *conflict*. But every conflict or clash of doctrines is also an opportunity. Transposing Whitehead's treatment to Grayling's opposition between religious and humanistic approaches, the following words of Whitehead opportunely applies: "The clash is a sign that there are wider truths and finer perspectives within which a reconciliation of a deeper religion and a more subtle science will be found.... In an intellectual age there can be no active interest which puts aside all hope of a vision of the harmony of truth" (185).

Kenneth C. Masong
Centre Culturel
Notre Dame de Vie
84210 Venasque, France
kcMasong@yahoo.com

We find in A. C. Grayling's book an informative and highly readable survey of the history of ideas intended to present "the best that has been thought and said about the good life for human beings" (1). It is immediately apparent from the outset what comprises the best in his estimation: the liberal values of autonomy and self-determination, seen as the bright bloom of secular humanism throughout various periods of history.

The first flowering is to be found in classical philosophy, from the investigations of the pre-Socratics up to Aristotle, followed by the ethical schools of the Hellenistic period. Other upsurges of the humanist ideals which are also constitutive of the march of human progress, are found in the return to classical thought and care for human dignity in the Renaissance. This leads us to the full pre-eminence given the free use of reason in the Enlightenment of the 18th century. This in turn heralds the predominance of the scientific approach in the last two centuries, as Grayling elaborates on the ideas of Darwin and Nietzsche and the utilitarian philosophers, particularly insofar as they posit a challenge to religious thought. A chapter is assigned to each one of these various periods as he lucidly presents major proponents in each, bringing to life the character and concerns of each age, thereby drawing out the important

contributions they made in our understanding of what constitutes a good life.

The omission in this historical study is blatant: what about the good life as it appears in the characteristically religious thought of the medieval ages? In Grayling's estimation, all religiosity – and therefore, all religious thought and religiously-grounded ethics – presents a transcendental vision of the good life unachievable in this world and diametrically opposed to the values of secular humanism. He clearly announces that his project involves in recovering the ethical humanist perspective of the 'good life' against the tyrannical hegemony of religious thinking: "My claim is that the great ethical debate that has always confronted mankind, and does so still, is between a fundamentally humanistic view and the religious moralities it opposes" (8). We will need to focus, then, on this primary contention.

He does assign a chapter to religious thought, entitled 'The Ordinances of God', where he points to the disjunction between metaphysical religious beliefs and a rational ethics that may have been inspired by faith. Any religious ethics is, for Grayling, "ultimately based on a sanction of posthumous rewards and punishments" (81) wherein one "achieves the good by obedience to an authority that tells him what his goals are and how he should live" (248). All religious ethics is reduced to a divine command theory which is rightly viewed as an unsatisfactory ethical precept because of its non-rational base. Grayling, however, goes further and delineates a divide between what he sees as the unthinking obedience in religiosity, on the one hand, and human progress, on the other. Religious ethics, especially Christian ethics, is thought to be scanty and self-serving, a 'perfumed smokescreen' which does not allow for independent thought.

The book delivers quite a powerful critique, one that sheds light on the failings of the major religions to bring about heaven on earth. However, a question may be asked whether this unfortunate reality justifies Grayling's assertion of seeing religion to be a worthless ground for human activity. He also fails to consider, for example, what various religious thinkers in history may have contributed to the development of ideas and understanding of human nature, or what place religious belief might occupy in one's conception of the good life.

This kind of imbalance is apparent in a variety of ways throughout the text. After rightly stating that any consideration of the good life requires a particular understanding of the human person, this all-important question is apparently forgotten, as we are presented only with the merits and failings of Freudian psychoanalysis. Also, after solemnly announcing that the differences between Enlightenment and Romanticism are presented not so as to force us to choose between one or the other, he summarily dismisses the latter by telling us that “the good life for human individuals certainly requires the best of both traditions, but arguably it least requires the worst aspects of Romanticism” (141). On the other hand, in defending the views of the Enlightenment against its detractors, he becomes much more voluble, quickly dismissing worries about the excesses of the scientific and technological outlook by distinguishing between “[scientific] mastery intended to liberate mankind [and] the mastery over the majority of mankind exercised by those who... came to control the levers of economic and political power” (144). While he is certainly right to distinguish between science as a method and its various practitioners whose applications of it are dubious or even downright immoral, he does not extend this courtesy to religion and some instances of misconduct in religious leadership, choosing instead to simply denounce “a Church whose corruptions largely consisted in a venal enjoyment of those same alleged sources of misery” (124).

In order to make his point, Grayling’s strategy is to present us with as unfavourable notion of all religious thought as possible, embellishing it with gruesome pictures of the truly lamentable and repressive practices that have littered the histories of major religions. All religions are dismissed as, first, *anti-moral*, in their ways of “distracting attention from what really counts and focusing instead on trivia” (79-80) and, then, as *immoral*, given the excesses performed by religious fanatics. In stark contrast, we are presented with a highly desirable notion of humanistic values and its immediate identification with liberal thought and scientific outlook.

The excesses of science and technology are briefly mentioned as potential dangers and are immediately dismissed. One comes away with the blithe optimism that all scientific thought is singularly directed towards the promotion of universal human happiness.

Science and technology is not spoken of as anti-moral or immoral, as though they have never been used for frivolous or reprehensible ends. Yet when this is finally acknowledged, we are quickly reassured that “science is often our best hope for dealing with science’s mistakes and applications” (246). At the same time, Grayling derides the enemies of science “whose beliefs about the world have remained essentially unchanged since the Stone Age” (245). The reader thus is made to feel that when one’s beliefs do not conform to the hegemony of science, they must be antiquated, naïve and worthless. Such beliefs are worthless, apparently, because they are not faithful to human nature. Ethics must fully be in keeping with human nature: “promoting moral sensibility requires the continued humanisation of ethics – which means: rooting it securely in human needs and values” (187). It is supposed that science has the monopoly on what is constitutive of human nature. But is science the only creditable bearer of truth about the human? Is it not often the case that the result of scientific hegemony over human life is an experience of alienation? How can one consider the scientific view to be humane when one’s body is seen no more than an instrument of dissected bits and parts or one’s deepest thoughts and desires no more than chemical atomic processes within an indifferent and wholly material world?

Another point left unquestioned and yet requires investigation is Grayling’s acceptance of liberalism and all that it entails. Even when one accepts his stance that religious fanaticism is detrimental to the good life, one can still ask whether complete liberal freedom is the answer. For instance, Grayling writes: “Religious – and especially Christian – morality is not only irrelevant but inimical to modern interpersonal relations and sexual attitudes, and the attempts to perpetuate its distorting influence on human nature in this fundamental aspect” (79). This supposes that he – or perhaps each person – is an authority on human nature, and is entitled to consider anything and everything given by thoughtful religious teaching as not simply misguided but downright dangerous. This is because he generalizes all religions, expecting an imposition of “a harsh and limiting uniformity on behaviour and opinion” (94) at every turn. Beyond this extremist absolutism, is it not preferable to take a more balanced position of recognizing what value may be found in each

specific teaching – religious or secular – concerning human dignity? Similarly, one can also ask whether a liberal position, if it truly leads us to the good life, can also be balanced by an assimilation of other values that follow more communitarian lines.

The sketches that he gives at the outset are quite indicative of the opposition he wants us to see between religion and liberalism: on the one hand, there is a lyrical passage from Junichiro Tanizaki which explores aesthetic contemplation; on the other hand, he elaborates on the repressive Victorian upbringing of Augustus Hare. Here, it is suggested that all humanism is captured in an almost mystical rapture of aesthetic mindfulness while all religiosity is generative of suffering and deprivation.

These images are quite compelling but are things truly that simple? Must we not take a more nuanced view? The questions that we have posed here are not meant to challenge and declare false any of the assertions made by Grayling. I do not argue against the idea that “[b]y far most of what has been a gain for both individuals and civilisation in the West has come from the endeavours and triumphs of [the autonomy of humanism]” (248). Least of all, my criticism does not aim to be an apologia for religion. My main point, however, is this: that in our consideration of the search for the good life, the dualism Grayling creates is at best questionable.

It would have been interesting to see how religious thought has been accommodated into the search for humanistic values, particularly in the light of the rising concern with various ethical issues in daily life which he rightly elaborates on. A consideration of the good life might have profited from trying to better investigate the psychology of religion, rather than simply agreeing to a neurophysiological reduction. Also, one might try to understand the importance of religion as a social phenomenon, rather than consign it to the idiosyncratic private sphere. Grayling focuses on religious ethics as imposed, claiming that “the chief motivation for religious ethics is the need felt by potentates of many kinds to exert control over individuals, to limit their freedom, to make them conform, obey, submit...” (248). By concentrating on this view from above, he fails to consider the view from below: the need and desire to obey, to have something to follow, to believe in something greater than one’s self to which one belongs. Not only do these form an integral part

of any consideration of religious belief but one may also argue that these aspects of religiosity might outweigh the isolation of one's liberal freedom, and the cold comfort of belonging to an abstract humanity in a truly atomic world. This might sound strange to liberal ears but it can take on new light when one sees a unique contemporary phenomenon Grayling himself speaks of. "Many people have given up the older religious traditions," he writes, "and substituted a Babel of New Age religion and quasi-religion in its place... because life has become lifestyle and the shopping-mall ethos applies as much in philosophies as in footwear. That is a fact; it is neither good nor bad except as taste dictates" (239). Is this observation not a concrete invitation to see in it a reflection of how a wholly secular world leads to the erosion of meaning and values, and the sorry loss of – and desperate need for – something to believe in.

In conclusion, *What is Good?* is a presentation of a wide-ranging survey, one that provides an excellent introduction to a number of thinkers and ideas. It is also a presentation of a forceful argument, one which is bound to find many sympathetic readers in a secular audience that has been disillusioned by the many failings of organized religion. In it, various thinkers of importance are very clearly presented in an engaging manner, almost as characters in the compelling story of human progress. However, one cannot help but sense a certain imbalance in the presentation – one that all too quickly dismisses everything that has to do with religion while elevating science as mankind's last great hope.

This imbalance is regrettable, not only because it compromises the search for what indeed comprises the good life but fails to enter into the open-mindedness and proper dialogical stance Grayling himself espouses.

Jesus Principe

Higher Institute of Philosophy
Catholic University of Leuven
Leuven, Belgium