NON-NATURAL PERSONS

A paper **by Ann Long** delivered in the **Oxford University Department for Continuing Education** to **members of the Philosophical Society and others** on the occasion of a meeting on **Naturalistic Ethics** on **Sunday 23 June 2002**

[1] Historically there have been just *two* main candidates as contenders for that in which we might ground a universal morality: the natural and the supernatural. I will argue that it is the second of these where we can find such grounding. And I will argue this as an atheist.

[2] Freud suggested that the concept 'God' had done three things for us: given us an account of where the universe had come from (why there was something rather than nothing); told us where we fitted into the scheme of things (as creatures created in God's image and given dominion over the earth); and told us what it meant to be good (to do God's will). Now it seems to me that when Neitschze proclaimed God dead in 1882 – as the wit had it, just eighteen years before God proclaimed Neitschze dead in 1900 – he was both right and wrong. Our natural sciences, physical and biological, *have* given us what many now take to be a better (because non-narrative) explanation of the first two: and so on these fronts God *could* die, and I think has proceeded to do so. [Or perhaps not 'die' – things that have never lived *can't* die, and ideas don't live – perhaps I should say instead that old Gods never die, they only fade away.]

[3] But in his third role – that of providing us with an account of the good – there is as yet no moral science strong enough, no non-narrative explanation, to make him totally redundant. It is I think for this reason that there is some power, resonance and poignancy in the phrases of theologians such as that 'the world is suffused with the presence of the absence of God', or that there is 'a God-shaped hole'. I think they are right. For it seems to me that when humans invented a monotheistic, *personal* God, they invented the most important

single idea the world has ever come up with. In opposition to the naturalistic ethicist, they invented that idea which, perhaps more than any other, has helped us precisely to haul ourselves *out* of the natural, make the '*break* with nature' (which was Burkhardt's way of characterising civilisation) a real possibility. For if not just me but each and every other person too is made in God's image, then those things which as animals red in tooth and hand are merely natural to us become the sacrilegious. And what *this* does is to make imaginatively real for the first time in history the possibility of a world of *neighbours* who are to be loved as one loves ones self; the possibility of a society of *friends* who are to be mine for reasons with no hint of mere biology in my reasons for loving them. [And if you want to read someone just entranced by the realisation of the non-biological nature of love – as opposed to desire or lust or attachment behaviour – read the 'philia' chapter in C. S. Lewis's *The Four Loves*]. As 'the doing of God's will', what those many persons of the Axial period had done was to invent the *first* idea of the good which was immune to a relativising critique the world had ever known. And the only one ever to become hegemonic. It was a stupendous achievement.

[4] But things that are made wear out. One of the problems I have with analytic philosophy is its tendency to search for Bob Dylan's 'card which is so high and wild you'll never need to play another'. We will *always* need to play another: the *only* certainty is change. And to use now Dennett's language – but not, as he does, pejoratively – the God 'skyhook', graceful and fine as once it was, is old now and shabbily worn. During our recent raucous and basically meaningless millennial shindigs – after all on the 2000th anniversary of just one among many key moments in the skyhook-making project of the Axial period – it occurred to me that the way we *should* have been celebrating them, loving them and celebrating them, was by some serious emulation. They made their skyhook, and saw that it was good. We should be making ours. It's not a job of resurrection: faced with the collapse of an old paradigm, nostalgia for the past gets us nowhere. And certainly doesn't celebrate the achievements of that past. No instead it's a job of recreation. They made in their image: now we must make in ours. Let me explain.

[5] They made their God, their view-from-nowhere grounding of the moral ('the view from nowhere' is Nagel's phrase, used to delineate an impartial – in both senses – because disinterested position from which to make absolute rather than relativistic judgements) in their own image. What then *was* their image of themselves? I think it was one which until quite recently has remained also ours: until perhaps – to give us a date – Hume looked into his head and found nothing there - - - as a no doubt apocryphal student was once supposed to have put it. And clouds at first no bigger than the proverbial mans hand began to gather.

[6] That image has four main ingredients. And because all of them – or so I will suggest – are increasingly coming to be understood as *wrong*, there is rumbling around in the philosophical zeitgeist – or so I believe – another and *different* image of ourselves, another and *different* idea as to what a person is and therefore what a personal God would be, which when it takes full hold of our consciousnesses will offer *at last* the possibility of a *scientific* idea of the good: to put it in perhaps more familiar language, will solve the problem of getting an ought from an is by enabling us to come to understand – with Spinoza as *spectacularly* precocious forefather – that the oughts were all ises in the first place. You will remember all those much repeated stories of decenterings: of Galileo et al decentering the earth in the universe; of Darwin et al decentering the human animal in the biosphere. These I believe will be as nothing beside what will be the decentering of the first person, and with him the prime mover. Kierkegaard said that 'deepest down in the heart of piety lurks the mad caprice which knows that it has itself produced its God'. I will argue that if the problem is that of grounding a universal morality of principle, that 'mad caprice' is wonderfully sane. It can give us what we need. And this is how I think that it can do it.

[7] In their own image, they made a personal God: a person like they were, *super*-the-natural, only more so. And these were the four characteristics with which they endowed him: their own characteristics - - - *or so they then thought*.

[8] Firstly, since they were outside the world, so he was outside the world. Their image of themselves – still ours, but getting flakier now – was of an entity 'about two inches behind the eyes and up a bit', as Galen Strawson puts it, which sits 'over against' the world looking out on it: an observer, but able when it chooses to poke things a bit and make a difference with the poking. So OK, their observer status hardly compared with his: their privileged first-person view and his privileged prime mover view were hardly commensurate. But they were of the same order. His prime mover role conferred of course a *matchless* status. But their 'first person' version conferred at least some sort of privileged position, as anyway 'over against' mere second person and third person varieties.

[9] Secondly, since they were exclusively male he was exclusively male. Obviously. In the person stakes, women have never come in very high. Kant in making *his* distinction between a human animal and a human person – which he did in terms of degree of autonomy, of course – suggested that given their dependence on their fathers, brothers, husbands, sons, women were human beings but not persons.

[10] Thirdly, just as they were not strictly bound by cause and effect, so neither was he, but on a much grander scale. He could create *ex nihilo*. He could perform miracles. And although their little 'free will' miracle was puny beside his, it was nonetheless precious: something to which they clung tenaciously, as many cling so still, if a little more nervously.

[11] Fourthly and lastly, just as they were individuals capable of being powerful, knowing and good (well anyway, sometimes), so he was an individual capable of being powerful, knowing and good (but in his case, always).

[12] Before analysing these four characteristics further, I need to introduce two 'technical terms' of my own. The historically (*and currently*) dominant image of persons is of what I will call I AM persons: that is, those for whom their 'I' is something which 'has' its

experience. A lurking and new image of persons is of what I will call I IS persons: those for whom their 'I' is not something which 'has' its experience – else what is it that *has* so? – but something which *is* its experience. Using now these terms, how should the four characteristics given to the Axial God be analysed?

[13] I will call what they made the I AM God: a prime mover; exclusively male; able to perform miracles; and all powerful, all knowing and all good. His was a view from nowhere, and thus his the final moral judgement. Appearing to Moses in his burning bush, he even called himself I AM: and I AM that I AM (Eyeh Aser Eye) became what theologians call 'the great tautology'. The image of themselves, out of which they made the I AM God, was that of the I AM person already introduced: also a first person; exclusively male; with free will; and powerful, knowing and good (if only sometimes). The I AM *person's* view was of course never from that imperious nowhere (and thus impartial), always from merely somewhere (and thus partial): though it took a good few centuries (for the most part until the development of sociology in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries) for him to understand that. [And some I AM persons haven't got it yet!] But if his viewing place *was* merely a somewhere, at least it was a somewhere much closer to the nowhere of his creator than the somewheres of many an other: than the somewhere, for example, of one made out of his own spare rib! And speaking from such a privileged somewhere made him well capable of making all but the last judgement as to what should be what: what should count as the good and the bad, and how the latter should be punished - - - *particularly* how the latter should be punished. As first person I AM on earth, he has always been the appropriate representative of prime mover I AM in heaven.

[14] What has happened now – or so I will argue – is that all four of these characteristics, all of them central to *their* image of *them*selves and thus *their* image of *their* God, are fast being removed from *our* image of *our*selves and thus *our* image of what could be *our* God: where God is of course to be read as 'an idea of the good which is immune to a relativising critique'.

So how will such a change play out in our search for that in which to ground a universal morality?

[15] Firstly, where I AM persons make an I AM God *outside* the world because they see themselves as *outside* the world, I IS persons just begin to know that they are not: that they have to live – in Don Cuppitt's wonderful word – 'outsidelessly'. Instead of seeing themselves as some sort of nested set of homuncular I AMs squatting in infinite regress behind the eyes and *observing* the world, IS persons see themselves as *of* the world. And the world they are 'of' – a world, not a biosphere – is an inter-subjective, linguistically structured, culturally created, always-already human *conversation* or *discourse*. Heidigger speaks of our being 'thrown' or 'hurled' into such a world: I would more readily go with George Pattison's image of our being loved into it. Marx speaks of us as being the 'supports' ('traeger') of such a world, each an 'ensemble of social relations': I would prefer sites (or better, moments) of such a world, for as constituents of a world so conceived, persons are constituents of time rather than of space. My own preferred formulation would be that a person is the linguistically structured experience of a *Homo sapiens*. But whichever, what all this means is that if an I IS person were to make its I IS God, it would make one *developmental* and *in* time rather than *unchanging* and *out of* time - - - as anyway to some extent *Process* Theology tries to do.

[16] Secondly, where I AM persons make an I AM God male because they are male, I IS persons are neither female nor male, these being the characteristics of the organisms they aren't. So their I IS God, with only *personal* characteristics, would have those drawn from an entirely new idea of what a person is: that is, non-sexed, non-gendered-by-sex, non-raced, non-sexually oriented, non-disabled, non-any-other-animal-based-and-organic characteristic you can think of. And our immediate past, of course, has witnessed a quite staggeringly swift progress towards this all-inclusive concept of a person. At a rate and to a level almost mind-blowing to contemplate, there has been in a whole range of Hegelian 'master-slave' dyads –

men in relation to women; the colonisers in relation to the colonised; heterosexuals in relation to homosexuals; adults in relation to children; whites in relation to blacks; the able-bodied in relation to the disabled – a veritably *huge* redistribution of power. This new and all inclusive image of what a person is is far from yet being hegemonic. But it is getting an increasing hold upon the consciousnesses of more and more of us: and nowhere of course more movingly than among those of the old God, where women are at last finding the beginnings of an equal voice; and Jesus recovers his brown skin, his Jewish race and maybe even a little of his perhaps homosexual orientation. What this means is that if I IS persons were to make an I IS God, it would be in all these ways all-person-inclusive.

[17] Thirdly, where I AM persons make their I AM God *undetermined* and therefore free, because they experience themselves as *undetermined* and therefore free, I IS persons come to understand freedom differently: which means coming to understand that there is no greater enemy of that freedom which is the recognition of necessity than a so-called 'free' will - - - an entity arbitrary, miraculous, ineffable, capricious and un-understandable. As Hegel puts it (in *The Philosophy of Right*): 'the ordinary man thinks he is free if it is open to him to act as he he pleases, but his very arbitrariness implies that he is *not* free'. To give up free will is I think to give up an illusion. But as the man said, we can only give up illusions when we are no longer in situations that require illusions. So how can we tame the contemplation of the possibility – I would say certainty – that free-will is an illusion into being something less than terrifying? This is such a huge topic that I have not a hope of successfully explicating my stance on it here. But having nothing to loose but the reputation I don't have, let me make just a first and tiny attempt to do so.

[18] I do *not* define a person, in I AM mode, as something which *has* experience: something which sits around waiting for such experience to happen to it, and if none does yet stays there 'experienceless'. Instead, I define a person as something which *is* experience: specifically *linguistically structured* experience, in the absence of which - - - it just isn't! And since I do

this, determinism is a logical consequence. I think this is something very hard for us all to take in - - - though I think more and more of us are being driven to try. In trying myself, I take off from the now notorious work of Benjamin Libet (1985) whereby he showed that the readiness potential (sometimes called the action potential) which signals the onset of an action fired 350 milliseconds *before* his subjects 'willed' that they would clench their fists - - - their experimental task. In effect, this is brain potentials preparing to clench a fist 350 milliseconds *before* a 'free-will' decision so to clench had been taken. And then *unless something intervened to block or re-direct it*, action ran to consummation, leading one commentator to suggest that perhaps this meant was that what we had was not free will but free wont! My own interpretation would be to say that what happens during a present which is thus 350 milliseconds long – *but also of course always, because I is 'of it' as opposed to 'in it'* – is a happening called 'I': the continuous recreation, millisecond by millisecond, of a happening called 'I'. And that the sort of freedom which can be wrested from understanding that reality – a freedom which is the recognition of necessity – is one *inter*-subjective rather than *intra*-subjective: that is, one which means that collectively, but only collectively, we can come to determine the determinations. How?

[19] I think that the free-will or determinism question has tormented us *by being wrongly posed*. We have worried that if determinism were true we would not be able to change the future. But it is not the future which determines, it is the past. We do not *need* to be able to change the future: which is just as well because the future doesn't exist, never will exist, and therefore cannot be 'changed'. How anyway could we know when we had done it?! We *do* need to be able to change the past: which again is just as well because, far from not being able to do so, we cannot help but change the past all the time. Let me illustrate *very very crudely* by saying 'potato'. And let us suppose that before I said 'potato' then I had said 'potato' before 27 thousand 6 hundred and 49 times. So I have now said it on 27 thousand 6 hundred and 50 times: I have changed the past. And in whatever ways the saying of 'potato' – that is, its configuration as a discrete state of my symbol manipulating system – *had* been

determining the happening 'I' before, it is *now* determining the happening 'I' slightly differently: in whatever ways the happening called 'I' *was* being determined by its potato-saying *then*, it is being differently determined by its potato-saying (new version) *now*. What I am saying is that an 'I' is a moment by moment creation – *in some way which we do not yet understand, but obviously in no way as crudely as I have here expressed it, out of the symbolic function* – of its own determining past. An 'I' is not an *agent* of that creation but a *site* – or better a *moment* – of that creation. Unrecognised, such a process means that our determination is totally by that which we cannot determine. Recognised, such a process might let us see that the very widespread attempt to identify our humanity with our capacity to 'anticipate the future' is misplaced: that ours is a humanity much more importantly to be identified with our capacity to 'anticipate the past'. That is the best I can do in a few minutes. I know I have failed. I hope it is a less than *totally* inglorious failure. But what anyway all of this means is that if I IS persons were to make an I IS God, *it* would be one *determined* and therefore free, as they were (gingerly) coming to know themselves to be *determined* and therefore free.

[20] Fourthly and lastly, where I AM persons make their I AM God all *powerful* all *knowing* and all *good*, I IS persons making an I IS God would make one *all* powerful, *all* knowing and *all* good. And that is all that needs to be said about that!

[21] So when we collect up all the characteristics that such a God – being defined as an entity whereby the doing of its will is the doing of the good – would need to have, what do we find? That it would need to be all-person inclusive; existent in time and developmental; and that the included persons would need *all* (not some) to be powerful, *all* (not some) to be knowing, *all* (not some) to be good. Well, *can* such a God be made? If it can, we have our criterion of a universally valid morality.

[22] The Enlightenment had as its confident aim the making of scientific explanations of *all*

that there was. On the three fronts identified by Freud, only the science of the good – moral science rather than just moral philosophy – has as yet not materialised. But hold. The philosopher who more than any other has argued that the Enlightenment project is unfinished, and has given the whole of his intellectual life to making some contribution to finishing it is Jurgen Habermas. And in his magnum opus *The Theory of Communicative Action* (2 volumes, 1984 and 1989) he has directly addressed our question: given the now defunct nature of a common normative framework based in a supernatural God, how do we construct an alternative criterion? His response is to say that for godless societies there is only *one* alternative criterion: that of the consensus of all participants in a non-coercive and rational discussion in which only the best argument carries the day. But that if we are to establish the *validity* of such a procedure, we would need to create what he calls 'an ideal speech situation': that is, one equally open to all persons, and unconstrained by imbalances of power. For him, what matters is not whether this 'ideal speech situation' actually *exists*, but whether the interlocutors to any discussion can *take it as existing*, even if only counterfactually.

[23] The detailed working out of the idea – reminiscent of course of John Rawls's struggles with 'the veil of ignorance' – are interesting. But *my* main reaction – as also to Rawls – was as to a cop-out. For wasn't it ever so? 'The consensus of all participants in a non-coercive and rational discussion in which only the best argument carries the day' worked also *before* 'modernity' (as Habermas calls it); that is, *before* the demise of 'a common normative framework based in the supernatural '. It was just that there 'all participants' meant very few persons; 'the best argument' meant the one that defended their interests (with God on their side); 'rational' meant ditto; and 'non-coercive' meant being coerced only by ideologies, institutions, common-senses and unchallenged practices of which you were *not* aware rather than by those of which you were. Habermas's valiant effort has been to find some way of grounding our claims about what is to be considered true (or rather, valid), about the moral as about anything else, in an *ob*jective which is an inter-*sub*jective. And in that enterprise he follows in a long line of such 'inter-subjectivists' which includes Hegel, Husserl, George

Herbert Mead, Martin Buber, Wittgenstein, Merleau-Ponty (for some examples). I think that these are people fishing in pools much more likely to result in a catch than those frequented by naturalistic ethicists, but only with a certain 'toughening up'. A *counterfactual* 'ideal speech community' won't do: an *imagined* veil of ignorance still less. But how about the real things?

[24] In the *Philosophical Society Journal* (Summer, 1993), Charles Brown points out that in our theory-less state vis-à-vis the moral 'disagreeing parties use different nostrums, each preferring the one that maximises his/her likelihood of prevailing, his/her socioeconomic advantage'. But suppose there was a criterion of the good which, when it was to the socioeconomic advantage (or any other advantage) of one, was also to the socioeconomic advantage (or any other advantage) of all? He also remembered that 'Bentham said it is inevitable that governors will organise things so as to maximise their own interests; the real difficulty of collective morality therefore lies in trying to organise things so that the interests of the people just happen to coincide with those of the governors.' But suppose there was a criterion of the good such that the interests of the people didn't just *happen* to coincide with those of the governors (by *chance*), but *ineluctably* coincided with those of the governors (by *necessity*)? It is my contention that such a criterion exists: or rather, *could be made* - - - as the Axial God was *made*. It is one which has been heavily 'trailed' in all the monotheistic religions, but always of course only in I AM form. It is one thoroughly non-natural, and so only available to an entity which was hauling itself out of nature in the ways I have tried to suggest persons have been doing. It is one that would take the Golden Rule and the categorical imperative and weld them into a truly sovereign virtue. But to make it, we would first have to rid ourselves of a hugely significant and largely unrecognised ideology. Without such ridding, Moore is just right: there *is* no coherent way of analysing the good - - - hence all the angst. But with it? We need now to look at the results of my little experiment.

[25] The origins of what I call 'the having ideology' are almost certainly in the natural

organic. For anything that has a metabolism, the 'to be or not to be question' – the one about whether or not it will survive – is actually a 'to have or not to have' question, and results in that competition for scarce resources which we call evolution. Small wonder perhaps that the verb 'to be' and the verb 'to have' sit so regularly together at the beginnings of books offering language instruction; that philosophers have been wont to talk of things as 'having' properties, as if they could go on existing 'propertiless' when those they 'had' had been removed; that we have thought of ourselves as 'having' our experience - - - as I have already discussed; that 'having and holding' – a rather ugly idea when you come to think about it – is yet elevated into a significant part of a marriage ritual; and that a general 'having' of things – and people – is regularly equated with success. It is only *natural*: the association between 'good' and 'goods' is not accidental. But it is also *only* natural. The results of the little experiment you helped me with earlier – for which, many thanks – show my 'having ideology' to be alive and well and living in Rewley House. As usual – I have done this experiment now many times, and the results are always the same – 100% of respondents answered a question I did not ask. I asked the question 'do you think that most people want *better* wages?': everybody answered the question 'do you think that most people want *higher* wages or *more* wages?'. 'Better' – and remember its 'good' associations, as in 'good, better, best' – is totally hegemonically taken to mean 'more'. Perhaps even more amazing: when I am reading about distributive justice – in Rawls or Nozick or Cohen or whoever – I count the number of pages before such authors also in effect answer the same unasked question. I don't think I have ever got into double figures. In Rawls, for example, the whole of 'the difference principle' is premised on the idea that inequality can be morally justified if the position of the least well off (read those who *have* less) is such that they are *better* off (read *have* more) than under any distribution more equal: a stance which totally precludes one from seeing that if 'more equal' were to be 'better' – for both haves and have-nots – then for haves, 'better' would mean 'less'. This is the ubiquitous ideology which as an almost totally unconscious mind-set helps to keep hidden a human reality: that while a measure of the flourishing of an organic entity is that it lives well, a measure of the flourishing of a personic entity – a

different entity – is that it loves well.

[26]The huge paradigm shift to which I earlier referred – the decentering of first persons – would mean the end of the having ideology. The philosophical question of 'who I *am* and therefore what I *ought* to do' becomes instead the question of 'what I *is* and therefore what I *will* do'. It's not that we *ought* to love our neighbours as ourselves, but that we *do* love our neighbours as ourselves: ourselves and them badly when we rest easy in primary-secondary relations with them - - - for both primariness and secondariness stunt the full flourishing of a human person: ourselves and them well when we do all that we can to erode those primary-secondary relations and build instead relations of loving equality. An I IS person, freed from the having ideology, will be one not which *ought* to seek that equality which makes love operational, but one which *will* seek that equality which makes love operational.

[27] So here indeed is the sovereign virtue. The criterion which I recommend to you as that in which we can find an absolute standard of the good is this one: will this action of mine tend to increase or to decrease the levels and types of inequality that exist between persons. If increase, it is bad, and I will not do it: if decrease it is good, and I will do it. It is also of course that criterion whose steady application by more and more people across more and more situations would help to build Habermas's 'ideal speech situation' for real. As it is also that criterion which has already been just glimpsed from behind Rawls' 'veil of ignorance'. As it is also the way in which the interests of the people will not just *happen* to coincide with those of the governors but will *necessarily* coincide with those of the governors, such governors being themselves. As it is also the way in which Buber's image of the human dyad as 'I-thou' will be replaced with one which is 'I-I', there being no more first persons. What in fact we will be doing as we work with this criterion is *making* the all-person inclusive, existent in time, developmental I IS God: *making* it, and seeing that it is good.

[28] The I AM God was nowhere - - - and that is a concept with not inconsiderable reality

problems: what anyway might you expect to be able to *do* from nowhere? But there is

another way of being nowhere: it is to be everywhere. Borrowing an image from one of 'the

old dispensation' – it might have been Hildegard of Bingen: I'm not sure – the old God was

pictured as that whose centre was everywhere and whose circumference was nowhere. An I IS

God would have its centre everywhere because in each and every equal person, and its

circumference nowhere because in a world of limitless *linguistically structured* experience.

For note that of the two determining 'discrete combinatorial systems' – the genetic *code*

determining the natural, and the human *language* determining the cultural – the one, being

code, is not infinite; the other, being language, is. 'The limits of my language are the limits of

my world': and it has no limits.