Good without God: 19th Oct 2025

When I sat down to explore the topic of Good without God in preparation for tonight, the first thing I did was to look up the definition of good.

That was probably a mistake since there are 121 meanings of the word in the Oxford English Dictionary. And from an academic standpoint, its meaning could be debated for many hours. We could make very slow progress!

But I want to suspend such debate and ask that we base the meaning of being good in a broad and holistic way. This might mean helping people we don't know - as well as those we do, random acts of kindness, and broad compassion to our fellow man, to the animal kingdom, and to our natural world. Tonight, I am going to reject debate around the word and accept this holistic definition.

I want to set the scene by giving an example from a recent experience. My husband and I recently went to our daughter's graduation ceremony in Oxford, which took place in the Sheldonian Theatre in the heart of Oxford. It's an extraordinary building designed by a young Christopher Wren when he was Professor of Astronomy in Oxford, and its construction was finished in 1669.

The design was inspired by drawings of Roman theatres and adopts a D shaped layout. In the highest levels of seating where we'd been directed to sit, there are rows of steeply banked continuous benching that arc around in a semi-circle, with just enough space on the floor to place your feet. There's no backrest, no barrier between the row you are sitting in and the one above or below you, and nowhere to hold on to. In other words, it's entirely possible to tumble forward to the row below.

Now, people often go to graduations in family groups. And someone in our row had saved a space for a member of their group who turned up late, just before the ceremony began. The spare space was about 8 places along, and the person was an elderly gentleman who was not altogether steady on his feet. This was an accident waiting to happen.

But it didn't happen, because people held out their hands to steady him and ensure he made safe passage. They collectively kept him safe in a completely spontaneous act. It started with the person at the end of the row, and the wave swept along until he was safely seated. The act was almost imperceptible in its delivery and felt automatic.

I consider this to be a good, kind and selfless act.

The people involved were not an unbiased cross-section of the population. But there was a mix of young and old, male and female, and different ethnicities. This was not a tribal or community act between people who knew each other. They were only together because someone in their family had attended University.

There are several explanations for this behaviour. The first unflattering explanation proposed by a colleague who is trained in psychology and who chatted to about the content of this speech is that people may conform out of fear of being judged and singled out as someone who didn't help, particularly if there is someone else to observe the good act. In this case, the act is performative and not altruistic.

But I prefer an alternative explanation for this and many similar observations from my life. That as a human race, we can be inherently good, without the promise of reward.

This is consistent with the famous quote from Albert Einstein: 'If people are good only because they fear punishment, and hope for reward, then we are a sorry lot indeed.' Here, he suggests that if individuals are only driven to do good based on these external incentives, it reflects a sorry state of affairs for humanity. I could not agree more.

Now, we're all aware of the many deep, dark moments of our history, and by now you may be wanting to bring me up sharp by pointing out the terrible individuals who've wreaked havoc and are capable of immense cruelty. I am not a denialist, and I acknowledge that there are people who lived in the past, and that live alongside us now, who are not inherently good; indeed, they are quite the opposite.

But I do believe that many of us can and do demonstrate goodness to others without reward, and simply because we want to.

But I don't want to move on from this point with just my example. I am going to ask each of you to recall the last time you came across human goodness, however you define it. It may be something that you did, or something that you witnessed. I am going to create a minute's silence so that you can think about it. Please listen to your own thoughts and see where this takes you.

Pause

My guess is that many thoughts came to you, and that you may have even had to choose between several examples. If this is the case, it means that despite everything we read about, everything we see on the news, the maelstrom of newsfeed on social media, that as a group here tonight, and as a human race, we are surrounded by good. And I take comfort from that.

Much of this is represents being Good without God. It is simply a reflection of being human.

The question is, where does this drive to help others come from? Is it nature [are we born like this] is it nurture [the effect of our surroundings], or a combination of the two? And where does God fit in to this?

Many philosophers have attempted to tackle this question, going way back to the ancient Greeks and well before Christ. I'm no philosopher, but I found myself turning to much more recent experimental evidence that looked at the behaviour of babies, who are the least likely to have been conditioned by cultural and environmental influences. By the time they're a few months old, their minds are no longer a blank canvas, but they are as close as we as can get to the raw material of a human being.

Working with babies is challenging since they don't understand instructions. But they will reach for things they want or like, and they tend to look longer at things that surprise them.

A much-quoted study on babies in relation to social behaviour was published in the journal *Nature* in 2007. This was entitled *social evaluation by preverbal infants* and was conducted by Kiley Hamlin when she was a PhD student in the Department of Psychology at Yale University.

She studied infants who were 6 and 10 months old and ran experiments which used a visual image of a bright green hill in the background, superimposed on which were puppets made of simple cut-out shapes with stick-on wobbly eyes; there was a triangle, a square and a circle, each in their own bright colours.

What happened next was a short play, as one of the shapes tried to climb the hill, struggling and falling back down again. On the third attempt, the other two shapes get involved, with one shape helping the climber up the hill by pushing from behind, while the other hinders the climber by pushing down from above.

After the show, infants were given the choice of reaching for either the helping or the hindering shape; the researchers found that infants were much more likely to reach for the helper (14/16 infants).

So not only do babies interpret the movement of the shapes as resulting from motivations, but they also prefer helping motivations over hindering ones.

The experiment was changed so that the climber, the helper and the hinderer were shown together, where the climber alternately approached the helper (considered an unsurprising action) or the hinderer (a surprising action). The outcome from this replicated the previous results, with infants looking longer at the latter event, indicating surprise when the climber approached the hinderer.

A different type of experiment conducted at Harvard and nicknamed the Big Mother Study showed that small children helped others, regardless of whether a parent commanded them to help, or was even present.

Thus, elements that underpin altruism, sympathy for others and the understanding of other people's goals appear to be inherent in us, and in place before children turn two. It's an inbuilt part of who we are.

But as a parent, I don't want to believe that nurture makes no difference, and I wanted to explore nurture in relation to families and community, since these areas must be where religious or secular belief systems develop and reside.

Our experience through families and community provides our first exposure to behaviours, ideas and beliefs. We often model ourselves on the behaviour of our parents, extended family and peer group, in whatever form this takes. For better or for worse.

Family and communities are also where we are exposed to religious teachings and their frameworks for models of good behaviour, such as the ten commandments in the case of Christianity.

This individual exposure provides an opportunity for people to consider whether this is something they want to embrace. And many people born into a specific religious culture will adopt the beliefs to which they are exposed.

There are many reasons why religion develops in communities and society, based on the benefits it can bring. Humans have a strong need to belong. Religion helps meet this need and provides membership of a community.

Religion also often includes music. This need can be filled in so many ways, but the sound made through the choral tradition can bring a sense of peace and spirituality. Religion also emphasizes collective action and can bring about good acts. It also provides a moment in time when we focus on our fellow man, including those who are undergoing hardship in its many forms.

This provides a basis, or a framework, for people to be good, linked in the case of Christianity to the teachings of Christ.

But there is a further element at play here beyond nature and nurture, and that is the role of private reasoning. This is not completely divorced from nature and nurture, but it represents the mechanism by which we accept or reject what is presented to us.

I can illustrate this through my own lived experience.

I was raised in the traditions of the Pentecostal church. My dad and grandad built a church where my grandad was the minister, and I spent much of my younger life there. I studied the Bible very intensively. It was the thing I knew most about, even after starting school. Once my parents moved to Sussex, we joined a Pentecostal International Bible Training School, which trained missionaries from around the world.

But I stepped away from this life once I reached adolescence and crafted my own secular mind-set. When I was in my teens, I was not sure how to articulate this, but I knew that I could be good without God through public service, in nursing and then medicine. I struggled to find a label for my mind set as it pertained to any kind of belief system. I had not heard at this stage about Humanism, which is often used as a collective term for non-believers.

I find it a useful framing of a good life, well lived. Someone who takes a democratic and ethical life stance, and who believes that human beings have the right and responsibility to give meaning and shape to their own lives. It stands for the building of a more humane society through an ethic based on human and other natural values in the spirit of reason and free inquiry through human capabilities.

While I am not keen on labels, this sums up how many people aspire to live these days.

Paul Bloom, the senior author of the paper in *Nature* that I just referred, tried to summarise his views on how morality develops, saying that morality is a mix of “the unlearned, the discovered and the invented,” meaning we begin

with some morality, acquire more from our families and communities, and develop still more through private, creative reasoning.

Different religions or belief systems give us different ways of looking at the world, different diagnoses of our problems, and different solutions. They are a competition between different stories about how things should be.

But at the end of the day, there is something that is even more important, based on the principles around diversity, tolerance of difference, and an ability to debate such differences without fear of backlash or criticism. A narrative around debate that spans a full spectrum of ideas rather than polar opposites, which we see so much in our society today.

And these are the principles that, as master of Churchill College, where this chapel sits, I will uphold and defend. Our students bring with them a diversity of religions, or none at all. Many of our students do not consider themselves to be religious, and in fact, many students are drawn to the fact that this College was founded as a secular institution.

And as a community, we must be able to debate and discuss the role of religion within our community, and recognise that we can be good with, or without God.

Because at the end of the day, the buck stops with each of us – regardless of the belief system that we hold close. It is up to each of us to show kindness to others, regardless of our own experiences of nature and nurture.

My closing message this evening comes from a quote that is sometimes attributed to the Buddha but is more likely to have been written in 1973 by the American journalist, Walter Scott.

He wrote: Resolve to be tender with the young, compassionate with the aged, sympathetic with the striving, and tolerant of the weak and the wrong.

The reason that this resonates with me is that each of us will experience each of these states of being. We will experience youth, age, striving, weakness, and doing wrong.

Life is full of challenges, and we should acknowledge that being good all the time is not possible, with or without God. All we can do is remember the importance of being good, kind and tolerant whenever we are able.