

Oxford Union 2015

Transcripts of speeches

Motion

“This house believes that there is nothing wrong with spending more on looking good than doing good”

James Bevan (for)

I want to talk about the profound importance of this motion: “This house believes that there is nothing wrong with spending more on looking good than doing good”. Now the motion itself, I find surprisingly ambiguous, and I suspect it is intentionally so, because it’s requiring us to think very carefully about the notions of what is *wrong*, what is *spending*, what is *looking good* and *doing good*. So if I begin with premise that we need to talk about what is good and what is not good, we move immediately into the field of ethics and aesthetics – we are dealing immediately with a challenge that there is something inherently right or wrong about being able to make a choice.

So for me this is not an issue of either/or, this is a question of and – can we not do things that both look good and which do good? Should we be judgmental about whether one is inherently better than the other? So I move the premise that we should not be axiomatic about the notion that it is inherently wrong to spend more on looking good than doing good. I would say that we need to be conditional in our assessment of what is good and what is not good; and also conditional in terms of who is looking, who is doing and the outcomes of both.

I think there is then the practical and fundamental reality that if we direct how society should behave, then actually we have given up on the challenges of democracy, freedom and the rule of law, which bind us in British society, and allow every individual to determine the extent to which they direct their resources, their energies and their time to either looking good or doing good.

I would further suggest that if we were to define behaviour such that we denied people the capacity to spend on looking good, that we might actually reduce net societal benefit. Because it is not the case that if we deny people the opportunity to behave in one way (that is not as we perceive it optimal), that necessarily they will behave in the way we would prefer. So it could be that there is a net loss from saying that people have to do good rather than look good?

I would also question this issue about what exactly is being spent. Spending is a process by which something is used. It needn’t necessarily be about cash – it needn’t necessarily be monetised. When we think about what is being spent, we need to distinguish between money and time, and indeed people’s lives. And if we are going to raise the stakes and talk about how people spend their lives, we need to be very clear about what we mean by looking good and doing good. So to me when we think about looking good I am not talking about when one looks fabulous – I am talking about a much more deep level of looking good in the eyes of the Lord, or looking good in the context of being seen to do the right thing.

And I do think that if we are going to acquire a certain joy, a momentum, a shared vision in something that can gather pace and create the best outcomes, then being seen to be counted, standing together, is a critical part of what motivates society to move together.

I then think that we need to think quite carefully about what we mean by *good*. I was spending some time trying to understand what the great philosophers said about good, and I came across the

works of Emmanuel Kant, and what he says is that good is essentially a cultural idiom – it is a choice, it is a set of values that are unique and specific. If it is the case therefore that the definition of good is something that we must figure out for ourselves, we need to think carefully about what we think good might mean in the context of debating here in the Oxford Union, and whether or not looking good and doing good in that frame is something that is necessarily better or less worthwhile.

I find it very revealing that the Oxford Union was built and prospered just as the Oxford Movement in the Anglo-Catholic tradition was also beginning to become more substantial and to wield more influence. This was a period when there was a great sense that we needed to be broader in our assessment of how we might move society forward, and I would argue that this was a period when that very strong Victorian sense of cultural imperialism, through the act of doing created a lot of the misery that was the result of the invasive empire behaviours of the 19th century.

So I want to look back beyond the Anglo-Catholic traditions of the 19th century, both to the purer sense of Christian tradition and being seen to do good in the eyes of the Lord, but also the premise that you have to love yourself before you can love others – a premise that therefore means you need to remove the beam from your own eye before looking at the mote in others is of critical significance.

But earlier than that there was Cicero – and Cicero made some very interesting comments about ethics and aesthetics. He argued that ethics were about obligation, and doing things was simply getting things done, and that there was no real merit in doing. However the aesthetics of choice, of how we do things, he would argue were more important for society.

Against that background I do think that it is critically important to recognise that if we accept that there is nothing inherently wrong in spending more on looking good than doing good, then you should absolutely support the motion – and against that backdrop, society is better off trying to find a means by which looking good *and* doing good together can bear greater fruit.

Ladies and gentlemen, I thank you for your time.

Danny Dorling (against)

Ladies and gentlemen, you don't need to spend a very large amount of money on yourselves to love yourselves. I find myself in a strange position today because I am not normally somebody who argues for large amounts of charity funding or for the kind of normal, 'do gooding' arguments in society. I'm not opposed to them but that isn't my normal stance.

However, I do worry about the amount of money that people are now spending on their appearance to try to make themselves feel better about themselves. I think it has escalated to a point where we need to control it again, and we need to think about how we could use that money in better ways. The kind of things you spend money on – it's not just things like cosmetics or expensive haircuts – it's buying clothes at a higher rate than clothes are bought in other similar countries. The average item of clothing in the UK is only worn 12 times. You are enticed by advertising. Advertising spend in this country is twice what it is in the rest of Europe. You're enticed to think that if you go out and spend more on yourself and on your appearance, you will feel happier about yourself, it will help you. This clearly makes money for people involved in the cosmetic and fashion industries. But does it actually make you love yourself more, or does it make you worry about yourself more?

Now we all worry about our appearances – some of us slightly more than others – I put on this very special jacket today to come to talk to you! We are not arguing about creating a totalitarian state where we say "you shall not do this, you shall do that" – the question is have we got to a point where people, particularly young people are becoming so obsessed with their appearance that it is actually damaging their lives?

And it would be in their own selfish interests to spend a little bit less on themselves and their own appearance, and a little bit more on doing good, in the many ways in which you can do good. And there are numerous ways in which you need to do good, and you can just start locally.

We've heard that there are 750 people who are homeless in the county – but you can come down to this city. In Oxford West and Abingdon 2,000 children are living in poverty. In Oxford East about 5,500. A quarter of the children in this city are living in poverty. In a city which also has incredible



wealth and affluence in it, there are school teachers who bring in food to their schools to give out to the children who are hungry in this city, at the same time as we have food that isn't being eaten on the tables of many of the colleges in this town.

There are many terrible things that you can worry about, and there are many groups who are advocating about this and if you want to spend a little less on some item or other, that money could be used for that good.

Now I was brought up in Oxford, and if you were brought up in Oxford in the 1980s, the set text for O Level English was *Down and Out in Paris and London*. And when you got to the very end of it you heard the missive from George Orwell saying whatever you do in life, do not give money to the Sally Army. Because there are arguments against do gooding. You do need to worry about what the good is and is it really helping, but I don't think any of you would oppose the idea that it is good to try to do good.

But let's go back to the idea of beautifying ourselves, more and more and more. When I left this city and went to Newcastle University I met a friend on my first day who was studying dentistry. He'd come from an area near Huddersfield, from a family who'd come over from Pakistan, and he decided that he wanted to study dentistry because he wanted to stop people's teeth hurting. He was shocked (this was in 1986) to find that so many of his fellow students were not that worried about pain in teeth, but much more interested in cosmetic dentistry, even then. In helping people whiten their teeth, in making money from dentistry in a different way. He qualified as a dentist, despite the fact that his first ten years of life were leading an ox round a well in Pakistan, and then he qualified as a doctor, and became a maxillo-facial surgeon in Manchester. And every day he reconstructs people's faces who are in car accidents in the North West of England.

That is incredibly important. That is the kind of looking good we have to worry about. But the more money we have to spend as a society on making ourselves look good cosmetically, the less it actually benefits us and the more we begin as we age to look slightly strange! We're not yet at the stage of the Americans, but it doesn't actually make you look good spending a lot of money trying to look good!

For those youngsters in the audience, you are all beautiful anyway. You do need somebody to tell you that because the ages at which people are most obsessed with how they look are between around 14 and 28 – and there are obvious biological reasons for why that is.

It's very interesting – social class actually stops being a key issue in young people's lives and, hot or not, an interest in appearance and acne and all that rises in terms of social anxiety. But it goes again – I can tell you that the worries about how you look do go with time.

We need to worry less about how white and how straight our teeth are; we need to not inject our faces with poisons to paralyse them so we can look a little bit younger for a few more years. A bit of modest spending on ourselves is fine, but if you find that you are spending more on your appearance and how you look than anything else, you are veering towards being narcissistic, and narcissism is a disorder. We need to put a cap on this and a control on it, because if you go forward from what was normal in my childhood, to what is now normal in my children's childhood, and it carries on and on, and the women get thinner and thinner, and there are more and more likes on people's Facebook picture, for how wonderful this supposedly is, and I think about my potential grandchildren's lives, this is not a direction of travel we want to go in. So I very much hope that you are going to oppose the motion.

Thank you very much.

Nigel Mercer (for)

Well ladies and gentlemen, I am Daniel in the lion's den! I am your plastic surgeon. There will be those out there who hate me, although you've never met me. Because of what Danny said, you have an in-built, visceral dislike of me and what I do – and hopefully in the next seven minutes or so I will change that. One of the things about being a plastic surgeon is when I talk to students in school about what we do – what do I do every day of my life? Well Danny's alluded to that when he talked about his colleague in Manchester, who I have a very similar life to – every day of my working life I



go and stab the public, and by and large they say thank you, and I don't get arrested! And that does make surgeons interesting people, and I'd like to hold that thought in your head.

Unfortunately we are biologically programmed to like attractiveness. Ladies and gentleman, unfortunately despite these beautiful buildings, we are animals. We've only been humans for a relatively short period of time and inside your brain – all of you have watched Spectre, the Bond movie? You know that there's a little voice in here, you cannot see beauty – it is active in your brain. And within architecture – this building probably about fits it – there's a divine proportion which has been known since about the time of the pyramids, 1.618 etc etc. And it's a proportion that makes everyone look beautiful to the human brain. And it's in the pyramids, it's in Notre Dame, it's all around us; and it's in the human face. And the one thing that we need to remember is that we've known that since year one, since time immemorial.

The most beautiful face, the most beautiful body, is one of the most famous, is Michaelangelo's David – that is not real, it is actually an artefact of his brain.

So I'm afraid to say that attractiveness is what allows us to pass on our gene pool to the next generation. We only have to watch David Attenborough, his current programme about the hunt, we are unfortunately animals. And therefore we will want to be the best of whatever we do, we'll want to be the most attractive, and the attractive animal gets the best mate. We are animals.

Now I'm not suggesting for a moment that that's where we should focus, because we are now higher beings – we are apes that can walk, and I think I would agree with the speakers talking for my side that we should certainly not disparage the looking good bit.

If you look back to history, Albrecht Dürer, the famous German artist in the 1500s, he worked out the ideal female form for his generation, for his work. It wouldn't fit the bill now, and that's where I'll come to advertising a little bit later.

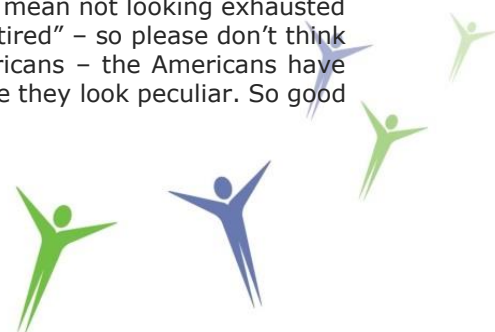
If you look at the urban population now, a third of the income of the urban population is spent on looking good. And that ladies and gentlemen is from your toothbrush to what you put in your hair and having your hair cut. It is not just about cosmetic and plastic surgery. Now I think in your minds plastic surgery means cosmetic surgery, and it doesn't. Plastic surgery started 100 years ago with the battle wounds, in the carnage of the First World War. At Passchendaele, 2,000 facial injuries came in on that first day at the Battle of the Somme, and one man, in Sidcup in Kent, went about reconstructing these faces.

So what we do is not about making people look beautiful – it's about making people work in society. So looking normal in society is what everyone does. As a plastic surgeon my day job in the NHS is cleft and palette, so children walking away with a face without scars; one of my major successes in life was being sent a tweet by a patient of mine who doesn't know me – I treated her as a baby, and her mum said: "this bloke made your face better", and she tweeted to say "I've never met you, but I'd like to say thank you."

What we now know about facial attractiveness and facial deformation, is that it's not about the surgeon's skills and what the surgeon does, it's actually about the family – and Danny did mention this and family's terribly important. I gave a talk a few years ago at a work conference in London, and there was a Girl Guide who said that three girls in my year in Cardiff aged 16 were saving for a breast augmentation. That is a tragedy – and some of you will be thinking the parents should intervene – the parents knew nothing about it.

And what I wanted to say about advertising is that there are standards for how people like me perform in aesthetic surgery, and one of these stipulates that advertising should not be in a place where a child can see it, in this type of market, for exactly the reason Danny said. So please don't think we're being irresponsible, because we're not.

We have to remember that youth gives you an idea of fertility, and that's an area from which most of the people in this room are now retired, which is a pretty horrific thought! But actually we want to remain healthy, and fit and well, and looking good – and by that we mean not looking exhausted – we don't want people to say "My God, you look exhausted, you look tired" – so please don't think looking good equates to looking different! Danny alluded to the Americans – the Americans have gone a bit too far and sometimes have to sit at a different table because they look peculiar. So good



aesthetic surgery is not about making people look peculiar, it's about making people look better, and more comfortable literally in their own skin.

So I think we have to bear that in mind. Unfortunately the female figure has been looked at for 30 thousand years – there are cave drawings, there are paintings sculptures that date back thousands of years, showing how important it is to have a hip–waist ratio, and how it changes with time and how the male brain perceives this hip–waist ratio, and how this is needed for us to be able to procreate. The same applies to looking well – and we can see how some of this imagery shows figures as more colourful and therefore someone with whom you might want to pass your genes on with.

So the evidence I think, I'm afraid ladies and gentlemen is heavily in favour of our motion. If you think about the tax benefits – if VAT was put onto Botox and fillers, we could fund the gap in the health service. That is not a joke – we could bring in £2 billion in revenue a year if that tax was brought in – that is how much is spent. Professionally, I'm saying to the Chancellor, "do this mate, come on!".

Ladies and gentlemen, I'm going to sit down and ask you to vote in favour of the motion.

James Partridge (against)

Good evening, Mr President, Ladies and Gentlemen.

Like Professor Dorling, I too came extremely well attired – in my case £250's worth of fine clothing. I enjoy fine clothing, I enjoy wearing good-looking clothes – but I have absolutely no interest in owning lots of them – and I'm not very good at choosing them either.

But I also hear you say "nice clothes –shame about the face". Because yes, it's not pretty is it? And of course, really not very good-looking. Could do better. Severe burns I went through at 18 made my life here as an Oxford student in the early 1970s extremely challenging. Hundreds of thousands of pounds were spent on me by taxpayers on fantastic plastic surgeons like Nigel to get my face to look 'okay'.

But not good enough, of course. Because the prevailing orthodoxy, which I had swallowed a child – yes, I'd swallowed it completely – a prevailing orthodoxy which I suspect we all hold – would have it that without a good-looking face, I am doomed to three nasty effects: the first, I won't feel very good inside; the second, I won't be liked by others and, thirdly, with scars as good or as bad as mine, I'm likely to live in the shadows. I should spend a lot more on 'looking good', not just on moisturisers but perhaps even on more cosmetic surgery, brilliant as it is – or perhaps even a face transplant.

We live in a culture which I think has swallowed, hook line and sinker, this orthodoxy that 'looking good' brings big rewards. It also imposes a very nasty stigma on people like me whose faces don't fit these norms of the day, which I find profoundly unfair.

It's a culture in which we are bombarded daily with slickly presented messages telling us why spending massively on 'looking good' is not just good for our psyches but absolutely vital for them. If we don't aspire to the spotless, wrinkle-free, age-less norms of appearance, our sex lives will be poorer, our self-esteem lower and our job and career prospects diminished. This was the orthodoxy that I have grown up with, and I think it is even more strongly conditioned into the youth today.

The facts suggest that over 50,000 people in Britain choose to spend half a billion pounds on cosmetic surgery every year and that across the beauty and fashion industries, something like £70 billion a year is spent on 'looking good'. Over £1,000 a person.

Now compare that with how much is spent on doing good: even on very generous assumptions about how much volunteering is worth (something like 25% of the population do volunteer, and about 44% of the population give) – when you add the whole lot up, it comes to about £35 billion a year. Half of what is spent on looking good.

So why am I against spending of so much – and certainly any more – on looking good? For three reasons:



First, because I think the link between 'looking good' and being successful, feeling good and being loved is far more tenuous than anybody really understands and it's possibly dangerous too.

I work with a lot of psychologists and they confirm that self-esteem and confidence are very complex and are hard for most of us to acquire. Research suggests that parental support, academic achievement and the development of skills in all sorts of things – that's what brings us self-esteem and to some degree confidence. There are some people for whom their self-esteem is heavily dependent on their looks. Self-confidence too is gained by your ability to manage other people, to deal with their comments and their criticisms.

So do looks matter? Yes, of course they do... in the first five minutes of any new encounter – and I've been speaking for about five minutes – you've been taking me in. But as Professor Argyle of this University, showed years ago: actually, you will have been pretty much impressed by my overall appearance, my gestures, my body language, the way I speak, how loudly or how softly, and my face will be of very little importance to you – about 4%, he estimated.

Which isn't to say that looks aren't important – they do matter enormously – but after those first five minutes, I don't think so. Sexual chemistry is not about some superficial stuff about the face – it's a whole body-mind-spirit experience.

Incidentally, one statistic that I really do like around this subject is to have a look at the Hollywood divorce statistics if you think that looking good and being happy is a really good correlation! It's not the case!

But, the dangerous bit too, let us not forget. Unfortunately we are in a culture where the over-zealous search for looking good has very dangerous consequences. We've got epidemics of eating disorders, over-exercising, body dysmorphic disorder and self-harm are all on the rise in our society, and they are all the results of obsessive behaviours associated with a frustrated search for a perfect body. Research from Girlguiding found that one in five girls aged nine to 10 said the way they look makes them feel most upset, and 39% of girls say they experience demeaning comments about the way they look every week.

These are unacceptable social consequences of this 'look good' economy. We should be very careful about the culture that promotes ultra-thin models and eats lots too. We need to get a grip with this retail therapy world. So there is really something 'wrong' with spending so much on 'looking good', it seems to me.

But the second reason I dislike this motion is that I don't like a culture which suggests that looking good is somehow morally good too. I dislike the flipside intensely. It suggests that people who look not very good are going to be villains and unpleasant characters.

But the third and most important reason why I dislike this motion and oppose it is that in some ghastly way it suggests that doing good is not important. Looking good distracts monies from those incredibly important causes, some of which are local, some of which are international. And if that money were put to those causes, it would create so much good. Philanthropy, sadly, is in retreat, and yet the state is also backing away. We need to galvanise our society into giving much much more, and in the process people will get a buzz out of it. They will feel good about it.

Mr President, I move to oppose this motion, very strongly.

Sali Hughes (for)

The house believes there is nothing wrong with spending more on looking good than doing good. The house is right. Much was made in the opposition's argument about looking good not actually making us feel better. I spend my life around women – real women – who would categorically disagree – and some men. The fact is that looking good is important to many people, and it is not frivolous.

As we've heard we have an innate instinct to groom, and that's correct, but I know that beauty lifts up confidence, happiness and can be extremely creative and empowering for men and women – not everyone, you don't have to join in, but for many people.



Women's Refuge is a charity that I work with a lot. At the end of every season after I've been sent every beauty product under the sun, and at the end of every season when I have too many beauty products in my house I give them all to Women's Refuge. Women's Refuge consistently report to me that the change that makes in women's lives – women who have fled violence and leave with nothing – no self-respect, no belongings, no job prospects – they turn up at Women's Refuge and they are given products; some of them are just toiletries to keep them clean; some things are more luxurious and make them feel nice; some things are to make them look smart for job interviews; they make a massive difference to these women's lives.

There are so many anecdotes I hear from readers that tell similar stories. So many – but I wanted to devote time to one of the most moving stories I've heard on this subject. It's an extract from the diary of Lieutenant Colonel Mervin Willett. He was the DSO in charge of the liberation of the Bergen Belsen concentration camp in 1945.

"It was shortly after the British Red Cross arrived, though it may have no connection, that a very large quantity of lipstick arrived. This was not at all what we men wanted, we were screaming for hundreds and thousands of other things and I don't know who asked for lipstick. I wish so much that I could discover who did it, because it was the action of genius, sheer unadulterated brilliance. I believe nothing did more for those internees than lipstick. Women lay in bed with no sheets and no nightie but with scarlet red lips; you saw them wandering about with nothing but a blanket over their shoulders, but with scarlet red lips. I saw women dead on the post mortem table and clutched in her hand was a piece of lipstick. At last someone had done something to make them feel individuals again, they were someone, no longer merely the number tattooed on the arm. At last they could take an interest in their appearance. Their lipstick started to give them back their humanity."

Anyone who dismisses beauty as an irrelevance or a frippery for the shallow knows nothing of humanity, and certainly knows nothing about women.

Money spent on other things just doesn't draw the same criticism. It's not realistic to expect selflessness all the time. It's not unreasonable for people to spend the majority of their income on themselves and their families, while giving a percentage to charity. So what are the comparable motions? "This house believes there is nothing wrong with spending more on holidays, cars, takeaways?" We spend more on takeaways than we do on beauty incidentally. If someone spends £10,000 on a car do we ask them to consider how many pairs of waterproof trousers it could have bought for refugees in Calais? No. We accept that cars are a necessary expense. But it's not. You could survive without it if you had to.

Beauty is the same. It's not a matter of survival in most cases, but it is important to many. Perhaps the reason is that spending on our appearance assumes a kind of superficial, narcissistic person by nature; the kind of person who spends their money on their appearance is unintelligent and sensitive, has little regard for others, those with an interest in surface are perceived to have no depth – this happens to me daily. This is why below-the-line commenters frequently wonder aloud how my readers and I can possibly justify spending £30 of our own hard-earned cash on moisturiser instead of inoculating the children of Darfur.

They're amazed to hear that women are actually capable of having multiple interests while maintaining perspective. For the women on my beauty forum, where the sense of community is incredible, recently – they spend all day long talking about make-up, fashion and much more substantial things – but recently sold all their clothes and make-up to raise £8,000 for one of their own who'd developed cancer.

Which brings me neatly on to a little-known fact about the beauty industry: the beauty industry bankrolls more medical research than practically any other industry in the world. In 2011 Estée Lauder gave 40 million dollars to 197 oncology scientists worldwide. And Amore Pacific Cosmetics in Korea donated the resources and facilities that became key in the development of Ketotop, an arthritic pain relief. L'Oreal USA funds research and technology in 3D tissue reconstruction for medical purposes.

Are these entirely selfless acts? No, of course they're not. Are they doing it because they're lovely? No, it's not simply that – they're hoping for cosmetic breakthroughs, they're hoping for patents that



they can apply for cosmetic purposes. But that research would not be taking place without my industry. It doesn't matter how we got there – they're just three examples of countless examples I could give of how the beauty industry and beauty as a whole does great good.

The motion assumes there is a way of comparing spending, but doing good needn't cost anything at all. It assumes some kind of opportunity cost that money spent on looking good could be better spent on doing good. But doing good doesn't cost anything, always. It's an unfair comparison. A volunteer might give on night to a soup kitchen then spend 99 pence on a lip balm – they are already spending more money on looking good than doing good. How can you compare the value?

The motion says there's nothing *wrong* – it doesn't say you *should* spend more on your appearance. No-one is forced to. There's no need to demonise and belittle those who think it important. They won't jeopardise the existence of charities.

I almost didn't come tonight, because a very close friend of mine has just died. I'm not looking for a sympathy vote – should would have been disgusted that I mentioned her! She died of osteo sarcoma. She was supposed to have her leg amputated a couple of years ago, and she went into surgery, and before she went into surgery the surgeon came round and said you will still feel your leg, this will be very upsetting for you, I'm terribly sorry, but you'll go through intensive physio and eventually you won't be able to feel your leg anymore.

She went into surgery, and when she came out she could feel her leg, and didn't dare look. The surgeon came round and said have you looked? I managed to save your leg.

When she rang me up the next day and told me this, I said "Christ, what do you do when a surgeon says you are losing your leg, then you wake up and it's still there?!" And she said: "I painted my toenails!"

If you understand that instinct, and you understand that she was doing good, then you have no option but to vote for the motion.

John Nickson (against)

Some years ago, archaeologists discovered a pre-hominid jawbone in France that was estimated to be 700,000 years old. It belonged to a 45 year old man. Because our ancestors had a very different diet, dental decay was not as common as it is now so it is odd that all the teeth were missing. Research showed that the teeth had been lost at varying intervals before death and that the man suffered from multiple abscesses making eating painful and difficult.

Unlike modern Provençal cuisine, most of the food then would have been tough and hard. Our man would almost certainly have found it impossible to masticate and so that the only way he could have survived to the age of 45 was if others chewed his meat for him.

Think about that at breakfast tomorrow.

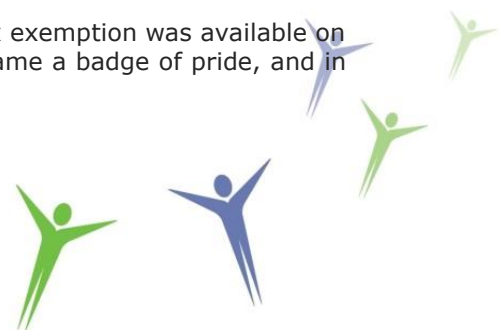
If correct, this must be one of the first examples of charity in our history. All the evidence suggests that altruism is a deep-seated instinct. We are supposed to be charitable. We developed a biological need to help others because this was the best way to sustain and prolong life.

I define doing good as being charitable. I believe giving is good for us individually and good for society. I am all for people being as attractive as possible, I'm rather keen on it; but the beauty industry is estimated to be worth £17 million a year, but I must tell you that actually personal giving as done by individual is estimated to be just over £10 billion, so I regret to say that we really ARE spending less on doing good than looking good.

But why on earth should that matter? History tells us why.

We know that the most successful and stable societies were those where the rich and powerful demonstrated commitment to their fellow citizens by being philanthropic. Their motives may have been suspect but the outcome was generally good.

The concept of charitable status began in 6th century Greece when tax exemption was available on gifts to establish hospitals, orphanages and schools. Philanthropy became a badge of pride, and in



the second century AD, Rome decreed that gifts of legacies could be made in perpetuity, providing the legal framework for the trusts and foundations we have today.

Since then, philanthropy has shaped contemporary Britain. Hospitals, hospices, museums and galleries, theatres, libraries, public parks and gardens and of course, great universities such as Oxford, were all originally funded by philanthropy and are all manifestations of a civilised society.

That was then. What about now? Now many people have no idea about the foundations of contemporary society. Most people think that philanthropy is nothing to do with them.

We need to think again about giving and volunteering because the state is in retreat. The state will provide less over the next five or ten years. It is not my job tonight to say whether this is a good or bad thing, but I must point out that a smaller state has implications for the future of our civil society and our liberal democracy itself. A smaller state requires a response from all of us if we are to maintain the fabric of society.

We like to describe ourselves as a generous nation but here are some facts. Despite a colossal increase in personal wealth in Britain charitable giving has not grown in real terms for 30 years. A parliamentary report in 2014 showed there has been a long-term decline in giving by households from 32% in 1978 to 27% in 2010. Only 9% of us are responsible for two thirds of all charitable giving.

Coutts bank reports that only 10% of those selling a business are engaged in significant philanthropy and a recent survey shows that almost half of top rate tax-payers feel no obligation to give to charity.

In 1987, there were nine billionaires based in the UK and now there are estimated to be 117. I must confess to being profoundly shocked that giving has not grown. Why should that matter? Try to answer these questions:

What happens to civil society when the state is in retreat? How is it possible for the voluntary or social sector to compensate if charitable giving has not grown in real terms for 30 years and only a minority of the wealthy is philanthropic?

Is a civil society and our liberal democracy sustainable in a more unequal world, while automation threatens jobs and youth unemployment remains high, where there is fragmentary support for mainstream political parties and an endemic lack of trust in authority and institutions?

Are we sure that we will bequeath the civil society we enjoy to future generations who will live in an increasingly unequal world where liberal democracy might not prevail?

The top 1% owns almost half the world's wealth. Will future generations inherit a plutocracy rather than liberal democracy?

According to the governor of the Bank of England, we are living in an Age of Irresponsibility. The cult of the individual and consumerism has brought us to the point where I believe humanity is losing the plot. When we lose our humanity, when we ignore the needs of others and start to stigmatise them as something other so that they become less than human, we are in trouble, for that way leads to violence, carnage and genocide.

If you think I am being alarmist then consider this. Three years before I was born, there was no civil society in most of Europe and only four functioning democracies. Look at the world today and the seeds of discord are not far away. There was genocide in the Balkans only 20 years ago. How will Europe's flashpoint react to mass migration by people of different religion and ethnicity?

So it's time to rebalance our priorities. The answer is to revive an old-fashioned concept: the Common Good. This concept ought to unite right and left. I define the Common Good as the sum of all the values, activities and services that sustain our liberal democracy. We need to renew our commitment to the Common Good if our civil society is to survive and that requires that we give money and time to others in addition to paying our taxes.

In Victorian times, all classes engaged in philanthropy as testified by Frank Prochaska, the historian, who is with us this evening. We should try to revive the Victorian spirit of enterprise and philanthropy whilst avoiding the hypocrisy, repression, poverty and squalor that blighted the nineteenth century.



Perhaps the rash of beards and a mania for baking is a sign that we are recreating our Victorian heritage.

I am not making a plea to return to a rosy past that didn't exist. I am looking forward to a future shaped by the experience of those who have gone before us.

In conclusion, let us think about the most powerful impulses that have enabled the human species to flourish.

We have to eat. If we eat well, we feel good. We have to make love and if we do that well, we feel even better. Those who give will tell you that giving inspires a feeling of wellbeing that is like no other. I know from personal experience that is true. I must also tell you that 30 years of professional fundraising have taught me that the great majority of those who give are, however plain or ugly, more attractive and more loveable and have more fun than those who do not. So those of you who are missing out, get in touch with the Oxfordshire Community Foundation, start giving now and enjoy doing good, and vote against the motion!

