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## CHAPTER 8

# British moralists of the eighteenth century: Shaftesbury, Butler and Price

David McNaughton



In this chapter I discuss the moral theories of three influential writers: Anthony Ashley Cooper, Third Earl of Shaftesbury (1671-1713); Joseph Butler (1692-1752) and Richard Price (1723-91). All three wrote extensively on issues in religion (Butler was an Anglican Bishop and Price a Dissenting Minister) but I shall only touch on their religious views where they bear on their ethical doctrines.

## — LORD SHAFTESBURY —

I largely base my account of Shaftesbury's views on his most systematic ethical work, *An Enquiry Concerning Virtue or Merit*, in the version which was included in his *Characteristics*.

Shaftesbury was deeply influenced by Greek and Roman thought. In a letter he distinguishes two strands in Ancient philosophy:

the one derived from Socrates . . . the other derived in reality from Democritus . . . The first . . . of these two philosophies recommended action, concernment in civil affairs, religion. The second derided all, and advised inaction and retreat, and with good reason. For the first maintained that society, right and wrong was founded in Nature, and that Nature had a meaning, and was herself, that is to say in her wits, well governed and administered by one simple and perfect intelligence. The second again derided this, and made Providence and Dame Nature not so sensible as a doting old woman.<sup>1</sup>

The former strand is the one to which Shaftesbury owes allegiance. It proceeds through Plato, Aristotle and the Stoics, to the Cambridge Platonists of the previous century, especially Cudworth, whose influence on Shaftesbury was considerable.<sup>2</sup> For Shaftesbury the universe is a well-ordered, intelligible system, in which humans have their proper place. By the use of unaided natural reason we can discover what role we are designed to play in that system and thus live virtuous and happy lives. That role is not arbitrary, but dictated by the very nature of things – by the way the world is organized.

This theme is developed in the first half of the *Inquiry*, which explores what it is to be a good or virtuous person, and how virtue is related to religion. The goodness of any creature, whether animal or human, must be judged, Shaftesbury holds, by its contribution to the good of the system of which it is a part. Just as each organ, if it is sound, is well-fitted to play its role in the functioning of the body, so each animal, if it is a good one of its kind, plays its part in a wider system. Each system is, in turn, part of a larger system, until we eventually reach the universe, which is the complete system comprehending all others. Thus each animal is a member of a species, and has a role to play in the preservation of the species as a whole. Each species, in its turn, makes a contribution to the welfare of other species, and so is a part of a system of animals. That system is itself a sub-system within the broader ecological system of the planet, and so on.

Each creature is ultimately to be judged good or bad by the contribution it makes to the good order of the universe. While a predator may appear bad from the point of view of the hunted, it is not really bad if, as Shaftesbury believes, it plays its proper part in the economy of the whole. It is, however, perfectly proper to judge an individual or a species bad, from the point of view of some sub-system of which it is a part, if it is injurious to the whole of the rest of that sub-system. Thus it is sufficient to show that a human being is bad if he is, by his nature, harmful to his fellow-humans.

In judging someone to be good or bad we are concerned only with his character. We look to see if what Shaftesbury calls his affections – his desires, motives and enjoyments – are good. Thus we do not think ill of someone because he has an infectious disease, though this may cause harm to others. Nor do we think well of someone who has only refrained from crime because she is imprisoned, or because of fear of punishment. This is as true of animals as it is of humans; a dog does not cease to be vicious because it is muzzled or cowed by its keeper. Neither do we think someone good if they act from a motive which, though it usually does harm, on this occasion happens to do good. 'A good creature is such a one as by the natural temper or bent of his affections is carried primarily and immediately, and not secondarily and

accidentally, to good, and against ill.'<sup>3</sup> Shaftesbury is not as clear as he might be about what it is for an affection to carry an agent immediately (or, as he sometimes says, directly) to the good. The most charitable interpretation is that an affection is good if it has a natural tendency to promote the public good, even though particular circumstances may conspire to prevent the normal effects. It is certainly not necessary that what is desired is some good of the system to which one belongs. There are some instincts or desires, such as that for self-preservation, which, though their object is one's own good, normally and naturally contribute to the good of the species, since a species whose members lacked that instinct would be less likely to survive.

Both humans and other animals can be good, but only humans can be virtuous. What differentiates them from animals is that they are self-conscious. They have the capacity to reflect on their own actions and affections so that these in their turn can become the object of approval or disapproval. Our attitude will, of course, be determined by the contribution the action or affection in question makes to the public good. We cannot help forming these reflective affections. Shaftesbury, in typical eighteenth-century vein, goes so far as to maintain that, provided he has no personal interest in the case, even a morally corrupt person will approve of what is 'natural and honest' and disapprove of what is 'dishonest and corrupt'.<sup>4</sup> While we have no choice in forming these reflective affections their presence does enable humans to make choices about their actions in a way that is impossible for unreflective animals. Animals, because they lack a capacity for rational reflection, always act on the strongest unreflective desire. But a human being whose unreflective affections are not in the sort of harmony which would lead her naturally to do good can, nevertheless, resist the pull of any desire which reflection tells her is one on which she should not act. Thus rational reflection is capable of overcoming desire, and we can build a capacity for virtue which will withstand the assault of even the most alluring temptation.

Shaftesbury then turns to the relation between morality and religion. Like the Cambridge Platonists before him, he is opposed to theological voluntarism: the view that what is right or wrong depends on the will or decision of God. Voluntarism locates our obligation to obey God, not in any legitimacy which authorizes him to command and requires others to obey, but in His unchallengeable power, which compels our obedience through fear of the consequences of rebellion. It conflicts with both the central tenets of Shaftesbury's world-view because it denies that right and wrong are determined by the nature of the universe, independently of anyone's choice, and it denies that we can discover how we should live by rational reflection on our own nature and that of the world. If what is right or wrong depends on

God's will, then we require divine revelation to find out what our obligations are.

The rejection of voluntarism leaves open the question of whether religious belief, or the lack of it, has a good or a bad influence on one's virtue. Shaftesbury argues that false religion or superstition can certainly corrupt one's moral sense by giving one a distorted sense of values. Atheism, by contrast, does better on this account since it does not itself prescribe the adoption of any particular values. Nor is it necessary to believe in God in order to distinguish right from wrong; our capacity to reflect on our own actions is sufficient for that. Belief in God might, nevertheless, strengthen our commitment to virtue. This is not, as the voluntarist supposes, because fear of divine wrath keeps us in check, since Shaftesbury has already argued that one who acts rightly through fear of punishment is not thereby virtuous. The recognition of God's moral perfection can, however, inspire us to develop our character so that it becomes more virtuous. It is easier, Shaftesbury concludes, to love the order or harmony of character in which virtue consists if one is convinced that the world is an orderly and harmonious system in which virtue has its proper place. Hence true theism has advantages, so far as the practice of virtue is concerned, over atheism.

Having defined virtue '[i]t remains to inquire, what obligation there is to virtue; or what reason to embrace it'.<sup>5</sup> Shaftesbury assumes, without argument, that he can only show that there is reason to be virtuous if he can show that it is in our interest to be so. In other words, Shaftesbury is a rational egoist; the justification of any way of life consists in showing how it would benefit the agent. He is not, as we have seen, a psychological egoist for he holds that we can be motivated by a concern, not for our own good, but for the good of the system of which we are a part. Nor is he an ethical egoist, for morality requires us to be motivated by a concern for others.

To be virtuous, as we have seen, an agent's affections must be so ordered as to dispose him to promote the common good. There are, Shaftesbury holds, three kinds of affections: natural affections which lead to public good; self-affections, which lead only to private good, and unnatural affections, which promote neither public nor private good, and may even have the opposite effect. Affections of the third type are intrinsically vicious; whether an affection of either of the first two kinds is good or bad depends on its strength; a desire can be bad in being either too strong or too weak for the constitution of that creature.

The distinction between the first two kinds of affection is unclear. His remarks seem most naturally to be taken as implying that a desire is a self-affection if, in the ordinary course of nature, indulging that affection tends to promote only the good of the agent and not the good of the species. But Shaftesbury includes among the self-affections

self-preservation which, as we have seen, promotes the public good. Sometimes it seems that this distinction rests not on the causal tendency of the affection, but on whether the object of the affection is a good of the agent or of others.

His discussion of the correct classification of the delight some people take in mathematical and scientific discovery is an illustration of the latter point. He thinks it sufficient to show that this delight is not a self-affection to point out that it is quite disinterested. That is, its object is not some advantage to ourselves. In particular, its object is not the pleasure we gain from the contemplation. It is, he claims, a natural affection, because it is a delight in an admirable feature of the universe, namely its harmony and proportion.

Virtue consists in having no affections of the third kind, and in those of the first two sorts being neither too strong nor too weak. It is possible, though unusual, to have one's self-affections too weak, or one's natural affections too strong. To have an insufficient concern for one's own good or safety is a 'vice and imperfection'.<sup>6</sup> An over-strong natural affection can frustrate its own ends and is also a defect. Thus an excess of pity can simply paralyse, rendering one incapable of giving aid. Vice more usually consists, however, in any or all of the following: an insufficient concern for others, an excessive concern with oneself, or the presence of unnatural desires. To prove that virtue is in one's interest Shaftesbury must therefore show that to be in any of these three states is to be in an unenviable and miserable condition.

He begins with the natural affections. His strategy is to show that mental pleasures are vastly superior to bodily ones; he then argues that the mental pleasures are either identical with the natural affections or are their effects. There are difficulties with this strategy. First, the distinction between mental and bodily pleasures is not a clear one, yet Shaftesbury offers no help in drawing it. As examples of the sensual appetites, from whose satisfaction bodily pleasure arises, he apparently offers us the tired triumvirate of desires for food, drink and sex. Even here there is some unclarity, for he classifies sexual desire as a natural affection, because it has as its end the good of the propagation of the species. Unlike the other natural affections, however, its satisfaction gives rise to a sensual as well as a mental pleasure.

Second, Shaftesbury holds that it is only the natural affections which are, or can give rise to, the higher mental pleasures and thus make their possessor truly happy. But it is by no means clear that every desire or delight of an intellectual kind is to be classed as a natural affection, even if we think that he has successfully made out his case with respect to the joys of mathematics. There remains a suspicion that Shaftesbury cheats by suggesting that the only possible competition to the delights of virtuous living comes from the grubby sensual pleasures.

The pleasures of the virtuous life, Shaftesbury plausibly claims, are considerable. We are conscious of how delightful it is to be moved by such affections as 'love, gratitude, bounty, generosity, pity, succour, or whatever else is of a social or friendly sort'.<sup>7</sup> Not only are these feelings delightful in themselves but they are usually accompanied by equally delightful effects. The virtuous person derives a sympathetic pleasure from the good of others and is pleasantly conscious of the love and merited esteem of others. Finally, the virtuous person will be able to reflect on her own life with pleasure. The vicious person will still, as we have seen, disapprove of his own deeds and character, and will thus feel discomfort whenever he reviews, as he sometimes must, the conduct of his own life. In making this last claim Shaftesbury greatly underestimates the human capacity for self-deception. It is true that self-esteem is an important element in happiness, but those who lack any real worth are often not short of it.

Such are the rewards of virtue. How can we show them to be superior to the pleasures of sensual indulgence? Shaftesbury appeals, in a manner later to be made (in)famous by John Stuart Mill, to the verdict of qualified judges; that is, those who have had a full and proper experience of both kinds of pleasure. It turns out, however, that the verdict is a foregone conclusion, for whereas the temperance of the virtuous person makes him all the more able to savour keenly the delights of the flesh, 'the immoral and profligate man can by no means be allowed a good judge of social pleasure, to which he is so mere a stranger by his nature'.<sup>8</sup> This is too quick. It may be that a just appreciation of the social pleasures, like a taste for olives or opera, takes time and application to achieve. So we can reasonably demand that would-be judges give both kinds of pleasure a fair trial. But we cannot, without begging the question, assume that the sensualist only prefers his way of life because he has so little acquaintance with the alternatives.

Fortunately, Shaftesbury has a better point to make. The mere gratification of bodily appetite does not, in itself, offer any great satisfaction and soon palls. The real pleasures in the life of a *bon viveur* are social, the conviviality which comes from eating and drinking together. Nor should we assume that it is only the physical pleasures which make sexual relations enjoyable; much greater pleasure comes from the mutual passion and requited love of which sexual intimacy can be an expression. The sensualist misidentifies the source of much of the satisfaction that he obtains. We might add that the social pleasures that enter his life are, partly because of that misidentification, often second-rate; the conviviality forced and shallow and the passion feigned.

If a deficiency in the natural affections is not in one's interest, neither is an excess of self-love. An exaggerated concern for the pro-

longation of one's own life would lead one to cling to life even when illness or pain made this undesirable. The life of one who is excessively concerned about her own safety is full of the unpleasant emotions of fear and anxiety. Moreover, such a concern can be self-defeating, by robbing its victim of the capacity, when in peril, for sensible and resolute action which might save her life.

Among the unnatural passions are sadism, malice, envy, misanthropy and sexual perversion. To be prey to any of these is to be miserable. For the vicious person will not only be the object of the hostility and disapproval of others, but will also be aware, since he cannot extinguish his moral sense, that their attitude to him is justified. Nevertheless, we might object, there is surely this to be said for unnatural affections, that their satisfaction is pleasurable. Shaftesbury, however, following Plato, denies that these are true or genuine pleasures. Some states are only pleasurable in comparison to the unpleasantness of what went before. Thus recovery from an illness, or cessation of a headache, may be experienced as intensely pleasurable. In reality, we might think, there is no positive or real pleasure here, but only the relief of returning to a neutral state. No one would choose to have a migraine in order to experience the joy of its disappearance. Similar remarks can be made about cravings, addictions and even bodily appetites. There is nothing in itself particularly appealing about drinking a glass of water, but when one is parched with thirst it seems delicious, by contrast to the discomfort which preceded it. The trouble with cravings is that they are unpleasant in themselves and drive their possessor to satisfy them to gain that 'pleasure' which is, in effect, only the temporary removal of discomfort. Other pleasures are not preceded by discomfort; the delight of smelling an unexpected scent, or coming across a magnificent view, need not depend for their intensity on the quieting of some craving. Such, on this view, are the true pleasures.

If Shaftesbury were right in claiming that all unnatural desires are cravings, whereas the social affections give genuine pleasure, then he would have made a powerful case for his contention that anyone who encourages her unnatural affections will lead a miserable life. But we might doubt this claim. Contrast the natural affection of benevolence and the unnatural one of malice or ill-will. They seem mere mirror images of each other. The benevolent person is pleased when people flourish, pained when things go badly for them. The malicious person's reactions are the reverse. We need not think of the malicious, any more than the benevolent, as in the grip of some craving, from which he can only obtain occasional and temporary relief.

Despite these flaws in his arguments Shaftesbury has made out a strong case for saying that, in general, it is better to have the kind of sociable character that is sensitive to the rights and welfare of others,

and that it is no good thing to be excessively self-absorbed. But is this enough to show that it is on every occasion in our interest to be virtuous? Surely the demands of morality sometimes involve a sacrifice for which there is no adequate compensation. And how can that be compatible with our self-interest?

Shaftesbury could acknowledge that morality may require individual acts which are not in our interest and yet defend his theory. He would have to claim that it is in our interest to develop a character in which the self-affections are not too strong and the natural affections not too weak. If we develop such a character we may sometimes be motivated to do an act which, on balance, damages our interests. But it will still be in our interest to develop such a character if there is no other character we could have developed that would serve those interests better.

Shaftesbury's influence on eighteenth-century thought was enormous. Of British philosophical works of the period only Locke's *Essay* went through more editions than the *Characteristics*. Among those who were most influenced was Hutcheson and, through him, Hume. This has no doubt occasioned the quite common view<sup>9</sup> that Shaftesbury was the founder of the sentimentalist school in ethics and the originator of the view that moral distinctions are known by a moral sense. I am inclined to think that this is mistaken. Shaftesbury's occasional use of the term 'moral sense' is casual and carries no implication that moral discernment is analogous to sensory awareness of secondary qualities. Nor would he side with those who held that morality is based on human sentiment or feeling rather than on reason. Moral distinctions are eternal and immutable, and the reflective faculty which discovers them is reason itself. Shaftesbury does indeed hold that, once we are capable of rational reflection on our affections, we shall immediately and inevitably develop reflective affections, but that may only be because, as a good Platonist, he holds that to recognise the good is to love it.

### ~ JOSEPH BUTLER ~

Butler's ethical doctrines are to be found in his *Fifteen Sermons* and in the later *Analogy of Religion*, particularly in the 'Dissertation on Virtue' which forms an Appendix to the latter. He is as much a practical as a theoretical thinker; his careful analysis is aimed at dispelling any intellectual confusions in his audience which may give them grounds, or at least excuse, for being less devoted to the cause of virtue than they should be. His central contention is that virtue consists in following

human nature and vice in deviating from it, and that this reflection is sufficient to show why we should follow the path of virtue.

Like Shaftesbury, he conceives of the virtuous person as someone in whom the various motivational principles stand in the right relation to each other. For Butler, human nature is hierarchical; there are at least two principles which are by nature superior to the rest and whose verdicts must be respected. These are self-love, which considers what is in our interest, and conscience, which judges what is right or wrong. Butler's use of the term conscience is wider than ours – its verdicts embrace not only my own actions but those of others. Some commentators have contended, mistakenly in my view,<sup>10</sup> that Butler also thought of benevolence as a superior principle. At the bottom of the pecking order are the particular appetites, passions and affections, which can be thought of as desires for particular things – food, shelter, comfort, and so on.

Butler's account of superiority rests on a distinction between the strength and the authority of a principle of action. If there were no superior principles in our nature then we should be acting according to our natures in following the strongest impulse. A superior principle, however, has an authority which is independent of its strength, so that the question of whether we should act on its edicts is settled by appeal to its authority. That authority is a rational one; the verdict of a superior principle provides better reason to act than the promptings of an inferior one. To act deliberately in defiance of one's interest, or of what is right, is thus to violate one's own nature, for it is to follow a lower principle in preference to a higher, to prefer the worse reason to the better. Butler does not attempt to *argue* that moral and prudential requirements provide better reasons for action than those that stem from particular desires, rather he seeks simply to remind his readers of what he takes to be common knowledge. What chiefly seems to distinguish conscience and self-love from the other principles is that they are both reflective; they both survey our actual or proposed actions and pronounce upon their worthiness.

Though similar in their reflective authority, self-love and conscience differ in various ways. Butler classifies self-love, but not conscience, as an affection. It is hard to know what to make of this, but it seems to imply two things, both of which can be questioned. First, self-love, like any of the affections but unlike conscience, can be present in an immoderate degree, in which case it is liable to frustrate its own end. To this it might be objected that conscientiousness, as well as prudence, may perhaps be carried to excess. Second, Butler thinks of self-love, like any affection or desire, as having a distinctive feeling-tone of which we are aware when it is aroused in us. But in writing, as he sometimes does, of *cool* self-love Butler seems implicitly

to acknowledge that a concern for our own good may be present and effective without manifesting itself as a feeling. Nor does it seem correct to deny that the promptings of conscience can have a feeling-tone; the pangs of conscience can be as searing as those of unrequited love.

More importantly, Butler contrasts the judgements of self-love, which require careful calculation of all the consequences of the actions open to us, with the deliverances of conscience, which are immediate, not in the sense that they require no thought, but that they are concerned only with the nature of the action itself, including the intention, and not with its consequences. Conscience 'pronounces determinately some actions to be in themselves just, right, good; others to be in themselves evil, wrong, unjust'.<sup>11</sup> Judgements of conscience, unlike those of self-love, are thus not hostage to fortune; we do not have to wait to see how things turn out in order to determine whether our moral judgement was correct.

In what relation do self-love and conscience stand to each other in Butler's hierarchical account of motivational principles? Are they equal or does one carry more authority than the other? This is a question to which Butler appears to give a variety of answers, and his apparent inconsistencies have much exercised commentators. Since he is generally concerned with theoretical matters only in so far as they bear on practice it might at first appear that he could, and perhaps should, have avoided the question altogether. For Butler is as convinced as Shaftesbury that there can never be a genuine conflict between duty and self-interest, at least if we take into account a future life.

Conscience and self-love, if we understand our true happiness, always lead us the same way. Duty and interest are perfectly coincident; for the most part in this world, but entirely and in every instance if we take in the future and the whole; this being implied in the notion of a good and perfect administration of things.<sup>12</sup>

The question does not however, as Butler points out, lack practical application. Those who doubt Butler's claim can face a choice between what they believe to be two conflicting sources of obligation, and those who accept it may still find, because of the limitations of our knowledge, that self-love and conscience offer conflicting advice on some occasion.

Butler often writes as if conscience is pre-eminent, but there are places where he seems to rank the two equally and, in one notorious passage, self-love is given the power of veto.

Let it be allowed, though virtue or moral rectitude does indeed consist in affection to and pursuit of what is right and good,

as such; yet, that when we sit down in a cool hour, we can neither justify to ourselves this or any other pursuit, till we are convinced that it will be for our happiness, or at least not contrary to it.<sup>13</sup>

This passage is generally considered not to represent Butler's considered views but to be a concession by him to his sceptical and wordly congregation. Even if Butler does not hold that we are not justified in pursuing some course unless we are convinced that it is not contrary to our interest, we should not however conclude that he holds that we would ever be justified in acting in a way that we were convinced was against our self-interest. For he nowhere states that moral obligations are, by their very nature, superior to prudential ones. What he does offer is an argument for holding that, when in doubt, we are obliged to follow the guidance of conscience rather than self-love. That argument is based, however, not on the superiority of moral to prudential reasons, but on the difference between the calculative nature of prudential reasoning and the immediacy of the verdicts of conscience.

For the natural authority of the principle of reflection [i.e. conscience] is an obligation the most near and intimate, the most certain and known: whereas the contrary obligation can at the utmost appear no more than probable; since no man can be *certain* in any circumstances that vice is his interest in the present world, much less can he be certain against another: and thus the certain obligation would entirely supersede and destroy the uncertain one.<sup>14</sup>

Thus Butler holds, in conscious opposition to Shaftesbury, that our obligation to virtue remains even if we are completely sceptical about the coincidence of duty and interest. We do not have to appeal to something external to morality as our justification for doing what is right.

On what grounds does conscience determine that some course of action is the morally right one? Butler, in denying that benevolence is the whole of virtue, rejects the utilitarian position (strongly urged, for example, by Hutcheson) that the right action is the one which produces the most happiness. Butler advocates instead a pluralist deontology; that is, a theory in which there are several distinct duties, of which benevolence is merely one, each of which has its own claim on us. We disapprove, for example, of stealing and fraud in and of themselves, quite independently of their generally deleterious effects on the general happiness. Butler thinks that our other duties can be encompassed within three general headings: justice, veracity and, perhaps more con-

troversially, prudence. Imprudence is, he holds, a vice because we not only regret our follies but disapprove of them as well.

Although Butler is clear that we are not, and should not be, utilitarians, he does appear at least to entertain the hypothesis that God might be a utilitarian, concerned only with maximizing the happiness of his creatures. If that were so, then He would have implanted a deontological conscience in us because 'He foresaw this constitution of our nature would produce more happiness, than forming us with a temper of more general benevolence'.<sup>15</sup> It is doubtful, however, if Butler would endorse this suggestion, for the following reason. He holds that to judge actions as morally good or evil carries with it the thought that they deserve reward or punishment respectively. God, as a morally righteous judge, must be supposed to reward and punish us according to our deserts. But to say that someone deserves ill is not to say 'that we conceive it for the good of society, that the doer of such actions should be made to suffer'.<sup>16</sup> Questions of desert look back to the quality of the action, but utilitarianism is essentially forward-looking, concerned only with the future effects of reward and punishment. In treating us according to our deserts God would be motivated not by benevolence but by justice.

Many commentators have criticized Butler for failing to give a more detailed account of the criteria which conscience might apply in determining what we ought to do on any specific occasion. In particular, he does not address a problem which faces anyone who holds that there is more than one duty, namely how we should decide in cases where duties conflict. His silence stems from his conviction that further guidance is not necessary.

The inquiries which have been made by men of leisure, after some general rule, the conformity to, or disagreement from which, would denominate our actions good or evil, are in many respects of great service. Yet let any plain honest man, before he engages in any course of action, ask himself, Is this I am going about right, or is it wrong? Is it good or is it evil? I do not in the least doubt, but that this question would be answered agreeably to truth and virtue, by almost any fair man in almost any circumstance.<sup>17</sup>

While I share Butler's doubts about the utility of the reflections of the 'men of leisure', it is no longer possible to share Butler's confidence in the (almost complete) inerrancy of the pronouncements of conscience.

While benevolence may not be the whole of virtue it is a large part of it, and a correspondingly large part of Butler's defence of virtue is devoted to defending benevolence against two kinds of attack from those who think that self-love is, or ought to be, our only motive. He

seeks to show, first, that benevolence is a genuine motive in human beings and, second, that there is no special antipathy between self-love and benevolence.

Benevolence is real only if people are sometimes directly motivated by a concern for the welfare of others. Two theories deny that this is the case: psychological egoism, which holds that all our actions are, at bottom, motivated by a concern for our own good, and psychological hedonism, which holds that what primarily motivates us is always the prospect of our own pleasure.

Butler's central argument against the psychological egoism of thinkers such as Hobbes and Mandeville draws on his analysis of the differences between self-love and the other, particular, affections. The particular affections are directed towards some specific object or state of affairs which we find attractive, for example, drinking a glass of beer, reading a novel or playing a round of golf. The object of self-love is not, however, any particular desirable state of affairs, but one's own happiness as such. Happiness is defined by Butler as consisting 'only in the enjoyment of those objects, which are by nature suited to our several particular appetites, passions, and affections'.<sup>18</sup> Self-love, the desire for our own happiness, is thus a reflective affection; it is a desire that our other desires attain their objects. But if that is so, then it cannot be the case that we are motivated solely by self-love. Self-love achieves its object through the satisfaction of our other affections; 'take away these affections and you leave self-love absolutely nothing at all to employ itself about'.<sup>19</sup> While we might question Butler's claim that happiness is to be identified with the satisfaction of our various affections, it cannot be doubted that getting what we want is an important element in happiness, and that is all Butler needs for this argument to be decisive.

The psychological hedonist claims that Butler has misdescribed the object of the particular affections; what motivates us to drink beer, play a round of golf, or relieve the distressed is always the pleasure we shall receive from these activities. Did they not please us we should not engage in them. So our primary object in helping others is not their welfare, but our pleasure. Making them happy is but a means to making ourselves happy. Butler argues in reply that the hedonist's account of the object of our affections is incoherent. We only derive pleasure from engaging in an activity or achieving a goal, Butler claims, if we want to engage in that activity or achieve that goal. I will only get pleasure from playing cricket if I want to play it; if I only wanted the pleasure and cared nothing for cricket my efforts to achieve pleasure that way would be self-stultifying. When I help others I may well get pleasure from doing so, but that does not show that my aim was to experience the pleasures of altruism. On the contrary, I must have

wanted to help them in order to be pleased; my primary object must have been their good. Of course, given that I do experience pleasure from acting altruistically, self-love may encourage me to continue in that path in order to get more pleasure. But the pleasure will cease unless I continue to be motivated by a concern for the others' good.

This is a famous rebuttal but not, I think, a decisive one. It crucially depends on the claim that we cannot find pleasure in any activity unless we have a prior desire to engage in it. That claim is, however, false. Some pleasures come unbidden and unsought, as when we suddenly smell a delightful scent, or discover a fascinating programme while idly twiddling the radio tuner. The psychological hedonist can make use of this fact to construct a theory in which all intentional action is motivated by a desire for the associated pleasure. We are born, this theory runs, with some instincts which lead us to explore our environment in the search for food, warmth and so on, and a capacity to take pleasure in certain activities, while finding others distasteful. Our initial behaviour is thus instinctual but not intentional. We soon discover, however, that some activities are pleasant or bring pleasure in their wake. We then repeat the activity in order to experience the pleasure again. It is always the prospect of further pleasure which motivates the intentional repetition of what was not, initially, an intentional action. The correct response to this defence of hedonism is, I believe, to deny the distinction in terms of which the debate takes place; that is, to deny that we can here distinguish between our wanting to do some act and our wanting the pleasure that comes from doing it. But that would take us beyond Butler's argument.

Are benevolence and self-love incompatible? Butler has shown that the exercise of self-love requires us to be motivated by particular affections, and some of these affections, such as ambition and desire for esteem, have some good of our own as their primary end. Between such affections and self-love there would seem to be no essential conflict. Benevolence, however, appears directly opposed to self-love. The former aims at the good of others, the latter at my own good; so the more I am motivated by the one the less, it seems, I can be motivated by the other.

Butler's exposition of the mistake behind this line of thought is masterly. It falsely presupposes that if I am acting in your interests I cannot also be promoting my own. Butler's analysis has shown that, with respect to any desire of mine, my happiness consists in that desire being gratified. This is as true of a desire for the happiness of others as it is of any other desire. Insofar as I want you to be happy then my happiness depends on your being happy; my happiness is bound up with yours. We must not think of happiness by analogy with property, so that to give happiness to others is necessarily to diminish my own.

The truth is that benevolence, while distinct from self-love, is no more opposed to it than to any other particular passion. The gratification of any passion whatever will be seconded by self-love when it promotes my interest and vetoed by it when it conflicts with it.

Butler proceeds, in a Shaftesburian vein, to show both that to have a character in which benevolence is a strong motive is conducive to happiness, and that an excessive concern for one's own happiness is self-defeating. His discussion errs at only one point, and that is easily corrected. Butler equates selfishness with immoderate self-love, i.e. with an excessive calculating concern for one's own interest or advantage. But there is another type of person who is also properly regarded as selfish. As we have seen, some of our particular affections, such as ambition or covetousness, have as their end some good to ourselves; others, such as compassion or love of one's children, aim at the good of another. Someone in whom the former desires are too strong and the latter too weak is rightly seen as selfish, even if the attempt to satisfy his selfish desires leads him to ignore his real interest. Imprudence and selfishness are not incompatible.

Where does Butler fit into the eighteenth-century debate between rationalism and sentimentalism? Given his interest in moral instruction, rather than in metaphysical theory, Butler constructed a moral psychology which was neutral between rationalism and sentimentalism. Throughout his writings, however, there are clear indications that he sides with the rationalists in general and, almost certainly, with the position of Samuel Clarke in particular (with whom he corresponded on moral theory while he was a very young man).

### ❧ RICHARD PRICE ❧

Richard Price develops a rationalist theory which develops and improves on earlier theories, such as Clarke's. While indebted in many ways to both Shaftesbury and Butler, Price is chiefly distinguished from them by his interest in moral epistemology. The sentimentalists offer us an account of moral awareness which is modelled on what had been, since Locke, the orthodox account of our awareness of secondary qualities, such as colours, tastes, sounds and smells. The story runs like this. Through our sense-organs we are able to receive ideas of objects and events in our immediate environment. Some of these ideas, those of the primary qualities, such as shape, size and solidity, are both caused by and resemble those qualities in the objects of which they are ideas. There is nothing, however, in the objects themselves that resembles our ideas of colour, sound and so on. The story of what is going on in the physical world when someone sees red or smells coffee



would not mention colours or smells at all. Rather, the object is so constituted that, under certain circumstances, it emits either waves or particles which stimulate the sense-organs in certain ways causing us to have the characteristic secondary quality experience. It follows that creatures whose sense-organs were unlike ours would have a quite different range of secondary quality experience.

When it comes, however, to the question of what colours, smells etc. actually are, we find two accounts current. First, there is the dispositional theory: colours etc. are properties of the object, but now understood as nothing more than a disposition of the object to cause characteristic ideas in normal human observers in standard perceptual conditions. Second, there is the subjective theory: colours, sounds etc. are not in the objects themselves but are identified with the ideas in the perceiving subject caused by those objects. Both accounts exist, in tension, in Locke, though it is now generally agreed that the former represents Locke's 'official' theory. But the latter account gained considerable currency through the work of Berkeley and Hume, who took it to be the one Locke was offering.<sup>20</sup> It is the account which Price accepts, and which he takes the sentimentalists to have used as their model for moral qualities. Thus the sentimentalists, represented for Price by Hutcheson, aided and abetted by Hume, maintain that '[m]oral right and wrong, signify nothing *in the objects themselves* to which they are applied, any more than agreeable and harsh; sweet and bitter; pleasant and painful; but only *certain effects in us*.'<sup>21</sup> We have within us a moral sense which finds certain actions (and characters) pleasing and others displeasing. It approves of the former and disapproves of the latter, and hence we call the former right (or good) and the latter wrong (or bad). It is clearly possible that there should be creatures whose moral sense is differently constituted from our own. Such beings would have different patterns of approval or disapproval from ours, but it would be idle to claim that one set of reactions might be closer to the truth or fit the facts better than another. The moral sense theory denies that there are distinctively moral facts and, if it allows for moral truth at all, can do so only relative to a particular type of moral sense.

In opposition to this view, Price offers us a realist conception of moral properties. An action is either right or wrong quite independently of our responses or choices, or those of any other being, including God. This position commits Price to rejecting not only the moral sense theory but also, like Shaftesbury and Butler before him, theological voluntarism. He sees that the prevailing Lockean epistemology forces one towards a moral sense theory and so sets about demolishing it, drawing extensively on Plato and the Cambridge Platonists, especially Cudworth.

Price agrees with the prevailing orthodoxy that all our ideas are

either simple or complex, and that the latter are built out of the former. On the empiricist account, simple ideas, from which all our knowledge is built, are derived either from sense experience or from reflection on what passes in our own mind. Since our ideas of right and wrong are not sensory concepts, in the way in which squareness or redness might be thought to be, they must, on the empiricist story, be ideas of reflection. From what aspect of our inner life might they be derived? The obvious answer is from the feelings of pleasure or displeasure, approval and disapproval we experience when we contemplate action or character. Empiricism thus spawns a theory which offers an account of morality, not in terms of the nature of the object but in terms of our response to it.

Price defends several anti-empiricist theses which he does not always clearly distinguish. His main contention is that there is a third source of simple ideas, in addition to sense and reflection, namely the understanding, and that right and wrong are simple ideas derived from this third source. Sense and understanding have, on Price's view, quite different roles. Sense deals only with particulars – we are necessarily only aware, on any occasion, of one or more particular things and their properties – whereas understanding can grasp universals or abstract ideas and the relations between them. Sense is passive, while understanding is an active, discerning faculty, which, reflects, compares, judges and seeks to comprehend the nature of things. An idea which has its source in the understanding would be an a priori rather than an empirical concept; that is, a concept which could not be constructed by the standard Lockean method of abstraction from the contents of sense-experience.

Price's defence of the claim that right and wrong are simple a priori concepts is to search, as J. L. Mackie once put it, for companions in guilt. He produces many examples of ideas whose source, he claims, can only be the understanding, and these fall into different groups. They include: ideas applicable to objects of more than one sense, such as equality, resemblance and difference; ideas of what is unobservable, such as substance; ideas that involve modal notions, such as impenetrability and causation. (Modal notions include necessity and possibility. If something is impenetrable then it *cannot* be penetrated; if one thing causes another then, given the first, the second *must* follow. Experience can only tell us what does happen, not what cannot or must happen.)

We might concede, for the sake of argument, that all the items on this rather motley list are a priori concepts, but they are not all, on even the most generous interpretation, simple ideas, for many of them seem capable of further analysis. Price does not seem to be aware of this objection, but his argument may easily be developed to show that the understanding is the source of *simple* ideas. What Price is trying to

show is that the complex concepts on his list cannot be built up in the standard empiricist manner, from simple ideas of sense or reflection. But then, given the traditional account of simple and complex within which Price is operating, that can only be because, of the simple ideas out of which they are built, at least one must itself be a priori. Thus, in the cases of concepts like impenetrability and causation, the argument would seem to be this. To hold that something is, say, impenetrable, is to hold that it is impossible for another body to occupy the space which it is occupying. The concept of impossibility is a plausible candidate, however, for being a simple a priori concept. Although there are other ways of saying that something is impossible – such as saying that it cannot happen – these do not provide an analysis of the concept into simpler elements. To understand that something cannot happen presupposes that one understands what it is for something to be impossible, and vice versa. So Price's argument can be construed as supporting the claim that there are simple a priori concepts.

If there are simple a priori concepts, then rightness and wrongness may certainly be among them. Since the consequence of believing they are not is the adoption of the counter-intuitive moral sense theory, we are justified in believing they do have this status. It has to be said, however, that Price makes the case for realism look stronger than he is entitled to by confronting it with a weak and implausible version of the moral sense theory. Because Price holds the subjective theory of secondary qualities he takes it that it is not only false but absurd to ascribe colours, sounds and so on to bodies.

*A coloured body*, if we speak accurately, is the same absurdity with a *square sound*. We need no experience to prove that heat, cold, colours, tastes, etc. are not real qualities of bodies; because the ideas of matter and of these qualities are incompatible. But is there indeed any such incompatibility between *actions* and *right*? Or any such absurdity in affirming the one of the other? Are the ideas of them as different as the idea of a sensation and its cause? <sup>22</sup>

But a sensible moral sense theorist would opt for the dispositional account of secondary qualities as his model and then argue, by analogy, that it is perfectly proper to speak of actions as right or wrong, just as it is to speak of objects as coloured. He would hope to give an account which did not require Price's kind of realism but which left our normal way of speaking and thinking unaltered.

Another of Price's favourite arguments against the moral sense theorist, which we might dub the indifference argument, is also too quick. It takes a theological turn in Price, but its implications are more general. If no actions are in themselves right and wrong then they are,

in themselves, morally indifferent. God, who is not deceived, would recognize this and hence would be unable to approve or disapprove of any action, for He would see that nothing in reality could ground His approval or disapproval. But that would be to suppose that His concern for our happiness had no rational foundation and was the result of 'mere unintelligent inclination'<sup>23</sup> which would greatly detract from His moral perfection. The more general consequence of this line of thought is that, if the moral sense theory were true, it would be irrational to continue to make moral judgements once we had discovered this truth. This conclusion serves, once again, to make the rival theory look unpalatable. But the crucial premise, that the moral sense theory deprives us of any good reasons for approving of one course of action rather than another, is not supported.

The origin of our ideas of right and wrong is not the only issue between Price and the empiricists. For Price claims that we can have a priori knowledge of basic moral principles. The rightness or wrongness of an act springs from its nature. Thus an act may be wrong in virtue of its being, for example, cruel, or dishonest, or a breach of promise. The connection between the moral character of an act and those features on which its moral character depends is, Price maintains, a necessary one. If cruel actions are wrong then they are wrong in all possible circumstances. Empiricism claims, however, that all our knowledge of the world comes from experience and experience can, apparently, reveal only contingent connections between features. It can show only that they are connected, not that they must be. Price asserts, in contradiction to this, that we know of these connections through an intuitive act of reason; not, that is, through a process of reasoning, but by rational reflection on the propositions in question.

Empiricists classically allow that there is one kind of connection which is necessary and can be known a priori, and that is a connection between concepts – a doctrine which finds expression in Hume's account of relations of ideas. We can know a priori, to use a hackneyed example, the necessary truth that all bachelors are unmarried because to be a bachelor just is to be an unmarried man. If it could similarly be shown that the concepts of rightness and wrongness can be analysed into other, less philosophically puzzling, concepts then two contentious features of Price's account would be removed at a stroke. Suppose, to give a concrete example, it was claimed that to call an action right was simply to claim that it was productive of happiness. First, we would have to show that the word 'wrong' signified, not a mysterious a priori concept graspable only by understanding, but the familiar empirical notion of making people happy. Second, we could then accommodate, within an empiricist epistemology, the claim that it is a necessary truth, known a priori, that an action which produces happiness is right.

It is here that Price's claims that right and wrong are simple ideas comes to the fore. Rightness and wrongness are indefinable, and we can prove this by showing that any such analysis will produce untenable consequences. For if the proposed analysis were correct then it would be 'palpably absurd' to ask whether producing happiness is right, for that would be just to ask whether producing happiness produces happiness. But the question is not palpably absurd, and so the definition fails. This tactic was revived by G. E. Moore 150 years later and is now known as the Open Question Argument. Anyone familiar with the history of twentieth-century moral philosophy will be aware of the extent to which the epistemological issues which Price raises here have dominated the subject.

It is a corollary of his position, Price tells us, that morality is eternal and immutable. If lying and ingratitude are wrong they are so in virtue of the kinds of action they are and no one, not even God, can alter this truth. But that seems to raise an obvious difficulty. It seems reasonable to believe that an action that is in itself morally indifferent may become obligatory if commanded by God, or if I have promised to do it. Yet how can this be, if its moral nature is unalterable by the will of any agent? How could, for example, an action be indifferent before I promised to do it and obligatory after? Price's answer is that we must not suppose that, in promising to do the act, we have left the non-moral nature of the original act unchanged but changed its moral character; that is impossible. What we have done is to change the nature of the act; it is now, in addition to its earlier properties, an instance of promise-keeping and, as such, obligatory.

In the broad outlines of the remainder of his moral theory Price repeats and elaborates points already made by Butler. So I shall merely draw attention to one or two discussions where Price goes beyond anything we find in Butler.

We have seen that moral judgement is the work of reason. Our judgements of right and wrong are often accompanied, however, by feelings of delight or detestation respectively. These feelings are distinct from the judgement, but they are not merely arbitrarily connected with it in virtue of our particular human sensibilities. We feel revulsion *because* we judge the action to be wrong, and any rational agent would feel the same. Price, like Shaftesbury, is a Platonist, and holds that to love virtue it is only necessary to know it. Similarly, we should not suppose that all our desires are the product of instinctive drives which we just happen to have, but which other rational beings might lack. Some desires, such as hunger and thirst, are instinctive, and are properly called appetites. But rational creatures are so constituted that they will necessarily desire happiness and truth, once they understand the nature of these goods. Desires which are in this way the product of reason

are best called affections. In imperfectly rational humans this rational desire for the happiness of ourselves and of others is strengthened by an instinctive concern for these ends; when so strengthened the resulting desire is properly called a passion.

Like Butler, Price rejects utilitarianism. We have a number of distinct duties, which he lists under six heads: (1) Duty to God; (2) Duty to self, or prudence; (3) Beneficence; (4) Gratitude; (5) Veracity; (6) Justice. Unlike Butler, Price does think that we need an account of what happens when duties conflict. In some cases, one duty is clearly weightier than another, and no perplexity arises. But there are many cases where it is not clear, and conscientious people may differ as to which duty should give way in these cases. There is always a determinate answer in such cases to the question What ought I to do? but we may lack penetration and wisdom to discern it. Doubt about what we should do in a particular case should not, however, infect our confidence in the existence of moral truth, for the fundamental principles which we bring to bear on individual cases are self-evident.

Does perfect virtue consist in performing all our duties or are there, as many have supposed, meritorious acts of heroism and saintliness which, while not morally required, are singled out for particular praise? Price maintains that there are no supererogatory acts, acts which go beyond the call of duty. Many of our obligations, such as that of being benevolent, are framed only in general terms; how we fulfil that duty is up to us. Since it is unclear how much is required of us by way of benevolence, truly virtuous persons will err on the side of generosity, but the praise we bestow on them will not be because they went beyond duty but because they showed such a great regard for their duty.

Finally, Price was apparently the first to draw the distinction, much discussed in the first half of the twentieth century, between what he called abstract and practical virtue, or what was later called objective and subjective duty. An agent's objective duty is determined by the actual facts of the case; his subjective duty by what he believes to be the facts of the case. It is for succeeding or failing to do one's subjective duty that one should be praised or blamed, for an imperfect agent cannot be required to avoid all errors of fact.<sup>24</sup>

#### ◆ NOTES ◆

1 Rand [8.7], 359.

2 Although Shaftesbury was Locke's pupil, he rejected his ethics and his empiricism. See his scathing attack in a letter to Michael Ainsworth, 3 June 1709, in Rand [8.7], 403-5.

- 3 *Inquiry*, Book I, Part 2, sect. ii, p. 250 in [8.5]. All subsequent quotations from the *Inquiry* will appear in this form: I. 2. ii [8.5], 250.
- 4 *Inquiry*, I. 2. iii [8.5], 252.
- 5 *Inquiry*, II. 1. i [8.5], 280.
- 6 *Inquiry*, II. 1. iii [8.5], 288.
- 7 *Inquiry*, II. 2. i [8.5], 294.
- 8 *Inquiry*, II. 2. i [8.5], 295.
- 9 One might almost say, orthodoxy. See for example Selby-Bigge [8.10], xxxii; Hudson [8.12], 1.
- 10 I give my reasons for thinking this contention mistaken in [8.27].
- 11 References to Butler will be by Sermon number and paragraph number in Bernard [8.8] (reproduced in many other editions). The *Sermons* will be denoted by an *S*, the Preface, added in the second edition, by a *P*, and the *Dissertation on Virtue* by *D*. Then will come the page number in Bernard, [8.8]. Thus the present reference is *S* 2.8 [8.8], 45.
- 12 *S* 3.9 [8.8], I: 57.
- 13 *S* 11.20 [8.8], I: 151.
- 14 *P* 26 [8.8], I: 12.
- 15 *D* 8 [8.8], II: 293.
- 16 *D* 3 [8.8], II: 288–9.
- 17 *S* 3.4 [8.8], I: 53.
- 18 *S* 11.9 [8.8], I: 141.
- 19 *P* 37 [8.8], I: 17.
- 20 See Berkeley, *Principles*, sect. x ([8.31], 117), and Hume in Raphael [8.11], 2: 18–19.
- 21 Price [8.9], 15. (All future quotations from Price will just give a page number.)
- 22 [8.9], 46.
- 23 [8.9], 49.
- 24 I am greatly indebted to Jonathan Dancy and Eve Garrard for comments on an earlier draft of this piece.

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