

## ETHICS AND SENTIMENT

Shaftesbury and Hutcheson

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In the eighteenth century, a number of British moral philosophers – the most notable of whom were Shaftesbury (1671–1713), Hutcheson (1694–1746), Hume (1711–76), and Adam Smith (1723–90) – developed a position that has come to be known as “moral sentimentalism,” or the moral sense theory. These philosophers disagreed about some things, but they all believed that there is a crucially important respect in which *non-selfish affection* is essential to morality.

The sentimentalists’ insistence on an essential moral role for non-selfish affection constituted a rejection of the two other main contending moral theories of the day. One of those positions was *egoism* – the view that morality is based entirely on self-interest. The other was *moral rationalism* – the view that morality originates in reason alone. In this chapter, I will explicate the views of Shaftesbury and Hutcheson, who were the first to set this sentimentalist course.

I will first describe Shaftesbury and Hutcheson’s anti-egoist arguments. I will then turn to their anti-rationalist arguments. In-between, I will briefly discuss Joseph Butler (1692–1752), whose views will serve as an illustrative transition between discussion of the sentimentalists’ attacks on egoism and on rationalism. I will conclude with some very brief remarks about Shaftesbury and Hutcheson’s influence on later sentimentalists.

**Shaftesbury and Hutcheson’s attack of egoism**

According to egoism as Shaftesbury and Hutcheson understood it, all of one’s actions have as their ultimate goal the promotion of one’s own happiness, and all of one’s normative judgments are based in self-interest as well. So, according to egoism, whenever I form a positive moral judgment about others’ conduct, it is because I think their conduct benefits me; and whenever I form a negative moral judgment about others’ conduct, it is because I think their conduct harms me.

Shaftesbury and Hutcheson thought egoism was a dangerous doctrine, not merely false but pernicious. Belief in egoism, they thought, promotes religious error, leading people to heed God's commandments only because of his power to reward and punish rather than to love and emulate him because of his intrinsic goodness. Belief in egoism damages political society, as it leads people to believe that peace can be bought only at the price of (Hobbesian) absolutism or (Mandevillian) manipulation. And belief in egoism destroys moral character, as believing that people always act selfishly can lead one constantly to regard others through a lens of jealous suspicion as well as deter one from ever trying to act non-selfishly oneself. The belief that self-interest underlies all human conduct can become a corrupting self-fulfilling prophecy.

To combat what they took to be these catastrophic consequences of egoism, Shaftesbury and Hutcheson launched a battery of arguments to show, first, that we judge people to be virtuous when we think they are motivated by concern to benefit humanity as a whole and not merely when we think their conduct advances our own selfish interests; and to show, second, that people can and sometimes do act out of truly non-self-interested concern to benefit others.

To combat the egoist claim that all of our moral judgments are based in self-interest, Hutcheson argued that there are in fact many things we think promote our self-interest that we nonetheless do not judge to be virtuous. Inanimate objects can be just as advantageous to us as human beings, but we never judge inanimate objects to be virtuous (1725, *Beauty and Virtue* 117–18). Nor do we judge people to be virtuous if we believe their motives are selfish, no matter how much we may benefit from what they do (119, 124). A foreign traitor may benefit our country as much as the most valorous hero, but we still do not think the traitor virtuous (130). Moreover, at times we ourselves may have the option of performing actions that harm others, but coming to believe that those actions will be to our own advantage will not necessarily lead us to think that they are virtuous (126–7). And when we give in to temptation and do things that benefit ourselves while harming others, we may continue to morally condemn what we have done even after we have reaped the benefits (127).

A non-egoist account of moral judgment also better explains the fact that there are many things that we think do *not* promote our self-interest that we nonetheless *do* judge to be virtuous. We judge to be virtuous people who have done good deeds long ago in distant lands, even though there is no chance that their actions will have any bearing on our own welfare (117, 121). We judge to be virtuous people who have attempted to benefit others, even if, as a result of circumstances outside of their control, no good whatsoever came of their actions (123). Indeed, it is not uncommon for us to judge to be virtuous people who have performed actions that actually conflict with our self-interest, such as someone with good intentions who harms us by mistake, or a “gallant Enemy” who serves his country well even though it damages our own cause (120, 130, 133).

So according to Shaftesbury and Hutcheson, we judge people to be virtuous when and only when we think they act from ultimately benevolent motives. But it could still be the case that no one ever acts on such benevolent motives – that no one ever acts in a truly virtuous way. Shaftesbury and Hutcheson argued against this possibility, however, contending that egoist accounts of motivation did a manifestly worse job than non-egoist accounts of explaining the wide spectrum of observable activities humans engage in.

Shaftesbury ridiculed egoistic interpretations of “civility, hospitality, humanity towards strangers or people in distress,” arguing that it is much more natural to explain such conduct simply by positing real sociability and benevolence (1999, *Characteristics* 55). Human conduct, according to Shaftesbury, is better explained by supposing that people are often motivated by “passion, humour, caprice, zeal, faction and a thousand other springs, which are counter to self-interest” (54; cf. 247–57). The only way the egoist view of motivation can be plausibly maintained is if it is construed tautologically, i.e. if self-interest is defined so as to encompass as a matter of definition everything we pursue. But such a view is empty.

In a similar vein, Hutcheson argued that all egoist attempts to reduce or assimilate our seemingly benevolent conduct to the pursuit of self-interest are miserable failures (*Beauty and Virtue* 145, 155). One of Hutcheson’s principal examples was the benevolence parents exhibit toward their children, which can lead them to act in ways that don’t seem to be in their self-interest at all (155–8). Egoists try to explain away such cases by attributing all sorts of selfish motives to parents who benefit their children. But, Hutcheson plausibly argued, such interpretations either tacitly presuppose that parents have a disinterested, ultimate desire for the happiness of their children, mistake metaphors for literal truths, or define “selfishness” in a way that makes the claim that parents act selfishly a mere tautology. Hutcheson clinched the point with the following thought experiment: Imagine that God has declared that a person is about to be “suddenly annihilated, but at the Instant of his Exit it should be left to his Choice whether his Friend, his Children, or his Country should be made happy or miserable for the future, when he himself could have no Sense of either Pleasure or Pain from their State” (1753, *Beauty and Virtue* [5th edn] 147). Would such a person lack the motive to promote his children’s happiness? Of course not. If anything, a person’s motivation to promote the future well-being of his children grows stronger as his death draws near. Nor is it only a child whose happiness one may care about for its own sake. At “the instant of his Exit,” one may be motivated to promote one’s friends’ long-term happiness as well. Indeed, this benevolent motive is readily apparent in many actual human interactions. We often act benevolently toward “Neighbours” even when we have “receiv’d no good Offices” from them, and we desire the happiness of our fellow citizens even when we are not in any position to share in it (1725, *Beauty and Virtue* 158). We care about the happiness of people in the “most distant parts of the Earth,” as is evident from the distress we feel on hearing of the misery of people in faraway lands and the joy we feel on hearing of their good fortune (159).

### Butler: against egoism, non-committal on sentimentalism vs. rationalism

In their battles against egoism, Shaftesbury and Hutcheson had a powerful ally in the person of Joseph Butler, Bishop of Durham (1692–1752). Butler endorsed anti-egoist arguments similar to those found in the work of Shaftesbury and Hutcheson. Butler also developed an additional argument that was particularly incisive (Butler's presentation of this argument can be found in Raphael 1991: 332–6 and 363–73).

According to Butler, the egoist view that our desire for our own happiness leaves no room for any truly benevolent motives is based on a misunderstanding of what desire for one's own happiness truly is. The desire for one's own happiness, which Butler called "self-love," is not the desire for any particular substantive thing. Rather, the desire for happiness is a general, second-order desire that our substantive, first-order desires be fulfilled. Happiness consists of the fulfillment of our first-order desires; it is not a single particular thing itself. But what sorts of things do we have first-order desires for? What are the objects of our particular, substantive affections? Some of these are for things that concern only ourselves or our own pleasures. But observation of ourselves and others plainly reveals that many other of our particular substantive affections are for things that are non-selfish or disinterested. And the crucial point to realize, according to Butler, is that these non-selfish desires are not in conflict with self-love (properly conceived) but rather are the first-order components of which happiness consists. Egoists who say that everything we do is based on self-interest are then either saying something true but compatible with truly benevolent desires – namely, that the fulfillment of our first-order desires contributes to our happiness (where "happiness" is taken to be just the term we use to encompass the satisfaction of our first-order desires). Or they are saying something incompatible with truly benevolent desires – namely, that all of our substantive, first-order desires are for our own selfish pleasure – but false.

But while Butler was on Shaftesbury and Hutcheson's side in their fight against egoism, he did not align himself with all of their views. Butler thought that virtue involved a wider array of character traits than just benevolence, while Shaftesbury and Hutcheson often identified virtue entirely with benevolence (see Raphael 1991: 383–6). And – particularly important for our discussion – Butler did not equate the source of our moral distinction with a non-rational sense. Like Hutcheson and Shaftesbury, Butler believed that our moral judgments and actions are based on a non-selfish principle internal to every human mind. Like Shaftesbury and Hutcheson, Butler claimed that that principle is distinct from self-interest. But Shaftesbury and Hutcheson also held that this principle was affective, not rational. And on this point Butler remained resolutely non-committal, explicitly refusing to side either with those who claimed the moral faculty should be taken to be "moral reason" or with those who claimed the moral faculty

should be taken to be “moral sense.” Perhaps, Butler said, the moral faculty should be “considered as a sentiment of the understanding, or as a perception of the heart” (Raphael 1991: 379), a turn of phrase that gracefully sidesteps the dispute between rationalists and sentimentalists.

One explanation for Butler’s not committing to one side or the other of this dispute was his belief that a resolution of it was irrelevant for his overriding practical purpose, which was to make people more virtuous. Defeating egoism was crucial to this purpose, as belief in egoism can destroy political, religious, and moral character. But it seems that Butler thought this purpose could be equally well-served by a rationalist or sentimentalist account of the internal non-selfish moral faculty.

Shaftesbury and Hutcheson shared Butler’s primary goal of defending the cause of virtue, and they too thought the most important aspect of this was to show that we had truly non-selfish concerns for others. Whether the origin of that concern was rational or affective was of secondary importance. Shaftesbury and Hutcheson did maintain from the start that morality was based on a moral sense, but their initial emphasis was on the *moral* part of that term, not on the *sense* part.

Eventually, however, Shaftesbury and Hutcheson’s differences with moral rationalism would come to the fore (albeit pretty much after Shaftesbury had concluded his philosophical career). Let us examine these differences now.

### Shaftesbury and Hutcheson on moral rationalism

Moral rationalism has a long and varied history, but the rationalist views most current in Shaftesbury and Hutcheson’s day were well-represented by Ralph Cudworth, Samuel Clarke, John Balguy, and Gilbert Burnet. The claim that is often taken to be essential to moral rationalism is that morality originates in reason alone, and Cudworth, Clarke, Balguy, and Burnet did certainly hold to that. But on closer inspection we find that this is not a single claim but actually encompasses a cluster of at least the following three ideas.

- (1) The rationalist ontological claim: there are purely rational moral properties that are independent of all human minds.
- (2) The rationalist epistemological claim: humans apprehend morality through the use of reason alone.
- (3) The rationalist practical claim: humans act morally when they are motivated by purely rational considerations.

It is especially important to keep in mind the differences between these when examining Shaftesbury, as it turns out that his views are consistent with (1), conflict with (2), and stand in a complicated, hard-to-quickly-summarize relationship to (3).

*Shaftesbury and moral rationalism*

Shaftesbury never denied the rationalist ontological claim. He believed that good and evil existed independently of human sentiments (*Characteristics* 150, 168, 175, 266–7). This affinity with the rationalists is, however, decidedly absent in Shaftesbury's account of the *conduct* of the virtuous moral agent.

Shaftesbury holds that the moral status of persons' conduct is based entirely on their motives. Indeed, Shaftesbury's contention that moral worth is based on motive is as uncompromising and emphatic as Kant's (see *Characteristics* 169–71; 174–7; cf. Kant 2002: 199–201). Where Shaftesbury differs from Kant – what makes him a sentimentalist and not a rationalist – is his belief that only affections can motivate to action. But because he believes only affections motivate, and because he thinks moral status is based entirely on motive, Shaftesbury is led to the conclusion that moral status is based entirely on affection (*Characteristics* 171, 174, 192). For Shaftesbury, the essential difference between virtuous conduct and non-virtuous conduct is that the former is motivated by one kind of affection and the latter is not. This is clearly inconsistent with the rationalist practical claim.

A crucially important related aspect of Shaftesbury's view is his belief that virtue is a subset of goodness – that all who are virtuous are good but that not all who are good are virtuous. A creature is good, according to Shaftesbury, if its affections promote the well-being of the system of which it is a part, and non-human animals are just as capable of possessing this type of affection as humans. Goodness is thus within the reach of all sensible creatures, not only humans but also non-human animals, such as tigers. "Virtue or merit," on the other hand, is within the reach of "man only" (*Characteristics* 172). That is because virtue or merit is tied to a special kind of affection that only humans possess. This special kind of affection is a second-order affection, an affection that has as its object another affection. We humans experience these second-order affections because we, unlike non-human animals, are conscious of our own affections. Not only do we possess affections, but we also reflect on or become aware of the affections we have. And when we reflect on our own affections, we develop feelings about them. Imagine, for instance, you feel the desire to help a person in distress. In addition to simply feeling that desire, you may also become aware that you are feeling that desire. And when you become aware of that, you may experience a positive feeling (or "liking") toward your desire to help. Or imagine you feel the desire to harm a person who has bested you in a fair competition. In addition to simply feeling the desire to harm, you may also become aware that you are feeling that desire. And when you become aware of that, you may experience a negative feeling (or "dislike") toward your desire to harm (172). Shaftesbury calls this capacity to feel second-order affections the "sense of right and wrong" or the "moral sense" (179–80). The moral sense is that which produces in us feelings of "like" or "dislike" for our own (first-order) affections. When the

moral sense is operating properly, it produces positive feelings toward affections that promote the well-being of humanity and negative feelings toward affections that detract from the well-being of humanity. The second-order feelings that the moral sense produces can themselves motivate to action. And humans – who alone possess the powers of reflection necessary for consciousness of their own affections and thus alone possess a moral sense – are virtuous if they act from those second-order feelings (175–6).

Shaftesbury held that this moral sense is the basis of the moral judgments we typically make in day-to-day life. If I conduct myself in a way that leads you to think I am motivated to benefit (or harm) humanity, your moral sense will lead you to approve or “like” (or disapprove or “dislike”) me. And these approvals (and disapprovals) are the basis of the moral judgments you form about me. In addition, the approvals and disapprovals of your moral sense are the basis of your assessment of which conduct open to you is virtuous or vicious. As Shaftesbury writes,

In these vagrant characters of picture of manners, which the mind of necessity figures to itself and carries still about with it, the heart cannot possibly remain neutral but constantly takes part one way or other. However false or corrupt it be within itself, it finds the difference, as to beauty and comeliness, between one heart and another, one turn of affection, one behaviour, on sentiment and another, accordingly, in all disinterested cases, must approve in some measure of what is natural and honest and disapprove what is dishonest and corrupt.

(*Characteristics* 173)

Such an account of moral judgment conflicts with the rationalist epistemological claim, as it implies that our judgments of morality involve the moral sense – that our judgments that something is virtuous (or vicious) are based on the second-order affection of approval (or disapproval).

Elsewhere, however, Shaftesbury suggests that we can apprehend morality through reason alone. When presenting his philosophical account of goodness in the *Inquiry* – and this account is the foundation of his views of morality as a whole – Shaftesbury does not seem to take himself to be relying on sentiment at all. It seems that he thinks the nature of goodness is something that he can discern and establish through the use of reason alone (*Characteristics* 167–9). In other works, moreover, he suggested that we can apprehend the eternal and immutable standards of morality through something like *a priori* rational intuition (*Characteristics* 68).

What is the relationship between Shaftesbury’s apparently rationalist account of the nature of goodness and his sentimental account of the moral judgments we make in everyday life? It seems that Shaftesbury took the rationalist and sentimental accounts to be parallel – coexistent but not in interaction with

each other. But it's far from clear that such a combination can be made philosophically coherent. However that may be, for a fully fledged and uncompromising expression of the sentimentalist position – a position that unequivocally rejects all three aspects of moral rationalism – we have to turn to Hutcheson.

### *Hutcheson's arguments against moral rationalism*

Hutcheson's most important anti-rationalist arguments occur in his *Illustrations on the Moral Sense*, which was published in 1728. Following Shaftesbury, Hutcheson held there that virtuous conduct is conduct that has as its ultimate end or motive the promotion of the welfare of humanity (a view that, in Hutcheson's hands, became one of the most important precursors to utilitarianism). Hutcheson also held that all of our judgments that another person is virtuous are based on our having the positive reaction of approval toward the benevolent motives of that person. But the truths that reason alone informs us of are insufficient to give rise to such benevolent motives or to our approvals of them. Reason alone can play only an instrumental role in our moral conduct and judgments (1728, *Moral Sense* 139, 213–14, 217; Burnet and Hutcheson 1971: 209, 227). It tells us what the effects of an action will be – whether an action will promote certain ends or frustrate them – but it is incapable of favoring (in the sense either of approving or of motivating to pursue) one ultimate end over any other (*Moral Sense* 139). Our favoring of ultimate ends must therefore involve the operation of non-rational mental principles.

Hutcheson called these non-rational mental principles “internal senses,” a terminological choice warranted by what he took to be the phenomenological similarities between the experience of the external sensations of sight and touch and the experience of benevolent motives and approvals (*Moral Sense* 134, 154–5). The sense that gives rise to benevolent motives to actions Hutcheson called the “public sense,” and the sense that gives rise to approvals of benevolent motives Hutcheson called the “moral sense.”

The rationalists, of course, claimed that reason alone can give rise to ultimate ends and our moral judgments of them – that Hutcheson was wrong to limit reason to a purely instrumental role. According to Hutcheson, however, in making this claim the rationalists relied on vague formulations that, when made more precise, are false or fail to support moral rationalism in the slightest.

Rationalists sometimes maintained, for instance, that the “Morality of Actions consists in *Conformity to Reason, or Difformity from it*” (*Moral Sense* 136). But if something's conforming to reason means simply that “true propositions” apply to it, then this characteristic cannot distinguish morality from immorality, as there are as many true propositions that apply to immoral conduct as there are that apply to moral conduct (*Moral Sense* 137–8; see also 144–5, 148, 154). If an action's conforming to reason means that the action will achieve the end at which it is aimed, the rationalists are no better off, for one action can be just as



effective at achieving the vicious end of harming humanity as another action can be at achieving the virtuous end of helping (138–40). Then again, when people say that an action is conformable to reason they may sometimes mean simply that they approve of it. But since this approval presupposes a moral sense the rationalists still have not made any headway (144; cf. 160). (Hutcheson makes similar arguments against the rationalist view that morality is based on the eternal and immutable relation of fitness; see Hutcheson's *Moral Sense* (155–60) for discussion of this issue.)

Another rationalist tack was to hold that it is rationally self-evident that certain ends ought to be pursued over other ends. Burnet, for instance, claimed that it was self-evident that the happiness of humanity as a whole is a more reasonable or fitting end than the happiness of a single individual. Hutcheson agreed that we morally ought to pursue the happiness of humanity rather than our own selfish interests. But he denied that this idea can be construed in a way that is both self-evident and supportive of the rationalist cause, arguing that one makes no purely rational mistake if one prefers the happiness of the few to the happiness of the many. This will look to be a mistake only to those who have a prior preference for the happiness of the many (Burnet and Hutcheson 1971: 211; cf. 213, 228–9, and *Moral Sense* 222–3).

Hutcheson also argued that the only way the moral principles his rationalist opponents advanced could be rightly thought of as rationally necessary is if they were construed tautologously. Clarke, for instance, contended that the following is a self-evident, rationally necessary truth: “whoever first attempts, without the consent of his fellows, and except it be for some public benefit, to take to himself more than his proportion, is the beginner of iniquity” (Raphael 1991: 218). Similarly, William Wollaston contended that it is a self-evident, rationally necessary truth that it is wrong for a man to live “as if he had the estate which he has not” (Raphael 1991: 242). What Clarke and Wollaston are saying is that reason alone tells us that we ought to respect others’ property – that the principles of morality that condemn theft are rationally necessary. Hutcheson did not deny the self-evidence of Clarke and Wollaston’s statements of the morality of respect for property and the immorality of theft. He maintained, however, that if these statements are self-evident, it is only because the positive moral status of respect for property and the negative moral status of theft have been smuggled into the descriptions of the relevant actions. Clarke said that it was wrong, all things being equal, for someone to take more than is “his.” Wollaston said that it is wrong for someone to make use of something “which he *has* not.” But Clarke’s “his” and Wollaston’s “has” presuppose the morality of respect of property and the immorality of theft. So their principles are rationally necessary only because they are circular or tautologous (see *Moral Sense* 160, 213–14, 228–30, 272–3, and Burnet and Hutcheson 1971: 213).

An important rationalist criticism of his moral sense theory that Hutcheson addressed was that the deliverances of the senses are too uncertain and unstable

to serve as the foundation of morality. According to the rationalists, we do not as a matter of course simply accept our sentimental reactions as decisive of whether something is virtuous or vicious, because we know that our sentimental reactions are very often swayed by deceitful appearances. Rather, we hold our initial sentimental responses up to some standard before we properly pass judgment, and we then correct our judgments accordingly. But since we do this (so the rationalists maintained), we must be relying on some standard that is independent of our sentimental responses, as we use that standard to assess and correct our sentimental responses themselves.

Hutcheson responded by pointing out that we correct many of our initial sensory impressions of external objects while its still being the case that our judgments about the objects in question essentially involve sensation and cannot be funded merely by reason alone (*Moral Sense* 138–41, 147, 149). Under unusual lighting conditions, something may appear to us to be one color and yet we will judge (because we are cognizant of how the thing would appear under normal lighting conditions) that it is actually another color. But the fact that we correct our initial visual impression does not show that we have some purely rational, non-sensory standard of visual judgment. Similarly, I may sometimes feel negative emotions when I first consider an action or character, but then, after calm reflection on the action's actual tendencies or the actual features of the character, come to form a positive judgment about it. But the explanation for this correction of my initial reaction is that my moral judgment is based on the emotion I feel when I calmly reflect (just as my visual judgment is based on the visual impression I would have under normal lighting conditions), not that I refer to some purely rational moral standard.

## Conclusion

Just as Hutcheson clarified and extended Shaftesbury's moral sentimentalist ideas, so too did David Hume and Adam Smith refine and in some cases alter Hutcheson's sentimentalist ideas. Both Hume and Smith agreed with Hutcheson that morality originates in sentiment – where that claim is taken in a metaphysical, epistemological, and practical sense. But Hume and Smith also both believed that Hutcheson's account of the sentiments at the origin of morality was overly simplistic. While Hutcheson maintained that the moral sentiments were based in an explanatorily basic, divinely implanted moral sense, Hume and Smith argued that these sentiments were the end result of more basic and naturalistically explicable mental processes. And while Hutcheson maintained that benevolence was the single taproot of morality, Hume and Smith argued that other kinds of sentiment were also of fundamental moral importance. There is no doubt, however, that Hume and Smith's moral theories – as well as the sentimentalist theories of a myriad contemporary moral philosophers – grew out of

Shaftesbury and Hutcheson's initial insight into the crucial moral role of non-selfish affection.

See also Hobbes (Chapter 8); Ethics and reason (Chapter 9); Hume (Chapter 11); Adam Smith (Chapter 12); Non-cognitivism (Chapter 27); Error theory and fictionalism (Chapter 28).

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## Further reading

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