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Shaftesbury and the Psychological School of Ethics

British eighteenth-century psychology: the most typical association is probably to the *Nihil est in intellectu, quod non prius fuerit in sensu* epistemology of the empiricists. The view that the psychology of the period was synonymous with *tabula rasa*, sensation and association has long been widespread. Such a perception stems in part from the tendency of certain historians to stress the over-riding importance of the nineteenth-century German experimentalists in the development of psychology and hence, by extension, of the empirical tradition which had nurtured them. Yet modern psychology had roots other than these, and the eighteenth-century had additional, and at times apparently more pressing, intellectual concerns than the epistemological. Among these, problems of ethics and aesthetics—or in Neo-Platonic fashion, some fusion of the two—loomed large.

Predominant among British ethical theories of the first half of the eighteenth-century was the Moral Sense School whose founder was Anthony Ashley Cooper, third Earl of Shaftesbury (1671-1713). John Locke, as medical attendant to the Ashley household, was present at the birth of its heir, whose education he was also to superintend. "Mr. Locke having the absolute direction of my education, and to whom, next my immediate parents, as I must own the greatest obligation, so I have ever preserved the greatest gratitude and duty" (quoted by Fowler, 1882, p. 5). The 'polite arts' and the classics played a prominent role in this education, and the young Cooper later broadened his knowledge of those fields through the requisite Continental travel. Returning to Britain, he was briefly involved in politics—the family motto was "Love, Serve"—but ill health forced him to adopt a more retiring life. During his final decade the moralist was primarily involved in writing and revising the essays which were eventually included in his *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times* (1711).

Shaftesbury's first published work—in 1698—was a Preface to the *Sermons* of Benjamin Whichcote, a Cambridge Platonist. The following year a rough version of the *Inquiry Concerning Virtue, or Merit* was published—without permission—by John Toland: the author, when apprised of the fact, bought and apparently destroyed the unsold copies. This treatise had apparently been outlined as early as 1691 and is a “self-sufficient work which seems to have been intended to stand alone” (Voitle, 1955, p. 25). It was, however, later included—in substantially revised form—among the essays comprising the *Characteristics*. It was again corrected and revised by the author for what was to be a posthumous edition of that work (1714). Although Shaftesbury constantly returned to the same themes throughout the two volumes of the *Characteristics*, it is in the *Inquiry* that the most important statement of his moral theory is to be found. This treatise, in its final form, was his last official statement on the topic and was also the most formal and systematic presentation of that theory. His other papers, which add little to the moral theory described in the *Inquiry*, are more discursive in style, in keeping with his intention of bringing philosophy into ‘polite society’: the goal of philosophic discourse, he claimed, should be to improve mankind and not merely to describe and analyse.

As Fowler (1882, p. 63) has stated, Shaftesbury was “emphatically a Moral Philosopher.” A true son of the Enlightenment, he believed that to understand morality—like so many other subjects—one must begin with a study of human nature. It is, furthermore, by motives that men are “esteem'd good or ill” (p. 35).^{*} An examination of actions or their consequences alone is not of much value to the moralist since these may be influenced by external constraints or “a fear of some impending Punishment, or thro the allurement of some exteriour Reward” (p. 33). One must turn instead to the “inward Anatomy” (p. 138) of the mind, for only a study of the “Temper” can reveal the “Springs and Sources of all Actions” (p. 100) and the “Motive” or “sufficient Cause” of morality.

The “Fabrick of the Mind” (p. 140) is composed of various motives. Among these are such private or “self-affections” as love of life, resentment of injury, the appetites for nourishment and procreation, and love of praise and honour. Shaftesbury agreed with Hobbes that self-love is natural and necessary, but argued that the complexity of behaviour is too great to be explained by any one motive—such as egoism—or by one class of motives with varying forms. There are, he argued, two other major categories of affections, the “natural” and the “unnatural.” The former are the social motives and are “suited to the publick Good, or Good of the Species” (p. 44). Included among them are love, compassion, kindness, gratitude, equity, sociableness, good-

will and sympathy. The motives of the third category, the unnatural affections, benefit neither the self nor others; these include "*INHUMAN DELIGHT in beholding Torments, and in viewing Distress, Calamity, Blood, Massacre and Destruction, with a peculiar Joy and Pleasure*" (p. 254). Such inclinations are particularly strong among "Tyrants, and barbarous Nations" (p. 254). Other unnatural affections include "WANTON MISCHIEVIOUSNESS" (p. 255), and "MALICE, MALIGNITY, or ILL-WILL" (p. 256). Shaftesbury's disciple, Francis Hutcheson, was to doubt the very existence of such unnatural motives in pure form.

It is to the class of natural affections that we must look for the basis of morality. In Shaftesbury's view virtue is primarily a matter of one's relationship with others. It is a "social Passion" (p. 94) and the various motives which lead to virtuous behaviour are, therefore, those which involve relationships with others of one's kind—generosity, compassion, love, kindness, succour or "whatever else is of a social or friendly sort" (p. 167). Everyone, he claimed, "discerns and owns a publick Interest" and is aware of "what affects his Fellowship or Community" (p. 73). Being aware of the public good, we naturally seek "Advantage to Society" (p. 55). Yet behaviour which benefits others but is motivated by some hoped for gain cannot be considered moral or virtuous. Only when the affections are "suited to the publick Good...is the *natural Temper* intirely good" (p. 44).

Animals as well as men are capable of acting in a 'pro-social' fashion, since they too have an innate disposition to respond in ways which benefit their fellow-creatures; but they cannot, in Shaftesbury's opinion, be allowed "VIRTUE or MERIT" (p. 46). This requires not only the natural affections but also the capacity to observe and reflect upon these motives and upon actions and their consequences. Men, being capable of forming concepts, can develop a "Notion of publick Interest, and can attain the Speculation or Science of what is morally good or ill, admirable or blameable, right or wrong" (p. 53). Once we have such an idea, "the Heart cannot possibly remain neutral" (p. 51) and feelings of approval and disapproval will inevitably result. We will "be taken with any shew or representation of the social Passion" (p. 94). There arises, therefore, a new rational affection "towards those very Affections the social, themselves" (p. 47); this disposition, like the others, is original and natural—an inevitable consequence of man's original nature. It is the "*Sense of Right or Wrong*," the moral sense, and it provides an evaluation or "Judgement of what is done" (p. 54). Man has, therefore, both an inclination to goodness stemming from the natural affections and a moral sense by which he makes moral judgements.

Since to have a rational notion of moral worth is also to have an inclination towards it, it is essential to have correct ideas of right and wrong. Whatever, therefore, "causes a Misconception or Misapprehension of the Worth or Value of any Object, so as to diminish a due, or raise any undue, irregular, or unsocial Affection, must necessarily be the occasion of Wrong" (p. 58). Such virtue-destroying errors are the product either of "Superstition or ill Custom" (p. 60). Shaftesbury believed that fashion, political institutions, laws and religion are all major contributors to the development of mistaken ideas; such errors appear whenever "certain Actions naturally foul and odious are repeatedly view'd with Applause, and Honour ascrib'd to them" (p. 81). Religion is particularly culpable in this respect, although 'right' religion is the firmest support of true morality. Reason is absolutely necessary to "secure a right application of the Affections" (p. 61) and to produce that "uniform and steady *Will* and Resolution" (p. 65) which enables us to resist those passions or affections which prompt us to behave in immoral ways. It alone can ensure a correct knowledge of right and wrong. Luckily the natural temper is typically strong, and it is only through "long Practice and Meditation" (p. 76) that it is overcome and erroneous conceptions of morality creep in and a "second Nature"—an immoral one—is created by "Habit or Custom" (p. 77).

What led Shaftesbury to develop this particular theory of morality? Most obviously the doctrine of the social affections was proposed as an alternative to the Hobbesian view of human nature. Shaftesbury claimed, as we have seen, that behaviour is too complex to be explained by any single motive: Hobbes had forgotten to "mention Kindness, Friendship, Sociableness, Love of Company and Converse, Natural Affection, or anything of this kind" (quoted by Willey, 1940, p. 59, from Shaftesbury's Preface to Whichcote's *Sermons*). However, opposition to Hobbes' one-sided and pessimistic view of human nature cannot alone account for the distinctive features of Shaftesbury's moral theory. For this one must look to the intellectual problems which certain of the theories of his old mentor, John Locke, had created for him.

Despite Shaftesbury's life-long friendship with Locke, he was not constrained from criticizing, particularly after Locke's death, certain of the principles of his philosophy. First of all Shaftesbury was not impressed by the emphasis which Locke had placed on epistemology. Distinctions between simple and complex ideas and analyses of space and time were, for Shaftesbury, of little use, for as a consequence of them man "is neither better, nor happier, nor ... of a more ... enlarged mind or generous heart" (quoted in Rand, 1900, p. 269). Such theories

did not help philosophy to fulfill its prescriptive function. More importantly, Locke's attack on innate ideas raised serious difficulties for Shaftesbury, the moralist. In the eighth of the "Several Letters written by a Noble Lord to a Young Man at the University," he wrote:

Mr. *Locke*, as much as I honour him on account of other writings ... and as well as I knew him, and can answer for his sincerity as a most zealous *Christian* and believer, did however go in the self-same track as *Hobbes* ...

It was Mr. *Locke* that struck the home blow: for Mr. *Hobbes's* character and base slavish principles in government took off the poison of his philosophy. It was Mr. *Locke* that struck at all fundamentals, threw all *order* and *virtue* out of the world, and made the very ideas of these... *unnatural*, and without foundation in our minds (*Shaftesbury*, 1757, Vol. 1, pp. 309f).

Shaftesbury became progressively more concerned by this implication that moral principles are "unnatural." If there are no innate moral ideas, must one accept that there is no objective basis for ethical principles, that virtue "has no other measure, law, or rule, than *fashion* and *custom*" (p. 311)? Are moral ideas purely a product of individual experience and therefore totally relative and subjective?

Like Shaftesbury, Locke had felt a need to find some firmer foundation for moral behaviour. His solution had been to root morality in the "Will of God," but this did not satisfy Shaftesbury who believed that such a theory implied the possibility of capricious behaviour on the part of the Deity who is "free to will, *any thing, that is however ill*" (*Shaftesbury*, 1757, Vol. 1, p. 311). Further, it suggested that men are moral merely because of a desire to obtain heavenly rewards and avoid eternal punishment. Such a utilitarian theory was as egoistic as that of *Hobbes*. And as we have seen, to perform right acts and eschew wrong merely because of external constraints or a desire for personal gain—even when meted out by God—cannot be considered moral. Other views about the religious foundation of morality Shaftesbury found—on several counts—to be just as unacceptable. Clergymen had too often adopted a view of human nature as black as *Hobbes's*: in attempting to demonstrate the necessity of revealed religion, they argued "as if Goodness and religion were enemies." Shaftesbury, as the "friend of man" (*Thomson*, 1790, p. 100), found the view of human nature propounded by *Hobbes* and the typical divine disturbingly similar and equally wrong. Furthermore, historical criticism had led to doubts about the accuracy of the Bible. Shaftesbury was quick to expose any such inconsistencies and improbabilities. Again, he was disturbed by the prevalence of factional religious strife and noted the frequency with which the various sects each justified their opposing beliefs by

reference to 'the Word of God.' Clearly Revelation was at best open to a variety of interpretations. Concerns such as these account for Shaftesbury's statement at the beginning of the *Inquiry* that it would be his goal to establish independent bases for morality and religion.

If any notion of innate ideas must be discarded, the existing alternative accounts of the foundation of morality—Hobbesian egoism, Divine Revelation or some doctrine of the "Will of God"—were all unacceptable, in Shaftesbury's opinion. Yet having been steeped in classical thought, he could not accept that morality was relative; he felt compelled, instead, to defend the principle that morality has an objective existence. The possibility occurred to Shaftesbury of rooting morality in what was then called the "nature of things." As a self-proclaimed Deist, he believed that the universe has been so created and designed by a benevolent God that "every thing is govern'd, order'd, or regulated *for the best*" (p. 12). It is a single system comprised of many levels of interconnecting subsystems, the parts of which interact lawfully. There are no chance events.

The concept of a system was to play a key role in Shaftesbury's thinking. Everything in the universe is composed of interacting parts which, since each has its own "End" or role to play in the grand "Oeconomy," must be in proportion, harmony and balance. In the animal kingdom, each creature—to fulfill its purpose in this scheme—is compelled by nature to seek its own "private Good and Interest" and its constitution is so created that all its "Appetites, Passions, or Affections" (p. 21) propel it in that direction. But no animal is complete in itself; each is "discover'd to have relation to some other Being or Nature besides his own" (p. 24). Each species, in turn, is "a *Part*" of some other System" (p. 25) to whose well-being it contributes.

For instance; To the Existence of the Spider, that of the Fly is absolutely necessary. The heedless Flight, weak Frame, and tender Body of this latter Insect, fits and determines him as a Prey, as the rough Make, Watchfulness, and Cunning of the former, fits him for Rapine, and the ensnaring part. The Web and Wing are suited to each other.... In the same manner are Flies also necessary to the Existence of other Creatures, both Fowls, and Fish (pp. 26, 27).

There is, then, an harmonious "System of all Animals; an *Animal-Order* or *Oeconomy*, according to which the Animal Affairs are regulated and dispos'd" (p. 27). Animals in turn, existing in a balanced relationship with plants and inanimate things, form a part of the earthly system or "Globe," which is itself dependent on the sun and the other planets. There is "in like manner a SYSTEM of *all Things, and a Universal Nature*" (p. 29). The human species is one of the earthly parts of this "Universal Nature." Each of its parts, individual men, has been

created by God with his own self-interest, but 'no man is an island.' Each is a part of the whole of humanity and as such has roles to play and responsibilities to fulfill towards others. Just as the body is a whole, constructed of inter-related parts, yet with connections outside itself, so too is the mind. Its parts are the affections or passions.

The affections, like other 'parts,' do not operate singly: there is a "mutual Relation and Dependency" (p. 138) among them. And again, the ideal is harmonious balance. "*Timourousness*, and an habitual strong Passion of Fear," for example, "may be according to the *Oeconomy* of a particular Creature... while, *Courage* may be contrary to his *Oeconomy*; and therefore vitious" (p. 155). Even within one species there may be a different balance of the affections for the "different Sexes, Ages, and Growths" (p. 155) depending on the function and capacity of each. In Shaftesbury's words, "the inside work is fitted to the outward Action and Performance" (p. 214). Living creatures are not mere machines but are distinctive organic unities whose natural form is determined by their functions, roles or purposes in nature. In animals there is typically an exact balance among the affections. In man, however, the original motives—each of which has a "natural degree" in keeping with its appointed role—are capable of being strengthened by exercise and weakened by disuse. But for proper functioning in both man and animals there must always be "Order and Symmetry" (p. 138) among the parts. "Whoever is the least vers'd in this moral kind of Architecture, will find the inward *Fabrick* so adjusted, and the *whole* so nicely built; that the barely extending of a single Passion a little too far, or the continuance of it too long, is able to bring irrecoverable Ruin and Misery" (p. 214). Even with the most admirable of the social motives, if one is "over-great, it must be injurious to the rest" (p. 147), since too little attention will be paid to others equally natural and useful. Too intense a love of one's children, for example, will destroy the "effect of love" (p. 45). Since each affection has a useful role to play, there is no necessary conflict between the self and the social affections as long as each is in its proper degree and a proper balance exists among them. Indeed it is "impossible that the public Good, or Good of the System, can be preserv'd without...the Affections towards private Good" (p. 150). In further support of this argument is the contention that

[a] part of an organism cannot be said to be in a healthy or 'natural' condition if it is working against the good of the whole of which it is a part. Since Shaftesbury assumes an organic relationship, between the individual and the species, the man who acts against the good of the species is unhealthy or 'unnatural.' Since man's 'natural end is society,' to work for the public welfare is to work for one's own good, and vice

versa. Self-interest is 'not only consistent with, but inseparable' from public interest" (Crean, 1964, p. 43).

Mind is a microcosm of the external macrocosm. In its operation one sees the same principles of proportion, balance and harmony which govern all systems in the universe. An animal is good when its affections predispose it to fulfill its functions towards others of its type and man is moral when he has, through reflection, developed a "Notion of the Publick Interest."

We have found, that to deserve the name of Good or Virtuous, a Creature must have all his Inclinations and Affections, his Disposition of Mind and Temper, suitable, and agreeing with the Good of his Kind, or of that System in which he is included, and of which he constitutes a PART (p. 129).

There is, therefore, a *natural* and objective basis for morality even if there may not be an innate idea of right and wrong. Morality is founded on those principles of human nature which an all-seeing and benevolent Deity has created.

Although morality always remained one of Shaftesbury's primary concerns, the significant differences between the 1699 and 1711 editions of the *Inquiry* attest to his increasing interest in aesthetics. Indeed, the content of several of the essays included in the *Characteristics* is primarily aesthetic. Concurrent with the emergence of beauty as a major focus of Shaftesbury's writing was an increase in his concern with the wider implications of Locke's dismissal of innate ideas. He realised that if there are no innate ideas, there is a problem in providing an objective basis for beauty as well as for morality. The classical conception of beauty, he noted, had avoided subjectivity and relativity without necessarily positing the existence of an innate idea of the beautiful. Adopting a version of this classical view, Shaftesbury argued that the beauty of "ordinary *Bodys*, or common Subjects of *Sense*" (p. 48) is dependent upon perception. When there is, in objects, a balance and harmony among the parts, the observer inevitably has an impression of beauty. "The Shapes, Motions, Colours, and Proportions of the *subjects of sense*, being presented to our Eye; there necessarily results a Beauty or Deformity, according to the different Measure, Arrangement and Disposition of their several Parts" (p. 48). There is a "natural Joy in the Contemplation of...*Harmony, Proportion and Concord*" (p. 171).

It is apparent that Shaftesbury's conceptions of beauty and morality were essentially identical; the one is a perception of external harmony, balance and proportion, the other of inward.

The MIND, which is spectator or Auditor of other *Minds*, cannot be without its *Eye* and *Ear*; so as to discern Proportion, distinguish Sound, and scan each Sentiment or Thought which comes before it. It can let nothing escape its Censure. It feels the Soft and Harsh, the Agreeable and Disagreeable, in the Affections; and finds a *Foul* and *Fair*, a *Harmonious* and a *Dissonant*, as really and truly here, as in any musical Numbers, or in the outward Forms or Representations of sensible Things. Nor can it with-hold its *Admiration* and *Extasy*, its *Aversion* and *Scorn*, any more what relates to one than to the others of these Subjects (p. 49).

Virtue, then, is "no other than the Love of Order and Beauty in Society," and the pleasure to be derived from observing harmoniously balanced affections and their resultant actions is even greater than that from observing the physical world. Our sense of physical beauty is firmly rooted in the nature of things and so too, by analogy, is our sense of right and wrong. Although there may be no innate ideas, it is still possible to argue that there is an objective basis for ethical judgement and beauty.

It is ironic that Shaftesbury's elucidation of a moral sense should so soon have led to the very thing against which he was reacting—a thoroughly subjectivist theory of morality and aesthetics. His successor Francis Hutcheson adopted his idea of original senses of morality and beauty. But in the writings of that Hibernian Scot, the notion of the "inward Anatomy" as a microcosm of the universal macrocosm was de-emphasized, while the analysis of the psychological bases of the two innate senses—or rather three, for Hutcheson proposed both a benevolent sense and a moral sense which makes ethical judgement—are innate, and so formed as to respond naturally to specific features of the world, each also has a *learned*, and therefore idiosyncratic, component. As an inevitable product of experience, each of us acquires certain new and 'unnatural' ideas of what is beautiful or moral; these are then akin to the errors in our notions of right and wrong which Shaftesbury had attributed to custom and habit. Hutcheson, carrying the argument one step further, claimed that they are the result of associations of ideas. John Gay, in responding to Hutcheson, argued that if association could account for the individual differences in perceptions of beauty and morality, there is no logical reason why the innate faculties of beauty and morality could not be dispensed with entirely. Beauty and morality could be explained completely by this associational process. David Hartley and a host of other successors accepted Gay's argument and for the moment subjectivity had won the day.

NOTE

- * This and following numbered references are to the paragraphs of the *Inquiry*. The edition used, which is based on the final version included in the 1714 edition of the *Characteristics*, is that of David Walford.

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