

Moral Sense

By Mark Rigstad

The concept of 'moral sense' first gained currency in the eighteenth century, principally among British sentimentalists who held that human nature is endowed with a natural emotional faculty of immediate, quasi-aesthetic ethical discernment. According to this school of thought, moral judgements are not inferences of reason. Instead, they are sentiments or 'affections' of moral approbation rooted in our innate social appetites.

The first philosopher to employ the precise term 'moral sense' appears to have been Thomas Burnet, in his *Remarks upon an Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1697). His *Remarks* comprised a series of critical responses to John Locke's famous *Essay* which argued that there are no innate ideas and, *a fortiori*, that there are no innate moral principles (I.ii.1 & I.iii). According to Locke, diversity of human experiences yields diversity of opinions in matters of right and wrong. Yet, rationally demonstrable knowledge of formal principles of morality is possible without 'the assistance of the senses', not because such principles are stamped on the human mind before birth, but because they can be artificially constructed from creative definitions of words (III.xi.17-18). Burnet responded to Locke's moral epistemology by arguing that discrimination between good and evil is 'not like a Theorem, which we come to know by the help of precedent demonstrations and postulatems, but it rises as quick as any of our passions, or as laughter at the sight of a ridiculous accident or object' (*Third Remarks*, 5). Much as our senses of sight and smell give us immediate knowledge

of the colors and scents of particular things, our moral sense gives us immediate knowledge of the ethical qualities of particular actions.

Anthony Ashley Cooper, the Third Earl of Shaftesbury, was also responding to Locke when he presented a highly innovative and influential version of moral sense theory in *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times* (1711). Unlike Burnet, however, Shaftesbury was less concerned with moral epistemology than with the deficiencies of Locke's moral psychology. Even if we can gain demonstrative knowledge of principles of morality by constructing formal proofs, a substantive problem of moral motivation remains if, as Locke argued in the second edition of his *Essay* (1694), reason alone has no motive force and only the present feeling of uneasiness accompanying some desire can move us to action (II, xxi, 31-41). Shaftesbury addressed this problem by positing a natural faculty of emotional intelligence which, although not an unassailable source of speculative knowledge of objective moral qualities or relations, is nevertheless an adequate subjective source of ethical self-knowledge and autonomous self-control (IV, 336-7). Human nature is constituted such that certain sociable, kind, generous and public-spirited affections, which happen to be well-adapted to the flourishing of the human 'species system,' naturally *strike* us as being good in themselves; and certain contrary, malicious, envious and 'monstrous' passions we naturally *feel* to be intrinsically bad and malformed (IV, 250). 'Private affections', such as anger, which immediately aim to promote self-interests, are also approved as 'just' if, but only if, they harmonize with our sociable 'public affections'. Most importantly, we have a natural capacity to respond, not only to the emotions of other minds, but also to our own emotions in a kind of psychological 'self-inspection' (IV, 304-305). These emotional

responses constitute 'another kind of affection towards those very affections themselves, which have already been felt, and are now become the subject of a new liking or dislike' (IV, 251). Such reflective emotions belong to what Shaftesbury calls our 'natural moral sense' (IV, 262). We form the concept of the 'public interest' by reflecting on the type of affection that we naturally tend to approve. With the aid of this concept we are able to employ our reflective emotions as internal incentives for deliberate self-cultivation of the harmonious 'economy' of 'just affections' which best promotes the public interest and which constitutes the true character of virtue (IV, 181 & 253). In this way, we can achieve a form of effective moral agency that is autonomous in the sense that it does not depend upon the influence of externally imposed sanctions.

As a Country Whig republican, Shaftesbury was especially concerned with the conditions that make autonomous civic virtue possible. In *Leviathan* (1651), Hobbes maintained that we are thoroughly egoistic creatures who always act entirely from motives of self love, and he argued that moral order between us must therefore be imposed by the coercive commands of an absolute sovereign power. Contrarily, for Shaftesbury, the kind of 'politick virtue' that enables ever-vigilant citizens of a free republic to resist the corruptions of political absolutism requires a capacity for ethical discernment and motivation that does not ultimately depend upon external incentives (IV, 280). Thus, Shaftesbury's theory of moral sense offered an alternative moral psychology which emphasized our natural sociability and our reflective capacity for self-directed and felicitous devotion to the public interest. Creatures naturally endowed with moral sense need not look outward to *de facto* political power as their ultimate source of ethical authority. Furthermore, as a deist who disliked the theological

voluntarism of Hobbes and Locke, Shaftesbury held that pursuit of virtue solely for the sake of gaining divine rewards and avoiding divine punishments is the cosmic equivalent of the 'slavish' passivity that political absolutism imposes upon its subjects. What is worse, since our sociable nature tends to be moved more by emulation than by fear, the theological notion of an angry and revengeful God tends to inspire more 'savageness and inhumanity' than genuine virtue (IV, 263). Our natural moral sensibilities are therefore better guides to the maintenance of virtue than any system of externally imposed sanctions, whether human or divine.

Francis Hutcheson constructed the most systematic theory of moral sense. In his *Inquiry into the Original of our Ideas of Beauty and Virtue* (1725) he explicitly claimed to be explaining and defending Shaftesbury's principles. Accordingly, he reiterated that a natural faculty of immediate moral response to affections or motives must be posited in order to account for the fact that we feel no special approval for outwardly moral conduct that is bribed or coerced (II.i.1). The fact that Hutcheson was also a republican thinker, having overlapping political connections with Shaftesbury, suggests again that moral sense theory initially rose to prominence as a philosophical bulwark against Hobbesian political absolutism.

Despite broad agreement, however, important differences emerged in Hutcheson's account. Unlike Shaftesbury's moral sense, which approves of whatever affections belong to the overall emotional balance that is best adapted to the good of humankind, Hutcheson's faculty is ultimately moved to feelings of approbation only by the singular motive of disinterested benevolence, because it alone *intends* to promote the public interest (II.ii.1). Moreover, this natural,

spontaneous motive does not require a high degree of reflective self-cultivation (II.iii.14). Although the reflective emotion of moral approbation picks out the motives that justify actions, it does not itself play a dominant motivational role in the life of virtue. The 'universal benevolence' that delights moral sense is itself sufficient to the task of producing social cohesion through the gravitational pull of particular attachments (II.v.2). Acting out of this instinctual form of benevolence improves one's own state of well-being when, upon reflection, one experiences the satisfaction of moral self-approbation. But for the agent who acts out of benevolence this reflective moral pleasure is an unintended providential consequence (I.i.8). We add nothing to our moral merit by making our desire for self-approbation part of the motivational complex that moves us to promote the public interest. By the time he composed the *Illustrations upon the Moral Sense* (1728), Hutcheson came to believe that Shaftesbury had failed to appreciate the essential self-indifference of morally meritorious motivation. Shaftesbury's moral sense delights not in instinctual and spontaneous benevolence, but in our reflective capacity to promote simultaneously both the public good and our own private good as fully harmonized ends. By insisting that we feel moral approval only towards examples of such self-reflective virtue, he allowed an element of egoistic hedonism to creep into his theory of moral motivation (V, 469-70).

Since Hutcheson conceived of the ultimate goal of universal benevolence as 'the greatest happiness for the greatest numbers', a formulation which clearly prefigures the principle of utility, he is sometimes seen as a precursor to Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill (*Inquiry*, II.iii.8). Yet he maintained that the moral sense approves of the promptings of instinctual benevolence even when no one benefits from the actions to which they give rise. In this respect, his moral sense

belongs to what philosophers today would call a 'non-consequentialist' theory of virtue. There is some scholarly debate about whether or not Hutcheson believed that the subjective feelings of moral sense correspond to objective moral qualities inhering in the motives of human agents. It might seem that disinterested benevolence must be objectively good inasmuch as it aims to promote the general welfare. If so, then Hutcheson's moral system could be understood as a version of what philosophers now call 'motive utilitarianism'. Yet, Hutcheson sometimes insists, for example in *An Essay on the Nature and Conduct of the Passions* (1728), that we do not approve of benevolence and the actions to which it gives rise because they are good, but rather we call them good because we happen to approve of them (I.i). The immediate subjective deliverances of the moral sense ground every ethical judgement. For this reason, to Bentham's mind, Hutcheson's system failed to be truly utilitarian because its foundation was mired in subjective sentiment (*Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*, I.xii.4).

Although he did not share their stridently republican convictions, David Hume followed Shaftesbury and Hutcheson in embracing a sentimentalist account of moral judgement. He presented arguments against ethical rationalism more compelling than even Locke was able to articulate. Our substantive moral values cannot be determined by reason alone because, as Hume famously averred in his *Treatise of Human Nature* (1739), "Tis not contrary to reason to prefer the destruction of the whole world to the scratching of my finger" (II.iii.3, 416). Reason is purely instrumental. It can only tell us how best to promote the values which are determined by our feelings and appetites. Thus, 'Reason is, and ought only to be the slave of the passions' (III.iii.3, 415). By laying somewhat

greater emphasis on the degree to which we are naturally self-interested, Hume tempered the overly optimistic psychological altruism of Shaftesbury and, especially, Hutcheson. Perhaps most importantly, whereas his sentimentalist predecessors merely posited an emotional faculty of immediate moral approbation, Hume provided a more psychologically complex explanation of the inner workings of our 'sense of morals' (III, 458). Impersonal feelings of moral approbation for benevolent motives that do not directly benefit us arise from sympathetic identification with those who do receive some benefit (III, 581). In this respect, contrary to Hutcheson's theory, Hume's moral sense approves of the 'natural virtue' of benevolence not only because it is immediately agreeable, but also because of its utility. Other virtues, such as cheerfulness or frugality, we naturally approve because we are able sympathetically to share in the agent's own immediate enjoyment or consequent advantage (III, 591). Also contrary to the views of both Shaftesbury and Hutcheson is Hume's contention that, unlike beneficence, justice is an 'artificial virtue' which does not arise directly from any particular natural affection, nor even from the internal incentives of moral sentiment, but rather from a duly civilized and conventional form of self-interest (III, 497-500). We approve of the conventions of justice, and therefore also the disposition to adhere to them, because those conventions have utility and because we are able through an abstraction of the moral imagination to identify sympathetically with the great sea of humanity whose interests are thereby served.

Adam Smith would appear to have been the next heir apparent to the British tradition of moral sense theory. After all, he was a sentimentalist whose *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759) sympathetically engaged, expanded and

modified the insights of Shaftesbury, Hutcheson (his teacher) and Hume (his friend). Yet, Smith cannot properly be considered a moral sense theorist. First, he rejected the supposed analogy between moral sentiment and sense perception as fundamentally flawed because, whereas appropriate moral sentiments are themselves morally laudable or approved, accurate perceptions of color or scents are not themselves colored or smelly. Moreover, he rejected the idea that there is a 'peculiar' feeling of approbation that somehow comprehensively maps the entire field of human ethical concern, and he rejected the term 'moral sense' as being too unfamiliar and far removed from our rich ordinary language of emotional self-understanding (VII.iii.3). Finally, he argued that the moral sense posited by Shaftesbury and Hutcheson would make us better judges of ourselves than we are of others since our own passions 'would be more immediately exposed to the view of this faculty'; yet, contrary to this implication, our general propensity towards vain 'self-deceit' makes us poor judges of our own merits (III.iv).

Notwithstanding his repudiation of the concept of moral sense, Smith's moral psychology represented the most systematic elaboration of the notion that moral judgments are deliverances of sentiment. Following Hume, he makes sympathy the cornerstone of his theory. In contrast, however, Smith emphasized that we are able to sympathize not only with the pleasures and pains of those who are affected by the actions of others, but also with the motives of the actor. This more flexible conception of sympathy is crucial for his account of the distinction between mere 'propriety', which involves simple sympathetic approval of an actor's motives, and 'merit', which involves both sympathetic admiration of the actor's motives and sympathetic identification with the gratitude of affected

persons (II.i.1). By drawing upon sympathetic awareness of the actual or potential resentments of others, Smith provided a more psychologically compelling account of the motive to justice than Hume was able to furnish. Perhaps more importantly, for Smith, the moral imagination is able to cultivate moral sentiments not only by placing us sympathetically in the position of particular persons or groups, but also by placing us in the abstract and ideal position of a purely 'impartial spectator' (II.ii.2). In this way, his moral psychology invoked a kind of political neutrality or quasi-objectivity which was notably absent from Shaftesbury's more partisan moral sentiments.