

## CRITICAL STUDIES

***THE BRITISH MORALISTS ON HUMAN NATURE AND THE BIRTH OF SECULAR ETHICS,***  
**BY MICHAEL GILL** (CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2006, ISBN 0-521-85246-3), VIII + 359  
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Michael Gill's book on *The British Moralists on Human Nature and the Birth of Secular Ethics* is an excellent piece of intellectual history, history of philosophy, and philosophical analysis. It tells the story of how moral philosophers of the early modern period gradually pried ethical theory free, first, of distinctively Christian commitments, and later, any theological ones. Early on, the relevant commitments had to do with the human nature question—if it is good or evil. By the end, it can no longer be assumed that morality exists in the form of an independent standard of goodness against which human nature can be measured. Rather, morality becomes (merely?) one item of study in a descriptive science of human nature. Gill shows how this idea developed through the work of Whichcote and Cudworth (Part I), Shaftesbury (Part II), Hutcheson (Part III), and Hume (Part IV), and how this “Copernican” shift in moral theorizing has left an indelible mark on contemporary metaethical debates.

Gill's well-crafted story begins with his insight that the most significant debate in moral philosophy in the early modern period wasn't between rationalists and sentimentalists. Certainly, there were important differences between them, but it's somewhat anachronistic to assume that this was the issue that preoccupied philosophers like Whichcote, Cudworth, Shaftesbury, and Hutcheson. Substantially more significant than those differences is the unified front that rationalists and sentimentalists alike presented in defending a positive answer to the human nature question against the negative answer presupposed in the voluntarism of Calvin (or, at least seventeenth-century English Calvinists) and Hobbes.

Rationalists and sentimentalists disagreed about the origin of our moral ideas—whether internal principles of reason or natural affections—but both

groups affirmed that we're able, under our own steam, to acquire moral knowledge and be motivated to live virtuously. In fact, Cudworth's views about the most effective way to combat the negative answer seemed to shift over time. Early on, he published two sermons that adopted what Gill refers to as a proto-sentimentalism. The sermons dealt with the "law of love." Cudworth's view, Gill writes, was that "this 'law' is not an external command but an internal spirit of action, a 'kindling' and 'warming' principle of the heart. . . . To be truly religious, Cudworth tells us, is not to be in mere 'outward conformity to God's commands' but to have a certain kind of motivation or character . . ." (40). Virtue is a "heart" matter rather than a "head" matter. The rational aspects of our personalities aren't essential to morality. However, in his posthumous *Eternal and Immutable Morality*, Cudworth rejected the view that our moral ideas originate in sensation for the view that morality exists necessarily and is apprehended by reason alone. Gill argues that part of the reason Cudworth did this was because he failed to see a way to make conflicting dictates of the "heart" rationally tractable. What do we do if the dictates of my inner light tell me to try to usurp the monarchy while yours rejects such egalitarian sentiments? But whatever is the right way to deal with that kind of diversity and conflict, whether it is such that it is insurmountable without the rational necessity of morals, it's more important to see the idea that was unswerving in Cudworth's thought. For Cudworth, the origin of virtue was relocated from the lawless heart to the "eternal and immutable" principles of reason; but access to it was still firmly seated within the person. This is the essence of the positive answer. Human nature is such that virtue is internally accessible to every one of us.

This is the basis for Gill's claim that in the positive answer of Whichcote and Cudworth there is the key insight behind present-day internalist conceptions of morality. For proponents of the positive answer, the same thing that justifies a moral judgment also motivates acting in accord with it. The state of mind associated with identifying some conduct as virtuous, whether through the senses or reason alone, is essentially connected with the state of mind of being motivated to act that way. The negative answer entails a denial of this. The source of normativity isn't anything evident to our senses, reason, or anything internal. Instead, it's the command of someone very powerful, a political or divine sovereign, issued via a legal code or revealed in Holy Scripture. The source of normativity is external. In fact, according to the negative answer, human nature is so corrupt that not only do we need to be told what is morally required of us, but even when that's sufficiently clear, we can't be counted on to be motivated to discharge our obligations absent the threat of punishment, which is also external. Finally, the only thing that, according to orthodox Christianity, effects salvation and makes genuine virtue possible, the substitutionary atonement of Christ, is external to the agent. Chapter 5 on "The Emergence of Non-Christian Ethics" looks at the attempts of Whichcote and Cudworth to reconcile their positive answer with the indispensability of Christ and the rejection of Pelagianism. Gill argues that these attempts don't fair too well. He says,

“Whichcote simply cannot reconcile his rationalism with his Christianity, and frankly, it’s somewhat painful to watch him try” (67). And, “Cudworth doesn’t do any better than Whichcote at dealing with the conflict between his Positive Answer and the mainstream view of Christ’s sacrifice” (72).

Gill draws attention to the fact that this problem doesn’t arise for Shaftesbury or Hutcheson. Both argued that non-Christians, and even atheists, have equal access with Christians to moral truth and virtuous behavior. Their example shows how taking the positive answer seriously paved the way for the birth of secular ethics. However, they weren’t quite there yet. Even though Shaftesbury and Hutcheson didn’t think that belief in God was necessary for getting things correct about morality, or being motivated to acts of virtue, they did think that their views in moral philosophy implied the existence of God. Recall Gill’s conjecture that the main reason Cudworth exchanged his proto-sentimentalist positive-answer model for a rationalist one was to head off the problem of diversity and conflict that he saw in accounts where moral judgment is made dependent on affective responses. Shaftesbury and Hutcheson’s sentimentalist accounts had to deal with the same problem. Both argued that at least one of two parties to a moral disagreement is making a mistake. The difference is that for Shaftesbury this is true a priori, while for Hutcheson it is a contingent fact.

Shaftesbury’s strategy was to find an essential role for both sentiment and reason. His views in moral psychology and moral epistemology relied on the workings of a moral sense, but his moral ontology was unmistakably rationalist. According to Gill, “Goodness, as Shaftesbury conceives of it, is an objective property, one that is independent of all human minds, and reason tells us of what that property consists” (94). Something “is good only if it promotes the well-being of the system of which it is a part” (93). Virtue springs from actions motivated by people “seeing” things aright morally; that is, through a moral sense properly attuned towards the good. Shaftesbury argued that their moral sense has that quality when it’s ordered towards promoting the well-being of humanity. Importantly for the view Shaftesbury developed, this ordering is the natural state of our affections, “instinctive, imprinted on our minds by God. When we judge and act from our natural internal sense, therefore, we conduct ourselves in the way that God designed us” (111). The view implies that we are able, through the employment our natural internal sense, to gain access to the unchanging mind of God.

Hutcheson’s strategy eschewed these remaining vestiges of rationalism. Gill says that the difference between Shaftesbury and Hutcheson is the difference between a Ptolemaic positive answer and a Copernican one. For Shaftesbury, since there can be conflicting expressions of moral sentiment, there needs to be an independent standard against which to measure the deliverances of the moral sense. When our moral sense lines up with this standard, we’re motivated to do the thing that promotes the well-being of humanity and so capable of living up to the requirements of morality. The problem is that it’s not clear that Shaftesbury had the resources for ascertaining what the well-being of humanity consists in when there are conflict-

ing notions about this. If, on the one hand, he privileges one person or group's moral sense to tell us, then the view smacks of the kind of arbitrariness he detested about the voluntarists' negative-answer model. On the other hand, if he leaves open what the well-being of humanity consists in, then we don't have a mind-independent standard. We don't have a way to distinguish between a moral sense that's been corrupted and one that lines up with objective moral reality, and so no way to mitigate moral conflict rationally.

According to Gill, Hutcheson took a version of the second horn of this dilemma, initiating a Copernican revolution in moral philosophy. Gill writes that according to this version of the positive answer, "there are not moral standards that are independent of human nature. The Copernican Positive Answer holds that human beings can and often do succeed in living up to the standards of morality. But the moral standards human beings can and do succeed in living up to are determined by human nature itself" (171). The moral distinctions an individual makes originate in his affections; moral properties exist only because people have a moral sense. The affections of our moral sense are the foundation for the standard against which we measure actions, and these affections, their direction and force, are brute facts of human nature. Morality is dependent on affective responses. Gill describes Hutcheson's view as an "attenuated moral realism" (168). But why is it a form of moral realism at all? There's something funny about it, like shooting an arrow, drawing a circle around where it landed, and calling it a bulls-eye. After all, human nature could have been very different. The moral sense we have as a matter of nature is contingent. In fact, is there even a uniform moral sense that we have as a matter of nature? How does Hutcheson's Copernican positive answer address the problem of moral diversity and conflict in such a way as to avoid moral relativism?

Gill explains, first, that Hutcheson's view was moral realist in an eighteenth-century sense that rejected egoism. Chapter 11 on "Hutcheson's Attack on Egoism" shows that he used realist language only in the anti-egoist way, which means that he took there to be "a difference between the motives of those people we judge to be virtuous and the motives of those people we judge to be vicious" (296). Second, Hutcheson conceded that human nature, along with the moral sense it manifests, is contingent. Nonetheless, as a contingent matter of fact, the moral sense we have as a matter of nature is in perfect accord interpersonally and intrapersonally. Third, Hutcheson affirmed that as a contingent matter of fact at least one of two parties to a moral disagreement is making a mistake. Gill writes that "for Hutcheson, what is a correct moral judgment for a particular person depends on what that person's moral sense will cause her to feel approval and disapproval for" and so mistake-free moral disagreement and moral relativism are logical possibilities (174). However, as it happens, it's always the case that in a moral disagreement at least one side is making a mistake. That means moral relativism is false.

The mistake is merely factual if one person believes that an action promotes the well-being of humanity and another denies this. But that isn't

enough for genuine moral conflict. As Hutcheson noted, even if they disagree about which action promotes the well-being of humanity, they're still led in their judgments by their approval of whatever does that. Hutcheson attributed genuine moral conflict to unnatural affections. In today's parlance, Hutcheson thought of natural affections as innate dispositions; they're the deliverances of our original affective equipment. According to Gill, in contrast with unnatural affections, "A natural affection cannot be explained by experience or by our interactions with the world. It does not result from habit, education, or custom" (183). This makes things very convenient from Hutcheson's point of view. Our natural constitutions are such that they are uniform, so there would be no moral disagreement between people who have managed to retain them, and they are perfectly in accord with benevolence.

According to Gill, then, Hutcheson was relying on an asymmetry between the explanation of something that is morally correct or praiseworthy and the explanation of something that is morally incorrect or blameworthy: all virtue is natural and all vice unnatural, the result of habit, education, or custom. So, Hutcheson's view was that when someone doesn't respond appropriately to, say, suffering in others, this is because of pernicious alternations to our original constitutions. Our harmonious affections "do not admit of empirical explanation and are therefore natural, while [our disagreeable, discordant affections] can be explained by the corrupting effects of custom, education, and habit and are therefore unnatural" (187). This suggested to Hutcheson that a morally good God exists who designed us to manifest this benevolent harmony with each other in our original dispositions. Given the a priori improbability of such perfect accord in our natural affections, of the fact that all virtue is natural and all vice is unnatural, he thought supernatural design is the best explanation for it. Even atheists are motivated to be virtuous, and thank God for that—literally! God plays a central role in Hutcheson's Copernican positive answer, even though no one need believe that, or in God, in order to be moral, just as in Shaftesbury's Ptolemaic positive answer.

I think Hutcheson's account faces a dilemma similar to the one that Shaftesbury's did. The problem for Shaftesbury was that, supposing there is a standard of goodness that exists independently of the affective responses of people, we don't have a way to distinguish between ones that deliver judgments that line up with the standard and ones that don't. On Hutcheson's Copernican theory "the affections of our moral sense determine the standard by which we measure good and evil" (172). There is no standard that exists independently of natural affective responses. According to Gill, "Hutcheson accepted that his theory implied that morality depends on an affection we have no reason to believe in. He accepted that he gave us no grounds for thinking that we're right to approve of benevolence" (172). And, for Hutcheson, "if everyone had a moral sense that approved of, say, malice, then malice would be as moral as benevolence is now" (296). But this seems to undermine Hutcheson's argument for the existence of a morally good God.

According to Hutcheson, human nature is determined by God's design. He believed this because human nature gives unmistakable evidence of God's design: "if all of our affections were in their natural state, we'd all be benevolent and happy, in perfect accord with ourselves and with others" (186). That's very unlikely a priori, but the hypothesis that a benevolent deity exists and designed us this way brings a degree of intelligibility to the picture. We should expect this kind of accord in natural affections if a morally good God exists. So there are actually two pieces of evidence. It isn't just that there is interpersonal and intrapersonal accord in our natural affections, but also that they accord with benevolence. Having the former without the latter might indicate design, but why should it indicate design by a morally good God? Interpersonal and intrapersonal accord in our natural affections only requires coordination among its deliverances. But coordination problems have multiple equilibria. A moral sense that approved of malice could be as neatly coordinated as one that approved of benevolence. Would Hutcheson have thought that there would be equally good evidence for the existence of a morally good God either way? If he would have, then his notion of a morally good God is empty. But I think that it's unlikely Hutcheson would have held that our natural moral sense approving of malice would be good evidence for the existence of a morally good God. The moral sense we have naturally should count in favor of the existence of a morally good God only if it delivers certain judgments—ones that accord with benevolence. In his design of our natural moral sense a morally good God would conform of necessity to a standard of morality that exists independently of human affective responses. What else would a morally good God have in mind for our design? Hutcheson rejected this Ptolemaic answer, though. His theory entails that morality depends on affections that we have no reason to give any credence. So, either Hutcheson has to give up his belief that a morally good God designed our natural affections, since we don't have adequate evidence for that, or he has to give up the Copernican positive answer.

Hutcheson never really addressed this dilemma, though his arguments might imply that he should at least think there would be no great loss on a practical level in grasping the first horn. He's already asserted that atheists are as committed to virtue as theists are. Likewise, his view was that the motive to virtue remains just as strong even if we assume the Copernican model, and even if we assume that we have no reason to give our moral affections any credence. This fits with his view that we are to understand the moral sense as straightforwardly analogous to a sense of beauty or any of our five main senses. Gill writes,

Beauty is mind-dependent. Nothing is beautiful in itself. But this discovery will not make beauty any less important to us. We will continue to care just as much about beautiful music and art after coming to believe Hutcheson's sense-based explanation of beauty, just as we will continue to find certain foods just as delicious even after we have learned that their deliciousness is due to the particular structure of our taste buds. And the case of morality,

according to Hutcheson, is the same. Beauty and morality both originate in our affections. But just as this discovery will not lead us to care any less about beauty, neither will it enervate our commitment to morality (170).

This is quite right. Certain things are important to us, and learning that their importance to us is an entirely contingent matter won't change the fact that they are important to us. Gill develops this line of thought in such a way in Part IV that, in the hands of Hume, it becomes the beginning of the end for theistic ethics. It mainly puts pressure on the theistic, Copernican positive-answer model of morality. Gill has no interest in pursuing this suggestion, but it also seems to show how the negative answer can avoid the more relevant criticisms of the early British moralists.

Chapter 1 on "The Negative Answer of English Calvinism" is a parade of the horrors in English Calvinism and is the shortest chapter of the book. Gill relies on a children's catechism written by William Perkins, with which Cudworth certainly would have been familiar. Gill chooses to highlight its elaboration of the fall and its effects and potential consequences. Saving faith was the instrument for avoiding them, which apparently required a kind of morbid preoccupation with individual self-examination in order to experience the full conviction of sin. He concludes the chapter by summarizing the view as "a Negative Answer that proclaimed that everyone is fundamentally evil, corrupt, and sinful, and a fatalism that proclaimed that everyone's eternal fate has been forever sealed. Coupled to those two notions was a vividly literal conception of hell and a never-ending exhortation to engage in obsessive fault-finding self-scrutiny. It must all have loomed over the heads of young children like the sword of Damocles" (11). Indeed, the suggestion is that the threat of hell is the only thing that motivates obedience, and this was a common theme in the criticisms of Whichcote, Cudworth, and Shaftesbury.

I know Gill isn't overly concerned to put a happy face on English Calvinism, but there is some selective quotation of Perkins and maybe even outright misrepresentation. First, Perkins did emphasize the doctrine of assurance by which "a man is verily persuaded by the Holy Spirit, of God's favour towards himself *particularly*, and of the forgiveness of his own sins."<sup>1</sup> Such a man feels "the assurance of [God's] love, wherewith he loveth him in Christ. . . ." Perkins wrote that this follows from saving faith. In addition, "The true sign of [saving faith] is this: when a man can be grieved for the very *disobedience to God* in his will, word or deed, though he should never be punished, and though there were neither heaven nor hell." This is an explicit disavowal of the motive to fearful obedience, and, in fact, sounds a lot like a passage Gill quotes from Shaftesbury: "There is *inherent punishment* belonging to all *vice*; and no power can divide or separate them. For, tho' God should not, in a *positive way*, inflict punishment; or any instrument of God punish a sinner; yet he would *punish himself*; his misery and unhappiness would arise *from himself*" (79). Perkins suggested that the actual motive to obedience for the Christian is rather something like loving gratitude. A real internalization of virtue is at least consistent with the negative answer.

The main positive-answer criticism of the negative answer—that “fearful obedience bears no resemblance to . . . a real and justified commitment to morality” (45)—is, therefore, misplaced.

Even so, this ultimately reinforces Gill’s main point about the probative force in ethics of the human nature question. Even though the negative answer of the English Calvinists held that genuine Christian virtue was available only to those redeemed in Christ, it also generally held that a lesser sort of virtue is available to any rational person. Any such person is capable, under his own steam, to see himself clear to acts that tend to have the characteristics of benevolence. Of course, they were quick to point out that these acts were like filthy rags from the perspective of God (Is. 64:6), but this was taken as a claim only pertaining to the salvific efficacy of these acts. It doesn’t rule out their importance from a human perspective where they could agree with Hume that “virtue in rags is still virtue” (*Treatise*, 3, 3, 1) even if it doesn’t have the nature, or hold the promise, of genuine Christian virtue. If all that’s right, then, from that perspective, nothing having to do with the motivational issue hangs on theism or the human nature question.

The main idea Gill advances in Part IV is that Hume’s moral philosophy is just the Copernican model stripped of any theistic commitments. It describes how Hume used the earlier moral sentimentalists as a springboard for the development of a thoroughly secular moral theory where the human nature question simply no longer matters. This culminates in the final chapter, Chapter 20, “What Is a Humean Account, and What Difference Does It Make?” Gill enumerates four features of a Humean account of morality (263):

1. God does not play any role in the explanation of morality and human behavior.
2. Sentiment plays an essential and robust role in the explanation of morality and human behavior.
3. Empirical, contingent experience plays an essential and robust role in the explanation of morality and human behavior.
4. There is an explanatory symmetry between accounts of what is morally correct and praiseworthy and accounts of what is morally incorrect or condemnable—an explanatory symmetry that makes it impossible to claim that all virtue is natural and all vice unnatural.

Points 3 and 4 are connected. Hume argued on empirical grounds that natural tendencies and tendencies formed in response to habit, education, and custom both can be the source of either virtue or vice. Hume’s arguments and examples show that there’s no explanatory asymmetry of the sort relied upon by Hutcheson: “Traits that are impeccable and traits that are condemnatory both turn out to be based on dispositions shaped by empirical factors [e.g., habit, education, and custom]. Nothing that is morally significant has a perfectly pure, non-empirical origin.” (215). In fact, Hume gives examples where human artifice is the remedy for overcoming injustices that result from innate affections. These arguments help to clarify 2, for while Hume agreed with Shaftesbury and Hutcheson that moral distinctions derive from sentiment, they don’t derive only from non-rational innate

equipment. That means Hume wasn't a moral sense theorist. The arguments and examples also provide support for I insofar as they undermine Hutcheson's a posteriori argument for the existence of God. More broadly, Hume's empirical arguments and examples show that the human nature question is the wrong question. Human nature, according to Hume, isn't either unmitigatedly good or evil. It depends on what your point of comparison is, but realistically, it's a little of both. In any case, that's beside the point. The important issue is picking out features of human nature that ought to be encouraged and those that can be profitably modified by habit, education, and custom.

But how do we do *that*? Our judgments about which features to pick out for encouragement are themselves just derived from features of human nature. What's doing the normative work of justifying those judgments? It seems like the Humean answer should be: nothing. Gill addresses whether Hume's account debunks or undermines the normative foundations of morality; i.e., whether it amounts to an error theory: "According to Hume, that our internal survey issues in a certain verdict [of approval or disapproval about some act] . . . is simply a fact—a robustly contingent one at that—about us. And some might think that if this fact lies at the base of morality, then morality must be deemed a normative failure" (266). Gill denies the implication and adds a fifth feature of a Humean account (268):

5. The considerations in favor of maintaining a commitment to morality and giving up the belief that morality is normative only if [it accords with God's will and immorality does not, or it originates in reason alone, or it is natural to human beings and immorality is unnatural] are more compelling than the considerations in favor of abandoning a commitment to morality and holding onto the belief that morality is normative only if [it accords with God's will and immorality does not, or it originates in reason alone, or it is natural to human beings and immorality is unnatural].

In other words, the reasons to believe in the normativity of morality are stronger than whatever reasons there are to believe any of those metaethical theories of what justifies the normativity of morality. It's difficult to know how to take this claim since Hume would say that not only do our moral verdicts depend on contingent facts about us, so do our views about what's essential to justifying the normativity of morality. Gill seems to be relying on a broadly quasi-realist strategy which says we can justify the normativity of morality within the domain of first-order moral discourse, but beyond that, outside of moral discourse, there's nothing we can say to justify the normativity of morality. But if that's true, then isn't the normativity of morality really debunked? This is a live issue. So is the idea of taking seriously the descriptive, empirical approach Hume employed in moral philosophy. Gill's history is unmistakably whiggish. He seems to think of Hume as the first experimental philosopher and is encouraged that more philosophers are utilizing some of the tools in cognitive science, psychology, and sociology to illuminate issues in moral philosophy (264).

Gill has written a very good book. A good portion of it has been

reworked from the half-dozen or so articles he's previously published on the British moralists. The final product is very readable: every chapter ends with a summary that helps situate the arguments into the main narrative, and many of the more technical points raised are chased down in endnotes, often very lengthy ones. Besides the obvious boon to historians of philosophy, the book is valuable for metaethicists. It will improve their understanding of how things got where they are in metaethics today, and provide an important perspective on the direction things seem to be headed. Gill's book is about the birth of secular ethics, but it also forces an examination of its promise and prospects.

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## **NOTE**

1. Like Gill's references to Perkins, all of these come from his "Foundation of Christian Religion Gathered into Six Principles," which I accessed at [http://www.pap.com.au/perkins/wp\\_found.htm](http://www.pap.com.au/perkins/wp_found.htm) on 7 July 2007.