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Interdisciplinary before the Disciplines: Sentimentalism and the Science of Man

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Abstract:

This chapter argues that Enlightenment sentimentalism's greatest potential contribution to scholarship today is not a matter for moral philosophy alone, but rather an agenda for fruitful collaboration between fields across the humanities and social sciences. This interdisciplinary program for both understanding and improving human nature is contrasted with alternative approaches, and defended against objections that it cannot produce a moral code categorically binding on any rational being as such. The chapter concludes with some sociological and psychological hypotheses that might help explain why the interdisciplinary and sentimentalist approach to ethics, for all its intellectual virtues, has not been adequately appreciated.

Keywords:

interdisciplinarity, moral philosophy, rationalism, empiricism, anthropology, Immanuel Kant, J. G. Herder, David Hume, Adam Smith, John Locke, Bernard Mandeville, G.W.F. Hegel, Alasdair Macintyre, Anthony Ashley Cooper of Shaftesbury, Joseph Butler, Francis Hutcheson, Copernican revolution, William Leechman, Benedict Spinoza, Cambridge Platonists, G. E. Moore, naturalistic fallacy, Stoicism, X-Phi, Isaac Newton, Arthur Schopenhauer, David Miller, John Rawls, Annette Baier, modal realism, G. L. Collins, John Zammito, Manfred Kuehn, Johann Funk

1. Introduction

One of the obstacles that we face when interpreting the philosophy of another era is the fact that key terms change their meaning over time. The very word "philosophy" is itself rather protean. In eighteenth-century English, the terms "science" and "philosophy" could still be used interchangeably to refer to intellectual investigation as such. To isolate the "philosophy" of the

Enlightenment as a distinct subject of scholarly inquiry—one to be interpreted by a community of philosophical specialists, separate from those devoted to the history of science—is therefore to risk serious misunderstanding.¹

Once we use two protean words together, the possible confusion only magnifies. This is precisely the problem with the phrase “moral philosophy,” since the word “moral” also meant something rather different in the Enlightenment than it does today. In a narrow sense, “moral” could mean something like it does now, but it could also be used in a broader sense to refer to anything having to do with the mental or social lives of human beings. A professor of moral philosophy was expected to teach what we still call by that name, but also what we now call psychology, philosophy of mind, sociology, anthropology, history, political science, and economics. In eighteenth-century English, “moral philosophy” in this broad sense was also often called “the science of man.”

As is so often the case, these changes in language reflect deeper changes in social practices. The narrowing of the word “philosophy” represents a narrowing of the philosophical profession itself, as philosophers take their place alongside a host of other specialists in the modern university. Moral philosophy, in turn, is reduced to a mere subfield of this one small discipline. Outside of that subfield, most of the subjects once considered part of moral philosophy are now investigated using allegedly value-neutral methods modeled on those of the natural sciences.

¹ In a new introduction to the new edition of *Leviathan and the Air Pump*, Shapin and Schaffer (1985/2011, p. xxxv) complain that their work has not been able to overcome the division between those who study Hobbes the “philosopher” and those who study Boyle the “scientist.”

Although all Enlightenment philosophers felt free to cross what would later become disciplinary boundaries, not all of them did so in the same way. Kant famously begins his critical moral philosophy with the a priori metaphysics of morals, only then turning to empirical investigation to determine how imperfect, real-world creatures such as ourselves may be better brought in line with morality's authoritative demands. By contrast, other philosophers seamlessly integrate empirical and normative analysis throughout their work—asking how creatures such as we are, possessing the kind of psychological constitutions that we do, can agree on standards of happiness and virtue tailored to our particular nature. This approach can be seen as culminating with Kant's estranged student J. G. Herder, whose comprehensive "history of humanity" was intended as a grand synthesis of all of our knowledge about human virtues and vices.

We can follow contemporary custom call the former camp "rationalist" and the latter "empiricist," but only with the caveat that categories developed to organize the history of other branches of philosophy and science must be used with care when applied to moral philosophy and the science of man. In Germany at the time, the same two approaches to moral subjects could be called "metaphysical" and "anthropological," respectively—with "anthropology" used to mean all forms of empirical study of human beings, and not the narrower discipline with which we are familiar today. In Britain, the first approaches could be called "abstract" and the latter "experimental"—with "experiments" used at the time to mean simply "observations," not necessarily the controlled experiments of the laboratory. Unfortunately, all of the available names for these approaches are liable to cause one form of confusion or another (see Debes 2014).

Regardless of the labels we use, the important point for purposes of this volume is that Hume, Smith and the other authors who we now call sentimentalists all follow empiricist procedures. There is no necessary connection between empiricism in other fields and sentimentalism in ethics; Locke was more or less a moral rationalist. Nor is there even a necessary connection between moral sentimentalism and specifically moral empiricism; empirical study of the human condition might reveal that the road to hell is paved with good sentiments, as Mandeville argued. There is, however, an elective affinity between the empiricist methods and sentimentalist conclusions. Careful investigation of the origins of our actual moral commitments, and of the empirical requirements of human happiness, typically reveals that human ethics is based in large part on emotion, and that we can only hope to be happy by pursuing the virtues toward which our emotions point us. Many eighteenth-century moral empiricists who are not typically thought of as sentimentalists, Herder most prominent among them, can readily be reclassified as such.² Scientists and philosophers examining empirical moral psychology today have also endorsed roughly sentimentalist positions, while those opposed to empiricist methods in ethics are more often moral rationalists.³

Those who reject both moral empiricism and moral sentimentalism have often taken their inspiration from the critical-period Kant. Neo-Kantians are generally comfortable with the narrow confines of the modern discipline of philosophy. As has been widely observed since Hegel, Kant's critical philosophy is built around a series of of divisions: divisions between

² For a full defense of my reclassification of Herder as a moral sentimentalist, see Frazer 2010, Chapter 6, pp. 139-167.

³ For some examples of recent empiricist sentimentalism, see Haidt 2001, Nichols 2004, and Prinz 2007.

phenomena and noumena, between theoretical and practical reason, between virtue and justice, and, between the a priori metaphysics of morals and the empirical study of practical anthropology. The modern Anglo-Germanic university—with its many autonomous disciplines and its commitment to scholarly specialization—is the institutional embodiment of intellectual distinctions that make sense from a Kantian perspective.

Still, it is important not to exaggerate Kant's responsibility for today's division of intellectual labor, which can also be defended in a wide variety of other ways. It is particularly ironic that many defend the division of labor between moral philosophers and scholars in the other arts and sciences by reference to a misinterpretation of Hume, the view that "Hume's law" draws a sharp boundary between "is" and "ought." Closer attention to Hume's work and that of his fellow sentimentalists cures us of this confusion. As Macintyre (1966, p. 242) memorably points out, Hume himself regularly breached his own alleged law. Similar violations were committed by all of Hume's immediate sentimentalist predecessors (such as Shaftesbury, Butler, and Hutcheson) as well as his immediate followers (such as Smith, Herder, and the pre-critical Kant).

There is a growing sense that the current structure of disciplinary divisions is both arbitrary and unduly constraining. Interdisciplinarity is the watchword of the day, but most scholars are so utterly socialized into their segregated disciplines that it is often unclear how interdisciplinary research can proceed. Enlightenment sentimentalism's greatest potential contribution to scholarship today is thus not a matter of humanistic scholarship, empirical social science, or normative ethics, but rather an agenda for fruitful collaboration between these fields. Eighteenth-century sentimentalists were united in a common project synthesizing

all of what are now the humanities and social sciences so as to both understand and improve human nature, a project that could serve as an inspiration to analogous work in the twenty-first century.

Section 2 of this chapter will further elucidate the empirical approach of eighteenth-century moral sentimentalism by contrasting it to the alternative approaches that came both earlier and later. Section 3 will then use Hume and Herder as methodological models for interdisciplinary research on the moral sentiments. This interdisciplinary approach will then be defended against two important objections. Section 4 will respond to the objection that an empirically-informed approach to human ethics is unacceptable because it cannot produce a moral code binding on any rational being as such. Section 5 will respond to the objection that this approach cannot establish the categorical authority that moral principles have over us. Section 6 will conclude with some sociological and psychological hypotheses that might help explain why the sentimentalist approach to ethics, for all its philosophical virtues, has not been adequately appreciated.

2. The New Science

There was widespread agreement in the eighteenth century that something new and exciting was going on in moral philosophy. The standard analogy is to the radical changes that “natural philosophy” (that is, science) had undergone in previous centuries. Like his teacher Kant, Herder calls for a second Copernican revolution, but he has a rather different revolution in mind. Just as “the Ptolemaic system became the Copernican system,” Herder heralds the coming of a day when “our entire philosophy has become anthropology” (Suphan 1967-8 v. 32,

p. 61).⁴ “You are already a philosopher,” he enjoins his fellow intellectuals. “Oh, be a human being, and think for human beings, that they may act and be happy” (Gaier 1985 v. 1, p. 118; Forster 2002, p. 15).

The echo of Hume’s injunction “Be a philosopher, but amidst all your philosophy be still a man” (Hume 1748/1999, 1.6)⁵ is surely intentional. Herder—an excellent reader of English—was aware that the revolution he advocated in German philosophy was already underway in Britain. Hume himself cites his sentimentalist precursors Shaftesbury, Hutcheson and Butler alongside their interlocutors Locke and Mandeville as among the “late philosophers in England who have begun to put the science of man on a new footing” (Hume 1739-40/2000, Intro.7). Although “they differ in many points among themselves,” Hume praises these authors for all “founding their accurate disquisitions of human nature entirely upon experience” (Hume 1739-40/2000, Abstract 2).

The analogy to the earlier revolution in natural science was taken seriously by all of the British authors that Hume mentions. In his preface to the posthumously published *System of Moral Philosophy*, Hutcheson’s colleague William Leechman recalls that Hutcheson

...had observed that it was the happiness and glory of the present age that they had thrown off the method of forming hypotheses and suppositions in natural philosophy and had set themselves to make observations and experiments on the constitution of the world itself... He was convinced that in like manner a true scheme of morals could not be the product of genius and invention, or of the greatest precision of thought in metaphysical reasonings, but must be drawn from proper observations upon the several

⁴ There are two widely used editions of Herder’s works in German: Gaier 1985 and Suphan 1967-8. Whenever a translation has also been consulted, it is listed after the citation to the German edition. In other cases, translations are my own.

⁵ As has become common practice, Hume’s works are cited by chapter and section number. When the editors of the editions cited themselves failed to do so, I have modernized and Americanized the spelling and punctuation of eighteenth-century English texts.

powers and principles which we are conscious of in our bosoms, and which must be acknowledged to operate in some degree in the whole human species (In Hutcheson 1755/2005, v. 1, pp. xiii-xiv).

It is important to realize that eighteenth-century moral empiricists consciously decided to reject what they saw as the previously dominant approach to the subject. Seventeenth-century moral rationalists—such as Spinoza and the Cambridge Platonists—had employed methods surprisingly similar to those used by twentieth-century Anglo-American analytic ethicists. It was not that the seventeenth-century approach to moral philosophy was every purely metaphysical or aprioristic, at least not with the kind of purism that would emerge later. In Butler’s formulation, the distinction between the “two ways in which the subject of morals may be treated” is a matter of different starting points. The old method, he says, “begins from inquiring into abstract relations of things”; the new “from a matter of fact, namely, what the particular nature of man is, its several parts, their economy or constitution; from whence it proceeds to determine what the course of life it is, which is correspondent to this whole nature” (Butler 1983, Preface 12, p. 13).

In the twentieth century, the a priori approach to ethics was thought to be the only possible means of escaping what Moore (1903/1993) called the naturalistic fallacy. Even as they consciously chose to reject the seventeenth-century ancestors of this approach, eighteenth-century empiricists were well aware of the danger of blurring the distinction between empirical and normative claims. Hume is of course famous for making a distinction along roughly those lines, and Smith too describes how the bulk of his moral philosophy “is not concerning a matter of right, if I may say so, but concerning a matter of fact.” (Smith 1759-90/1984, II.i.5.10, p. 77).

Yet while we must indeed distinguish between matters of fact and matters of right—and may not be able to derive one from the other—it is nonetheless the case that coming to understand the facts concerning human moral sentiments will, as a matter of psychological fact, have an effect on those very sentiments. While identifying the psychological effects of this factual knowledge is itself a matter of empirical investigation, Enlightenment sentimentalists did not merely identify the psychological effects of self-knowledge in a value-neutral way, but also evaluated them normatively, and concluded that they were overwhelmingly changes for the better. “By examining the various turns, inflections, declensions and inward revolutions of the passions,” Shaftesbury explains, “I must undoubtedly come the better to understand a human breast, and judge the better of others and myself” (Shaftesbury 1711/2001, v. 1, p. 182).

Moral philosophers must begin with our moral sentiments as they are; they must devote most of their time and energy to insuring that their descriptions of all the relevant facts are empirically accurate. Smith nonetheless notes that “by the justness as well as delicacy of their observations they may often help both to correct and to ascertain our natural sentiments with regard to the propriety of conduct, and suggesting many nice and delicate attentions, form us to a more exact justness of behavior, than what, without such instruction, we should have been apt to think of” (Smith 1759-90/1984, VII.iv.6, p. 329).

Here, the appropriate analogy is not to the natural science of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, but to the ethics of a much earlier era. The Enlightenment science of man represents a return to the Hellenistic conception of moral philosophy as a kind of practical therapy, the art of learning to think, act and feel properly, and hence to live well and become happy. Modern empirical science is valued, not for its own sake, but insofar as it is the best

means available to help us achieve the ancient ideal of happiness through self-awareness.

Shaftesbury—the most self-consciously neo-Stoic of all the Enlightenment sentimentalists—is convinced that the proper “harmony and proportion” of the soul is only “discoverable in the characters and affections of mankind, in which are laid the just foundations of an art and science superior to every other of human practice and comprehension” (Shaftesbury 1711/2001, v.1, p. 218).⁶

3. The Experimental Method

Once we have decided to attempt an empirical investigation of human virtue, the next question is how such an investigation should be conducted. Admittedly, Enlightenment sentimentalists were not always the most methodologically sophisticated researchers. In an era before the discovery of the full depths of the subconscious mind, most were convinced that the human soul was fully transparent to introspection. As a result, Hutcheson could reasonably claim that to discover truth on the subject of human psychology “nothing more is necessary than a little attention to what passes in our own hearts, and consequently every man may come to certainty in these points, without much art or knowledge of other matters” (Hutcheson 1728-42/2002, p. 4).

Yet moral philosophy could not ignore the methodological changes that had occurred in natural philosophy. The remarkable effectiveness of new scientific approaches convinced Hume that with any “question of fact we can only expect success by following the experimental

⁶ On the neo-Hellenistic character of Enlightenment sentimentalism, see, among others, Immerwahr 1989, Martin 1994, and Potkay, 2000.

method” (Hume 1751/1998, 1.10). Today’s methodological innovators would certainly seem to agree. Current proponents of “experimental philosophy” (e.g., Appiah 2008, pp. 5-28) explicitly defend this movement as an attempt, in the spirit of Hume, to reintroduce “the experimental method of reasoning into moral subjects” (Hume 1739-40/2000, Title Page).

Unfortunately for X-Phi-ers seeking to claim Hume as one of their own, “experimental” (as was already noted) is yet another protean term that has changed its meaning since the eighteenth century. Rather than recommending the controlled tests of today’s laboratory science, Hume instead equates “careful and exact experiments” with the “observation of those particular effects which result from... different circumstances and situations” (Hume 1739-40/2000, Intro). If experimentation in general is to be equated with careful observation, in the case of “moral subjects” experimentation will merely involve close observation of the operations of the social world around us and the psychological forces within us. For Hume, who was most famous in his own time as a historian and an essayist, these observations were not to be conducted in the laboratory under controlled conditions, but in the uncontrolled reality of human life, a reality whose complexity is captured in history and literature. Although controlled experimentation will always be invaluable in psychology—as it is in so many other fields—humanistic inquiry also has an invaluable contribution to make when we are investigating the nature of human virtue.

The great danger with laboratory experiments is that they sacrifice external validity in favor of a rigorous demonstration of internal validity. While there is often little doubt that, in a particular controlled environment, it was indeed the experimental treatment that caused the observed effects, it is often unclear to what extent an experiment’s results can be generalized

to other settings. For Hume, by contrast, “following the experimental method,” is primarily about “deducing general maxims from a comparison of particular instances” (Hume 1751/1998, 1.10). The model here was Newton, who famously used his theory of gravity to explain everything from the orbits of the planets to the falling of an apple. As a result, Hume sought a general theory to explain all the diverse empirical phenomena which he observed in the moral realm. If the phenomena being explained are not sufficiently diverse then the theory derived from them will lack the global applicability necessary to qualify as a general theory of human virtue. In this regard, evidence rigorously collected from a handful of (typically undergraduate) volunteers in the local laboratory is little better than evidence drawn from the intuitions of a group of professional philosophers gathered around a seminar table, or even from solitary introspection.

Herder was particularly concerned that the theories of virtue put forward by his contemporaries were unduly parochial. “Woe... to the philosopher,” he writes, “who, in making theories on humanity and manners and morals, knows only his own scene...” (Suphan 1967-8, v. 5, p. 653). Herder, like Hume before him, thinks history is the only cure for philosophical myopia—but in this case, history, not only of England, or even of Europe, but of the world as a whole. “Whoever does not make it his main focus... to put together in imagination the taste and character of each age,” Herder writes, “and to travel through the various periods of the world events with the penetrating look of a traveler hungry to learn, he, like that blind man [of Mark 8:23-25] sees human beings as trees, and consumes in history a dish of husks without a kernel, in order to ruin his stomach” (Gaier 1985, v. 1, p. 158).

Herder's goal is still to identify human happiness and human virtue, but when he studies diverse cultures across all times and places—including their arts, literature, and religion as well as their philosophy, politics, and economics—he sees that “in humanity there lies one invisible seed of receptivity for happiness and virtue on the whole earth and in all ages which, differently developed... appears in different forms” (Suphan 1967-8, v. 5, p. 558; Forster 2002, p. 335).

While grounding universal claims about virtue in human nature is often thought to rely on an unduly “uniformitarian” understanding of our species,⁷ Herder's oeuvre shows us that “human nature is no container of an absolute, independent, unchangeable happiness as the philosopher defines it.” The human psyche is not a rigid structure but “a flexible clay, in the most different situations, needs and pressure, forming itself differently.” In this way, “the very image of happiness changes with each condition and region” (Suphan 1967-8, v. 5, p. 509).

That said, Herder insists that there are many important similarities underlying these different conceptions of happiness, so much so that he predicts they are gradually converging on a single ethical consensus. “There lies in the human species an infinite variety of sentiments, thoughts and efforts towards the unity of a true, effective purely moral character which belongs to the whole species,” Herder insists. “An infinite variety striving for a unity that lies in all, that advances all” (Gaier 1985, v. 7, p. 750; Forster 2002, pp. 423-424).

Just as Hume and Smith insisted that their moral philosophy was based more on matters of fact than on matters of right, so too does Herder often insist that he is merely an empirical historian. “I merely want to gather historical examples of how far the diversity of human beings

⁷ For two classic statements of this position, see Collingwood 1946/1994 and Meinecke 1936/1972.

can extend, to bring it into categories, and then to try to explain it," he writes. "I shall lead my readers out onto a knoll and show them how in the valley and on the plain creatures stray about that are so diverse that they hardly have a common name left; however, they are our fellow brothers, and their history is the history of our nature" (Gaier 1985; v. 1, p. 151; Forster 2002, p. 249). This historical project produced Herder's masterworks: the methodological essay *Auch Eine Philosophie der Geshichte zur Bildung der Menschheit* (*Yet Another Philosophy of History for the Education of Humanity*) of 1774; and the magisterial, if incomplete, application of this methodology in the four volumes of *the Ideen zur Philosophie der Geshichte der Menschheit* (*Ideas towards the Philosophy of the History of Humanity*) published between 1784 and 1791.

Just like the British sentimentalists, however, Herder is well aware that true understanding of the nature of moral sentiments does not, and should not, leave those sentiments unchanged. Herder calls on us to build empathetic understanding across otherwise insurmountable barriers of difference, not for its own sake, but to provide the insight necessary to take the morally appropriate stance on practical issues. Most importantly, Herder urges Europe to give up on her monstrous imperial goal of "compelling all the nations of the Earth to be happy in her way" (Gaier 1985, v. 6, p. 335; Churchill, p. 224).

4. Humans and Other Rational Beings

It is the fact that virtue is what Shaftesbury calls a "constitution or economy of a particular creature or species" (Shaftesbury 1711/2001, v. 2, p. 53) that allows us to identify it through empirical investigation of the species in question: *homo sapiens*. Insofar as this method

can prove effective, it can only do so for real-world human beings such as ourselves, creatures inescapably bound by the contingent features of our biology, our psychology and the unchangeable features of our social life. Other sorts of beings might require other sorts of virtues; Smith suggests that the kinds of moral judgments which might be appropriate for God to make are not appropriate for us (Smith, 1759-90/1984, III.5.7, p. 166). The virtues might look very different indeed if our species were, as Hume puts it, “so framed by nature as that each individual possessed within himself every faculty, requisite both for his own preservation and for the propagation of his kind” or if “all society and intercourse” were “cut off between man and man by the primary intention of the Supreme Creator” (Hume 1751/1998, 3.1.19).

What of the critical-period Kantian intuition that morality, to be worthy of the name, must be binding on any rational being as such? This intuition was simply one that sentimentalists did not share; for most of them, it barely even needed to be addressed. Later philosophers would try to fill in this apparent lacuna for them; Schopenhauer, for example, argues that the concept of a “rational being as such” is incoherent. We know the faculty of reason, he says:

...as the exclusive attribute of the human race, and are by no means entitled to think of it as existing outside that race, and to set up a genus called “rational beings” differing from its sole species, “man.” Still less are we justified in laying down laws for such imaginary rational beings in the abstract... We cannot help suspecting that Kant here gave a thought to the dear little angels... (Schopenhauer 1840/1995, p. 63.)

There is no need, however, for sentimentalists to accept Schopenhauer’s argument on this point. The concept of a rational being as such might be perfectly coherent, and it might be entirely possible to develop a moral philosophy out of principles binding on all members of that

class—be they humans, gods, extraterrestrials or even “dear little angels.”⁸ It is an interesting question whether there are any moral principles that apply both to us, as we are, and these imagined beings, as they are, but the sentimentalists never attempt to answer this question. Their goal was simply a different one—virtue “for earthlings,” as Miller (2013) calls it today. Such virtue is appropriate only for us. “Were the question to be whether the human being could become, and should become, more than human,” Herder admits, “a super-, an other-man [*ein Über-, ein Aussermensch*] beyond the realm of the species, every line written in response would be in vain” (Gaier 1985, v. 7, p. 125; Adler 1997, p. 99).

Insofar as eighteenth-century sentimentalists hint at an argument for choosing this goal over Kant’s, the argument is primarily a moral one. Just because a puzzle is coherent and interesting does not mean that it is worth spending our time trying to solve it. Life is short, and human needs are pressing. Sentimentalists therefore argued that it was their responsibility to their fellow humans to address moral questions of particular relevance to us as we happen to be. “If philosophy is to become useful for human beings,” Herder writes, “then let it make the human being its center.” (Gaier 1985, v. 1, p. 125; Forster 2001, p. 21).

For those with a deep concern for imaginary, non-human rational creatures, the results of the empiricist approach can be rather troubling. This is particularly true when we imagine fantastic beings interacting with realistic humans, and try to puzzle out not only whether they should be governed by the moral principles with which we are familiar, but whether we should

⁸ The possibility of rational creatures on other planets was of particular interest to Kant. See Dick 1984, Crowe 2008, and Szendy 2013.

be governed by these principles when we are interacting with them. In a discussion of what Rawls (1971/1999, p. 110) would later call the “conditions of justice,” Hume writes:

Were there a species of creatures, intermingled with men, which, though rational, were possessed of such inferior strength, both of body and mind, that they were incapable of all resistance, and could never, upon the highest provocation, make us feel the effects of their resentment, the necessary consequence, I think, is that we should be bound by the laws of humanity to give gentle usage to these creatures, but should not, properly speaking, lie under any restraint of justice with regard to them (Hume 1751/1998, 3.1.18).

Hume goes on to point out, however, that such a situation has never arisen in reality.

“Civilized Europeans” may be tempted to imagine that they have a position of superiority of this sort over “barbarous Indians,” and men may be tempted to imagine that they have such a position over women, but in both cases they would be mistaken (Hume 1751/1998, 3.1.19). The fact that Hume is willing to bite the bullet regarding such a disturbing hypothetical, and defend his position merely on the grounds that this possible world has never been actualized, leaves more recent philosophers rather unsatisfied (e.g., Baier 1980).

Hypothetical scenarios, often of an outlandish nature, are the stock in trade of ethicists today; a moral theory stands or falls on the basis of its ability to resolve them in ways that we find intuitively appealing. The implicit assumption seems to be a sort of moral modal realism—that our moral judgments about all possible worlds are genuine moral judgments, and that they are as important as our judgments about the actual world. This assumption is unquestioned even among those undertaking empirical research on moral psychology, whose modus operandi typically involves observing experimental subjects asked to solve the same scenarios used by philosophers. A distinctively human moral system, however, can only be expected to properly address situations in which human beings, with all their contingent features, actually

find themselves. Eighteenth-century sentimentalists are entirely comfortable with the principles of morality being contingent in their reliance on these features of humanity, while the critical-period Kant and those who take their inspiration from him generally are not. As a result, where ethicists today produce their own short-form science fiction, sentimentalists like Hume, Smith and Herder typically draw real-world examples from history, current events, and everyday experience.

5. Sources of Normativity

Yet it is not only those with a deep moral concern for extraterrestrials or angels who have reason to be concerned about sentimentalism's humanistic and empirical approach to moral philosophy. Those who are convinced that the naturalistic fallacy really is a fallacy will worry that defining virtue as an empirically-discoverable harmony of the human psyche will rob it of any unconditional claim it might have, even over us earthlings. Shaftesbury acknowledges that this is a concern worth addressing, since "what virtue is, and to whom the character belongs" is a separate matter from the question of "what obligation there is to virtue, or what reason to embrace it" (Shaftesbury 1711/2001, v. 2, p. 45).

As this quotation indicates, "obligation" is another English term that had a broader meaning in the eighteenth century than it does today. An obligation to perform an action simply meant an overriding reason to do it, one which ruled out the possibility of omitting it. This determinative reason could easily be self-interested. "If by obligation," Shaftesbury says, "we understand a motive from self-interest sufficient to determine all those who duly consider it, and pursue their own advantage wisely to a certain course of actions, we may have a sense

of such an obligation... by considering how much superior we esteem the happiness of virtue to any other enjoyment" (Shaftesbury 1711/2001, v. 2, p. 177).

Of course, there may be other sources of the "obligation to virtue" as well. The work of many eighteenth-century moral sentimentalists—with the adamant exception of Hume—is filled frequent appeal to natural teleology and the intentions of nature's designer (see Gill 2000). Yet while these religious and metaphysical foundations may play a significant role in establishing morality's authority, they play a surprisingly marginal role in sentimentalist moral philosophy. "In this art, as in all others," Hutcheson explains, "we must proceed from the subjects more easily known, to those that are more obscure." As a result, he insists, we must not "deduce our first notions of duty from the divine will, but from the constitution of our nature, which is more immediately known, that from the full knowledge of it we may discover the design, intention and will of our Creator as to our conduct" (Hutcheson 1742-47/2007, p. 24).

As in modern natural science, final causes are to be avoided when more mundane explanations based on empirically-observable efficient causes are available. Since virtue can be discovered as the form of psychic harmony necessary for our happiness, those who are already committed to the purposiveness of the cosmos and the benevolence of God can deduce that it is both the intention of our creator and the *telos* of our nature for us to be happy in this way. Yet neither divine intentions nor natural teleology are necessary for us to unearth either the substance of virtue or the necessary role it must play in our happiness.

Metaethicists today tend to be dissatisfied both with a mere "interested obligation" to virtue and also with the religious and metaphysical foundations that were once thought to lend

virtue an authority independent of its necessary contribution to human happiness. As a result, they have often looked elsewhere for the sources of morality's authority. Many have written approvingly of Enlightenment sentimentalists' discussions of reflective self-approbation as something of which only a virtuous mind is capable (e.g., Baier 1991 and Korsgaard 1996a). For most eighteenth-century authors, however, reflective self-approbation is a necessary element of happiness rather than an independent source of normative authority. As Shaftesbury argues, peace of mind can only come when "together with the most delightful affection of the soul there is joined a pleasing assent and approbation of the mind to what is acted in this good disposition and honest bent" (Shaftesbury 1711/2001, v. 2, p. 61). Only "a mind... well composed, quiet, easy within itself and such as can freely bear its own inspection and review" (Shaftesbury 1711/2001, v. 2, p. 66) can be harmonious and tranquil, and therefore happy.

Here is hardly the place to determine whether self-approbation can function as a source of normativity independent of its role in promoting happiness, let alone whether a view of normativity along these lines can be attributed to any Enlightenment sentimentalists.⁹ Such issues may be safely bracketed because the project of identifying virtue through the empirical investigation of humanity is compatible with a wide variety of positions on normativity. If we accept some version of eudemonism, then the fact that virtue is necessary for creatures such as ourselves to be happy may be sufficient to establish its authority over us. If we do not, then some further authority may be sought from a teleological Nature or Nature's God, from a quasi-Platonic realm of reified "reasons," or perhaps from the reflective stability of the virtuous soul

⁹ In Frazer 2010, I argue that a view along roughly these lines can be attributed to Butler and the later Hutcheson, but that Hume, in his correspondence with the latter, offers a devastating refutation of it. See also Gill 1996 and Loeb 2002.

itself. Regardless, these concerns were marginal to the project of the Enlightenment sentimentalists—typically confined to introductions, conclusions or passing asides. If anything, this should make their theories more rather than less attractive in today’s diverse societies, as we search for a moral and political consensus that can unite those divided by their religious and metaethical worldviews. There is no denying that the sources of normativity are of profound philosophical interest, but they must not be allowed to monopolize our intellectual energy when there are so many more pressing issues for human minds to address.

6. Concluding Socio-Psychological Speculations

There is no denying that the empiricist, sentimentalist agenda for moral philosophy represents a path not taken in modern scholarship. Insofar as the path we did take can be attributed to a single philosopher, Kant is as good a candidate as any. It is therefore a great historical irony that, at the time that he was Herder’s teacher, Kant was an adamant proponent of the sentimentalist approach. “The sole moral rule... is this,” Herder records Kant as proclaiming in his lectures of the early 1760’s: “Act according to your moral feeling!” (Kant 1997, p. 10; KGS 27:16).

Kant also makes clear his commitment to British-style sentimentalism in the *Inquiry Concerning the Distinctness of the Principles of Natural Theology and Morality*, written in 1762 but published two years later. Here, Kant notes that “Hutcheson and others have, under the name of moral sentiment [*des moralischen Gefühls*] provided us with a starting point from which to develop some excellent observations” (Kant 1992, p. 274; KGS 2:300). In the announcement of his program of lectures for the 1765-1766 winter semester, Kant again

asserts that “the judgment of moral rightness can be known, easily and accurately, by the human heart through what is called sentiment [*Sentiment*].” The word that Kant uses here isn’t even proper German; he has simply left the English term untranslated. “The attempts of Shaftesbury, Hutcheson and Hume,” he explains, “although incomplete and defective, have nonetheless penetrated furthest in the search for the fundamental principles of all morality.” Kant promises that, in his lectures, the moral theories of these British sentimentalists “will be given the precision and the completeness that they lack.” He continues:

In the doctrine of virtue I shall always begin by considering historically and philosophically what happens before specifying what ought to happen. In so doing, I shall make clear what method ought to be adopted in the study of man... My purpose will be to establish what perfection is appropriate to him... This method of moral enquiry is an admirable discovery of our times... (Kant 1992, p. 298; KGS 2:311).

In later years, of course, Kant was to reverse this procedure: establishing what ought to happen metaphysically before considering what really happens anthropologically. This is not to say that Kant ever lost interest in the empirical features of human virtue. Recent commentaries on Kant’s mature ethics have moved away from the rationalist foundational theories of *Groundwork* and the second *Critique* to see even the critical-period Kant as engaging with the contingent features of specifically human morality, in works of what might be called “impure ethics,” or, more closely following Kant’s own terminology, “practical anthropology” (e.g., Louden 2000, Shell 1996, and Sherman 1997). In the lectures of 1784-1785 preserved by G. L. Collins, Kant explains that this sort of inquiry must “build upon the characteristic feature[s] peculiar to the human race” (Kant 1997, p. 55; KGS 27:261-2).

In correcting interpretations unduly focused on his metaphysics of morals, however, we must be careful not to overstate the later Kant’s estimate of the moral or philosophical

importance of practical anthropology. To be sure, Kant recognized that human beings are not purely rational beings, and that the empirically-observable, non-rational features of the human soul neither can nor should be entirely extirpated. Instead, they must be cultivated so as to help our behavior conform with reason's authoritative demands. Yet if they are not put in service of the moral law legislated a priori by reason, distinctly human virtues are nothing but vices. Though they may "seem to constitute part of the inner worth of a person," Kant writes, such traits "lack much that would be required to declare them good without limitation (however unconditionally they were praised by the ancients), for, without the basic principles of a good will they can become extremely evil (Kant 1996, p. 50; KGS 4:394).

Kant's own reasons for his radical about-face on the methodology of moral philosophy are far too complicated to address adequately here. The question of whether we have any good reason to join him in this turn is more complicated still.¹⁰ There is some cause to worry, however, that Kant's later position on the matter might not have gained ascendancy—either in his own mind or in the wider academic community—on purely intellectual grounds.

In Kant's individual case, we cannot rule out psycho-biographical explanations rather than philosophical justifications. Zammito (2002, pp. 83-135; see especially pp. 131-135) hypothesizes that—suffering from severe melancholy at having turned forty the previous year and having been spurned in his quest for marriage—Kant underwent a "conversion experience" sometime in the mid-1760's, renouncing the emotional component of his psyche and identifying his true self with philosophical reason alone. Kant's biographer Kuehn (2001, p. 148)

¹⁰ On the former, biographical question, see Beiser 1992 Schlipp 1938/1960. On the latter, philosophical question see Cartwright 1987, Henson 1979, Korsgaard 1996b, Mendus 1985, and Sherman 1990.

concur that Kant underwent a sort of “rebirth” after a mid-life crisis, though he suspects that this may have had more to do with the death of Kant’s friend Johann Funk than with any romantic failure.

Socio-economic causes may play an analogous role in explaining why Kant’s melancholic rationalism came to dominate academic moral philosophy. The nineteenth and twentieth centuries saw an incredible increase in academic specialization spurred by a conviction that the division of labor is as good a means of achieving efficiency in the intellectual sphere as it is in commerce and industry. Universities were reorganized, with disciplinary departments given significant autonomy—first in Germany, then in the United States, and gradually in the rest of the world. Ethics was denied a department of its own, and eventually became part of a new discipline given the old name of “philosophy.” Kant’s distinction between the metaphysics of morals and practical anthropology could be used to justify this convenient bureaucratic arrangement. Ethics, when conducted in an aprioristic fashion, can use analytic tools akin to those used in other philosophical subfields. Confident of the autonomy of their enterprise, moral philosophers can now sit proudly among the specialists who surround them, both in their own particular discipline and in the university as a whole.

As a semi-independent guild of trained professionals, moral philosophers today have an interest in the rejection of empiricist sentimentalism wholly independent of its intellectual merits. Were it to prove impossible to segregate ethical questions from psychological, sociological, political, biological, historical, or literary ones, then moral philosophers would find themselves either having to collaborate with experts on these matters or attempt to develop these myriad forms of expertise themselves. While there is admittedly much excitement about

interdisciplinary work in the academy today, it is still very difficult to resist the professional awards which accrue primarily to specialists.

Admittedly, this hypothetical explanation of empiricist sentimentalism's decline is not only highly speculative, but also unacceptably uncharitable to those involved. There are both moral and intellectual reasons for assuming that our interlocutors hold the positions they do for good reasons, and that there are no ulterior motives at work—whether consciously or unconsciously. Yet what makes for good practice in scholarly debate can lead to bad practice in intellectual history, as we come to make the Pollyannaish assumption that the best arguments always win, and that the evolution of scholarship is always a matter of Whig-historical progress. Rejecting this assumption allows intellectual history to be of much more than mere antiquarian interest. By returning to the philosophical past, we can correct for wrong turns and missed opportunities, reclaiming lost ideas and approaches that should have never been abandoned in the first place.

There is no doubt that the most important Copernican revolution in the philosophy of the eighteenth century belonged to the critical-period Kant, not his estranged student Herder. It may only now be time for Herder's anthropological revolution—a revolution that is at the same time a restoration. In the twenty-first century, moral philosophers may once again remember that they are human, and forget about the dear little angels once and for all.

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