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## HEDONISM AND VIRTUE

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Virtue and pleasure have often been thought to stand in tension with each other. Not all philosophers have believed this, but many have regarded a life devoted to the pursuit of pleasure as the antithesis of a virtuous life. A virtuous person is one who is consistently motivated to pursue right actions for their own sake. The just person, for example, is disposed to act justly in her dealings with others, with such actions requiring no further motivation or justification than that they are just. One of the principal challenges to this conception of virtue is presented by the ancient philosopher Epicurus and his followers who defend the doctrine of hedonism. For Epicureans, virtue is only instrumentally valuable as a means to pleasure. The Epicureans' main ancient opponents, the Stoics, and later critics such as Cicero, found such a view unacceptable, because it accorded insufficient weight to virtue. A person whose primary goal was pleasure could not be expected to give the appropriate attention to the requirements of virtue: faced with a choice between actions that demanded moderation, courage or justice and actions that promised significant pleasure (or significantly less pain), he would inevitably choose the latter—to the detriment of virtue. Such criticisms were repeated by theologians and moralists throughout the ancient and medieval periods, and remained a stock criticism of Epicurean views in seventeenth-century Britain.

It is important at the outset to distinguish three varieties of hedonism that are often conflated. *Psychological* hedonism is a thesis about motivation. On this view, a person is only ever motivated by the anticipation of pleasure and the avoidance of pain. *Axiological* or *value* hedonism is a thesis about the ground of value, namely, that pleasure is the only thing good in itself and hence worth pursuing for its own sake, and pain the only thing bad in itself and hence worth avoiding for its own sake. Finally, *ethical* hedonism is the thesis that the actions of rational agents ought to be directed by considerations of pleasure and pain. Most often this view is embraced by consequentialists who also accept value hedonism. Thus, for ancient Epicureans, our actions ought to be directed toward the goal of a pleasing life, in which bodily pain and mental disturbance are minimized.

Each of these species of hedonism poses a significant threat to the claims of virtue. If psychological hedonism is true, then an agent is only ever motivated by the prospect of pleasure or the avoidance of pain. Given this, we may wonder whether virtue is even possible, since no agent will possess the distinctive form of motivation characteristic of a virtuous person. If axiological hedonism is true, a challenge can be raised to the value of virtue. Even if an agent is disposed to act courageously or justly, the value of such actions (and of the states of character from which they originate) will depend upon the contribution they make to the attainment of pleasure or the avoidance of pain. Similarly, if ethical hedonism is true, then whether virtue ought to be pursued will depend upon whether it can be shown that virtuous action, or the cultivation of a virtuous character, is an effective means to the promotion of pleasure.

For many philosophers in seventeenth-century Britain, a defense of virtue as the centerpiece of a moral life entailed a rejection of hedonism. Such views were expressed in the face of efforts by other thinkers to revive the teachings of Epicurus, while demonstrating their consistency with Christianity and the requirements of morality. Associated principally with the

French philosopher Pierre Gassendi, this effort was popularized in England by, among others, Walter Charleton in the second half of the century. Rightly or wrongly, many critics identified Hobbes's innovative doctrines with the revival of Epicureanism and saw them as undermining conventional notions of virtue. At the same time, defenders of virtue embraced the idea that happiness is best understood as a kind of refined pleasure or tranquility. This, largely unconscious, concession to Epicureanism brought with it unforeseen consequences. It was generally acknowledged that human beings have a natural and ineliminable desire for happiness. If the desire for happiness is just the desire for a kind of pleasure, then a large step has been taken toward meeting the claims of Epicureans.

In what follows we trace the development of this set of ideas in a number of leading seventeenth-century British thinkers. We begin by considering its immediate background in early modern natural law theory and the revival of Epicureanism. We then turn to the radical reformulation of moral philosophy advocated by Hobbes, and the reactions to his views offered by the Cambridge Platonists Ralph Cudworth and Henry More, and by Richard Cumberland. Finally, we consider the position defended at the end of the century by Locke, who attempts to reconcile the competing claims of virtue and pleasure.

## I. BACKGROUND

### *Natural Law Theory*

A useful way of gauging the transformation of moral philosophy in seventeenth-century Britain is to begin with Richard Hooker's landmark *Of the Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity*, published in 1593. Although Hooker's focus was a defense of the tenets and practices of the Church of England, his account of morality follows that of the thirteenth-century theologian Thomas Aquinas, whose theory of natural law was widely influential among both Catholics and Protestants.<sup>1</sup> Aquinas adopts Aristotle's teleological conception of human action, and his doctrine that the fundamental end of human beings is the attainment of their characteristic good or perfection, which is identical to their happiness. Like Aristotle also, he holds that this good requires the cultivation of excellences of character, exemplified by the virtues of wisdom, moderation, courage and justice. Christian natural law theory adds to Aristotle's perfectionism the idea that there is a divinely sanctioned universal natural law, and that this law directs us to respect our own nature as rational beings, our kinship with other human beings, and our dependence on God as creator and lawgiver. Accordingly, natural law commands wisdom and moderation in all our actions, justice in our dealings with others, and honor and love toward God.

As created by God, human beings are naturally responsive to this law, but they are also pulled away from lawful action by the desire for pleasure. To the extent that they obey the 'dictates of right reason', they act virtuously and in a way that promotes the attainment of their good.<sup>2</sup> As conceived by Hooker, human beings have both an inherent motive and an overriding reason to pursue this end. This follows from God's creation of a universe in which all things naturally act in ways directed toward their end, and in which the end of human beings is specified in terms of their union with God, which they pursue under the guise of a desire for

<sup>1</sup> For succinct surveys of natural law theory, highlighting the differences between intellectualist and voluntarist versions of it, see Haakonssen (1996: ch. 1) and Schneewind (1998: ch. 2).

<sup>2</sup> Hooker defines natural law as 'a directive rule unto goodness of operation' (1989: 77). In human beings, this is specified in terms of the proper operation of reason and will: 'Reason is the director of man's will by discovering in action what is good. For the laws of well-doing are the dictates of right reason' (1989: 72).

happiness (Hooker 1989: 74-5). Happiness is thus a natural and necessary end for human beings, yet the desire for happiness cannot be fully satisfied through the pursuit of pleasure, or even knowledge and virtue, but only through union with God in a life after death (1989: 111-7).

This traditional formulation of Christian natural law theory, reaffirmed by Hooker, is subject to an extensive rethinking in the writings of the Dutch jurist Hugo Grotius, whose major work *De Jure Belli ac Pacis* (*On the Law of War and Peace*) (1625) set a new direction for the understanding of morality in both Britain and on the Continent. Grotius's most important innovation is to detach natural law from the teleological perfectionism of Aquinas and his followers and to render it primarily (if not exclusively) an issue of secular political concern. The question is not: what are the laws of reason by which human beings can attain their greatest perfection and happiness? But rather: what source, if any, is there for principles of justice and right that are binding on human beings in general, irrespective of their political and religious allegiances?<sup>3</sup>

Grotius famously opens his work by raising the challenge, attributed to the ancient skeptic Carneades, that the good of others is not an intrinsic part of an agent's own good (as it is on most perfectionist accounts), and that in some cases the pursuit of others' good may be detrimental to an agent's interests. By identifying an agent's good with what is useful or advantageous to her, and detaching the notion of advantage from a perfectionist framework, Grotius's skeptic poses a powerful objection to the authority of morality: why respect the demands of morality if there is nothing in it for *me*?

Grotius frames the skeptic's objection confident that he has a compelling response to it. The basis of natural law, he argues, is to be found in human nature itself, which is expressed not just in the desire for personal advantage, but also in the desire to live in society with other human beings (Grotius 1925: 11). The precepts of natural law reflect our understanding of how best to satisfy the latter desire. Thus, acting justly is but a special case of our ability to act prudentially, in accordance with our rational nature. In principle, there is no conflict between what is demanded by 'right reason' and what is to our advantage.

Grotius does not neglect entirely the theological dimension of the laws of nature. He goes on to suggest that, in addition to their ground in human nature, such laws can be understood as commanded by God, at least in the sense that God has created human beings such that through the exercise of reason they judge the laws to be binding on them. Yet our experience of the binding character of the laws does not require that we understand them in this way. Grotius argues that his reply to the skeptic stands, 'even if we should concede that which cannot be conceded without the utmost wickedness, that there is no God, or that the affairs of men are of no concern to Him' (1925: 13). Grotius's willingness to entertain the idea that the authority of natural law can be explained in a way that makes no reference to God points toward the position of Hobbes and can be seen as at least part of the inspiration for it.

### *The Revival of Epicureanism*

A second major influence on the development of moral philosophy in seventeenth-century Britain is the increasing prominence of the views of Epicurus. Historically, western Christianity had been hostile to Epicureanism based on its rejection of a providential creator and of the immortality of the soul.<sup>4</sup> In the domain of ethics, much of the available evidence derived from

<sup>3</sup> For further discussion of Grotius's innovations, see Schneewind (1998: 66–81). Schneewind identifies the 'Grotian problematic' as the crucial turning point in the development of modern moral philosophy.

<sup>4</sup> Jones (1989) offers a helpful summary of historical attitudes toward Epicureanism.

Cicero, who paints a strongly negative picture of Epicurean hedonism. Cicero identifies hedonism with the narrow pursuit of self-interest and an excessive attention to sensual pleasure, both of which he takes to be inconsistent with a proper regard for virtue: ‘Justice totters, or rather falls flat, along with all the virtues that are found in sociability and in the fellowship of the human race. For there can be neither goodness nor liberality nor courteousness, no more than friendship, if these are not sought for their own sakes, but are directed toward pleasure or advantage’.<sup>5</sup> For Cicero, upholding the claims of virtue entails rejecting all forms of hedonism. These doctrines cut against the principle that virtue is to be sought for its own sake, and that a proper estimation of its value requires a conception of the human good that transcends a narrow notion of self-interest or advantage. For many early Christian moralists, these arguments were decisive in supporting their rejection of Epicurean ethics.

During the early modern period, the most significant attempt to revive Epicurus’s teachings in natural philosophy and ethics was carried out by the French philosopher Pierre Gassendi.<sup>6</sup> Gassendi’s interest in Epicurus was motivated by his dissatisfaction with Aristotelian philosophy and its inability to explain the phenomena of the natural world. In order to argue against contemporary Aristotelians, he sought an alternative theory, and in doing so recognized the necessity to make this alternative compatible with Christian theology. He began in his 1647 work *De vita et moribus Epicuri* by attempting to rehabilitate the reputation of Epicurus as a philosopher whose life exemplified the virtues upheld by Cicero and other moralists. Provided that one correctly understands the Epicurean notion of pleasure, he argued, Epicurus’s views are consistent with living as a virtuous person. What is valued by the Epicurean are not isolated moments of pleasure, but a life in which one enjoys bodily health and a mind free of disturbance—with the latter being achieved by inculcating habits of moderation, liberality, friendship and justice that exemplify the traditional virtues.<sup>7</sup>

Gassendi presented his defense of Epicureanism in a number of books, the last of which, *Syntagma philosophicum*, was published posthumously in 1658. His work was promulgated widely through the French translations of François Bernier, and in England through the publications of Walter Charleton and Thomas Stanley, the latter of whose *History of Philosophy* (1660) included a significant portion of Gassendi’s writings on Epicurus in English.<sup>8</sup> Prior to this Charleton had published several books offering sympathetic accounts of Epicurus’s views, among them *Physiologia Epicuro-Gassendo-Charletoniana* (1654) and *Epicurus’s Morals* (1656). In addition to his interest in Epicurean atomism, which had an obvious relevance for developments in natural philosophy, Charleton aimed to correct unfavorable interpretations of Epicurean ethics by arguing that neither Epicurus’s own character nor his doctrines supported the charge of immorality.<sup>9</sup>

The writings of Gassendi and his English followers made the case that Epicurean hedonism was more than mere sensualism. The pleasure it advocated was of a refined sort,

<sup>5</sup> *On Duties*, III.118, in Cicero (1991).

<sup>6</sup> See Jones (1989: ch. 7) and Sarasohn (1996).

<sup>7</sup> As Michael and Michael (1995) emphasize, it is important to distinguish Gassendi’s views from those of Epicurus. The former include Aristotelian, Stoic and Christian elements foreign to Epicureanism, and these undoubtedly helped to make Gassendi’s writings more palatable to contemporary readers. On this point, see also Johnson (2003).

<sup>8</sup> Stanley’s *History* appeared in three volumes between 1655 and 1660. His presentation of Epicurus’s views appears in the third volume. Stanley (2006) reprints the third edition of 1701.

<sup>9</sup> The body of the second book is a translation of Part Three of Gassendi’s *Philosophiae Epicuri Syntagma* (1649), and is prefaced by Charleton’s own ‘Apologie for Epicurus’. See Charleton (1926).

associated with virtuous action and with the affects that characterize the piety of a devout Christian. Modifying Epicureanism as the Gassendists did to allow for divine providence and the immortality of the soul, it could be argued that there was no reason to question the moral or religious standing of those with Epicurean sympathies. This is not to say that the term 'Epicurean' ceased to function as an epithet of abuse. It continued to have this sense in the second half of the seventeenth century. Nevertheless, the case could now be made that the adoption of Epicurean principles did not imply a narrow notion of the good as personal advantage, which could be realized independently of an observance of morality. On the contrary, only by living a virtuous life could one hope to enjoy the sort of pleasure that Epicurus identified as the *summum bonum*.

In this way, the arguments of the Epicureans dovetailed with the conclusions of Grotius's natural law theory, which likewise defended the claims of natural law against the critic who sought to limit rational action to that which promoted personal advantage. The two accounts remain formally distinct, one adhering to the framework of Greek eudaimonism, the other eschewing it; nevertheless, they meet in the conclusion that the prudential agent has reason to act in ways that take into account the well-being of others. Grotius's version of modern natural law theory is undoubtedly the more innovative of these positions, but in Britain it was soon surpassed by an even more radical reinterpretation of morality at the hands of Thomas Hobbes.

## II. HOBBS

In the minds of many of his contemporaries, Hobbes's philosophy was closely associated with the revival of Epicureanism. While there is, as we shall see, some justification for this charge, not least his friendship with Gassendi, Hobbes's challenge to the foundations of traditional morality goes well beyond that of Epicurus.<sup>10</sup> Hobbes begins from the fact of moral disagreement and like Grotius appeals to laws of nature as principles upon which a stable society can be constructed; but Hobbes takes his diagnosis of normative conflict to a deeper level and offers a more pessimistic assessment of the prospects for success. Where Grotius identifies a desire for society as a foundation for universal laws of nature, Hobbes credits human beings with conflicting social and anti-social tendencies that render a peaceful society a far-from-certain outcome. Hobbes adds to this a wide-ranging critique of the significance of normative language. The result is that he leaves it unclear not just whether human beings can live up to the standards of morality, but whether those standards have any sense independently of the power of a sovereign to enforce them.

Throughout his writings Hobbes expresses skepticism about the attempts of his predecessors to establish definitive conclusions about virtue and vice, the good and happiness. His criticisms go beyond identifying the shortcomings of particular philosophers' positions and target instead the general attempt by philosophy to establish objective truths about virtue and the good. Hobbes's reasons for thinking this combine metaphysical, epistemological and semantic considerations. He is a materialist, who believes that mental functions are to be explained as mechanical processes involving no more than the motions of matter. He is an empiricist, who holds that all cognition is grounded in particular sense experiences and that there are, strictly speaking, no universal notions of which we have any comprehension. According to Hobbes, we rely extensively on universal terms to record and convey our experience of the world; however, the reference of these terms is limited to bodies, their properties, the effects of other bodies on our body, and the parts of language itself (*Lev.*, 4.15–18).

<sup>10</sup> On Hobbes's relations with Gassendi, see Sarasohn (1996: ch. 5); Paganini (2001).

For Hobbes, perennial conflict about the central notions of morality, politics and religion is explained by the way in which normative language enters human discourse. His account takes as its starting point human passions, defined as ‘the interiour beginnings of voluntary motions’. Of these ‘small beginnings of motion’, he distinguishes two basic types, corresponding to the primary passions of appetite and aversion (*Lev.*, 6.2). Appetite and aversion are distinguished solely by the direction of motion, toward or away from an object; and Hobbes maintains that all other passions can be explained in terms of these two, whose names are ‘for divers considerations diversified’ (*Lev.*, 6.13).

To this, Hobbes adds to a second claim about the significance of evaluative language:

But whatsoever is the object of any man’s appetite or desire that is it which he for his part calleth *good*: And the object of his hate, and aversion, *evil*; and of his contempt, *vile* and *inconsiderable*. For these words of good, evil, and contemptible are ever used with relation to the person that useth them, there being nothing simply and absolutely so, nor any common rule of good and evil to be taken from the nature of the objects themselves. (*Lev.*, 6.7)

According to Hobbes, we call ‘good’ that which we desire, and ‘evil’ that for which we have an aversion. Because the reference of value terms is fixed in this way, he says, ‘one cannot speak of something as being *simply good*, since whatsoever is good, is good for someone or other.’ Furthermore, given the diversity of human appetites and aversions, disagreement among individuals about the goodness and badness of objects is inevitable. ‘Since different men desire and shun different things, there must needs be many things that are good to some and evil to others; so that which is *good* to us is *evil* to our enemies’.<sup>11</sup>

Hobbes consistently maintains that the meaning of the terms ‘good’ and ‘evil’ is determined by the varying appetites and aversions of different individuals. It is less clear, though, whether he believes that appetite and aversion as such endow things with value, or render them things that an agent has reason to pursue or avoid. In expanding on the multiple uses of the terms ‘good’ and ‘evil’, he writes:

The names of *good* and *evil* also vary in a number of different ways. For the same thing that, as desired, is said to be good, is said to be *pleasing* as acquired; the thing that, as desired, is said to be good, is said to be *pulchrum* when contemplated. For *pulchritudo* is that quality in an object that makes one expect good from it. For whatsoever things are seen as similar to those that have pleased, seem as though they would please. Therefore *pulchritudo* is an indication of future good.<sup>12</sup>

Hobbes may be intending here to define the pleasing in terms of the satisfaction of desire: to say that a thing is pleasing is just to say that it is good, i.e. an object of desire, which has been successfully obtained. But in this passage an independent notion of pleasure as an affect valued for its own sake seems to endure. To expect good from an object that has pleased us in the past makes little sense, if ‘pleased’ means simply ‘was the object of a satisfied desire’. It is more plausible to say that we expect good from such an object, because we have experienced it as

<sup>11</sup> *De Homine*, 11.4, in Hobbes (1991: 47).

<sup>12</sup> *De Homine*, 11.5, in Hobbes (1991: 47).

*pleasing*, that is, we have derived pleasure from it. If this is so, then a residue of hedonism persists in Hobbes's philosophy. Pleasure as such is good, an affective state for which we have a natural affinity or appetite; pain as such is evil, an affective state for which we have a natural aversion.

Hobbes's mechanistic theory of the passions confirms that there is an important sense in which pleasure and pain are explanatorily prior to appetite and aversion. Understood materially, the sense of pleasure or pain is a quickening or slackening of the vital motion of blood originating in the heart. In his version of the ancients' cradle argument, Hobbes postulates that from the earliest stages of human life there is a natural motion toward that which pleases (appetite), and a natural motion away from that which pains or troubles us (aversion).<sup>13</sup>

Hobbes thus ascribes the origin of our appetite or aversion for something to its capacity to produce pleasure or pain in us. Whether or not we *call* things good and evil on the basis of our desire or aversion for them, the reason why we pursue them is that they are perceived as sources of pleasure or pain, to which we are naturally responsive. Whenever we have appetites or aversions for certain objects, he writes, 'a preconception of future pleasure and pain necessarily follows from those objects'.<sup>14</sup> Given this, it is plausible to conclude that, for Hobbes, we act for the sake of the attainment of pleasure and the avoidance of pain. While it may be going too far to characterize him as a value hedonist, someone who maintains that the only good is pleasure and the only bad, pain, he is a psychological hedonist, who explains human action in terms of the pursuit of pleasure and the avoidance of pain.

The identification of pleasure and pain as common motivating factors in human beings does not lessen the threat of normative conflict. Even if people could be brought to acknowledge that in seeking what they call 'good' and 'evil', they were ultimately seeking pleasure (or the avoidance of pain), it would not follow that they would agree about which goods should be pursued and how they should be distributed. Since pleasure is the consequence of the satisfaction of desire, and desires vary widely, disagreement about ends is ineliminable in the state of nature.

Although Hobbes stresses the pervasiveness of disagreement about the things people call 'good' and 'evil', he nonetheless acknowledges a core set of ends about which human beings generally agree. All, or almost all, human beings desire to live in conditions of peace, in community with their neighbors, and with a level of comfort that goes beyond satisfaction of the basic needs of life. Furthermore, Hobbes credits human beings with an understanding of the means necessary to attain these ends and a disposition to act in accordance with those means. The latter he identifies with the laws of nature, which he characterizes as the 'science of virtue and vice':

[A]ll men agree on this, that peace is good, and therefore also the way or means of peace (which, as I have shewed before, are *justice, gratitude, modesty, equity, mercy*, and the rest of the laws of nature) are good (that is to say, *moral virtues*), and their contrary vices, evil. Now the science of virtue and vice is moral philosophy; and therefore the true doctrine of the laws of nature is the true moral philosophy. (*Lev.*, 15.40)

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<sup>13</sup> *De Corpore*, 25.12 (OL I 332).

<sup>14</sup> *De Homine*, 11.2 (OL II 95).

Hobbes's account of virtue is essentially the Epicurean one. The virtues, which he identifies with dispositions to act in accordance with the laws of nature, are desirable (or good) because they are necessary means to the end of 'peaceable, sociable, and comfortable living' (ibid.). Taking the latter as equivalent to what Hobbes calls 'felicity', we in effect have the thesis that the virtues are valuable because they stand in an instrumental relation to happiness.<sup>15</sup>

We may take Hobbes, then, as supporting an ethical outlook that is predominantly Epicurean. However, he does not propose this as a solution to the problem of normative conflict. The situation is complicated by two observations he makes about human psychology. First, there are individuals for whom 'peaceable, sociable, and comfortable living' is not an end. Such individuals are more strongly motivated by the desire for riches or honor than the desire for peace and comfort. Second, given the presence of such individuals, even agents who would in other circumstances comport themselves with virtue have a motive for acting otherwise: fear of their neighbors may lead them to neglect their own long-term well-being and perpetuate a state of war (*Lev.*, 13).

The combination of these factors shows why an ethical solution to the problem of conflict is insufficient, and why it must be supplemented by a political solution in the form of the institution of a commonwealth. In describing the motivation of human beings to cede their right of self-government to a sovereign, Hobbes lays primary emphasis on the motive of fear, especially fear of violent death. The first two laws of nature express the conditions for leaving the state of nature and entering a commonwealth in which one's security is guaranteed. As means to this end, the laws of nature enjoin human beings, first, to seek peace so far as it is seen to be possible, otherwise war; and, second, to be willing to lay down their natural right to all things in exchange for others doing likewise (*Lev.*, 14.4–5).

The interpretation of Hobbes's doctrine of the laws of nature has been a long-standing source of controversy.<sup>16</sup> To the extent that a coherent position can be discerned in his texts, it consists of two main theses: (1) the laws of nature are 'immutable and eternal' principles that (a) express necessary means to the ends of peace and self-preservation, and (b) 'oblige *in foro interno*' insofar as it is a psychological necessity that (almost) any human being is 'bound' to 'a desire they should take place'. That is, given the universal desire for self-preservation, no human being will knowingly act in ways that tend 'to procure his own certain ruin' (*Lev.*, 15.36–38); (2) the laws of nature are principles that obligate action, in the sense that disobedience to the law is an instance of wrong-doing that is rightfully punished, only when they are commanded by the sovereign of a commonwealth. The 'science of virtue and vice' that Hobbes identifies with the 'true moral philosophy' can be seen as an extension of (1), which links observance of the laws of nature not just to the preservation of life, but to the promotion of 'peaceable, sociable, and comfortable living'. In this case, likewise, the laws of nature may be understood as expressing means to an end that (almost) every human being is motivated to seek.

Missing from Hobbes's theory is any recognition of the laws of nature as moral principles that obligate or command by the force of reason alone. In contrast to Grotius, he denies that there is any universal 'unwritten law' that can serve as a foundation for the resolution of normative conflict (*Lev.*, 26.22). On Hobbes's account, there are psychological tendencies that dispose human beings to prudential action and obedience (as well as tendencies that work against these outcomes), and there are laws properly speaking that obligate human beings by virtue of

<sup>15</sup> Hobbes explains his notion of 'felicity', in *Lev.*, 6.58 and 11.1. For an argument that the desire for happiness remains central to Hobbes's ethics, see Rutherford (2003).

<sup>16</sup> For an entry point to the literature, see Darwall (1995: ch. 3).



being commanded by a sovereign. Beyond this, there is no universal system of morality, no doctrine of good, right, virtue or law, that can be appealed to as a standard against which human actions can be judged and their agents held accountable.<sup>17</sup> This consequence of Hobbes's philosophy was apparent to his contemporaries and, combined with his reputation for materialism and irreligion, made Hobbes one of the most reviled intellectual figures in seventeenth-century Britain.

### III. THE CAMBRIDGE PLATONISTS

Among the principal opponents of Hobbes's thought were the theologians and philosophers collectively known as the Cambridge Platonists.<sup>18</sup> As the name implies these thinkers embraced the tenets of intellectualism and moral realism associated with Plato's philosophy. In addition, they emphasized a rational defense of the existence and providence of God, and an understanding of Christianity that transcended sectarian differences. On both fronts, their main targets were the materialism and atheism which they associated with the writings of Hobbes and the Epicurean revival. Here we focus on the views of the two most prominent members of the group, Ralph Cudworth and Henry More.

Cudworth published only one major work during his lifetime, the massive *True Intellectual System of the Universe* (1678), the subtitle of which reads: 'The First Part, wherein all the Reason and Philosophy of Atheism is Confuted; and its Impossibility Demonstrated'. In addition, he left a large body of unpublished writings, including *A Treatise Concerning Eternal and Immutable Morality*, which was begun in the early 1660s but did not appear in print until 1731, and *A Treatise of Freewill*, which was not recovered until the nineteenth century.<sup>19</sup>

Cudworth defends a conception of morality diametrically opposed to that of Hobbes. His primary objection to Hobbes's philosophy is its implication that good and evil are merely expressions of appetite and aversion, or that they depend upon the commands of a sovereign. Whatever is truly good or evil, Cudworth contends, must be so in virtue of the nature of the object in question: 'moral good and evil, just and unjust, honest and dishonest... cannot possibly be arbitrary things, made by will without nature; because it is universally true, that things are what they are, not by will but by nature' (1996: 16).

Cudworth's main reason for holding that things deemed good and evil are so by nature, and not merely by will, is that only in this way do we have an adequate account of moral obligation. If an action is morally good (or evil), then an agent is obliged to perform (or omit) that action because of the kind of action it is and not simply because of the benefits or harms associated with it: 'things called naturally good and due are such things as the intellectual nature obliges to immediately, absolutely, and perpetually, and upon no condition of any voluntary action that may be done or omitted intervening' (1996: 20). What Cudworth is chiefly impressed by, then, are the demands that morality imposes on a rational agent. The demand that a certain action be performed *because* it is just, or avoided *because* it is unjust, are of the essence of

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<sup>17</sup> Although Hobbes reserves space for a construal of the laws of nature as laws commanded by God, he regards such laws as authoritative only for those who profess belief in a providential creator. They do not govern the actions of 'atheists, nor they that believe not that God has any care of the actions of mankind (because they acknowledge no word for his, nor have hope of his rewards, or fear of his threatenings)' (*Lev.*, 31.2).

<sup>18</sup> On the philosophy of the Cambridge Platonists, see Hutton (2002). On their targeting of Hobbes, see Mintz (1962).

<sup>19</sup> Both texts are found in Cudworth (1996). For discussions of Cudworth's views, see Passmore (1951), Darwall (1995: ch. 5), and Gill (2006: ch. 4).

morality, and in Cudworth's view such demands cannot be accounted for unless certain kinds of actions are, by nature, good or evil.

In defending good and evil as natural properties of things, Cudworth is clear that he is not referring to the properties of external bodies. Moral good and evil are properties that belong by nature only to intellectual beings. Thus, the distinction of good and evil must arise from 'a certain inward determination in the soul itself' (1996: 145). Cudworth further argues that because morality is inherently practical, in that it places demands on action, the soul cannot be conceived as a merely passive being, on which is imprinted knowledge of the truths of morality. Instead, morality must be grounded in the soul's nature as 'an innate active principle'. The 'anticipations of morality' spring from an 'inward and vital principle, in intellectual beings as such, whereby they have a natural determination in them to do some things and to avoid others, which could not be if they were mere naked passive things' (1996: 145). On Cudworth's account, the ground of the distinction between moral good and moral evil is a rational being's capacity to judge that a certain form of action ought to be done or avoided, and its disposition to act in accordance with its judgments of right and wrong.

Saying just this, however, leaves undetermined the standard according to which such judgments are to be made. Granted, 'morally good' and 'morally evil' are predicated of inherent tendencies of the soul that reflect its knowledge of good and evil and its disposition to act on that knowledge. But by what standard is the soul able to judge actions as meeting, or failing to meet, the requirements of morality? Incorporating appeals to Plato and the Bible, Cudworth argues that the nature of good is identical to the nature of God, and consists fundamentally in love or charity. Hence, to be morally good, or virtuous, is not merely to obey God's commands, but to emulate God, the source of all goodness, in our actions (1964: 205).

Cudworth's defense of the 'eternal and immutable' nature of morality is closely bound up with the metaphysics of Christian Platonism. Morality has the importance it does for us, because the souls of intellectual beings are created bearing an inherent tendency toward God that is also the ground of their ultimate happiness: 'the soul of man hath in it... a certain vaticination, presage, scent, and odour of one *summum bonum*, one supreme highest good transcending all others, without which, they will be all ineffectual as to complete happiness' (1996: 174). God acts on all things constantly, drawing them back to him, and this activity is expressed in the capacity of intellectual beings to understand what they should do and to desire such actions for their own sake: '[T]his love and desire of good, as good in general, and of happiness... is not a mere passion... but a settled resolved principle, and the very source, and fountain, and centre of life' (1996: 174). Accordingly, it is a mark of perfection for human beings to seek their greatest happiness in continued movement toward God.

The ethical theory of Henry More, presented in his *Enchiridion Ethicum* (1666), reflects many of the same concerns as that of his colleague Cudworth.<sup>20</sup> Like Cudworth, More takes morality to consist of 'eternal and immutable' truths concerning good and evil. He goes beyond Cudworth, however, in developing a theory, modeled on Euclid's *Elements*, in which such truths can be demonstrated in geometrical fashion. The work begins with 23 'moral noemata,' or axioms, 'into which almost all the Reasons of Morality may be reduced' (More 1930: 20–1). These range from definitions of good and evil to the rule that it is good or just to give each person his due, but that a person may nonetheless forfeit what belongs to him based on his

<sup>20</sup> There is evidence that More was familiar with Cudworth's unpublished writings, and that the latter chose not to publish his work after More's book appeared. See Passmore (1951: 15–6) and Gill (2006: 51–3). We cite the 1690 English translation of the *Enchiridion* reprinted in More (1930).

actions. From these principles, More claims to deduce all the ‘duties we owe to ourselves’, embodied in the virtues of prudence, temperance and fortitude, and the duties we owe to others—to God, man and virtue itself—embodied in the virtues of sincerity, justice, gratitude, mercy and piety (1930: 24–5).

More’s extended treatment of the topic of virtue gives his *Enchiridion* the appearance of a classical ethical treatise. He discusses the nature of virtue as the intellectual power of right reason, the role of the passions, the division of the virtues into the self-directed and other-directed (and these in turn into the primitive and derivative), and the relation of external goods to virtue. Further, he frames his account against the backdrop of a broadly eudaimonistic conception of ethics. More defines ‘Ethicks or Morals’ as ‘the Art of Living well and happily’ (1930: 1). To live well is to perfect one’s nature through virtue; to live happily requires both this and the favor of good fortune, on which depend those goods that lie outside our power.

Since we lack a full presentation of Cudworth’s ethics, we cannot say with assurance how far More’s views diverge from his. On one crucial issue, however, More’s theory seems to point in a different direction. More explicitly relates ethics to the pursuit of happiness, which he defines as a kind of pleasure: ‘Happiness is that pleasure which the mind takes in from a Sense of Virtue, and a Conscience of Well-doing; and of conforming in all things to the Rules of both’ (1930: 4). As all writers on the topic do, More distinguishes the relevant pleasure as a pleasure of the mind; yet he unambiguously reduces the final end of happiness to pleasure itself and not the operations of the mind on which that pleasure supervenes. ‘It is plain’, he writes, ‘that each Creature hath its own particular Pleasure, which is construed to be its supreme Happiness. Whence we may infer, That human Happiness does also consist in human Pleasure; but such, I mean, as ariseth from the Sense of Virtue’ (1930: 5).

More grounds the capacity of human beings to achieve their end in what he calls the ‘boniform faculty of the soul’: a faculty of ‘that divine Composition, and supernatural Texture, as enables us to distinguish not only what is simply and absolutely the best, but to relish it, and to have pleasure in that alone’ (1930: 6). Through this faculty, he says, ‘we are lifted up and cleave unto God’ and in this consists ‘not only the highest Wisdom, but the highest Felicity’ (1930: 28). As with Cudworth, the apex of human perfection presupposes our knowledge that in virtue there is manifest ‘a thing Divine, and God’s true Image’; thus, to be virtuous is to affirm the similitude of our rational nature to the ‘great Original’ (1930: 118). For More, however, this state of perfection is also, through the boniform faculty, endowed with an essential affective component. The happiness we find in God is a kind of pleasure, and this pleasure More identifies as our final end.

Although More remains, like Cudworth, a critic of Epicureanism for its materialism and imputed atheism, he also comes close to affirming a type of hedonism. By definition, happiness is ‘the pleasure which the mind enjoys from a sense of virtue’ (1930: 8). While human perfection consists in virtue, which we value for its own sake, we are drawn toward virtue because of the pleasure it promises. If virtue were not experienced in this way, More conjectures, we ‘would prosecute it so faintly, as never to obtain it’ (1930: 9). Thus, while More is not a value hedonist who identifies the good with pleasure, he exhibits a strong affinity with psychological hedonists who explain our motivation for virtue in terms of the pleasing affects associated with it.

#### IV. CUMBERLAND

Richard Cumberland composed his *Treatise on the Law of Nature* (1672) as a refutation of Hobbes's philosophy, which he regarded as extending the pernicious influence of Epicureanism. His aim, he says in the Introduction to the book, is 'to demolish the foundations' of Hobbes's mistakes, which have 'so grosly perverted so many'. Hobbes's doctrines, he maintains, 'are diametrically opposite, not to Religion only, but to all civil Society' (2005: 283–4), and in this they are more dangerous even than those of 'his Master Epicurus' (2005: 684).<sup>21</sup>

Among the 'wicked doctrines' that Cumberland seeks to confute is the idea that 'the virtues and their rules, the laws of nature', are to be understood merely as conditions of peace, 'or of finishing a certain War of every Man against every Man'. Against this, he cites as 'far more excellent' the view of 'the antient Philosophers' who taught that the virtues are 'to be cultivated as Means necessary to Happiness, the constant Aim of all Men' (2005: 592). Whether Cumberland has Hobbes right on this point, the fact remains that the two philosophers operate with fundamentally different notions of happiness. Whereas Hobbes defines 'felicity' as 'a continual progress of the desire' (*Lev.*, 11.1), allowing that this implies that the circumstances of happiness vary widely from individual to individual depending on the content of their desires, Cumberland holds that the greatest happiness comes through the perfection of our natural faculties and the reward that awaits us in a life after death. The 'true and intire Happiness' of human beings 'comprehends all the attainable Perfections both of Mind and Body, and extends it-self, not to the present Life only, but to that which is to come, as far as it may be known by the Light of Nature' (2005: 603).<sup>22</sup>

Underlying this difference in what they say about happiness are different accounts of the good. Cumberland strongly objects to Hobbes's explanation of the good in terms of desire. Picking up on the same point stressed by Cudworth, he argues that we do not judge things good because they are desired; rather, we desire them because they are good. By definition, the good 'is that which preserves, or enlarges and perfects, the Faculties of any one Thing, or of several' (2005: 462). Expanding on this definition, Cumberland further distinguishes private good and public good, based on whether the good profits one or many; however, in both cases an object is judged good because it 'truly helps nature', and 'not because it is *desir'd* from *Opinion*, whether true or false; or *delights*, for this or that Moment of time' (2005: 466).

Drawing together these points, we find in Cumberland a position that echoes that of the Cambridge Platonists. Against Hobbes, he stresses that the goodness of an object is an objective property of it, which is explained by the contribution it makes to the perfection of an agent's powers and thereby provides the agent with a reason to seek it. Where Cumberland goes beyond the Cambridge Platonists is in developing a unified theory of virtue and happiness that ties these goods to an innate disposition for universal benevolence, or desire for the common good. Cudworth also had stressed the close connection between virtue and benevolence, but on his account virtue consists in our disposition to emulate God, whose nature is love or charity. Cumberland, by contrast, argues that while benevolence is indeed the paradigm of virtuous action as judged from the standpoint of God, it also can be understood as prudential from the

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<sup>21</sup> The original Latin edition of Cumberland's book, *De legibus naturae disquisitio philosophica*, was published in 1672, and included as part of its subtitle: 'the Elements of Mr. Hobbes's Philosophy, as well Moral as Civil, are consider'd and refuted.' A complete English translation by John Maxwell was published in 1727. We quote from the modern reprint edition in Cumberland (2005), omitting Maxwell's idiosyncratic use of quotation marks but retaining his italics and orthography. For a fuller discussion of Cudworth's views, see Schneewind (1998: ch. 6).

<sup>22</sup> While acknowledging that pleasure, as the sense of perfection, forms part of the content of happiness, Cumberland rejects the view (affirmed by More) that the two can be identified (2005: 523).

standpoint of an individual agent. Although it may sometimes happen that ‘some particular person may obtain for a time some greater Advantages, than what are consistent with the Common Good’, nevertheless, ‘if the whole course of Existence be taken into consideration, greater Happiness may be obtain’d by neglecting those Advantages, than by pursuing them’ (2005: 604). In fact, we enjoy our greatest happiness insofar as we cultivate our capacity for virtue by acting on behalf of the common good.

Cumberland cites a variety of considerations in support of this conclusion. Most importantly, the happiness of a human being consists in the fullest expression of her rational powers, and this includes acting for the sake of what are understood to be the best ends. However, ‘the greatest and most excellent Object we can employ ourselves about’ is ‘the Common Good of God and Man’ (2005: 523). The common good unites the happiness of all and hence represents the greatest aggregate perfection. Thus, in promoting the common good, we act for the sake of the best possible end and thereby realize our own greatest perfection and happiness. Furthermore, when we act in this way, we take the greatest satisfaction, or pleasure, in our actions. This follows both from the nature of the actions themselves—‘the free exercise of the Virtues’ is naturally pleasing to the mind—and from our expectation that ‘virtuous Actions have a Reward annex’d to ’em by the Will of the First Cause’ (2005: 598).

The last point introduces what Cumberland regards as the most important feature of his position: its uniting of virtue and happiness through the necessity of natural law.<sup>23</sup> Cumberland defines the ‘law of nature’ as:

a Proposition, proposed to the Observation of, or impress’d upon, the Mind, with sufficient Clearness, by the Nature of Things, from the Will of the first Cause, which points out that possible Action of a rational Agent, which will chiefly promote the common Good, and by which only the intire Happiness of particular Persons can be obtain’d. (2005: 496)

As Cumberland conceives them, laws of nature direct us to perform those actions that promote the common good and their observance is associated with reward and punishment by God, on which our ‘intire Happiness’ depends. Framed in this way, it might seem that the force of such laws is wholly prudential: if we believe that virtuous action is rewarded and wicked action punished by God, then we will be disposed to act in the way dictated by the law out of concern for our future happiness. Cumberland contends, however, that there is also a genuine obligation associated with the law, on the basis of which we act wrongly, and thus are justly punished, if we do not obey its dictate. His argument for this conclusion rests on the relation he posits between God’s providential plan for creation and the capacity of rational beings to understand that plan, and hence God’s intentions toward them:

The supreme Governor of the World, or First Rational Cause, by whose Will things are so dispos’d, that it is with sufficient clearness discover’d to Men, that some Actions of theirs are necessary Means to an End, which nature determines to

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<sup>23</sup> Haakonssen (2000: 46–7) argues that Cumberland’s doctrine is distinguished by its subordination of the concept of virtue to that of law and its omission of any detailed classification of the virtues of the sort found in More.

pursue, wills, that Men should be oblig'd to those Actions, or he commands those Actions. (2005: 603)

According to Cumberland, human beings are capable of discerning by reason that the pursuit of the common good is a necessary means to an end necessary to them, namely, their own happiness. Hence they recognize that it is not just in their interest to act benevolently, but that God intends them to act in this way, that is, it is God's will that they *should* act in this way. Consequently, they are 'oblig'd to this Pursuit, or to such actions as flow from thence: That is, [God] enjoins Universal Benevolence, which is the Sum of the Laws of Nature' (2005: 603).

Although happiness is closely entwined with the rational pursuit of the good, it is not the source of our obligation to act on behalf of the common good. The obligation to act virtuously by honoring the content of the law of nature stems solely from the latter's being recognized as the will of God (2005: 607). Granting this, Cumberland does not minimize the fact that in acting for the sake of the common good we are also acting for the sake of our own good and greatest happiness. Indeed, his principal claim is that, properly understood, these two ends coincide perfectly: to act for the sake of one is just to act for the sake of the other (2005: 520-1).

The errors that vitiate Hobbes's philosophy are traceable, in Cumberland's view, to his failure to recognize this basic point: that we best promote our own well-being by acting for the sake of the well-being of others. As Cumberland reads him, Hobbes is committed to the position that whatever men do, they do solely in pursuit of their own advantage; consequently, whatever regard they show for the good of others, for example, by respecting the demands of justice, they do only insofar as they are motivated by fear. Here he sees a close connection between Hobbes and Epicurus, who 'places the *chief Pleasure*, (which with him is the chief Good and End,) in the *absence of Pain*' (2005: 590). Going no further than the evidence of experience, and the affections common to animals and humans, both philosophers limit their accounts of motivation and value to the avoidance of pain and the satisfaction of desire. As a result, they lack a conception of the good proper to a rational being. Against them, Cumberland aligns himself with 'all other philosophers', who believe 'that we are to take an Estimate of the *Nature of Man*, rather from *Reason*', and that the proper object of the will is whatever 'Reason dictates to be agreeable to the Nature of any Person'. From this perspective, philosophers ascribe value to '*whatever* conduces to the Preservation and Perfection, to the Order and Beauty of Mankind, or even of the whole Universe, as far as we have any Conception of it; *that* they think Good, *that* they will and desire, *that* they hope for, for the future, and rejoice in, when present' (2005: 471–2). So it is with Cumberland, who identifies the perfection and happiness of a rational agent with the agent's will to promote the perfection and happiness of humanity as a whole.

## V. LOCKE

For the Cambridge Platonists and Cumberland, the most repellent feature of Hobbes's ethics is its rejection of a substantive conception of the human good. This good, associated with the perfection of an agent's powers of intellection and volition, is the condition of virtue that is the rightful source of a human being's happiness, in which she most fully emulates the perfection of God. Hobbes, by reducing virtue to the disposition to act in ways that promote peace and minimize fear (especially the fear of death), rejects traditional perfectionist notions of the good. For Hobbes, there is simply the fact of desire, whose satisfaction is pleasing to us, and the fact that, in the absence of a commonwealth, the desires of human beings are invariably in conflict with one another. The inadequacy of Hobbes's position, in the eyes of his critics, can be traced

to the inadequacy of his starting points: his materialism and hedonism—the latter evidenced in Hobbes’s explaining good and evil in terms of appetite and aversion, which themselves are understood in terms of what is pleasing or displeasing to an agent.

In John Locke we find a different response to contemporary developments in moral philosophy. Although Locke does not offer a systematic presentation of his ethical theory, what he says in the *Essay* reveals how deeply hedonism runs in his thought and how closely he comes to mirroring views of Gassendi and Hobbes. While Locke upholds the ideal of a life proper to a rational being—one responsive to the dictates of divine law—the structure of his theory is at every point informed by hedonist principles.<sup>24</sup>

Locke leaves no doubt about his commitment to value hedonism: ‘what has an aptness to produce Pleasure in us, is that we call *Good*, and what is apt to produce Pain in us, we call *Evil*, for no other reason, but for its aptness to produce Pain and Pleasure in us’ (*Essay*, II.xxi.42; cf. II.xx.2; II.xxviii.5). Locke does not, strictly speaking, define good as pleasure, and evil as pain, but he proposes that the terms ‘good’ and ‘evil’ are meaningfully used to designate those things that are apt to produce pleasure or pain in us, for no other reason than that we are responsive to them in this way.

Locke is also, arguably, an ethical hedonist who believes that the best life for a human being is one in which we enjoy the greatest pleasure available to us. He asserts that the desire for happiness is necessary to any human being (I.iii.3; II.xxi.43), and that happiness is nothing but an enduring state of pleasure (or the absence of pain), which we desire for its own sake: ‘*Happiness* then in its full extent is the utmost Pleasure we are capable of, and *Misery* the utmost Pain: And the lowest degree of what can be called *Happiness*, is so much ease from all Pain, and so much present Pleasure, as without which any one cannot be content’ (II.xxi.42–43).

Locke rejects the ancients’ search for the *summum bonum* on the grounds that it presupposes a unique answer to the question of the content of happiness, that is, whether it consists in riches, or bodily pleasure, or virtue, or contemplation. He denies that there is any effective way to settle the happiness question in these terms: ‘they [the ancients] might have as reasonably disputed, whether the best Relish were to be found in Apples, Plumbs, or Nuts; and have divided themselves into Sects upon it’ (II.xxi.55). Nevertheless, Locke defends a univocal account of the form that happiness takes in any human being:

So the greatest Happiness consists, in the having those things, which produce the greatest Pleasure; and in the absence of those, which cause any disturbance, any pain. Now these, to different Men, are very different things.... This, I think, may serve to shew us the Reason, why, though all Men’s desires tend to Happiness, yet they are not moved by the same Object. Men may chuse different things, and yet all chuse right.... (II.xxi.55)

The structure of Locke’s account points unmistakably toward a relativism about the grounds of happiness, a position that would align him with Hobbes. This, he concedes, would be

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<sup>24</sup> Locke has long been held to have been influenced by Gassendi. For a critique of this assumption, see Milton (2000). Although Locke (with one exception noted below) studiously avoids mention of Hobbes, on his first reading of the *Essay*, Newton accused him of Hobbist tendencies. For an interpretation of this charge, which links it to Locke’s hedonism, see Rogers (1979: 199–200). Hedonism, in fact, is a relatively late addition to Locke’s philosophy. The earliest manuscript evidence of its appearance is from 1676, five years after the A and B drafts of the *Essay*. See Locke (1954: 263ff).

the correct conclusion to draw, if ‘Men in this Life only have hope’, or ‘if there be no Prospect beyond the Grave’ (II.xxi.55). Yet Locke invests his own account of happiness with a greater scope than this. The ‘true and solid happiness’, or ‘real Bliss’, which is ‘our greatest good’ (II.xxi.51–52), consists not in the variable and inconstant pleasures of this life, but in a ‘perfect durable Happiness’ that is promised in a life after death. Thus, a common standard is introduced for assessing the actions of human beings: the ‘prospect of the different State of perfect Happiness or Misery, that attends all Men after this Life, depending on their Behaviour here’ (II.xxi.60). According to Locke, it is this end of ‘true felicity’ that must guide our actions. For intellectual beings like ourselves, ‘the inclination, and tendency of their nature to happiness is an obligation’ which informs all of our deliberate actions (II.xxi.52).

Locke’s original position, presented in the first edition of the *Essay* (1690), was that human action can be explained in terms of the will’s determination by the greatest apparent good. An immediate objection to this account is that it seems to rule out the possibility of weakness of the will: the situation in which an agent recognizes a certain course of action as the best and decides to pursue it, yet is swayed from that decision by some more pressing want. In response to this objection, Locke revised his position in the second and subsequent editions of the *Essay*, attributing the immediate cause of action not to the mere representation of an object or end as good but to the *uneasiness* felt on representing the absence of some good: ‘This *Uneasiness* we may call, as it is, *Desire*; which is an *uneasiness* of the Mind for want of some absent good. All pain of the body of what sort so ever, and disquiet of the mind, is *uneasiness*: And with this is always join’d *Desire*, equal to the pain or *uneasiness* felt; and is scarce distinguishable from it’ (II.xxi.31).<sup>25</sup>

Locke’s revised theory is a form of psychological hedonism: we are motivated to act by the pain, or uneasiness, we feel on perceiving the absence of some good, which uneasiness is the source of desire. He further makes two important claims about the relation among our desires. First, the will is ‘ordinarily’ determined by the ‘most pressing’ uneasiness that is judged capable of being removed (II.xxi.40). Second, in addition to the ‘sundry uneasinesses’ that press upon us at any moment, there is also the ‘constant desire of Happiness’ (II.xxi.50)—that is, the desire for some degree of contentment in the balance of pleasure and pain we experience, or the desire for the ultimate happiness promised in a life after death. In general, Locke believes, the first of these claims supports the second: ‘the present *uneasiness*, that we are under, does naturally determine the will, in order to that happiness which we all aim at in all our actions’ (II.xxi.36). Yet this is not inevitably the case: we may on occasion be moved by a pressing desire for pleasure or the avoidance of pain that is at odds with the pursuit of ‘true and solid happiness’ (II.xxi.50). Thus, we may act contrary to what we recognize to be our greatest good.

Locke addresses this problem through another revision of his position. ‘Ordinarily’ the will is determined by the ‘most pressing desire’. In addition, however, we have the power to ‘suspend’ our desire, allowing ourselves time to reflect on whether it is indeed an effective means to our happiness—a reflection that may alter the force of the original desire. For Locke, adept agents cultivate the power of suspending desire, which provides an ‘opportunity to examine, view, and judge, of the good or evil of what we are going to do’. Thereafter, it is ‘not a fault, but a perfection of our nature’ to act from the desires resulting from this examination (II.xxi.47).

The doctrine of suspension of desire is closely connected with Locke’s explanation of morality. Morality, in general, for him consists of a set of rules or laws enforced by the

<sup>25</sup> For more on Locke’s revisions to his position, see Chappell (2007: 148–56).



expectation of appropriate reward or punishment. Of these laws, he distinguishes three kinds: (i) divine law; (ii) civil law; (iii) the law of ‘opinion or reputation’, which he identifies with virtue and vice (II.xxviii.6–7). Locke’s linking of virtue and vice to ‘the law of reputation’, or as he elsewhere puts it, ‘the law of fashion, or private censure’ (II.xxviii.13), raised the ire of later critics such as Shaftesbury, who objected to the relativism that Locke takes to attend judgments about the propriety of manners or customs (II.xxviii.10–11). His willingness to entertain such relativism about virtue and vice, however, implies no laxness on his part regarding the standards of moral rectitude. Indeed, Locke reinforces the absoluteness of such standards, grounded in divine law, by distinguishing them from rules that are supported only by custom and the power of the state. In general, he believes, judgments of virtue and vice do ‘in a great measure everywhere correspond with the unchangeable Rule of Right and Wrong, which the Law of God hath established’ (II.xxviii.11). However, where these two sets of rules diverge, it is divine law, the ‘Law which God has set to the actions of Men, whether promulgated to them by the light of Nature, or the voice of Revelation’ (II.xxviii.8), which dictates how they should act.

Locke’s doctrine of natural law—divine law promulgated to human beings by the ‘light of Nature’—has been criticized on several counts.<sup>26</sup> One objection targets his account of our knowledge of natural law. This is a pressing concern given Locke’s rejection of innate practical principles, the prevalent explanation of how we come to have knowledge of morality (I.iii.1-2). Locke envisions moral notions as constructed from simple ideas of sensation and reflection (II.xxii.12), and in the *Essay* he notoriously claims that because of this the principles of natural law can be demonstrated with geometrical certainty (III.xi.16; IV.iii.18-20). Locke himself may ultimately have drawn back from a strong version of this thesis. It does not follow, however, that he abandoned the idea of the rational justification of morality. His account of moral knowledge is consistent with the epistemic stance he adopts throughout the *Essay*: God has given human beings the ability to reason their way to the knowledge they require for happiness, where this includes ‘Light enough to lead them to the knowledge of their Maker, and the sight of their own duties’ (I.i.5). To this extent, moral knowledge is supported by reason, but it is not necessary that it meet the standard of demonstrative certainty (Tuckness 1999: 81-2).

A second issue on which Locke has been challenged concerns the consistency of his account of moral obligation and his psychological hedonism. Here it is essential to distinguish the origin of the obligation associated with natural law and our motivation to comply with it. For Locke, the obligatory force of law rests with the authority of the lawgiver. What makes natural law ‘law’ is that God commands it. Although it is true that to recognize the obligation created by such laws I must understand the relation in which I stand to God, that understanding does not determine the obligation. It is a function solely of the fact that the law is the command of a rightful superior, with an unlimited power to reward and punish (II.xxviii.8).

The existence of such an obligation by itself, however, does not explain why human beings are motivated to comply with it. Locke marks this point by distinguishing the ‘moral rectitude’ of an action, which is determined solely by its lawfulness, and an action’s being moral good or morally evil. Morally good (or evil) actions are voluntary actions that conform (or fail to conform) to the will of the lawgiver; but it is not their conformity as such that renders them good or evil from the perspective of an agent. Rather, it is the reward or punishment that such actions are apt to receive from a lawgiver powerful enough to dispense it (II.xxviii.5). Thus, Locke writes, by comparing them to the requirements of divine law, ‘Men judge of the most

<sup>26</sup> For a survey of these criticisms and a defense of Locke, see Tuckness (1999). Other useful discussions include Colman (1983); Schneewind (1998: ch. 8); and Wilson (2007).

considerable *Moral Good or Evil* of their Actions; that is, whether as *Duties, or Sins*, they are like to procure them happiness, or misery, from the hands of the ALMIGHTY' (II.xxviii.8).

Recognizing the dictates of divine law for what they are—rules of action commanded by an all-powerful creator—human beings can judge the consequences of obedience or disobedience for the overarching goal of happiness. Desiring happiness, and believing that their ultimate happiness or misery lies in the hands of God, they can choose to regulate their actions according to the standards of divine law. In doing so, they rely on their power to suspend desire until they have ascertained whether the proposed action is consistent with their 'real happiness' (II.xxi.51). Locke describes the 'careful and constant pursuit of true and solid happiness' as 'the highest perfection of intellectual nature' (ibid.). In a sense, this is correct: given the complement of desires and powers with which rational beings are endowed, they can do no better than to regulate their desires in accordance with the final goal of happiness. Yet the perfection of intellectual nature is not for Locke a measure of the human good, any more than virtue is. His account of the good remains hedonistic: human beings ascribe value to whatever is apt to produce pleasure in them, and for Christians at least, the ultimate realization of this value is the eternal happiness promised to those who obey God's law.<sup>27</sup>

## VI. CONCLUSION

Despite the preponderance of opinion against Epicureanism in seventeenth-century Britain, many of the major contributors to moral philosophy registered its significance by directing criticisms against it or by incorporating, sometimes unconsciously, elements of hedonism into their theories. The development of moral philosophy during the period reveals the growing place assigned to the concept of pleasure in accounts of motivation and value. In addition to the direct mediation of Epicureanism through the writings of Gassendi, the philosophies of Hobbes and Locke constitute wide-ranging attempts to ground ethical theory in a human being's natural affective responses to its environment (desire and aversion, pleasure and pain). Even among philosophers who present themselves as opponents of Epicureanism, such as More and Cumberland, there is an acknowledgment that the final end of action—happiness—is to be construed at least partly in hedonistic terms. All human beings desire happiness and act for the sake of it, because they desire pleasure, although they are often guilty of confounding the character and requirements of 'true happiness' with the immediate satisfaction of desire.

A fundamental criticism of hedonism, stressed already by its ancient critics, is that it is incompatible with a robust commitment to virtue. Acting only for the sake of pleasure, the hedonist will inevitably fail to give sufficient weight to the demands of right action, particularly when it requires sacrificing one's own advantage for that of another. Standing in strongest opposition to the Epicurean position is Cudworth, who identifies the good with the perfection of our rational nature as manifested in a virtuous character, one that is disposed to perform morally good actions for their own sake. Cudworth's perfectionism is extended by Cumberland, who equates virtue with benevolence: a will that aims always for the common good, identifying itself

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<sup>27</sup> In the one passage in the *Essay* in which Locke refers explicitly to Hobbes, he offers a revealing contrast between his conception of morality and that of the 'old heathen philosophers': 'That Men should keep their Compacts, is certainly a great and undeniable Rule in Morality: But yet, if a Christian, who has the view of Happiness and Misery in another Life, be asked why a Man must keep his Word, he will *give* this as a *Reason*: Because God, who has the Power of eternal Life and Death, requires it of us. But if a *Hobbist* be asked why; he will answer: Because the Publick requires it, and the *Leviathan* will punish you, if you do not. And if one of the old *Heathen* Philosophers had been asked, he would have answer'd: Because it was dishonest, below the Dignity of a Man, and opposite to Vertue, the highest Perfection of humane Nature, to do otherwise' (I.iii.5). See also II.xxi.70.

with the universal charity of God. For Cumberland, a human being who is disposed to act for the sake of the common good also thereby realizes her own good and enjoys the greatest happiness, since virtuous action itself is pleasurable and meritorious in the eyes of God. Thus, in the end, there is no real conflict between virtue and pleasure, properly understood.

As judged by his critics, Hobbes's rejection of traditional notions of virtue and the good constitute an affront to religion and a dangerous weakening of the bonds that undergird society. Hobbes identifies the moral virtues with the means to 'peaceable, sociable, and comfortable living'; however, he stresses that such qualities by themselves are insufficient to overcome the natural sources of conflict among human beings, including conflict about the ultimate grounds of value. Consequently, the peace and security of a society can only be achieved through the imposition of law by an absolute sovereign. Locke retraces, to a greater extent than he is prepared to acknowledge, the steps taken by Hobbes, yet stops short of the political conclusion his predecessor draws. For Locke, notions of virtue and vice reflect the conventional norms and customs of a people and so may vary widely across places and times. Underlying these diverging notions of right and wrong, however, is an unchanging law, known through reason and commanded by God, which represents the standard of 'moral rectitude'. Locke believes human beings can be brought to recognize the force of this law by understanding how observance of it bears upon their ultimate happiness: obey the law and enjoy lasting bliss; disobey it and suffer lasting misery.

Later philosophers such as Shaftesbury understandably found Locke's position inadequate. While identifying virtue and vice with conventional standards of propriety, Locke offers no convincing explanation of why we are bound to adhere to the requirements of morality. The prospect of future reward or punishment is simply not strong enough to sustain, and explain, a commitment to moral virtue.<sup>28</sup> Shaftesbury's response is to invoke, much like Cumberland, the idea of a divinely ordered harmony among all rational beings, and to link the motive of virtue to the pleasure we take in feeling ourselves part of this whole. Because our own best state results from acting in a way that is harmonious with the whole—that is, acting virtuously—virtue is obligating without having to be commanded by an external authority. Thus, it is not merely from the promise of future reward or punishment that we are drawn to virtue; our best life and present happiness depend upon it.<sup>29</sup> Shaftesbury's account goes beyond Cumberland's in setting aside the notion of natural law as necessary for morality. Instead, moral obligation arises through recognizing the authority of one's own 'better self'—a self whose directives are determined through the operation of 'moral sense'.<sup>30</sup>

Shaftesbury's position is but one response to the debates concerning hedonism and virtue that animate seventeenth-century British moral philosophy. Yet it is a position that entrenches the central place of pleasure, or more broadly affective responsiveness, in ethical theorizing—a trend that continues in the eighteenth century with Hutcheson, Smith and Hume.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> *Inquiry concerning Virtue or Merit*, book I, part I, sec. 3, in Shaftesbury (2001, vol. 2: 68–9).

<sup>29</sup> *The Moralists; a Philosophical Rhapsody*, part III, sec. 3, in Shaftesbury (2001, vol. 2: 434).

<sup>30</sup> Darwall (1995: 197–206) argues for Shaftesbury's importance as a thinker who combines moral sentimentalism with rational self-determination, the latter idea anticipating Kant's practical philosophy.

<sup>31</sup> On this trend, see in particular Gill 2006.

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