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THE MORAL PROBLEM IS A HUME PROBLEM

Abstract

The moral problem, as articulated by Smith, arises out of the attempt to introduce the experimental method of reasoning into moral subjects, developed by Hume. This paper returns to Locke's earlier attempt to provide an empirically adequate account of morality and the debate his attempt generated. It argues that the seeds of a more adequate, naturalistic account of the metaphysics and epistemology of morals than that developed by either Locke or Hume can already be found in aspects of Locke's *Essay* and in the defence of his views published by Catharine Trotter Cockburn. Locke and Cockburn find a natural, intrinsically moral, human disposition in our tendency to judge the moral good or evil of persons or actions in the light of their conformity with a moral law. It is constitutive of our nature as social beings that we are endowed 'with a moral sense or conscience, that approves of virtuous actions, and disapproves the contrary.' Moral laws are those prohibitions and obligations that benefit others and society as a whole. Thus, the question of natural, moral motivation is seen to be independent of the question of the objective grounds of moral truth. In virtue of our nature as social beings we are motivated to do what is approved of by other members of our society. Whether what is approved of by a society genuinely fosters the welfare of its members is an independent, *a posteriori* question that can only be answered through reasoned, empirically informed debate.

Keywords: Conscience · cognitivism · naturalism · natural law · counterfactuals

1. Introduction

The development of the methods of empirical science, during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, challenged widely accepted assumptions concerning knowledge of both the material and the moral universe. Belief in God's creation of a world governed by fundamentally moral laws, as taught by religion, spelled out by revelation, or intuited by innate reason, was undermined by the new science, based on observation and experiment. This set up an opposition between science and religion that continues to haunt society to this day. Descartes attempted to navigate the problem by distinguishing the realm of the material universe, the mechanical operations of which could be known

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by observation, from that of the immaterial mind, which remained knowable through introspection and innate reason. Locke in his *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* more uncompromisingly attempted to demonstrate that the foundation of all human knowledge resides in experience, while, as we will see, also allowing a place for a kind of introspective experience. Whereas Descartes had retained innate knowledge of geometry, mathematics, and morals, Locke denied the existence of innate knowledge of any principles, whether of logic, mathematics, or morals. Hume's *Treatise of Human Nature*, likewise, proposed to extend the empirical methods of science to the moral realm and is subtitled 'An Attempt to Introduce the Experimental Method of Reasoning into Moral Subjects' (Hume 1978). In what follows I argue that Hume's was a flawed attempt, condemned from the outset, in virtue of the way in which it built on the underlabourer, Locke's, unstable foundation. The moral problem that persists to this day, as set out by Michael Smith in various works, can be dissolved by repairing that flawed foundation (Smith 1994; 2009). At the same time, the seeds of a more adequate, naturalistic account of the metaphysics and epistemology of morals than that developed by either Locke, Hume, or Smith can be found in aspects of Locke's *Essay* that were overlooked by Hume.

To make this case I first examine the reception of Locke's own attempt to characterize our knowledge of moral truth, outlining the objections that were immediately raised against it. Next, I consider a repair to Locke's moral epistemology, developed by one of his defenders Catharine Trotter Cockburn. She proposed that morality is grounded in the fitness of things, developing a line of thought similar to that of Samuel Clarke. Hume's *Treatise* offers a direct response and critique of the resulting account of the nature of moral truth. This sets the scene for the moral problem that exercises Smith. Yet the problem only arises, in the form that it does, because Locke's flawed foundation is developed in a particular direction. Already there exists, in Locke's own writing, the materials for a more adequate, empirically based account of the nature of morality than that developed by Hume. This results in the dissolution of the moral problem, as set out by Smith.

2. Locke's moral epistemology and its critics

There is considerable confusion and controversy over the exact character of Locke's moral epistemology. It has been suggested that, depending on where one looks in the *Essay*, 'our knowledge of moral principles seems to depend on *a priori* reasoning, social learning, or the analysis of terms' (Wilson 2007, 381). As we will see this ambiguity results from the fact that different questions are being answered by Locke in various sections of the *Essay.* In the Introduction he is interested in the question of whether knowledge of moral principles is innate. Later his concern is to explain how we come by the idea of morality and what morality is, finally, he gives an account of the nature of our access to moral truth.

Soon after the publication of Locke's work an anonymous critic, who I will call 'the Remarker', published *Remarks upon an Essay Concerning Humane Understanding*, in which he accused Locke's empiricist epistemology of being unable to explain how we acquire knowledge of objective moral truth, or knowledge of the attributes of God, such as his goodness, or knowledge of the immortality of the soul (Watson 1989, 24). Knowledge of these, he argued, cannot be acquired by means of sensation or from reflection on ideas acquired through sensation.[1] With regard to moral truth, the upshot of his complaint is that the best an empiricist can do, by way of an account of the distinction between good and evil, is to conclude that the confection of such a distinction has been useful to society and government. But this is far from amounting to a demonstration that vice and virtue are grounded in intrinsic and immutable features of the nature of things. Using Michael Smith's vocabulary, the Remarker can be seen to be proposing that a consistent empiricist must really be a moral nihilist, since any naturalistic, utilitarian, or epicurean account of morality of the kind available to the empiricist cannot explain the existence of immutable, objective, moral truths (Smith 2009, 181–4).

In 1702, Locke was defended against these criticisms by Catharine Trotter Cockburn, who developed her own account of the nature of moral obligation and the objective grounds of moral truth, based on a clarification of what she understood to be Locke's position (Cockburn 1702; 1751; Bolton 1996; Sheridan 2007; 2018; Green 2019). Although Locke had rejected the view that humans possess innate knowledge of moral principles, arguing on the basis of observation, that different societies diverge markedly with regard to moral beliefs, he had also claimed that the idea of a Supreme Being, taken in conjunction with 'the *Idea* of ourselves, as understanding, rational Beings, being such as are clear in us, would, I suppose, if duly considered and pursued, afford such Foundations of our Duty and Rules of Action as might place *Morality amongst the Sciences capable of Demonstration* ... as incontestable as those in Mathematicks' (Locke 1975, IV.iii.18, 549). According to Locke our knowledge of morality is grounded in the recognition of relations among ideas, as is our knowledge of mathematics, but these are not ideas derived from sensation, but ideas derived from reflection on the idea of God and on our nature as rational beings. To modern readers, sensitive to the difficulties that attend an empiricist account of *a priori* truth in general, Locke's position looks heroic.

That it was heroic is confirmed by the repair that Cockburn later made to Locke's position in shoring up her defence of it. Locke claimed that reflection on our idea of ourselves as practical rational beings, plus the idea of God, will show us that moral truths are demonstrable––a surprisingly rationalist proposal. The thought that morality follows from our nature as

1 Since there is controversy over the identity of the author of the *Remarks*, it is safest to call him 'the Remarker', see (Walmsley et.al. 2006).

practical rational beings anticipates the anti-Humean and broadly Kantian, cognitivist account of morality, argued for by Smith (Kant 1990; Smith 1994, 130–81). Yet, unlike Smith, Locke assumes that objective morality depends on the existence of God as well as on practical rationality. Unlike Kant, Locke believes that God's existence can be proved from the idea of God, as derived from experience (Locke 1975, IV.x.1, 619). This supplies a reason to believe in the existence of a law maker, whose law Locke claims we are obliged to follow, in virtue of being his creation (Locke 1975, II.xxviii.4–8, 351–2).[2] Like Kant and Smith, he claims that the principles of this law can be known *a priori*. But the truths known depend for their existence on God the creator, as do mathematical and scientific truths.

In drawing the analogy between mathematics and morality Locke also assumes the possibility of an empiricist account of the *a priori* truth of mathematics, a possibility still hotly contested, since many are convinced that numbers are abstract objects and not part of the causal realm (Benacerraf 1973). The case for accepting an empiricism that makes moral truths knowable *a priori* is even weaker, since there is far less agreement over moral truth than over mathematical truth. Examples of *a priori* moral truths suggested by Locke, such as '*Where there is no Property there is no Injustice*' are simply unconvincing (Locke 1975, IV.iii.18, 549). This generalization is open to empirical refutation. Our moral ideas are derived from the moral practices of our society, and these are culturally variable. Societies in which injustice is recognised, but there is no property, are conceivable and may even have been actual. So, in defending Locke, Cockburn is faced with a problem, similar to that which Smith sets himself, that of providing a naturalistically acceptable account of our *a priori* knowledge of morality. Smith attempts to do this without assuming the existence of God. Moral judgments become 'expressions of our beliefs about what we have reason to do, where such reasons are in turn categorical requirements of rationality' (Smith 1994, 185). Cockburn also believes that moral obligations are requirements of rationality but, as we shall see, she repairs Locke's position by falling back on the existence of possible worlds, one of which, the actual world, God has chosen to instantiate. The nature of her repair suggests that no substantive solution to the problem of providing a naturalistic account of the cognitive grounds of morality, as Smith attempts to do, is available, unless God is surreptitiously reintroduced.

In the first version of her reply to the Remarker, Cockburn had proposed that the grounds of morality lie in our human nature. Here she was following Locke who, although he had denied that humans possess innate knowledge of moral principles, had said that those who 'deny that there is a Law knowable

2 Locke's claim that law requires a law maker has led some to deem him a voluntarist, (Darwall 1995, 37; Colman, 1983, 5; Sheridan, 2007, 143). That Cockburn is right to read him as an intellectualist is argued in Green, 2019).

by the light of Nature' fall equally into error with those who assume innateness (Locke 1975, I.iii.13, 71). When her reply was republished in her collected works, Cockburn added two clarificatory footnotes to it, which emphasized that relations among ideas are not simply relations among ideas as they are in the mind, but relations among ideas as they are in the mind of God, who has chosen to create things with the corresponding natures (Cockburn 1751, I.56, note f, 62, note k). Her first footnote made clear that insofar as '*the nature of man is the ground or reason of the law of nature; i.e.* of moral good and evil' there must be a real and everlasting truth as to the nature of man (I.57). Now, following Samuel Clarke, she accepts that this leads 'us to the supreme mind, where all truth, and the abstract nature of all possible things, must eternally and immutably exist' (I.56, note f). In the second footnote she says that the law of reason and the law of nature oblige us as *reasonable* beings 'in the same manner as the Supreme Being, who is subject to no laws, and accountable to none, obliges himself to do always what he perceives to be right and fit to be done' (I.62, note k).

The result is a theistic, realist, naturalism that in many ways harks back to Stoicism (Sheridan 2018). It relies on there being a truth concerning human nature, and certain acts being fit or appropriate for humans, given that nature. It is an account of moral obligation that can be recognised as being in Hume's sights when he says in the *Treatise of Human Nature*,

> Those who affirm that virtue is nothing but a conformity to reason; that there are eternal fitnesses and unfitnesses of things, which are the same to every rational being that considers them; that the immutable measure of right and wrong impose an obligation, not only on human creatures, but also on the Deity himself: all these systems concur in the opinion, that morality, like truth, is discerned merely by ideas, and by their juxtaposition and comparison. In order therefore, to judge of these systems, we need only consider whether it be possible from reason alone, to distinguish betwixt moral good and evil, or whether there must concur some other principles to enable us to make that distinction. (Hume 1978, III.1.§1)

From here he sets up the moral problem set out by Smith. Beliefs, Hume claims, do not motivate.[3] If morality were simply grounded on relations among ideas, as is mathematics, then we would be no more motivated to act on the judgement that the unjustified killing of an innocent is murder, than

3 The theistic naturalists would disagree. They adopt the principle of moral necessity. It is impossible for a completely good agent to believe that an act is the best possible act and not be motivated to do it. This is the reasoning that leads Leibniz to conclude that God must have created the best of all possible worlds. Interestingly Cockburn gives God more freedom, by assuming that there might be equally good possible worlds, (Thomas 2017). Theistic naturalism fails because it is impossible to prove, on the basis of ideas derived from sense, that there exists an infinitely good, supreme being.

we are by the judgement that the square root of 81 is nine. Moral judgements motivate, so cannot be solely grounded in relations among ideas.

Hume's own response to this problem is, in effect, to adopt a version of the naturalist position that the Remarker claimed was the only one available to a consistent empiricist. We approve of moral actions and virtues, in ourselves and in others, because we have come to believe that such actions and virtues promote the natural physical pleasures we desire, and they tend to reduce the natural physical pains we wish to avoid. G. E. Moore's open question argument, however, suggests a conclusion congenial to the Remarker. No such reduction of morality to a means of maximizing natural value can be truly adequate, since it always makes sense to question whether an act that maximizes the satisfaction of physical pleasure is actually morally good. Though he gives it an important place in the history of attempts to address the moral problem, Smith does not accept this rejection of naturalism, because, he argues, it fails to distinguish motivating from rationalizing reasons. But another response is to object that G.E. More assumes that there are no natural motivations that are intrinsically moral. It is here that an overlooked aspect of Locke's *Essay* is relevant.

3. An alternative strand in Locke's account of morality.

In later writings, Cockburn sets out her own understanding of morality as grounded in natural law and says,

> Mankind is a system of creatures, that continually need one another's assistance, without which they could not long subsist. It is therefore necessary, that every one, according to his capacity and station, should contribute his part towards the good and preservation of the whole, and avoid whatever may be detrimental to it. For this end they are made capable of acquiring social or benevolent affections, (probably have the seeds of them implanted in their nature) with a moral sense or conscience, that approves of virtuous actions, and disapproves the contrary. This plainly shews them, that virtue is the law of their nature, and that it must be their duty to observe it, from whence arises *moral obligation* ... (Cockburn 1751, I.413)

We can translate this into two propositions; first that humans are social animals, second, that in virtue of being social animals, humans can acquire social affections and have 'a moral sense or conscience, that approves of virtuous actions, and disapproves the contrary.' In more modern language, Cockburn is saying that it is constitutive of the fact that humans are social animals that they are possessed of social affections and a conscience. Hume also allows that there are natural social affections, but he fails to consider the

possibility, here raised by Cockburn, following Locke, that the possession of a conscience might also be part of human nature. For, while Locke denied that knowledge of moral principles is innate, he did not deny that humans have an innate tendency to judge their own actions in the light whatever moral law is established by the customs of their society (Watson 1989, 67–8).

In book two of the *Essay*, Locke set out to show how we come by all our ideas, either from sensation or by reflecting on the operations of our own minds. Both physical and mental pleasures and pains are natural. We derive ideas of the passions such as love, fear, envy, and shame, when we reflect on ourselves, and observe how both pleasure and pain, and the good and evil which cause pleasure and pain operate in us and 'what modifications or tempers of mind, what internal sensations (if I may so call them) they produce in us' (Locke 1975, II.xx.3). Among the passions are love, which derives from 'the delight that some present or absent thing is apt to produce' and shame, 'an uneasiness of the mind upon having done something which is indecent, or which will lessen the valued esteem which others have for us' (II.xx.4 & 17). Although he does not discuss the matter, nothing that Locke says implies that such passions are not natural. The idea of shame is derived from reflecting on feelings of the mind and is closely related to conscience. In her response to the Remarker, Cockburn had commented that he had not sufficiently considered that Locke had included ideas of reflection, as well as ideas gained from sensation, as underpinning moral obligation. If social and moral sentiments such as love and shame are natural to us, the naturalist can avail herself of these much richer materials in developing a metaphysics and epistemology of morality.

Later in book II, Locke discusses the idea of morality as a relational idea. Moral good and evil, he says, 'is the conformity or disagreement of our voluntary actions to some law' (II.xxviii.5). The law in question may be divine, civil, or that of opinion or reputation (II.xxviii.7). '"Virtue" and "vice" are names pretended and supposed everywhere to stand for actions in their own nature right and wrong' (II.xxviii.10). In so far as actions conform or fail to conform to the divine law, they are in fact virtuous or vicious. But he allows that, throughout the world, they are attributed to actions that are approved or disapproved of.

> Thus the measure of what is everywhere called and esteemed virtue and vice is the approbation or dislike, praise or blame, which by a secret and tacit consent, establishes itself in the several societies, tribes and clubs of men in the world, whereby several actions come to find credit or disgrace amongst them according to the judgement, maxims, or fashions of that place. (II.xxviii.10)

Different societies have different standards of what is right and wrong. But everywhere people judge the virtue or vice of their actions in relation to whatever the law is that sets the standard for their society. Here Locke is

pointing to facts that have induced others to move towards cultural relativism. He does not accept such relativism, because he believes that, as well as civil and conventional law, there is divine law. Just as many cultures are ignorant of scientific facts, so they may mistake the divine law. As we have seen he believes that the idea of a Supreme being, taken in conjunction with 'the *Idea* of ourselves, as understanding, rational Beings, being such as are clear in us,' can result in knowledge of the divine law, thus giving us access to the true nature of virtue and vice (IV.iii.18, 549).

Locke's path to natural but intrinsically moral motivations is not considered by Hume. He begins his discussion of the passions by following Locke in distinguishing original or sensory impressions from secondary or reflective impressions which he calls passions (Hume 1978, II.1. §1). Yet he never considers the possibility that it might be part of our nature, as social animals, to have a disposition to judge the appropriateness of our actions in relation to some law. Rather, he reduces the motivational aspect of the passions to the pains and pleasures that they produce in us according to the association of ideas. The thought that moral dispositions might be both natural and grounded in our nature as self-conscious reasoning beings is overlooked by him.

Superficially, the theological, naturalist realism, implicit in Locke and spelled out by Cockburn, offers little comfort to the modern naturalist. Objective moral truth is purchased at the cost of accepting that ideas of human nature exist eternally in the mind of God. These are surely 'queer' entities of the kind pointed to by error theorists such as John Mackie (Mackie 1977). We appear to have fallen back into nihilism or at best cultural relativism. Nevertheless, the account that Cockburn builds, on the material provided by Locke, also points to a different path to an internalist naturalism to that taken by Smith. Rather than being completely anti-relativist, as is Smith's more Kantian position, it arguably retains what is right in cultural relativism without abandoning objectivity.

4. Dissolving the moral problem

The moral problem that exercises Smith consists in three plausible but incompatible propositions.

1. Moral judgments are about objective matters of fact.
2. Moral judgments motivate.
3. Motivation is Humean, it depends on desires and means-end belief (Smith 1994, 12).

Smith solves the problem by rejecting Humean motivation; rationalising reasons motivate as well as desires (Smith 147–81). The solution built on materials derived from Locke and Cockburn agrees that reason motivates

rational individuals, but also proposes that conscience, interpreted as the desire for self-approbation, is a fundamental moral motivation, so the apparent incompatibility dissolves. Recognising conscience accounts for the ubiquitous conflict between the demands of morality and what self-interested reason may suggest. Objectivity is retained, since there are objective matters of fact as to what the moral laws require and these laws are themselves open to objective evaluation, as solutions to problems of social co-ordination. This implies a certain relativism but explains the grounds of reasoned moral debate without relying on the possible worlds to which, it will be argued, Smith must ultimately appeal.

Smith claims that our concept of moral rightness is the concept of what we would desire ourselves to do were we fully rational, where the substantive content of the desire involves contributing to human flourishing (Smith 1994, 184–5). This is like Cockburn's position. The content or aim of morality is the social good and we have reason to act on our beliefs as to what will bring about that good. What will bring about the good, according to her, is acting in a way that is fit, given our God given nature. Unlike her, Smith does not explicitly assume that we have a God given nature. However, there being a truth as to what we would desire, were we fully rational, requires the truth of a counterfactual. There are significant questions to be raised concerning the truth conditions of counterfactuals (Dummett 1993, 248–54). Those who believe that they can be true, explain their truth conditions in terms of possible worlds (Lewis 1973). Cockburn was forced to introduce ideas in the mind of God, that determine what is possible, to shore up her defence of Locke. Smith and Cockburn then, end up being committed to the same queer entities–– possible worlds––as truth makers for *a priori* moral truths.[4]

The thread to guide us along the path to a sufficiently objectivist naturalism is the observation that Locke and Cockburn do not actually believe that 'virtue is nothing but a conformity to reason.' True virtue, they claim, is conformity to reason, based on knowledge of human nature, but what passes for virtue, in most societies, is conformity with whatever is believed good, according to customary moral law. As social beings we are endowed 'with a moral sense or conscience, that approves of virtuous actions, and disapproves the contrary' (Cockburn 1751, I.413). But this 'moral sense' should not be thought of as a means of perceiving moral truths. Rather it is a natural disposition to judge our own actions in the light of their conformity or lack of conformity to established social custom. Unless custom can be shown to conform to a God given standard, this moral truth will not be

4 Like Locke, Smith thinks that moral knowledge is *a priori*. At least he says that 'it is a relatively a priori matter,' (2009, 203). He does not seem to recognise, as does Cockburn, that this means that he owes us an account of the existence of objective ideas as to human nature. Possibly, his admission that his own non-relativistic, internalist, naturalist, moral realism may rest on an illusion is an admission that, in the end, it presupposes the existence of God (205).

completely objective. If there is no God given standard, moral laws may fail to promote the good and so be rationally criticisable but not absolutely objective. Objective moral truth requires an objective, non-relative truth as to human nature, and this, it will be argued, is not available for partly self-constituting, ethical beings like us.

According to Locke, what counts as virtuous action is that which receives approbation, as a result of being in conformity with whatever is established, in a society, as being morally good. What is morally good or bad is simply what the people morally approve and disapprove of. Being approved or disapproved of by others, motivates conformity to whatever law is established. For,

> He who imagines commendation and disgrace not to be strong motives on men to accommodate themselves to the opinions and rules of those with whom they converse, seems little skilled in the nature or history of mankind; the greatest part wherof we shall find to govern themselves chiefly, if not solely, by this *law of fashion*; and, so they do that which keeps them in reputation with their company, little regard the laws of God, or the magistrate. (Locke 1975, II.xxviii.12, 356–7)

This offers a naturalistic theory of moral motivation that grounds it in an innate desire to be approved of by members of one's society. Being approved by members of one's society results in those feelings of self-approbation that accompany the judgment of oneself as being a good person. Being disapproved of is pain to (most) social animals, like humans, and results in feelings of guilt, or shame, reflective passions that are only available to creatures that are able to assess their own actions, in the light of the socially sanctioned standards of behaviour that we call moral laws.[5] Conscience is, in Smith's language a motivating reason. What Cockburn means by conscience refers back to this idea of morality, for she says it 'is nothing else but a Judgement which we make of our Actions, with reference to some Law, which we are persuaded ought to be the Rule of them' (Cockburn 1702, 71). Locke also uses the term 'conscience' in this sense. Conscience is not an innate vehicle that delivers knowledge of morality, but it is an innate disposition to judge one's own actions in the light of whatever morality is established in one's community.

A form of moral naturalism based on Locke's account is not subject to critique via the open question argument.[6] It is always an open question as to whether the moral laws established by a society maximize natural physical pleasure. It is not an open question whether the moral laws of a society are among those rules that members of the society conform to, in order to gain the approbation of other members of the society. Moral sentiments are

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5 The sociopath is someone who, for whatever reason, has failed to acquire such normal moral motives.

6 That the open question argument is not sound is now accepted by Smith, (2009, 200).

genuinely moral, on this view. But the position is open to the objection that it deprives morality of objectivity. On this account, how is morality different from politeness or fashion? We are back to cultural relativity. To add a measure of moral realism, we need to recognise that the account of moral motivation needs to be supplemented by a theory of moral judgement that explains both how judgements internal to a system of law can be objective and how some systems of moral laws can be judged to be more adequate than others. We need an account that distinguishes moral principles from those of fashion, taste, or beauty. That is to say, in Smith's language, we need an account of rationalising moral reasons. Before developing this, the view needs to be defended from the objection that what has been offered is not an account of genuinely *moral* motivation.

Cockburn recognises three sources of motivation, deriving from the fact that humans are rational, social, and sensible beings (Cockburn 1751, I.420; Sheridan 2007, 254). As sensible creatures we wish for pleasure and to avoid pain. As sociable creatures, we are disposed to care about the welfare and judgement of others. As rational creatures we desire to act in accord with what reason tells us to be the case, 'to act contrary to the reason, relations, and fitness of things,' she says, 'may not improperly be called the *pain* of rational being' (I.420). It is a significant aspect of her worked out view that all three sources of motivation are natural to us as humans. We have social affections and are rational as well as sensible beings. Implicit in her view is the acceptance that what distinguishes moral laws is that they are those that relate to behaviour that impacts on the welfare of others, and they are rationalizing in so far as they are grounded in knowledge of the truths of our nature.

What Cockburn says about social affections may well have been influenced by Hutcheson, for both mention the natural disposition that parents have to care for their children. He speaks of the honest farmer who, 'studies the preservation and happiness of his children without any design of good to himself' (Hutcheson 2008, 112; Harris 2015, 70). She asks, 'Can any one think, that the fondness of a mother, and her tender concern for the happiness of her child, is owing to her "having perceived, or been taught from her infancy, that her happiness is necessarily connected with that of others; that their esteem is useful to her ..."' (Cockburn 1751, I.427). She clearly has in her sights those, like Bernard Mandeville, who had attempted to explain such social affections as grounded in self-interest. Like Hutcheson she insists that they are genuinely other oriented. But since Hume had also rejected Mandeville's kind of psychological egoism, one might wonder whether bringing in the social affections can really avoid the open question argument. Might it still not be an open question whether a system of laws that maximizes the satisfaction of all the physical and social desires of a people, including their desires to be approved by others, is a genuinely moral system?

Locke would answer 'yes' to this question. People who are not enlightened by knowledge of the deity, might have a well-functioning set of

moral laws, and be virtuous in the sense of following their consciences and acting in accord with established law, but still be mistaken as to the moral truth. On this view, the idea of morality might be better compared with the idea of medicine than with mathematics. Medicine is the science of healing bodies. Different societies have different bodies of medical belief. There is ancient Chinese medicine, Gallenic medicine, twentieth-century Western medicine. These are 'medicines' thought of as social practices. But there is also 'true' medicine, that which tracks the actual functioning of the human body. 'Morality' likewise is a social practice. If there is to be a 'true' morality, there must be, as Cockburn concluded, a moral truth grounded in the truth about human nature. This is what Locke says is promulgated 'by the light of Nature or the voice of Revelation' (Locke 1975, II.xxviii.8, 352). It cannot be found in the mere ideas of human nature that different human societies have developed, that is to say, ideas as they exist in the human mind. Cockburn concludes that it must reside immutably and internally in the mind of God. I do not believe that this kind of theistic, immutable, moral truth is available to a genuine naturalist. The consistent empiricist will have to accept that, in one sense of 'objective moral truth', moral truths are social truths. What the moral laws of a society are at a time is a reasonably objective, social fact, but the empiricist does not have to accept that this leads back to nihilism. There is another kind of objectivity available, that is grounded in the purpose of the social practice. Moral laws are those that impose prohibitions and obligations on individuals that are taken to be necessary for the welfare of other individuals and the welfare of the society in general. So actual moral laws will be somewhat relative. They will be moral in virtue of their function, which is the overall welfare of the people who obey them. Yet they will be relative to the means available to secure that welfare and, potentially, different conceptions of welfare. The position is therefore somewhat like that developed by Gilbert Harman or David Gauthier (Harman 1975; Gauthier, 1987). For Smith this is not sufficient. Relativism, he claims, is not consistent with objectivity. He attempts to develop a non-relativistic, internalist, naturalist, moral realism but he fails to show that this does not, in the end, presuppose theism.

It is here that a fundamental fissure in the foundations of the Lockean account of knowledge needs to be recognised. Locke had begun his *Essay* by claiming that the immediate objects of perception are ideas and he only later distinguished ideas 'as they are in our minds' and as they are dispositions in things to affect us (Chappell, 1994). Locke's 'ideas' are sometimes sensations caused in us by powers in things, at other times they are the powers in things themselves. Sensory ideas, the effects of those powers that impinge on us through our senses are adequate in giving us real knowledge of things, though not of the fundamental causal mechanisms that underlie the powers (Locke 1975, II.xxxi.2, 375–6). Hume distinguishes impressions, thought of as sensations, from ideas in the mind. His 'ideas' are purely 'in the mind', resulting in scepticism with regard to the existence of mind-independent

reality and with regard to causal relations, thought of as involving necessary connection. If ideas are 'in the mind' then it appears that we cannot fall back on truths concerning human social nature to underpin our inquiry into objective morality. But if there are genuinely human social dispositions, a naturalist can avail herself of the existence of such social dispositions to underpin objective moral science. Just as there are truths about human physical nature, that can underpin objective medical science, there may be truths about humans as social beings, that can underpin objective moral science. And it is, as Locke insists, a fact about humans that commendation and disgrace are strong human motivators.

Smith attempts to defend moral objectivity by developing a version of the internalist option pursued by Kant. The passions are not the only source of human motivation, reason also motivates. Reason, Kant had claimed, desires to guide itself by a rational law (Kant 2018). Smith similarly finds moral motivation in the desire that a human has to choose what they would desire were they more perfectly rational and well informed than they actually are. Both are guided by Hume's subjectivism into thinking of the moral problem as a problem of individual motivation. They fail to recognise the other internal source of moral motivation, as recognised by Locke and Cockburn. It is an empirical fact that our nature as social beings means that we are innately disposed to judge our own actions, in the light of the moral laws established in our society. Reason is also a source of internal motivation. We do desire to determine our actions on the basis of true beliefs as to the nature of things. The rational medical practitioner does not merely accept the medical beliefs of their society, he or she subjects them to rational inquiry to determine whether they actually promote health. Equally, the rational moral practitioner does not merely accept the moral beliefs of their society, he or she subjects them to rational inquiry to determine whether they actually promote human welfare. The clash that can arise between the two sources of moral motivation, what society requires and what a more expansive reason suggests it ought to require, is the stuff of much great literature.

From this point of view, the moral problem that exercises Smith dissolves and is replaced by a different more urgent moral problem. This is the question of which socially sanctioned rules of behaviour will promote human welfare in the environmental, historical, and technological circumstances in which we now find ourselves. People are strongly motivated to mimic the behaviour, to seek the approval, and to avoid the disapprobation of others. This is the engine that fuels social learning of both linguistic and moral conventions. Yet this leads to conflict with those who have learned to conform to different ways of being. In both language and morality there is a certain arbitrariness and a certain lack of arbitrariness. The conventions of language work because they are shared by a population and the information conveyed by the language is adequate to the needs and pursuits of the people speaking

it. Many different systems of linguistic conventions are adequate, so long as their speakers conform to the standards that are necessary for language to perform the functions for which it evolved. Languages need to be sufficiently good vehicles for conveying information. They need to convey information about the things that exist in the environment in which the people operate. Language users need to be able to convey clear and consistent messages. They need to be sufficiently trustworthy sources of information, for the language to be of benefit. The evolution of language brings with it moral injunctions not to lie to those who are trustworthy (friends), and not to convey certain kinds of information to others who are not trustworthy (enemies). Language brings with it, norms of language use. Equally, without language, moral conventions and moral motivation could not have got off the ground. The articulation of a publicly recognised moral law is impossible without language. The development of a self-conscious sense of the self, as approved or disapproved of by others, depends on people possessing the capacity to convey their judgements of their own and other's conformity, or lack of conformity to a law, as articulated in language. Conscience is closely related to the kind of self-consciousness that is associated with the capacity to think about the beliefs of others, as conveyed in language.

This destroys the sharp fact value distinction that Hume introduced and the moral problem that results from it. Our theories of what we are, our understanding of our nature, bleeds into our understanding of how we ought to behave. We are by nature social creatures, whose sociability manifests itself in language and in the desire to conform to the law of our nature, operative in the social group into which we have been born. The best current account of our nature is that language, along with the capacity for reasoning, self-consciousness, and morality, evolved because they gave our species an evolutionary advantage. The importance to us of a sense of self-worth, that is tied to the conventional morality of our group, is both a strength and a weakness. For while it usually fosters in-group co-operation it also often motivates inter group conflict, particularly when groups that have evolved different moral codes come into contact with each other, or when well established codes cease to benefit overall welfare, because of environmental or technological change.

Smith argues that context relativity is not compatible with objectivity. But relativity is not necessarily at odds with objectivity. In physics, the time it takes for an object to travel a distance is relative to the speed at which the observer is traveling. This is objective but relative. Which moral principles will foster the well-being of a society are plausibly relative to the available technology, scientific knowledge, and environment that form the background of non-moral facts within which the society operates. On this view, moral truths are neither immutable nor are they completely arbitrary. They are social truths about the laws against which various people judge the

appropriateness of their behaviour. This is one source of the internalist aspect of moral vocabulary. There are also truths about the effectiveness of various systems of moral principles in achieving the goal that morality evolved to achieve. That is, promoting the welfare and survival of the species in which it evolved. This accords with the views of externalist realists (Smith 2009, 201). Just as the norms of language arise from its purpose as a vehicle for reasoning and communication, so to, the norms of morality arise from its function as a means of social co-ordination and co-operation. In both cases, the element of arbitrariness means that many different conventional systems may function equally well. This does not detract from the fact that others may have been rendered dysfunctional by changing circumstances.

The choice between Smith's Kantian cognitivism and the proposed modification of Lockean cognitivism comes down, then, to the choice between an implicitly theistic position and a somewhat relativistic one. For if there is to be a truth as to what one would do, were one fully rational, there must be a truth as to what is possible. There must be a truth concerning human nature and what is morally required given that nature. Kant had become convinced that pure speculative reason was incapable of proving the existence of God. The natural law theorists were therefore unable to ground the objectivity of morality. He argued instead that belief in the possibility of a good will, that freely chooses to be guided by a rational moral law, presupposes the existence of God. It is then from the presuppositions of pure practical reason that freedom, God, and immortality can be taken to derive "Bestand" (standing) and "objektive Realität" (objective reality) (Kant 1910–, 5.3–4; 2015, 3). If there is a truth as to what one would do, were one fully rational, there must be a God whose existence underpins that moral truth.

The consistent naturalist cannot concur that human nature is fixed by God, we are social creatures who are, up to a point, self-constituting. What is best for us is not determined by natural or by God given facts. Hence, moral principles are inevitably contextual, but that does not imply that they are not objective in a relevant sense. Moral laws are conventions the purpose of which is to foster social co-operation. They should be made fit for the circumstances in which humans find themselves. Principles that arose because adapted to the needs of relatively isolated agricultural communities are not necessarily adaptive for individuals living in a global, industrialised world. Looked at from this point of view the pressing moral problem is not, 'What ought I to do?' I ought to obey the moral law that I believe people in the narrower and broader communities, within which I operate, ought generally to obey. The pressing problem of our times is how to come to an agreement over the content of such moral laws, in the circumstances in which we now find ourselves. The pressing moral problem is how to reach agreement on moral principles, the implementation of which will actually foster the kind of co-operation necessary to preserve the existence of our species, thus achieving

the purpose for which morality evolved. The solution to this problem cannot be known *a priori* but has to be grounded in significant *a posteriori* investigation, negotiation, and a will to foster co-operation.

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