

Note

THE IDENTITIES OF HENRY MORE'S CORRESPONDENTS IN HIS LETTERS ON SELF-LOVE

In 1710, Richard Ward, a Cambridge-educated clergyman, published in his *Life of the Learned and Pious Dr. Henry More* three undated letters on self-love to unnamed correspondents. The letters were written by Henry More, the well-known Platonist philosopher and fellow of Christ's College, Cambridge.¹ Two of these letters had earlier been printed in *Two Letters Concerning Self-Love* (1708) while Ward inserted the third into the *Life* himself. Ward's *Life* referred to the former two epistles as letters IV and V and to the latter as letter III.² The identities of More's correspondents in these letters have long perplexed scholars. For though Ward referred to letter III as being sent to 'the Reverend Dr J. S. touching some passages in his Book, about serving God ex Intuitu Mercedis', neither 'J. S.', nor his book have been identified.³ Letter IV was later republished separately in 1756 as *An Essay on Disinterested Love; In a Letter to Bishop Stillingfleet*, but this edition provided no justification for the claim that More's correspondent was Edward Stillingfleet, the bishop of Worcester.⁴ The editors of the modern edition of Ward's *Life* have, therefore, only tentatively concluded that these letters were 'written in the post-1660 period to a younger Latitudinarian perhaps already known to More'.⁵ Although this inference about the religious leanings of More's correspondents was apt, there is decisive textual and contextual evidence that these three letters were written to two different clergymen—William Sherlock and John Scott—about two distinct works.⁶

More's correspondent in letters IV and V can be convincingly identified as Sherlock, the young rector of St George's, Botolph Lane, London, and later a prominent theologian. The subject of these letters was Sherlock's *Discourse Concerning the Knowledge of Jesus Christ* (1674). That *Discourse* was a powerful polemic against several important Calvinist ideas. Sherlock argued that the supernatural action of divine grace could be resisted and that free, moral obedience to Christ's commands is a condition, rather than a consequence, of justification for salvation. Sherlock also utilized these wider theological assumptions to challenge more mystical ideas of a selfless and self-denying love of God for His own intrinsic worth. He argued instead that humanity is reconciled to God through free obedience to His will for the sake of the rewards of Heaven. Accordingly, Sherlock contended that 'all the motives and arguments of the Gospel to persuade us to love, and fear, and obey God, are founded on self-love'.⁷

The *Discourse* elicited a fierce response from prominent nonconformists, such as John Owen and Henry Hickman, who accused Sherlock of abandoning the historic Reformed traditions of the Church of England.⁸ Sherlock also provoked a backlash from within the Restoration Church of England. On 26 September 1675, John Standish, a royal chaplain, preached a sermon before Charles II in which he critiqued anti-Calvinist ideas of reconciliation with Christ for denying the necessity of imputed righteousness and irresistible grace.⁹ Simon Patrick, a protégé of the Cambridge

Revolutionary England, 1640-1660: Arminian Theologies of Predestination and Grace (Woodbridge, 2023), 192; J. Giesel, *Retaining the Old Episcopal Divinity: John Edwards of Cambridge and Reformed Orthodoxy in the Later Stuart Church* (Oxford, 2022), 57.

⁷ W. Sherlock, *A Discourse Concerning the Knowledge of Jesus Christ* (London, 1674), 50–53, 74–5, 335, 408–32, 420–21.

⁸ J. Owen, *A Vindication of Some Passages in a Discourse Concerning Communion with God* (London, 1674), 3–9, 25; S. Rolle, *Prodromus* (London, 1674), 17; H. Hickman, *Speculum Sherlockianum* (London, 1674), 6, 68; E. Polhill, *An Answer to the Discourse of Mr. William Sherlock* (London, 1675), 23, 153; R. Ferguson, *The Interest of Reason in Religion* (London, 1675), 3; T. Danson, *A Friendly Debate Between Satan and Sherlock* (London, 1676), 47–8; V. Alsop, *Anti-Sozzo* (London, 1676), 41, 99–100. For further discussion see: P. Lim, *Mystery Unveiled: The Crisis of the Trinity in Early Modern England* (Oxford, 2012), 172–216.

⁹ J. Standish, *A Sermon Preached before the King at White-Hal, Septem. the 26th, 1675* (London, 1676), 19–20, 21–24, 25, 25–8.

¹ R. Ward and H. More, *The Life of the Learned and Pious Dr. Henry More* (London, 1710), 250–88.

² Ward and More, *Life*, 250–55; H. More, *Two Letters Concerning Self-Love* (London, 1708).

³ Ward and More, *Life*, 250.

⁴ H. More, *An Essay on Disinterested Love; In a Letter to Bishop Stillingfleet* (Glasgow, 1756).

⁵ R. Ward and H. More, *The Life of Henry More: Parts 1 and 2*, ed. S. Hutton, C. Courtney, M. Courtney, R. Crocker, and A. R. Hall, new edn. (Dordrecht, 2000), 359.

⁶ Both Sherlock and Scott have been described as latitudinarians by historians: A. Ollerton, *The Crisis of Calvinism in*

Platonist John Smith who remained closely connected with More's circle,¹⁰ interpreted Standish's sermon as being partly directed against Sherlock's *Discourse*.¹¹ Sherlock had himself been educated at Peterhouse, Cambridge, in the later 1650s and was acquainted with some of More's other associates, such as Edward Stillingfleet.¹² Unsurprisingly, therefore, More followed the debate over Sherlock's *Discourse*. On 9 January 1676, Thomas Pierce, the dean of Salisbury, wrote to More, asking him to 'consider Mr *Sherlock* (a stranger to me) before you condemn him, because I perceive, he has the best Men's Approbation'.¹³ Pierce may have been worried that More would 'condemn' Sherlock because although he held some similar anti-Calvinist principles, he had published a series of works in the 1650s and 1660s that critiqued excessive self-love as leading inexorably to vice and sin.¹⁴

That More was indeed concerned about Sherlock's theological principles is indicated by the text of letter IV. Ward noted in the margins of this epistle that it was '*Written to a late Learned Author*' shortly after Sherlock's death on 19 June 1707. More began the letter itself by thanking the recipient for asking 'Mr Kettliby'—Sherlock's publisher—to send him '*your Book*'. Considering the interest of More's circle in Sherlock's writings, it is significant that he wrote the letter because 'a Friend of ours advertising me from you' had remarked that 'you desired to hear from me, touching my *Dislike* of a Passage in your Book'. That passage was on 'pag. 420. where you expressly declare *That Self-love* (or Love of our

selfes) is the very Principle of all Love, whether to God, or any Others'.¹⁵ Indeed, on that page, Sherlock's *Discourse* contested the proposition that those who obeyed God for reasons of 'self-love' would not be saved. In language that was clearly reflected in More's paraphrase, he averred that separating the love of God from self-love would 'root out the very principle of all love'.¹⁶

More's letter, moreover, outlined a theological account of the process of becoming reconciled to God in a way that was evidently directed against Sherlock's fundamental principles. He described Sherlock's mercenary love of God for the sake of His rewards as a mere preparatory desire 'to hale us out of the Hurry and Dirt of this World'. He then argued that human nature is composed of both an animal principle driven by self-love and a spiritual principle that is capable of loving God for His intrinsic loveliness. By constantly exciting 'a Hunger and Thirst after this *Rectitude of Spirit* for its own sake', humanity could eventually attain a higher and purer love of God through the assistance of divine grace.¹⁷ In portraying this pattern of spiritual regeneration, More demonstrated that anti-Calvinist theological positions, such as the co-operative nature of divine grace, could be maintained without abandoning the notion of a selfless love of God. Thus, More specifically constructed his argument to challenge Sherlock's striking vision of humanity as capable of free, moral action but driven to be virtuous by a longing for the rewards of Heaven.

More must have also sent letter V to Sherlock because Ward noted in the margins that it was '*Written to the same Author*' as the previous epistle. This inference is further vindicated by the text of the letter. More began by apologising for the fact that he had not had sufficient time 'to communicate the *Notes* I had writ on *your Letter*, when you was with me at *Cambridge*'. He then remarked that illness had prevented him from conveying the notes during an 'intended Journey to *London*': Sherlock's place of residence. More thought it requisite to send these notes because his correspondent had been 'interpreting *my* other letter so *Candidly*'.¹⁸ In other words, More had sent a letter criticizing his correspondent's views on

¹⁰ R. Crocker, *Henry More, 1614-1687: A Biography of the Cambridge Platonist* (Dordrecht and London, 2003), 253.

¹¹ For general criticisms of Standish see: [S. Patrick], *An Earnest Request to Mr. John Standish* (London, 1676), 1, 8. For remarks on Standish and Sherlock see: [S. Patrick], *Falsehood Unmasked in Answer to a Book called Truth Unveil'd* (London, 1676), 4-6.

¹² For Sherlock's comments on Stillingfleet see: W. Sherlock, *A Defence and Continuation of the Discourse Concerning the Knowledge of Jesus Christ* (London, 1675), 120; W. Sherlock, *A Discourse about Church-Unity being a Defence of Dr. Stillingfleet's Unreasonableness of Separation* (London, 1681), iii-iv. On Stillingfleet and More see: Crocker, *Henry More*, 81.

¹³ H. More, *Letters on Several Subjects*, ed. E. Elys (London, 1694), 45.

¹⁴ See, for instance, H. More, *The Immortality of the Soul* (London, 1659), 304; H. More, *An Explanation of the Grand Mystery of Godliness* (London, 1660), 41, 44, 503; H. More, *Divine Dialogues* (London, 1668), 271-4; H. More, *Enchiridion Ethicum* (London, 1668), 71-8.

¹⁵ Ward and More, *Life*, 256.

¹⁶ Sherlock, *Discourse*, 420.

¹⁷ Ward and More, *Life*, 270, 264, 263-70.

¹⁸ Ward and More, *Life*, 271.

self-love, received an extended response to that letter, and replied with another epistolary critique.

More's references to his previous epistle strongly suggest that he was alluding to letter IV. In letter V, he softened his criticisms of his correspondent's theology by declaring 'That I guessed right in some Passage of my former Letter; wherein I intimated my Opinion of you, that I conceived your *Nature* and *Disposition* to be far better than your *Doctrine*'. This comment evidently referred to More's remark in letter IV that: 'I have so good an Opinion of your self, that I think you did not consult over-heedfully the Sentiments of your own Mind, when you wrote this Page' on self-love. After all, this observation clearly distinguished More's positive opinion of the personal sentiments of his correspondent from his ideas about the love of God in the manner that he would later recall in letter V. Given the strong evidence that Sherlock was More's correspondent in letter IV, this textual connection between the two epistles shows that he was also the recipient of letter V. In that epistle, More often paraphrased Sherlock's epistolary defence of his views on self-love in order to critique it, and thereby displayed important aspects of Sherlock's moral thought, such as his account of the relationship between human happiness and self-love.¹⁹ That Sherlock visited More in Cambridge, and More intended to contact Sherlock in London also indicates that they were more closely associated than has been previously recognized.

Sherlock was not, however, More's correspondent in letter III. There is conclusive evidence that this letter was written to John Scott, the popular devotional writer and rector of St Peter-le-Poor, London, on the second part of his *Christian Life* (1685). First, Scott meets Ward's description of More's correspondent. He had the initials 'J. S.' and his *Christian Life* exalted the earthly and heavenly rewards that ought to persuade one to love God.²⁰ Secondly, More's textual references were closely paralleled in the *Christian Life*. More began the letter by referring to 'your Excellent good Book you order'd Mr *Ketilby* to send me'.²¹ Ketilby had published the *Christian Life*, so it is unsurprising that he had been asked to send the

work to More. The letter then complimented the book for providing an effective challenge to 'the *Profane* and *Atheistical* Rout of this Age': the moral corruptions that Scott had sought to reform.²² More, however, quibbled with some parts of his correspondent's book. He thought that it was imprecise to state on 'Page 480' that '*strait Lines drawn from the Center run Parallel together*'.²³ Scott indeed commented on that page: '*strait lines drawn from the same Center run Parallel together*'.²⁴

More also disagreed with some passages on 'Page 439' of the book. He wondered: 'Whether you have met with any *Enthusiasts* so *high-flown* as to declare that to serve God *ex intuitu mercedis* is a *Sordid thing*?'²⁵ This statement was a close paraphrase of Scott's comment on that page, where he critiqued the '*high-flown* *Enthusiasts*' who pretended 'that it is *sordid* and *mercenary* to serve God for *our own good*'.²⁶ Soon afterwards, More challenged the book's claim that '*To serve God for His good is Profane and Blasphemous*'.²⁷ On the same page, Scott declared that 'I am sure to serve him [God] for *his good* is *prophane* and *blasphemous*'.²⁸ More demurred from his correspondent's conclusion that: '*Forasmuch as it is Blasphemy to serve God for his good, that we must either serve God for our own good or no good at all*'.²⁹ Scott indeed remarked that 'either we must serve him for *no good*, or serve him for *our own*'.³⁰ More's overall argument against Scott—that one must not love God 'for a *Reward* distinct from this *Divine Life*' in imitation of God—testifies to his continuing concern about the theological and moral issues raised in his discussion with Sherlock.³¹

The identification of Sherlock and Scott as More's correspondents also points towards a tentative dating of these letters. Seventeenth-century authors tended to send their works to their associates soon after publication, so More probably received Sherlock's *Discourse* in the mid-1670s

²² Ward and More, *Life*, 250; Scott, *Christian Life*, II, 106–80.

²³ Ward and More, *Life*, 250.

²⁴ Scott, *Christian Life*, II, 480.

²⁵ Ward and More, *Life*, 251.

²⁶ Scott, *Christian Life*, II, 439.

²⁷ Ward and More, *Life*, 252.

²⁸ Scott, *Christian Life*, II, 439.

²⁹ Ward and More, *Life*, 254.

³⁰ Scott, *Christian Life*, II, 439.

³¹ Ward and More, *Life*, 252.

¹⁹ Ward and More, *Life*, 271, 256, 277.

²⁰ Ward and More, *Life*, 250; J. Scott, *The Christian Life* (5 parts, London, 1681–99), II, 28–52.

²¹ Ward and More, *Life*, 250.

and sent his letters shortly afterwards. His letter to Scott, moreover, must have been sent at some point between the publication of the second part of the *Christian Life* in 1685 and More's death on 1 September 1687. As neither Sherlock's *Discourse*, nor Scott's *Christian Life* have been previously referenced as part of More's reading, these attributions shed new light on his intellectual world in the 1670s and 1680s. More's encounter with Sherlock's *Discourse* appears to have been particularly significant for the later development of his moral theology. Indeed, he seems to have responded to Sherlock's *Discourse* in the scholia or explanatory notes that he added to the edition of the *Enchiridion Ethicum* included in his *Opera Omnia* (1679). For though More had long been concerned about the morally disruptive effects of self-love in general, these scholia were distinctive in critiquing those who argued, like Sherlock, that self-love played an important role in stimulating the love of God.

More clearly regarded these scholia on the love of God as one of the most important additions to the *Enchiridion Ethicum*. After all, he chose to emphasize in the general preface to the *Opera* that the explanatory remarks on the fourth chapter of book one had demonstrated that all true virtue originates from the love of God; an overriding passion that he asserted also motivates the best enquiries into the natural world. In that note, More distinguished the true love of God from serving

Him out of 'self-love' for the sake of the rewards He provides: the same notion that he had critiqued Sherlock for defending in the mid-1670s. In one of the later scholia, More also appears to have targeted Sherlock's *Discourse* by arguing that the pleasures of virtue are consistent with loving God for Himself because such delights arise immediately from the consideration of His goodness.³² That other later editions of the *Enchiridion Ethicum* included these scholia raises the tantalizing possibility that they shaped More's considerable influence on eighteenth-century British moral thought, especially in Scotland where the moral salience of self-love was a central issue.³³ But the more concrete upshot of identifying More's correspondents in his letters on self-love is to reveal that he refined his ethical thought as he grew increasingly concerned about the centrality of self-interest to the moral theologies of some younger anti-Calvinists within the Church of England.

JACOB DONALD CHATTERJEE 

Balliol College, Oxford, UK

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³² H. More, *Opera Omnia* (2 vols., London, 1679), I, xiii, 20–24, 22, 77.

³³ H. More, *Enchiridion Ethicum*, new edn. (London, 1711), 33–43, 38, 228–29. On More's influence and British debates over self-love see: M. B. Gill, 'From Cambridge Platonism to Scottish Sentimentalism', *JSP*, viii (2010), 13–31; S. Hutton, 'From Cudworth to Hume: Cambridge Platonism and the Scottish Enlightenment', *CJP*, xlii (2012), 8–26; C. Maurer, "'A lapsu corruptus": Calvinist Doctrines and Seventeenth-Century Scottish *Theses Ethicæ*', *HoU*, xxix (2017), 188–209; C. Maurer, *Self-Love, Egoism and the Selfish Hypothesis: Key Debates from Eighteenth-Century British Moral Philosophy* (Edinburgh, 2019).

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