



Phenomenological Tendencies in British Moral Theory

WRITTEN WITH BARRY SMITH FOR THE ENCYCLOPAEDIA OF PHENOMENOLOGY,
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There is an inherent phenomenological tendency in British moral theory, especially from JOHN LOCKE <1632-1704> onward. The purpose of his Essay<1690> was, he said, to consider the discerning faculties of a man, as they are employed about the objects which they have to do with. This is language that might serve well in a general description of the work of Husserl and other phenomenologists.

In carrying out his purpose, LOCKE developed his Empiricist theory that all our "ideas," and hence all knowledge, originate from "experience," a type of conscious act or event which he never adequately characterized, but simply divided into sensation (sense perception) and reflection (the 'feeling' of our own mental acts and

states). He and numerous subsequent British philosophers then made significant application of this essentially unclarified ((Empiricism)) to the moral judgment, assuming that our ideas and knowledge about those states, acts and powers or dispositions of the self that are subject to moral assessment must derive from reflective awareness of such states and acts. Frequently the moral judgment itself is treated as something graspable by ((reflection)).

While this phenomenological tendency is never systematically exploited or methodologically clarified in the manner of HUSSERL, etc., it often comes sharply into play against the speculative and constructionist claims of moral theorists such as THOMAS HOBBS <1588-1679> and JEREMY BENTHAM <1748-1842>, who fairly represent the anti-phenomenological in British moral theory. On occasion it gives rise to what certainly has the character of (("eidetic")) analyses of the moral judgment or experience and its objects.

In his theory of knowledge LOCKE lays a foundation for a phenomenology of the moral life, but does little to build upon it. The morally central conceptions of good and evil, virtue and law are all explained by him with a mixture of stipulation, dogmatism, speculation and unrefined introspection that have almost as little to do with his announced Empiricist methods as it does with phenomenological ones. Still, the general outlines of his thought, and especially his "ideas of reflection," open the way for the many later "psychological" appeals in moral theory to what one 'finds' in oneself upon reflection--especially as they concern the balance between egoistic, altruistic and other motives and the nature and object of the moral judgment.

HENRY SIDGWICK <1838-1900> states that SHAFTSBURY (ANTHONY ASHLEY COOPER <1671-1713>) was the first moralist who distinctly took 'psychological experience' as the basis of ethics, and that this approach was carried onward through BUTLER, HUTCHESON, HUME and 19th Century Utilitarianism. That is basically correct, though we need to add that the earlier thinkers on this list were freer from domination by assumptions about what must be the case in moral experience and judgment than the later ones. BENTHAM and JOHN STUART MILL <1806-1873> in particular, the two main Utilitarians, are

more characterized, in their writings on moral theory, by psychological constructions and dogmatism than by description.

SHAFTSBURY actually opens his Inquiry<1699> with abstract reasoning about the good in terms of part, whole, and end. But he soon moves to the descriptive finding that when actions and affections come before the mind as objects there arises another kind of affection, one bearing upon those very actions and affections themselves. They become the subject of a new liking or disliking, based upon their character as benefiting or harming the human species or public, inclusive of the agent. Moral worth and the virtues of persons consist in their having a properly balanced and overall inclination toward the good of the social system of which they are a part and the individual's good in that system. While the presence of this 'new' moral liking or moral sense seems to be a discovery of reflection, most of what SHAFTSBURY presents remains within the domain of abstract reasoning from concepts.

FRANCIS HUTCHESON <1694-1747> provides what is essentially a development of SHAFTSBURY's system. However, in his Inquiry<1725> he flatly identifies virtue, or the object of the moral affection, with benevolence. The kind affections of rational agents immediately evoke an esteem or perception in us that is different in kind from all other appreciations of goodness that may occur. In particular, it has no connection with personal advantage or desire to possess. While he offers many arguments against opposing views or moral distinctions, the existence of this special "moral sense" and the determination of what its object is is clearly something that Hutcheson rests upon reflection. As he says, "Our hearts must decide the matter," and we read our hearts by reflection.

JOSEPH BUTLER <1692-1752> provides us with some of the best ((descriptive)) points in the history of British moral theory. He certainly argues, and often from abstract conceptions, such as that of a systematic whole and the roles of its parts--especially as found in the human being. But the specifically Butlerian points usually come to rest upon appeals to descriptive differences in experiences and their objects and to reflection upon such differences. The opening

paragraphs of his Dissertation on Virtue<1736> makes the strongest possible statements to the effect that we have a specific capacity for reflecting on actions and characters, or for "making them an object of our thought," that such reflection naturally gives rise to approval or disapproval of its peculiar objects, and that the existence of the capacity or faculty "is certain from our experiencing it in ourselves and recognizing it in each other"--that is, from a certain meta-reflection. (Cp. Sermons<1726>, #1) He proceeds with detailed elaboration of this faculty and its objects, concluding that there is a wide range of actions and states which find approval from the reflection faculty, including self-interested actions and those that arise from particular appetites and passions, in appropriate circumstances.

Often BUTLER's descriptions and inferences are so intermingled that one must take great care to sort them out. But his whole line of argument can be supported only on what from the phenomenological point of view are rightly called descriptions of ((essence)). One of his retorts to psychological egoism, for example, is that pain and pleasure have nothing essentially to do with self-love (egoism), that "the feelings themselves, the pain of hunger or shame, and the delight from esteem, are no more self-love than they are anything in the world." The famous Butlerian dictum, "Everything is what it is, and not another thing"--so badly used by G. E. MOORE's association of it with his own views in Principia Ethica<1903>--walks hand in hand, as BUTLER understood it, with the phenomenological slogan, "To the things themselves." The essential distinctions between conscious states or acts and their objects that are relevant to moral theory are ultimately, for BUTLER, to be determined by an ((intuitive)) reflective awareness that gives us their essences.

DAVID HUME <1711-1776> is close to BUTLER in this respect, and bases much of his moral theory on reflective analysis. Section I of his Enquiry<1748> concerning morals states his aim of settling the question about "the true origin of morals," and of finding the universal principles that form the "foundation of ethics," by analysis of the complex of mental qualities which form what he called "Personal Merit." To settle any doubt as to whether a given quality enters into Personal Merit is a simple matter: "One needs only enter his own

breast for a moment" to determine if one would desire to have the quality ascribed to oneself. The "experimental" method which HUME proposes to follow, in imitation of the natural sciences of his day, proceeds then to deduce general maxims of morals from a comparison of particular cases. The parallels with the eidetic analysis peculiar to phenomenology are obvious, though HUME retains his nominalism.

He takes his 'inner observations' to show that all mental traits which evoke the sentiment of moral approval are useful or immediately agreeable, either to oneself or to others. This is his primary generalization in the foundation of ethics. It obviously presupposes that the moral sentiment of approval is capable of being independently identified for what it is in its own right--perhaps in the manner of redness, sweetness and pain. Likewise for the mental qualities that make up Personal Merit. All that is left, then, is to observe, by reflection on the course of our experience, how that approval (or disapproval) does or does not show up in response to the various mental qualities (e.g. justice, benevolence) contemplated in people. Needless to say, such a procedure could never yield a basis for true generalizations apart from some ((essentialist)) framework. HUME's procedure and conclusions suggest that he is in fact presupposing such a framework in reaching the moral theory he does, regardless of his official rejections of it.

Descriptive analysis comes into play at many other points in HUME's discussions of morals. For example, when he gives in the Treatise<1739> an explanation of why people are misled into thinking that reason is practical because calm passions, which do influence the will, resemble reason so greatly that they are mistaken for it. Or when he claims, in that same work, that you cannot find vice in an act of willful murder, but do find 'it' when you "turn your reflections into your own breast, and there discover a sentiment of disapprobation, which arises in you, toward this action." In these and multitudes of other points of detail he shows his reliance upon descriptive distinctions of essence.

HUME's views have been criticized sharply by contemporaries and by successors in British moral theory, up to the present day, but rarely on

the basis of descriptive analyses of moral experience and its objects. ADAM SMITH <1723-1790> actually does disagree with HUME about the basic structure of Personal Merit on the bases of descriptive analyses of moral phenomena. He holds that there is an underivative sense of propriety that is more fundamental to moral distinctions than utility is. THOMAS REID <1710-1796> and RICHARD PRICE <1723-1791>, in opposition to HUME, treat the moral sense or faculty as a cognitive faculty, not a sentiment, and hold that our ideas are not confined to what we can derive from "experience" in LOCKE's sense. They, unlike SMITH however, really do belong in the earlier Platonist tradition of HENRY MORE <1614-1687>, RALPH CUDWORTH <1617-1688>, and SAMUEL CLARKE <1675-1729>, as well as the later tradition of "Intuitionism" from WILLIAM WHEWELL <1794-1866> and SIDGWICK to G. E. MOORE and W. D. ROSS in the 20th Century.

The Essentialist aspect in all of these thinkers is quite at home in the eidetic atmosphere of phenomenology. MORE, in his Enchiridion Ethicum<1666>, even uses the term ("noema") to apply to the directly evident axioms of all ethical reasoning. But this tradition is not strong on descriptive analyses of experience, to say the least. REID and PRICE, however, seem to have learned something from the practice of their Empiricist adversaries. One occasionally finds important passages in their works where descriptive analysis of moral experience plays a crucial role. For example, in REID's discussions of "the esteem which we have for a man on account of his moral worth," in Ch. 7 of the 3rd essay On The Active Powers<1788>, and in PRICE's discussion of what sense (sensation) consists of in Section ii of Ch. I of his Review<1758>. Price on occasion shows astonishing similarities to HUSSERL's practice and understanding of essence analysis, but without any corresponding methodological sophistication.

We have mentioned BENTHAM and MILL as paradigm cases of non-phenomenological moral theorists. HUME's Treatise was a major influence on the young BENTHAM, but only because he found HUME's idea of utility to be a core around which he could organize a theory of morality that would serve as a basis for legal and social reforms he saw to be necessary. He dropped the subtleties of HUME's 'psychological' analyses and conclusions, specified utility to be the only moral

consideration, and added Hedonism as a theory of value. BENTHAM is like HOBBS in that he presents constructions or stipulative definitions as if they were general truths that have been established and tries to throw the burden of proof onto those who would say his views are wrong. (See Ch. I of Principles of Morals and Legislation<1789>.) MILL is, certainly, a far more careful thinker; but he is hardly any stronger in willingness or ability to do justice to the 'descriptive facts' of moral experience and its objects.

SIDGWICK began his work as a disciple (his term) of Mill, but he was unable to accept MILL's account of our duty to choose the general happiness. He soon found himself forced to base that duty on a special intuition, not on Utilitarian considerations. He adopted much of BUTLER's account of moral experience, which allowed various motivations--personal happiness, the general good, as well as "particular appetites and passions"--all to be morally acceptable under appropriate circumstances. In working out a modified form of Utilitarianism in his Methods, one that rests on the above and other non-Utilitarian intuitions, he gives an analysis of the meaning of moral judgments that contains significant phenomenological elements. He provides arguments against the view that "ought" and "right," and judgments containing them, deal with physical or psychical facts, "facts of the sensible world." Thus Naturalism, including Hedonism, is rejected. But for a positive understanding of what 'oughtness' or 'rightness' is, "appeal must ultimately be made to the reflection of individuals on their practical judgments and reasonings." The basic moral concepts are "too elementary" to admit of any formal definition. "Ought" refers to a relation that must be "taken as ultimate and unanalyzable." Some clarification of it can be gained by plotting its relationships to other concepts, but ultimately we can know what it is only by viewing it reflectively and grasping its essence by ((abstraction)). Once we know what "ought" refers to, three general principles--of Justice, Prudence and Rational Benevolence--exhibit at least a degree of self-evidence, "immediately cognizable by abstract intuition." But "direct reflection" also shows us that certain more specific propositions, such as "I ought to speak the truth," are not self-evident and require justification from appropriate premises. The role

of direct reflection and abstractive intuition in SIDGWICK's analyses of moral phenomena and the meanings of moral concepts and judgments is so great that he stands second only to BUTLER and HUME among British moralists in the weight he gives to essentially phenomenological considerations.

Although some have regarded the "meaning analysis" characteristic of British moral theory from SIDGWICK up to the last quarter of the 20th Century as strongly similar to phenomenological analysis in terms of (('intentionality')), the actual practice of analytic philosophy is radically distinct from phenomenology in a way that the work of earlier British moralist clearly was not.

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Addendum by L. Embree:

As to the role of British moral theory in the phenomenological tradition, one must note, first of all, the degree to which BRENTANO and his successors were aware of an essential affinity between their own descriptive analyses of experience and the work of the British empiricists. Brentano's Psychologie vom empirischen Standpunkt (1874) is heavily indebted in its methodology to the work of Locke, Mill, Hamilton and Bain, and Brentano continues to embrace a psychological approach in his writings on ethics. The ethical work of Brentano and his students also evinces, however, a component that is absent from the British tradition: a concern with intrinsic value, and with the laws governing "correct" and "incorrect" emotion. This psychologically -based axiological approach to ethics and value-phenomena is further elaborated by Alexius MEINONG and by Edmund HUSSERL in his lectures on ethics and value theory. In the latter we find a detailed state of the parallelisms between formal axiology on the one hand and formal logic and formal ontology on the other. Husserl in addition criticizes what he sees as the PSYCHOLOGISTIC character of Humean empiricism, because the latter does not allow the sciences of experience to be grounded in a priori necessities. He defends instead an "absolutist" ethical theory, and especially in his political philosophy

he comes close to Hobbes and to a view of the philosophy of the state as found on a priori principles analogous to those of geometry.

Perhaps the most systematic treatment of ethical categories on the basis of the phenomenological description of experience is put forward by Max SCHELER in his Der Formalismus in der Ethik und die materiale Wertethik (1913/1916). Phenomenology, as Scheler conceives it, is a way of doing philosophy that allows us to grasp the value and significance which is, in his eyes, endemic to the world of human experience. We cannot try deliberately to observe these meanings or values in intellectualistic fashion, and we cannot try to use the instruments of logic and science in order to build up theories about these things. For in order to use logic or thinking to observe entities of the given sort, we should have to have grasped them already, and the only way we can grasp them is via feeling and intuition.

In his Essay on the Intellectual Powers of Man (1785), Thomas Reid (1710-1796) develops a doctrine of what he calls 'social operations' or 'social acts', which concern the systematic ways in which human beings use language non-descriptively or 'non-propositionally'. This occurs for example in questioning, in plighting, threatening, supplicating and bargaining, in acts expressing acceptance or refusal, in acts of giving testimony, and above all in commands and promises.

Adolph REINACH, too, developed a theory of "social acts" (later called "speech acts" or "performative utterances" by John Austin (1911-1960) and John Searle) in his "Die apriorischen Grundlagen des bürgerlichen Rechts," published in Husserl's Jahrbuch in 1913. Like Reid, Reinach takes the phenomenon of promising as the central object of his a priori descriptive analyses, and he sees the setting out of the essential connections governing this phenomenon as the basis of an a priori theory of the entire domain of social interaction. Reinach criticizes the Humean analysis of promising as the expression of an act of will, and he points out that the quasi-legal formations of claim and obligation associated with every promise can never be reduced to mere habits, feelings or beliefs. On the other hand, in his 1911 essay "Kants Auffassung des Humeschen Problems" (English translation in Southwestern Journal of Philosophy, 7, 1976), Reinach defends Hume

against common misinterpretations and shows that Hume had a sophisticated understand of the a priori connections governing basic mental phenomena. In this respect too, therefore, the affinity is maintained between British empiricism and phenomenology as descriptive analyses of experience.

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