Physical Objects and Moral Wrongness:
Hume on the "Fallacy" in Wollaston's Moral Theory

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Abstract: In a well-known footnote in Book 3 of his *Treatise of Human Nature*, Hume calls William Wollaston's moral theory a "whimsical system" and purports to destroy it with a few brief objections. The first of those objections, although fatally flawed, has hitherto gone unrefuted. To my knowledge, its chief error has escaped attention. In this paper I expose that error; I also show that it has relevance beyond the present subject. It can occur with regard to any moral theory which, like Wollaston's, locates the wrongness of an act in a property that can reside in non-actions no less than in actions.

INTRODUCTION

According to the moral theory of William Wollaston (1659–1724), the mark of a wrong action is that it signifies a falsehood.[1] This theory rests, in part, on an unusual account of actions according to which they have propositional content: they "declare," "signify," "affirm," or "express" propositions (*RN* 8–13). To take an example from Wollaston, the act of firing on a band of soldiers affirms the proposition "Those soldiers are my enemies" (*RN* 8–9). Likewise, the act of breaking a promise signifies the proposition "I did not make that promise" (*RN* 10, 16).[2]

This account of actions, as well as the moral theory that rests on it, has many harsh critics.[3] Unfortunately, some of them read Wollaston with little

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[1] William Wollaston, *The Religion of Nature Delineated* [hereafter *RN*] (London, 1724), 13–18, 20–25. A facsimile of this book is edited by Stanley Tweyman (Delmar, NY: Scholars' Facsimiles & Reprints, 1974). When quoting Wollaston I remove most of his italics; I also modernize his spelling and partially modernize his punctuation.

[2] For the purposes of this paper it suffices to give merely this brief statement of Wollaston's account of actions. For more details see Stanley Tweyman, "Truth, Happiness and Obligation: The Moral Philosophy of William Wollaston," *Philosophy* 51.195 (1976): 35–46.

[3] See, for example, David Hume, T 3.1.1.15n68, SBN 461–62n1. The "T" stands for the Clarendon edition of Hume's *Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. David Fate Norton and Mary J. Norton (Oxford: Oxford

care, and thus produce criticisms which, even if seemingly forceful, are at bottom unsound. This is true of most of the criticisms in David Hume's famous footnote about Wollaston's philosophy—the one in which he calls Wollaston's theory a "whimsical system" and purports to destroy it with a few brief objections (T 3.1.1.15n68; SBN 461–62n1). In this paper I examine the first of those objections (hereafter "Hume's objection"), the gist of which is this: Just as we can draw mistaken conclusions from observing an action, we can do the same from observing an inanimate object. Therefore, if Wollaston's theory were true—that is, if the tendency to produce error were the essence of vice—it would follow, absurdly, that inanimate objects can be vicious or immoral.

This is one of the most familiar objections to Wollaston's moral theory; also, to the extent that it applies to his theory it applies to any moral theory that locates the wrongness of an act in a property that can reside in non-actions no less than in actions. The attention it receives in this paper shows that it fails, for it implicitly distorts Wollaston's position. As will also emerge, the error it commits has relevance beyond the present subject, for it can occur with regard to any moral theory of the kind just mentioned, meaning any that locates the wrongness of an act in a property that non-actions can possess. In refuting the objection I join hands with Stanley Tweyman, Joel Feinberg, Olin Joynton, and others who argue that Wollaston's theory is more resilient than generally thought, that it withstands some of the best-known objections to it.[4]

At this point, some readers may suspect that this paper is superfluous, that its main task has already been done. Hume's treatment of Wollaston's theory receives criticism from the contemporary authors just noted; hence, some readers may suspect that the objections in Hume's footnote, including the one I aim to address, already stand refuted. This suspicion is false but understandable. It is false because, although the three authors just noted address Hume's footnote when considering Hume's treatment of Wollaston,[5] they do not refute the objection I wish to examine. It is understandable because Feinberg and

University Press, 2007), which I cite by book, part, section, and paragraph. "SBN" stands for L. A. Selby Bigge's 2nd edition of the *Treatise*, revised by P. H. Nidditch (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), which I cite by page number. For further examples of the critics to whom I refer, see Jeremy Bentham, *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation* (London, 1789), chap. 2, para. 14, note; Thomas Brown, *Lectures on the Philosophy of the Human Mind*, 7th ed. (Edinburgh: William Tait, 1833), 511–12; Leslie Stephen, *History of English Thought in the Eighteenth Century*, 2nd ed., 2 vols. (London: Smith, Elder, 1881), 1: 130; 2: 10; John S. Mackenzie, *Manual of Ethics*, 4th ed. (New York: Hinds & Noble, 1901), 189; and Alasdair MacIntyre, *A Short History of Ethics* (London: Macmillan, 1966), 170–71.

[4] Tweyman, "Truth, Happiness and Obligation"; Stanley Tweyman, *Reason and Conduct in Hume and His Predecessors* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1974), 87–99, 103–111; Joel Feinberg, "Wollaston and His Critics," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 38.2 (1977): 345–52; Olin Joynton, "The Problem of Circularity in Wollaston's Moral Philosophy," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 22.4 (1984): 435–43. The objections collectively refuted by these authors include Hume's quip about "liberties with my neighbour's wife" (see note 7 and the accompanying text) and Bentham's charge that Wollaston reduces all wrongdoing to lying. See Bentham, *Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*, chap. 2, para. 14, note.

[5] Tweyman, *Reason and Conduct in Hume and His Predecessors*, 109–11; Feinberg, "Wollaston and His Critics," 348–50; Joynton, "The Problem of Circularity in Wollaston's Moral Philosophy," 437–42.

Tweyman expose a defect in that objection: they show that it misconstrues Wollaston's criterion for wrongness.[6] However, as I will show, their comments do not refute Hume's objection, they merely require a slight revision of it.

1. HUME'S OBJECTION

Earlier I briefly summarized Hume's objection; let me now quote it:

> That we may discover the fallacy of [Wollaston's] hypothesis, we need only consider, that a false conclusion is drawn from an action, only by means of an obscurity of natural principles, which makes a cause be secretly interrupted in its operation, by contrary causes, and renders the connexion betwixt two objects uncertain and variable. Now, as a like uncertainty and variety of causes take place, even in natural objects, and produce a like error in our judgment, if that tendency to produce error were the very essence of vice and immorality, it shou'd follow, that even inanimate objects might be vicious and immoral. . . . If the tendency to cause error be the origin of immorality, that tendency and immorality wou'd in every case be inseparable. (T 3.1.1.15n68; SBN 461n1.)

We can reconstruct this objection as follows:

> According to Wollaston's moral theory, the likelihood of an act to produce error, i.e., to cause a witness to draw a false conclusion, is the very essence of moral wrongness.

> Physical objects can produce error. Just as my observation of an action can lead me (through "an obscurity of natural principles") to draw a false conclusion, so too can my observation of a physical object.

> Thus, a consequence of Wollaston's moral theory is that physical objects can be morally wrong.

> However, physical objects (unlike, say, the acts that produce them) cannot be morally wrong. It is absurd to say "That tree is morally wrong" or "That's a morally wrong teapot."

> Therefore, Wollaston's moral theory is false.

Before proceeding, three things deserve notice. First, in reconstructing Hume's objection I have substituted "morally wrong" for Hume's phrase "vicious and immoral." (Similarly, I have substituted "moral wrongness" for "vice and immorality.") This is because the latter phrase, as used in Hume's objection, is synonymous (roughly) with "morally wrong." That is, it serves as a predicate of *actions*, not as a description of agents, motives, or character traits. I say this because if it did not serve as a predicate of actions, Hume's objection would be

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[6] See note 8 and the accompanying text.

off target. Wollaston's focus is the morality of *actions*, not that of character, motives, and so on (*RN* 7–8, 13–18, 20–25).

Second, I have used the term "physical objects" rather than Hume's terms "natural objects" and "inanimate objects." I put no weight on his use of those terms—at least, I do not take them to indicate that his argument concerns natural objects to the exclusion of artifacts, or inanimate objects to the exclusion of animate ones. (I believe that he uses the terms for a rhetorical reason: to vividly bring home the points in which they appear.) After all, artifacts or animate objects can produce error in any sense in which natural objects or inanimate objects can. Likewise, the predicate "morally wrong" is no more applicable to artifacts and animate objects than it is to natural objects and inanimate objects.

Third, in the opening step of the objection I have substituted "likelihood" for Hume's word "tendency." This is because "likelihood" better reflects what Hume has in mind. To see this, consider the following of Hume's remarks, which appears in the same footnote as the one previously quoted.

> Add to this, that if I had us'd the precaution of shutting the windows, while I indulg'd myself in . . . liberties with my neighbour's wife, I shou'd have been guilty of no immorality [according to Wollaston] . . . because *my action, being perfectly conceal'd, wou'd have had no tendency to produce any false conclusion.* (T 3.1.1.15n68; SBN 461n1; emphasis added.)[7]

The italicized claim is disputable on at least one reading of "tendency." It is disputable, that is, if a tendency to produce a false conclusion is something an act has insofar as a person *would* draw a false conclusion from the act *were* she to witness it. Such a tendency cannot be removed by "shutting the windows" or otherwise concealing the action. However, the italicized claim is true if a tendency to produce a false conclusion is something an act has insofar as it is *likely* to cause someone to draw a false conclusion. Such a tendency can be removed by concealing the action. Thus, the word "likelihood" or something akin to it is what Hume seems to mean by "tendency."

2. TWEYMAN AND FEINBERG ON HUME'S OBJECTION

Hume's objection has multiple flaws, one of which receives notice from Stanley Tweyman and Joel Feinberg. As they point out, Hume mistakenly regards the notion of an *observer*, or more exactly, the likelihood of causing an observer to draw a false conclusion, as central to Wollaston's moral theory.[8] Hume is mistaken because what is central to Wollaston's theory is not the notion of an observer, but the view that wrongness derives from *signifying a*

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[7] It's worth noting that the objection in this remark distorts Wollaston's moral theory. See note 8 and the accompanying text.

[8] Tweyman, *Reason and Conduct*, 110; Feinberg, "Wollaston and His Critics," 347, 349.

falsehood. Also, it is no part of Wollaston's theory that an act can signify a falsehood only if a witness is present.

Do Tweyman and Feinberg regard this point as decisive? They do not, at least not against the objection we are examining.[9] Nor should we expect them to, for it is easy to see that their point does not refute the objection. It merely calls for a slight revision of it:

> According to Wollaston's moral theory, significancy of falsehood, the property of signifying a false proposition, is the very essence of moral wrongness.
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> Physical objects can signify false propositions. For instance, clocks, maps, and other objects with a representative function can do so.
>
> Thus, a consequence of Wollaston's moral theory is that physical objects can be morally wrong.
>
> However, physical objects cannot be morally wrong.
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> Therefore, Wollaston's moral theory is false.

Henceforth, by "Hume's objection" I mean this argument unless otherwise noted. In general, Hume's critics do not address this argument. However, Feinberg is an exception. In critiquing the original version of Hume's objection, meaning the objection as Hume words it, Feinberg writes this:

> It surely goes without saying that in order for an action to be "vicious and immoral," it must in fact *be* an action! Natural objects erupt, explode, tumble, and fall, but they do not act. *A fortiori*, they cannot act viciously and immorally. Wollaston's question was the same as that raised by all moral theorists, namely: What distinguishes the class of *human actions* that are morally wrong from the class of *human actions* that are not morally wrong? No answer to that question could possibly commit a theorist to the absurd consequence that inanimate objects sometimes act immorally.[10]

The first thing to note about this comment is that it does not *directly* address Hume's objection. For instance, Hume's objection says (in its third step) that a consequence of Wollaston's theory is that physical objects can *be* morally wrong. However, Feinberg has his sights on an objection which says that a consequence of Wollaston's theory is that physical objects can *act* wrongly or immorally. This stems, I believe, from a mistake on Feinberg's part about the thrust of Hume's objection. Hume's key point is that in whatever respect actions can signify falsehoods (or cause observers to draw false conclusions),

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[9] This is evident from the contexts of their remarks. Tweyman, for instance, is simply emphasizing the point, an important one, that "the role of the observer is not at all as pivotal for Wollaston's view as Hume believes" (*Reason and Conduct*, 110).

[10] Feinberg, "Wollaston and His Critics," 348.

objects can do the same; consequently, if actions can have moral properties in virtue of signifying falsehoods, objects can have those same properties. But of course actions cannot have the moral property of *acting* immorally, for actions do not act. Similarly, actions cannot have the property of *being immoral*, if "being immoral" means tending to *act* immorally. Hence, contrary to what Feinberg implies, Hume is not claiming that if Wollaston's moral theory were true, objects could *act* immorally or *be immoral* in the sense just described. He is claiming that if Wollaston's theory were true, objects could be immoral in the same sense in which actions can be immoral. In short, they could be morally wrong.

However, Feinberg's mistake is a small matter, for with the following revisions his comment directly addresses Hume's objection.

> It surely goes without saying that in order for an action to be morally wrong, it must in fact *be* an action! Physical objects are not the sort of things that can be morally wrong. Wollaston's question was the same as that raised by all moral theorists, namely: What distinguishes the class of *human actions* that are morally wrong from the class of *human actions* that are not morally wrong? No answer to that question could possibly commit a theorist to the absurd consequence that objects, like actions, can be morally wrong.

But now a second problem arises. Even with the above revisions, Feinberg's comment does not refute Hume's objection. For it contains no support for Feinberg's chief claim. That claim concerns the third step of Hume's objection, which says that a consequence of Wollaston's theory is that physical objects can be morally wrong. Feinberg asserts without argument that this step is false, that no account of right and wrong action, including Wollaston's, has the consequence that step concerns. In essence, Feinberg is claiming that the first phase of Hume's objection, the phase that culminates in its third step, is unsound. But why should we believe this claim? Exactly where, and of what nature, is the error in the first phase of Hume's objection? What's to prevent the Humean from insisting that Hume's third step is true, and true for exactly the reasons advanced in the steps preceding it? Feinberg does not tell us; he simply makes his claim and moves on. Hence, even if his claim is true, even if Hume's objection goes wrong in its first phase, Feinberg has not done enough to refute Hume's objection.

Thus far I have shown that Hume's objection suffers no serious damage from Feinberg's and Tweyman's remarks. For example, although Feinberg's criticism may contain some truth (perhaps the first phase of Hume's objection is unsound), Feinberg provides no evidence for it. Furthermore, I know of no other extant criticisms that refute Hume's objection. I thus conclude that to refute that objection is not to perform a superfluous task. It is to perform a task

that is overdue—a task, moreover, that contributes to showing that Wollaston's moral theory is more resilient than generally thought.

3. THE ERROR IN HUME'S OBJECTION

Feinberg is right in thinking that the first phase of Hume's objection is unsound. Let me now do what Feinberg does not do, which is to show *why* that phase is unsound. Here again is that phase:

> According to Wollaston's moral theory, significancy of falsehood, the property of signifying a false proposition, is the very essence of moral wrongness.

> Physical objects can signify false propositions. For instance, clocks, maps, and other objects with a representative function can do so.

> Thus, a consequence of Wollaston's moral theory is that physical objects can be morally wrong.

Is this argument valid? It is if its first premise means that according to Wollaston's moral theory, significancy of falsehood is *identical* to moral wrongness.[11] This, apparently, is what Hume means by it, for on any other reading of it—any viable one, at least—Hume's argument is invalid.[12] But more on this later; the point for now is that Hume's objection is valid if its first step means that according to Wollaston's theory, wrongness and significancy of falsehood are identical. For if a theory, *T*, asserts that two properties, *S* and *W*, are identical, and if, further, physical objects can have property *S*, then although it is not necessarily an *implication* of *T* that physical objects can have property *W*, it certainly is a *consequence* of *T* that they can have that property. In other words, *T commits* its adherents to the proposition that physical objects can have that property. A person could not deny that physical objects can have that property without either denying *T* or committing a factual error.

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[11] Or, alternatively, if it means that according to Wollaston's moral theory, significancy of falsehood is *logically equivalent* to moral wrongness, i.e., that those properties are necessarily coextensive in any domain. The points I will defend about the first reading of Hume's first premise, the reading just mentioned in the text, apply also to this alternative reading. (Of course, some philosophers will deny that this reading is a genuine alternative to the other, contending that the *logical equivalence* of two properties is necessary and sufficient for the *identity* of the two properties. But not every philosopher takes this line.)

[12] Also, there is some textual evidence that this is what Hume means by it. In T 3.1.1.19 (SBN 463–64) Hume uses the expression "[*x* is] the very essence of *y*" interchangeably with "*y* consists in *x*," which presumably means (unless Hume is speaking loosely) "*y* is identical to *x*." See also EHU 8.22n18; SBN 94n1. (This is a reference, by section and paragraph number, to the Clarendon edition of Hume's *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Tom L. Beauchamp [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000], followed by the corresponding page number in L. A. Selby-Bigge's 3rd edition of that work, revised by P. H. Nidditch [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975].)

However, Hume's first premise is unacceptable if it has this meaning. Allow me to show this, in the process identifying the only feasible reading of Hume's first premise, meaning the only reading that ensures its truth.

The view to be considered is that according to Wollaston's moral theory, wrongness and significancy of falsehood are identical. This view is unacceptable for at least two reasons. First, there is no textual evidence for it; and second, an alternative view is available, one that is fairer to Wollaston's position and more consistent with his text. The alternative view is that according to Wollaston's moral theory, wrongness and significancy of falsehood are *necessarily coextensive within the domain of actions*. In other words, Wollaston's thesis is not that wrongness and significancy of falsehood are the *same* property, but merely that, necessarily, an action is wrong if and only if it signifies a falsehood.

Let me begin with the point about fairness. If Wollaston's thesis were an identity claim, it would result in an absurdity. Ironically, that absurdity is the one Hume points out in his objection. It is the view that many non-actions, including many physical objects, can be morally wrong. Consider an inaccurate clock or map. Such an object signifies a falsehood; hence, if signifying a falsehood and being morally wrong were identical, clocks and maps could be morally wrong. But of course it is absurd to think that clocks, maps, or other physical objects can be morally wrong.

Wollaston's thesis is uncommitted to this absurdity if it asserts, not that wrongness and significancy of falsehood are identical, but merely that they are necessarily coextensive in the realm of actions. Although this view implies that any *action* that signifies a falsehood is morally wrong, it does not imply that *anything* that signifies a falsehood, including any inaccurate map, is morally wrong. The fact that two properties, *W* and *S*, are necessarily coextensive in a certain domain does not imply that in every domain in which *S* occurs, it shares its extension (in whole or in part) with *W*. In the domain of triangles, *being equilateral* and *being equiangular* are necessarily coextensive; however, a quadrilateral (or a pentagon, etc.) can be equiangular without being equilateral. Likewise, within the domain of adult men, *being a bachelor* and *being unmarried* are necessarily coextensive; however, in other domains, to be unmarried is not to be a bachelor.

Let me now address the issue of textual evidence. Let me show that there is no such evidence for the view that according to Wollaston, significancy of falsehood is *identical* to wrongness. Here are Wollaston's most explicit claims about the marks of right and wrong:

> No act (whether word or deed) of any being, to whom moral good and evil are imputable, that interferes with any true proposition, or denies anything to be as it is, can be right. (*RN* 13.)

> Every act . . . of such a being, as is before described, and all those omissions which inter-fere with truth (i.e. deny any proposition to be true, which is true, or suppose anything not to be what it is, in any regard) are morally evil, in some degree or other. (*RN* 20.)

> It is manifest that there is as certainly moral *good* and *evil* as there is *true* and *false*; and that there is as natural and immutable a difference between *those* as between *these*, the difference at the bottom being indeed the same. (*RN* 22.)

> If the *formal ratio* of moral good and evil be made to consist in a conformity of men's acts to the truth of the case or the contrary, as I have here explained it, the distinction [between good and evil] seems to be settled in a manner undeniable, intelligible, practicable. (*RN* 25.)

> The distinction between moral good and evil . . . is founded in the respect which men's acts bear to truth. . . . Every intelligent, active, and free being should so behave himself, as by no act to contradict truth. (*RN* 26.)

> If *T* takes or uses [*P*'s property] without the consent of *P*, he declares it to be his . . . when it is not his, and so acts a lie, in which consists the *idea* and *formal ratio* of moral evil. (*RN* 138.)

None of these remarks requires us to read Wollaston as holding that wrongness (or "evil," as he uses that term)[13] and significancy of falsehood are identical. Consider the third remark, for instance. Wollaston knows that rightness and wrongness are features of *actions*; hence, when he says that the difference between right and wrong is at bottom the same as the difference between true and false, we must read him in a certain way. What he means, almost surely, is that the difference between right and wrong actions is at bottom the same as the difference between true and false actions (where "false actions" differ from "true actions" in signifying at least one falsehood). That statement does not imply that wrongness is *identical* to falseness. The statement is unobjection-able, and indeed a natural way of speaking, as long as every right action is necessarily a true action and every wrong action is necessarily a false one.

To take a second example, the term "formal *ratio*," which appears twice in the quoted remarks, is no doubt Wollaston's anglicization of the Latin term "*ratio formalis*." However, the sentence "Inconsistency with the truth is identical to moral evil" would be a poor translation of the sentence "Inconsistency of men's acts with the truth is the *ratio formalis* of moral evil." A correct translation would be "Inconsistency with truth is the essence (or defining property) of morally evil action."[14] The latter does not imply that

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[13] Wollaston usually uses the word "evil" where I use "wrongness." However, he asserts that "moral good and evil are coincident with right and wrong" (*RN* 20).

[14] For these points about translation I'm grateful to Jason T. Eberl and Kevin M. Staley. Their advice agrees with the way I find "*ratio formalis*" used or defined in the scholarly literature, including the scholarly literature of Wollaston's day. See, for example, Richard Blackmore, *A Treatise of the Spleen and Vapours: or, Hypocondriacal and Hysterical Affections* (London, 1725), 42; and Peter Browne,

inconsistency with truth is the *same* as moral evil. Instead, it says that an act's inconsistency with truth is necessary and sufficient for the act to be evil. This is a way of saying that, necessarily, an act is wrong if and only if it signifies a falsehood, which in turn is a way of saying that within the domain of actions those two properties are necessarily coextensive.

In sum, to read Wollaston as I suggest, as asserting not that wrongness and significancy of falsehood are the same property, but merely that within the realm of actions they necessarily have the same extension, is to be fair to his theory and to respect the text of his explicit remarks. Indeed, no other reading has these virtues. Suppose, for example, that we take Wollaston to hold that within the realm of actions, wrongness and significancy of falsehood are only *contingently* coextensive.[15] This would be to ignore some of the remarks recently quoted, including Wollaston's claim that inconsistency with truth is the *ratio formalis* (the essence) of wrong actions. In addition, it would be to ignore the modal expressions Wollaston uses in setting out his theory. For instance, he says not merely that every act that denies a truth fails to be right, but that "no act" that does so "*can be* right" (*RN* 13, emphasis added). Similar examples are numerous, including Wollaston's claim that "nothing *can be* right that interferes with reason, and nothing *can* interfere with truth, but it *must* interfere with reason" (*RN* 52, emphasis added).

My next point is that if we interpret Hume's first premise so that it is true—that is, so that it reflects the reading of Wollaston just defended—then Hume's objection to Wollaston's moral theory is invalid. On the proposed interpretation, the first phase of Hume's objection becomes this:

> According to Wollaston's moral theory, within the domain of actions moral wrongness and significancy of falsehood are necessarily coextensive. In other words, Wollaston holds that, necessarily, an act is morally wrong if and only if it signifies a false proposition.
>
> Physical objects can signify false propositions. For instance, clocks, maps, and other objects with a representative function can do so.
>
> Thus, a consequence of Wollaston's moral theory is that physical objects can be morally wrong.

This argument is invalid, and we have already seen why: Even if two properties, *W* and *S*, are necessarily coextensive in a certain domain, this does not imply that in other domains in which *S* occurs, it shares its extension with *W*. Hence, from the fact that according to Wollaston's moral theory, wrongness and significancy of falsehood are necessarily coextensive in the domain of

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Things Divine and Supernatural Conceived by Analogy With Things Natural and Human (London, 1733), 476.

[15] Joynton appears to do this in "The Problem of Circularity," 439–43.

actions, and the further fact that in the domain of *physical objects* significancy of falsehood can occur, it does not follow that Wollaston's theory is committed to the view that physical objects can be morally wrong.[16]

Let us pause to sum up. The first step in Hume's objection asserts that according to Wollaston's moral theory, significancy of falsehood is the essence of moral wrongness. On at least one reading of this assertion, the one Hume favors, it means that according to Wollaston's moral theory, wrongness and significancy of falsehood are identical. On this reading the assertion is devoid of textual support and unfair to Wollaston's position. It becomes acceptable only if we read it to mean that according to Wollaston's moral theory, wrongness and significancy of falsehood are necessarily coextensive in the realm of actions. However, if we read it this way, Hume's objection is invalid: its first two steps do not entail its third, which says that a consequence of Wollaston's theory is that physical objects can be morally wrong. Thus, Hume's objection fails.

4. CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS

In the preceding section I did what Feinberg did not do: I showed *why* the first phase of Hume's objection is unsound. By way of conclusion, let me make two observations that reveal the wider significance of what I have shown.

I will keep the first observation brief, for I expand on it elsewhere.[17] Hume is not alone in mistakenly reading Wollaston to hold that wrongness and significancy of falsehood are identical. Francis Hutcheson (1694–1746) and John Clarke of Hull (1687–1734) do the same; they also build objections to Wollaston's moral theory on that reading.[18] Most likely, this similarity between Hume and those authors is no coincidence. Hume's treatment of Wollaston's theory reflects Clarke's and Hutcheson's influence;[19] hence, we should not be

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[16] Of course, it's open to an objector to argue that although the above argument is formally invalid, there is something special about wrongness and significancy of falsehood, something that not only distinguishes them from other properties that are (or purport to be) necessarily coextensive in a limited domain, but also makes the above argument guarantee its conclusion. But in the first place, it is hard to envision a successful project of this type, and in the second, were someone to attempt it, his or her efforts would take us quite a distance from the objection we began with. We would have a *new* objection to Wollaston's position, not a version of Hume's.

[17] In portions of the following papers, as yet unpublished: "Wollaston's Early Critics"; and "The Problem of Inconsistency in Wollaston's Moral Theory."

[18] Although the objections I have in mind differ in detail, each contends that Wollaston's moral theory is inconsistent. See Francis Hutcheson, *An Essay on the Nature and Conduct of the Passions and Affections. With Illustrations On the Moral Sense* (London, 1728), 269–70; and John Clarke, *An Examination Of the Notion of Moral Good and Evil, Advanced in a late Book, entitled, The Religion of Nature delineated* (London, 1725), 58–59. (A facsimile of Clarke's pamphlet appears in Tweyman's edition of *RN*, cited in note 1.) In section 6 of "Wollaston's Early Critics" I critique Clarke's objection; in section 3 of "The Problem of Inconsistency in Wollaston's Moral Theory" I critique Hutcheson's.

[19] As some commentators observe, Hutcheson's influence pervades not only Hume's discussion of Wollaston but other portions of T 3.1.1 (SBN 455–70). See, e.g., Stephen Darwall, "Hutcheson on Practical Reason," *Hume Studies* 23.1 (1997): 73–89, 73–74. John Clarke's influence on Hume's

surprised if a mistake those authors make turns up in Hume's objection. At any rate, the results of the preceding section, especially the point that Wollaston does not see wrongness and significancy of falsehood as identical, do not merely refute Hume's objection. They also call for a reappraisal of at least two other important critiques of Wollaston's theory.

My second observation concerns a remark by Feinberg, one that comes directly after his reply to Hume's objection.

> Hume's argument not only fails to touch the theory he . . . ascribes to Wollaston, but it also can be directed just as well against any moral theory, including the utilitarian theory that Hume himself held, for if the production of pain and suffering is the basis of immorality, and natural objects by erupting, exploding, falling, and tumbling, cause pain, then it could be said to follow (by Hume's logic and on Hume's own moral theory) that inanimate objects can be vicious and immoral.[20]

Before I make my chief comments about this passage, three brief points are in order. First, I ignored this passage in section 2 because it is not clear that Feinberg means it as a refutation of Hume's objection. It appears to be a side point, the gist of which is that *if* Hume's objection were sound (which it is not, Feinberg contends), it would refute more than Hume wants it to, for it would apply to Hume's own moral theory. Second, Hume does not hold a moral theory as crude as the one Feinberg attributes to him.[21] Third, contrary to what Feinberg says, Hume's argument cannot be directed against *any* moral theory. This is because some moral theories (e.g., Kant's) locate moral wrongness in a property that only actions can possess.

Despite its errors, Feinberg's remark contains something of interest, namely, the makings of a tempting, even if inconclusive, reply to Hume's objection. The reply is a two-part *reductio:* First, if Hume's objection refutes Wollaston's moral theory, then it refutes any theory of the form "*P* is the essence of moral wrongness," where *P* is a property that not only actions but also physical objects or other non-actions can share. To make the point another way, if the first phase of Hume's objection is sound, so too is the following argument:

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treatment of Wollaston is less obvious than Hutcheson's, but evidence for it exists. For instance, Hume's comment that Wollaston's theory is a "whimsical system" closely resembles Clarke's comment that Wollaston has a "whimsical notion of morality" (Clarke, *Examination Of the Notion of Moral Good and Evil*, 2). Also, Hume's example about "liberties with my neighbour's wife" appears to be adapted from a strikingly similar example on page 16 of Clarke's pamphlet.

[20] Feinberg, "Wollaston and His Critics," 348.

[21] For the sake of space I won't elaborate, but allow me to mention some recent, brief treatments of Hume's moral philosophy that respect its complexities: Rachel Cohon, "Hume's Artificial and Natural Virtues," *The Blackwell Guide to Hume's Treatise*, ed. Saul Traiger (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), 256–75; Jacqueline Taylor, "Virtue and the Evaluation of Character," *Blackwell Guide to Hume's Treatise*, 276–95; David Fate Norton, "The Foundations of Morality in Hume's *Treatise*," *The Cambridge Companion to Hume*, 2nd ed., ed. David Fate Norton and Jacqueline Taylor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 270–310; and Jacqueline Taylor, "Hume's Later Moral Philosophy," *Cambridge Companion to Hume*, 311–40.

According to at least one moral theory, pain-production is the essence of moral wrongness.

Many non-actions, e.g., a falling rock (or a rock's falling), can produce pain.

Thus, a consequence of the moral theory just mentioned is that many non-actions, including falling rocks, can be morally wrong.

Second, somewhere in this argument a fatal defect exists, for the argument is implausible on its face. Surely, those who hold that an act's wrongness resides in the fact that the act causes pain are guilty of nothing so silly as the view that falling rocks can be morally wrong. Thus, Hume's objection, which is structurally similar to the above argument, must be defective as well.

This reply is inconclusive, for it does not explain *why* the above argument is implausible. Without such an explanation, some philosophers might retort that the above argument is not implausible, that in fact it shows exactly what is wrong with consequentialist moral theories.[22]

However, given the results of the preceding section we can supply the explanation Feinberg leaves out. The above argument is valid if its first premise means that wrongness is *identical* to the production of pain. However, if the premise has that meaning, it is unfair to the advocates (if any exist) of the moral theory it concerns. This is because it commits them to an avoidable absurdity, namely, the view that falling rocks can be morally wrong. Interpreted fairly, their thesis is not that wrongness and pain-production are identical, but that within the realm of actions those properties are necessarily coextensive. This avoids the absurdity because, as said earlier, the fact that two properties are necessarily coextensive in a certain domain does not imply that in other domains in which the second property occurs, it shares its extension with the first. Hence, from the fact that according to a theory, *T*, wrongness and pain-production are necessarily coextensive in the realm of actions, and the further fact that in the realm of falling rocks pain-production can occur, it does not follow that *T* is committed to the view that falling rocks can be morally wrong.

These remarks do not merely show how we must read the first step in the above argument. They also show that if we interpret that step fairly, the argument does not entail its conclusion: that a consequence of the theory the argument concerns is that many non-actions, including falling rocks, can be morally wrong. As a result, the argument fails.

The main point to draw from all this concerns moral philosophy in general, not merely Hume's critique of Wollaston. When a philosopher contends that *P* is the "essence," "origin," "source," or "foundation" of moral wrongness,

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[22] Such a retort might come from Thomas Brown (1778–1820). His objections to Hume's brand of utilitarianism include an argument that resembles the above one. See Brown, *Lectures on the Philosophy of the Human Mind*, 516–18.

where *P* is a property that non-actions, no less than actions, can share, he or she almost surely means not that wrongness and *P* are the *same* property, but that within the realm of actions, those two properties are necessarily coextensive. To neglect this point is an error, one that can bring further errors in its wake. Unfortunately for Hume, he commits this error in the objection quoted in section 1. As we might put it, although Hume aims to "discover the fallacy" in Wollaston's philosophy, he fails in his purpose owing to a fallacy of his own.