

Wollaston's Early Critics

JOHN J. TILLEY
 INDIANA UNIVERSITY–PURDUE UNIVERSITY INDIANAPOLIS
 jtilley@iupui.edu

[Final draft of a paper that appeared in the *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 20(6) (2012): 1097–1116. Please cite that version.]

Abstract: Some of the most forceful objections to William Wollaston's moral theory come from his *early* critics, namely, Thomas Bott (1688–1754), Francis Hutcheson (1694–1746), and John Clarke of Hull (1687–1734). These objections are little known, while the inferior objections of Hume, Bentham, and later prominent critics are familiar. This fact is regrettable. For instance, it impedes a robust understanding of eighteenth-century British ethics; also, it fosters a questionable view as to why Wollaston's theory, although at first well received, soon faded in esteem among philosophers. This paper gives Wollaston's early critics some of the attention they deserve. It reconstructs some of their objections to Wollaston's philosophy, addresses replies to those objections, and shows that despite some minor flaws, the objections succeed. A fact that becomes clear is that Wollaston's philosophy had suffered devastating criticism years before Hume wrote anything against it.

Keywords: Wollaston; ethics; truth; Hume; Hutcheson; John Clarke; Thomas Bott

1. INTRODUCTION

The Rev. William Wollaston (1659–1724) is best known for his unusual moral theory according to which, roughly, an act is wrong just in case it denies a truth. This theory was well received when it came to the public eye through Wollaston's *Religion of Nature Delineated* (1722);¹ however, its esteem among

¹Hereafter *Religion of Nature*. I use the 1724 edition (printed in London), a facsimile of which is edited by Stanley Tweyman (Delmar, NY: Scholars' Facsimiles and Reprints, 1974). In quoting Wollaston I remove most of his italics, modernize spelling and capitalization, and partially modernize punctuation. I do the same for most of the other eighteenth-century authors I quote. Regarding my claim that Wollaston's theory was well received, see, for example, James Arbuckle's letter of 7 May 1726 in *The Dublin Weekly Journal*; reprinted in James Arbuckle, *A Collection of Letters and Essays on Several Subjects, Lately Publish'd in The Dublin Journal* (London, 1729) Vol. II, pp. 25–32 at 32; Joseph Butler, *Fifteen Sermons Preached at the Rolls Chapel*, 2nd ed. (London, 1729) viii–ix; and John Conybeare, *A Defence of Reveal'd Religion Against The Exceptions of a late Writer* (London, 1732) 239. See also the anonymously authored preface to the sixth edition of Wollaston's book (London, 1738; included in facsimile in Tweyman's edition of *Religion of Nature*), which says (p. xiii) that over ten thousand copies of the book were sold 'in a very few years'.

philosophers soon faded.² Indeed, its best-known philosophical critics treated it shabbily. Hume called it a ‘whimsical system’ and purported to destroy it with a few brief objections.³ Bentham and Leslie Stephen misrepresented it as the claim that all wrongdoing is lying, each adding some sarcasm to boot.⁴ Stephen, for instance, called it a ‘fanciful form of an illusory theory’.⁵ To this day Wollaston’s book receives far less respect and attention than other well-known works of the British moralists.

In the past several decades, however, many authors have published sympathetic works about Wollaston, some of which acknowledge the mistreatment his work received from Hume, Bentham, and later prominent critics.⁶ Some of these authors see a causal relation between the remarks of those critics

² For example, within roughly a generation after it appeared few philosophers saw it as a serious contender in ethical theory. We find it ignored in many philosophical works of that time, and mentioned in many others only to be dismissed. See, e.g., T. Rutherforth, *An Essay on the Nature and Obligations of Virtue* (Cambridge, 1744) 13–15; David Fordyce, *The Elements of Moral Philosophy* (London, [1748] 1754) 63–64; John Brown, *Essays on the Characteristics* (London, 1751) 125–26; William Adams, *The Nature and Obligation of Virtue* (London, 1754) 54–58; Soame Jenyns, *A Free Inquiry into the Nature and Origin of Evil* (London, 1757) 83–84; Richard Price, *A Review of the Principal Questions and Difficulties in Morals* (London, 1758) 218–19; and Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (London, 1759) 438–39.

³ *Treatise* 3.1.1.15n68. This is a reference to David Hume’s *Treatise of Human Nature*. Such references are to the Clarendon edition, edited by David Fate Norton and Mary J. Norton (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), which I cite by Book, part, section, and paragraph. Owing partly to the work of Stanley Tweyman and Joel Feinberg, nearly all of Hume’s objections to Wollaston’s position are now widely recognized to be defective. See Stanley Tweyman, *Reason and Conduct in Hume and His Predecessors* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1974) 109–11; and Joel Feinberg, ‘Wollaston and His Critics’, *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 38 (1977) No. 2: 345–52 at 347–50. See also John J. Tilley, ‘Physical Objects and Moral Wrongness: Hume on the “Fallacy” in Wollaston’s Moral Theory’, *Hume Studies*, 35 (2009) No. 1: 87–101.

⁴ Jeremy Bentham, *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation* (London, 1789) ch. 2, para. 14, note; Leslie Stephen, *History of English Thought in the Eighteenth Century*, 2nd ed. (London: Smith, Elder, 1881), Vol. I, p. 130; Vol. II, p. 10.

⁵ Stephen, *History of English Thought*, Vol. 2, p. 10. For further comments in this vein see Henry Home, Lord Kames, *Essays on the Principles of Morality and Natural Religion*, 3rd ed. (Edinburgh, 1779) 107–109; Thomas Brown, *Lectures on the Philosophy of the Human Mind*, 7th ed. (Edinburgh: William Tait, 1833) 511–12; and John S. Mackenzie, *Manual of Ethics*, 4th ed. (New York: Hinds & Noble, 1901) 189. For still further comments, negative even if not scathing, see Henry Sidgwick, *The Methods of Ethics* (London, Macmillan, 1874) 91; Richard Falckenberg, *History of Modern Philosophy*, translated by A. C. Armstrong (New York: Henry Holt, 1893) 198; and Alasdair MacIntyre, *A Short History of Ethics* (London: Macmillan, 1966) 170–71.

⁶ Feinberg, ‘Wollaston and His Critics’, 345–52; Tweyman, *Reason and Conduct in Hume and His Predecessors*, 87–99, 103–111; Clifford Griffeth Thompson, *The Ethics of William Wollaston* (Boston: Badger, 1922); Ralph E. Stedman, ‘The Ethics of William Wollaston’, *The Nineteenth Century and After*, 118 (1935) No. 702: 217–25; Stanley Tweyman, ‘Truth, Happiness and Obligation: The Moral Philosophy of William Wollaston’, *Philosophy*, 51 (1976) No. 195: 35–46; George H. Smith, ‘William Wollaston on Property Rights’, *Journal of Libertarian Studies*, 2 (1978) No. 3: 217–24; Olin Joynton, ‘Wollaston’s Theory of Declarative Actions’, *Southern Journal of Philosophy*, 19 (1981) No. 4: 439–49; Olin Joynton, ‘The Problem of Circularity in Wollaston’s Moral Philosophy’, *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, 22 (1984) No. 4: 435–43; and Diego Lucci, ‘Judaism and Natural Religion in the Philosophy of William Wollaston’, *British Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 30 (2007) No. 3: 363–87.

and the long-standing neglect of Wollaston's moral theory.⁷ These facts lead me to suspect that a common line now circulates about Wollaston, one that goes like this: Wollaston's moral theory has long been ignored owing not so much to its flaws as to the abuse it received from its most famous critics, beginning with Hume and continuing with Bentham, Stephen, and others. Perhaps Wollaston invited this treatment owing to incautious ways of expressing himself; even so, the treatment was unfair. It distorted Wollaston's philosophy and failed to refute it. Even so, it led to a neglect of Wollaston's work that remains to this day.

This line about Wollaston, although accurate to some extent, is flawed in an important way.⁸ In explaining the fate of Wollaston's theory it stresses *weak, unfair* criticisms, found in *prominent* works, published *many years after* Wollaston's book appeared. It neglects the fact that years before these criticisms were published, Wollaston's theory had received fair, potent criticism in three philosophical works which, regrettably, have long ceased to be widely read. Those works are Thomas Bott's pamphlet, *The Principal and Peculiar Notion Advanc'd in a Late Book, Intitled, The Religion of Nature Delineated* (1725);⁹ John Clarke of Hull's pamphlet, *An Examination Of the Notion of Moral Good and Evil, Advanced in a late Book, entitled, The Religion of Nature delineated* (1725);¹⁰ and the third section of Francis Hutcheson's

⁷ E.g., Stedman, 'The Ethics of William Wollaston', 217–18; Feinberg, 'Wollaston and His Critics', 346–47; Tweyman, 'Truth, Happiness and Obligation', 35.

⁸ Two ways, possibly, one of which concerns Hume's *Treatise*, the work in which Hume attacks Wollaston's philosophy. If, as Hume tells us (in 'My Own Life', many editions), the *Treatise* 'fell deadborn from the press', then how could it have influenced, at any *early* stage anyway, Wollaston's reputation among philosophers? Although this objection must be taken seriously, I am not sure how strong it is. Although Hume's *Treatise* did not win the popular audience he would have liked, we know that some influential philosophers, including Hutcheson, Kames, Smith, and Reid, read the *Treatise* not long after it appeared, and that Richard Price read it in the 1750's or before. (At least, Price cites it in his *Review of the Principal Questions and Difficulties in Morals*, 63, 89, 103.) If those philosophers read it, possibly many others did so at roughly the same time. For some worthwhile thoughts on this subject, as well as some pertinent facts, see David Fate Norton and Mary J. Norton, 'Historical Account of A *Treatise of Human Nature* from its Beginnings to the Time of Hume's Death', in Hume, *Treatise*, Vol. 2: 433–588 at 519–26.

⁹ Published anonymously in London, hereafter cited as *Principal Notion*. Thomas Bott (1688–1754) was a Church of England clergyman, the rector of Whinburgh, in Norfolk, and later of Spixworth and Edgefield in that same county. He published, among other things, works of theology and critiques not only of Wollaston's book but of Joseph Butler's *Analogy of Religion* and William Warburton's *Divine Legation of Moses*. Although he opposed the particulars of Wollaston's moral theory he resembled Wollaston in holding a form of moral rationalism or intellectualism. See particularly his sermon *Morality, founded in the Reason of Things, and the Ground of Revelation* (London, 1730).

¹⁰ Published in London, hereafter cited as *Examination*; included in facsimile in Tweyman's edition of *Religion of Nature*. John Clarke (1687–1734) was a classical scholar, educational reformer, and, for many years, master of the Hull grammar school. A prolific author, he is best known (which is not to say that he is well known) for his *Foundation of Morality in Theory and Practice* (York, 1726). Unlike Bott, Clarke opposed not only Wollaston's form of moral rationalism but moral rationalism in general. The first part of his *Foundation of Morality* is a critique of the moral rationalism of Samuel Clarke.

Illustrations upon the Moral Sense (1728).¹¹ The first two of these works are all but forgotten, and although Hutcheson's essay is still read, its section on Wollaston is generally ignored.¹² This is unfortunate, for these works contain plenty of good philosophy; also, to ignore them is to preclude a robust understanding of eighteenth-century British ethics. One purpose of this paper is to make these works more familiar by examining some of their arguments. Another purpose is to show that those arguments, even if flawed in some of their details, ultimately succeed against Wollaston's moral theory. To examine them is to see that Wollaston's theory had suffered devastating criticism years before Hume said anything against it. Indeed, I suspect that Hume's awareness of that fact largely accounts for his offhand treatment of Wollaston's philosophy.¹³

2. WOLLASTON'S MORAL THEORY

For our purposes there is no need for a lengthy exposition of Wollaston's moral theory, though of course we need an accurate statement of its chief elements. Those elements are Wollaston's propositional account of actions (A), his criterion for moral wrongness (W), and his account of how wrongness comes in degrees (D).¹⁴

¹¹ Published, in London (by Darby and Browne), as the second of the two essays in Hutcheson's *An Essay on the Nature and Conduct of the Passions and Affections, with Illustrations On the Moral Sense*. Hereafter cited as *Illustrations*.

¹² I say that Bott's and Clarke's pamphlets are 'all but' forgotten because we can find a few exceptions to my point. Tweyman, for instance, includes a facsimile of Clarke's pamphlet in his 1974 edition of *Religion of Nature*, noting on page x that Clarke deserves careful study. Tweyman mentions Bott on the same page. To give a second example, Diego Lucci mentions Clarke's and Bott's pamphlets in note 41 of his 'Judaism and Natural Religion in the Philosophy of William Wollaston'. In that same note Lucci points out, correctly, that although Hume's treatment of Wollaston's philosophy has received attention, 'the 1725 debate on *The Religion of Nature Delineated* [the debate in which Clarke's and Bott's works figure] . . . has not been studied in depth yet'.

¹³ Hutcheson's critique of Wollaston was certainly familiar to Hume. As some scholars observe, Hutcheson's influence pervades not only Hume's discussion of Wollaston but other portions of *Treatise* 3.1.1. See, e.g., Stephen Darwall, 'Hutcheson on Practical Reason', *Hume Studies*, 23 (1997) No. 1: 73–89 at 73–74. Hume seems also to have read Clarke's critique of Wollaston. For instance, Hume's comment that Wollaston's theory is a 'whimsical system' resembles Clarke's comment that Wollaston has a 'whimsical notion of morality' (*Examination*, 2). Also, Hume's most famous objection to Wollaston's theory, the one in which he speaks of 'liberties with my neighbour's wife' (*Treatise* 3.1.1.15n68), appears to be adapted from a strikingly similar passage on page 16 of Clarke's pamphlet. Finally, Hume assumes that the notion of an observer, or more precisely, the likelihood of causing an observer to draw a false conclusion, is central to Wollaston's account of wrongness (*ibid.*). This is understandable on the hypothesis that Hume had read Clarke's *Examination*. In that work Clarke identifies three readings of Wollaston's view that actions can signify falsehoods (*Examination*, 6–11, 12, 20), and maintains that the third is the only feasible one (*ibid.*, 20). Hume's reading of Wollaston's view is essentially the same as Clarke's third one.

¹⁴ Actually, there is a further element: Wollaston's thesis that a harmony exists between acting consistently with truth and acting in ways that promote happiness (*Religion of Nature*, 31, 38–40, 143). We can ignore this element in what follows. For discussions of it see Tweyman, 'Truth, Happiness and Obligation', 42–44, 45–46; and Joynton, 'The Problem of Circularity', 439–43.

- (A) Actions, no less than sentences, signify truths or falsehoods. To do them is to act as if p is true, and hence to signify that p , where p is a proposition.¹⁵ (For example, if some soldiers fire on another band of soldiers their act signifies that those other soldiers are their enemies. It does so just as clearly as the act of uttering ‘Those other soldiers are our enemies’.)¹⁶
- (W) Necessarily, an act is morally wrong if and only if it signifies a falsehood. In other words, necessarily, an act is wrong just in case it denies or conflicts with a truth, i.e., just in case to do it would be to act as if a proposition, p , is true when in fact the negation of p is true.¹⁷
- (D) The degree to which an act is wrong varies with the number and importance of the denied truths. (Suppose an act conflicts with exactly one truth. Then the more important that truth is, the more wrong the act is, and the less important that truth is, the less wrong the act is.)¹⁸

Before proceeding, let us note that thesis (D) raises a question: how do truths vary in importance? Although Wollaston thinks that variations in importance somehow relate to happiness,¹⁹ he is not clear on how they do so. For instance, in one place he implies that truths vary in importance according to the degrees of happiness to which they explicitly refer.²⁰ But this surely is a careless remark. First of all, in the relevant passage the deeds Wollaston mentions are acts of theft. In other places where he discusses theft he indicates that the truth denied by such an act is that the item seized is the property of the victim.²¹ The latter truth makes no reference to a degree of happiness. Secondly, Wollaston indicates that to break a promise is to deny a truth of importance;²² he also says

¹⁵ *Religion of Nature*, 8–13.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 8–9.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 13–18, 20–25, 26, 28, 31, 171. Note that contrary to Bentham and Stephen (see note 4 and the accompanying text), (W) does not imply that every wrongdoing is an intentional effort to deceive. Bentham and Stephen’s distortion of Wollaston’s position stems in part from Wollaston’s loose ways of expressing himself. One of his expressions, the one on which Bentham and Stephen capitalize, is ‘lives [or “acts”] a lie’. This expression appears only twice in *Religion of Nature*. It appears once in section 6 (p. 138), which, significantly, is not the section in which Wollaston explains and defends his moral standard. It also appears in section 1 (p. 11), where the context reveals that it functions merely as a figure of speech. Speaking of a person who ‘lives as if he had the estate which he has not’, Wollaston asks, ‘May we not say (if the propriety of language permits) that he lives a lie?’

¹⁸ *Religion of Nature*, 21–22.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 21.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *Ibid.*, 28, 138, 171–72.

²² *Ibid.*, 19.

that the truth we deny by such a deed is that we made the promise.²³ This reveals that in his view, a truth can be important even if it does not mention happiness.

So again, how do truths vary in importance? The fair way to read Wollaston is this: he holds that truths vary in importance depending not on whether they mention happiness, but on the extent to which comportment with them promotes happiness and non-comportment with them does the opposite.²⁴ Of course, some might say that the word ‘comportment’ creates intolerable indeterminacy. They might say that owing to variations in human goals, one person’s comportment with a given truth might involve acting a certain way, whereas the next person’s might involve acting differently. And this might be true even if the two people are similarly situated.

Wollaston’s account of actions provides a response to this objection. Whether the response succeeds is open to question;²⁵ even so, it deserves mention. In Wollaston’s view, actions signify propositions, and the proposition an act signifies (rather than any goal of the agent) determines whether the act agrees with a given truth. Consider the truth that Carl is lying in the street, grievously injured. According to Wollaston, any act that involves neglecting an opportunity to help Carl signifies that Carl is not grievously injured; consequently, it conflicts with the truth about Carl’s plight.²⁶ Hence, those who pass Carl by without helping him, no matter what their goals or desires, fail to comport with truth. Arguably, this shows that the word ‘comportment’ does not inject intolerable indeterminacy into Wollaston’s view of how truths vary in importance.²⁷

3. CLARKE’S FIRST OBJECTION

Let me now turn to Bott’s, Clarke’s, and Hutcheson’s objections to Wollaston’s moral theory. These are too numerous to cover in one paper; hence, I will limit myself to three. I have chosen these three partly because they are philosophically interesting, and partly because they allow me to give Bott and Clarke considerable attention. This is desirable because Bott’s and Clarke’s critiques of Wollaston are even less familiar than Hutcheson’s.

²³ *Ibid.*, 10, 16.

²⁴ Cf. *Examination*, 53–54, 60.

²⁵ See note 27.

²⁶ *Religion of Nature*, 18.

²⁷ This, at least, is what Wollaston would likely say. In fact, however, Wollaston’s account of actions (if true) only partially remedies the problem of indeterminacy. Unless we have a non-capricious way of determining which actions signify which propositions, it seems to be anyone’s guess whether, say, the breach of a bargain signifies the falsehood ‘The bargain was not made’ or instead signifies the truth ‘To breach this bargain is a way of cheating So-and-so’. As I point out in the next section, John Clarke takes Wollaston to task on this very point.

The first of the three objections comes from Clarke. I call it Clarke's 'first' objection because it is the first of the philosophical objections in his pamphlet. In essence, Clarke identifies the three most viable readings of thesis (A), particularly of its claim that actions signify truths or falsehoods. Since (W) presupposes that claim, corresponding to each reading of that claim is a reading of (W). Clarke shows that on each reading, (W) is false.

The three readings of (W) yield the following positions.²⁸

- (W1) Necessarily, an act is morally wrong if and only if the agent intentionally signals or conveys a proposition by means of her act, and that proposition is false.
- (W2) Necessarily, an act is morally wrong if and only if the act itself, apart from the agent's intentions and similar factors, signifies a false proposition.
- (W3) Necessarily, an act is morally wrong if and only if, were a person to observe the act, his observation would lead him to infer (or think of) a falsehood.²⁹

As I said, these views stem from three different readings of Wollaston's propositional account of actions. For example, (W1) is in the list because when Wollaston states his account of actions he uses the word 'affirm' more often than 'signify'. Clarke notices this, and thinks that strictly speaking only *agents* can affirm things.³⁰ Hence, on one reading of the claim that actions signify truths or falsehoods, the meaning of that claim is not that actions themselves signify truths or falsehoods, but that *agents* do so by means of their actions. Clarke also thinks that an agent affirms a proposition by means of her action only if she *intends* to communicate a proposition through her deed.³¹ Thus, Clarke considers the following a likely reading of the claim that actions signify truths or falsehoods: Sometimes, agents intentionally signal or convey propositions by means of their deeds. To adopt this reading is to interpret (W) as (W1).

It is worth noting that of the above three positions, (W2) comes closest to the view Wollaston intends.³² In fact, a close reading of his text reveals that (W2) *is* the view he intends. However, Clarke is wise to address the other two views, for each is a possible alternative to (W2) should (W2) prove untenable.

As it turns out, all three views prove untenable, as Clarke convincingly shows. Consider (W1), which says that an act is wrong just in case the agent purposely conveys a proposition through it, where that proposition is false.

²⁸ *Examination*, 6–11, 12, 20.

²⁹ Henceforth I ignore the parenthetical words. This affects none of my results.

³⁰ *Examination*, 6.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 9–10.

³² *Religion of Nature*, 8–13.

Clarke observes that to hold this view is tacitly to hold that many murders and robberies are not wrong.³³ The perpetrators of such deeds do not intend to communicate a proposition through their deeds, or if they do, the proposition is often true. A robber, for instance, may intend his act to imply ‘I’ll shoot you if you don’t give me your money’, but often that implication is true.

Clarke knows what Wollaston would say here: that to rob a person is to declare, falsely, that the person’s valuables belong not to her but to the robber.³⁴ In anticipation of this reply, Clarke writes this:

Does a villain that demands a man’s money upon the road, with a pistol at his breast, intend thereby the denial of any truth, or the truth Mr. Wollaston pretends is denied by such an action, *viz.*, that the money belongs to the traveller? Far from it! He never so much as dreams of the denial of any such thing, nor has his action any such signification, but quite the contrary. (*Examination*, 11)

Clarke makes a good point. If by robbing a person at gunpoint I ‘declare’ anything through my deed, then what I declare, most likely, is not that the person’s money is mine, but that it’s hers. If it were not, why use force to take it?

To return to the main point: many patently wrong actions fail to meet the test for wrongness in (W1). The agents of many such deeds do not intend to convey a proposition, or if they do, the proposition is true. Thus, (W1) is false.

Thesis (W2) is false as well. It says that, necessarily, an act is wrong just in case the act itself, apart from the agent’s intentions and similar factors, affirms a falsehood. As Clarke observes, this view would make many clearly permissible deeds immoral.³⁵ Suppose that one of my acts means that *p*, but I neither know that it means that *p* nor intend to convey anything by doing it. This sort of thing is possible if, as (W2) presupposes, an act *itself* can have a meaning, independently of the agent’s aims and the like. Suppose further that my act is harmless and done with no ill design. Then surely my act is innocent – this is so whether *p* is true or not. But according to (W2), unless *p* is true my act is wrong.³⁶

Clarke subjects (W2) to a further objection which, whether decisive or not, is worth notice.³⁷ If, as (W2) presupposes, an act itself affirms a proposition, then how do we identify that proposition? Surely not by examining the agent’s intentions or the conventions of his society. For it is such factors that we mean to exclude when we say that the act *itself* affirms the proposition. So again, how

³³ *Examination*, 11, 13.

³⁴ *Religion of Nature*, 28, 138, 171–72.

³⁵ *Examination*, 12, 13; see also *ibid.*, 56, 60–62.

³⁶ Here I am adapting Clarke’s point more than paraphrasing it. What Clarke specifically argues is that according to (W2) the falseness of *p* makes me ‘equally guilty with him who denies [*p*], though he knows it to be a truth’ (*Examination*, 12). As he elsewhere puts it, (W2) implies that ‘it will be a crime, and as great a crime, to deny the truth through ignorance or mistake as to do it wittingly and knowingly with a perverse and malicious intention’ (*ibid.*, 13).

³⁷ *Examination*, 14–17.

do we identify the proposition? No method is clearly available, nor does Wollaston provide one. Indeed, when he identifies an act's meaning he does so in an *ad hoc* way, thereby licensing others to do likewise. For example, if Wollaston can assert, with nothing but his own biases to guide him, that the breach of a bargain affirms the falsehood 'The bargain was not made', then why cannot a critic assert, with equal plausibility, that the real meaning of the act is the truth 'To breach this bargain is a way of cheating So-and-so'? Clearly, Wollaston faces a problem here if (W2) is his thesis.

Let us proceed to (W3), which says that, necessarily, an act is wrong just in case a person's observation of it would lead him to infer a falsehood. Clarke rejects (W3) on the following grounds.³⁸ Although right and wrong often are indeterminate, sometimes they are not. Many acts have a clear-cut moral status. However, many of those acts would have an indeterminate status if (W3) were true. For instance, suppose a con artist goes through his con act with the aim of cheating a person out of her money.³⁹ Is his action wrong? Barring unusual circumstances, the answer is yes; however, (W3) would make the answer indeterminate. A naive observer would fall for the con act, and thus infer that the agent is a 'civil honest gentleman'. An experienced person would make no such error; he would see that the agent is 'a cunning designing rascal'. In sum, there is no clear-cut answer as to whether a witness to the act would draw a false conclusion. So here we have an act that is plainly wrong, yet (W3) says nothing definite about the act's moral status. Hence, (W3) is unacceptable.

A possible reply here is that we can revise (W3) to say this: necessarily, an act is wrong just in case it leads, or would lead, at least *one* witness (e.g., a naive one) to accept a falsehood. But as Clarke observes, this reply makes (W3) absurd.⁴⁰ Many acts are morally innocent even if a witness draws a false conclusion from them. In fact, they are innocent even if most any witness would do so. Suppose I point an unloaded gun at a bird with the sole aim of training my sights on it.⁴¹ Given the right circumstances, most any witness would falsely think that I intend to shoot. But surely my act is not wrong on that account.

In sum, Clarke's objection is that Wollaston's moral standard is unacceptable no matter which of the three ways we read it. Let us now ask two questions. First, how have Wollaston's defenders replied to Clarke's objection, and do their replies succeed? Second, what is the best response to Clarke's objection, and is it effective?

Clifford Thompson addresses Clarke's objection at various points in his book *The Ethics of William Wollaston*. Although this book is the most thorough study of Wollaston's ethical theory, it is little known and seldom cited. This is

³⁸ Ibid., 20–22, 24–25.

³⁹ Ibid., 21–22.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 22–23, 25.

⁴¹ Ibid., 62.

no surprise, for Thompson's arguments and expositions are poor. I will discuss two specimens, one here and one in section 5.

The specimen I will discuss here is a response to Clarke's objection to (W). It consists of the following two remarks.⁴²

I would like to ask Clarke what the intention of the rogue is if it is not to take something for his own that belongs to some one else? The rogue, by his action, does practically deny truth, for he denies things and relations to be as they are, and he intends to deny these essential relations.

Wollaston, as much as Clarke, believes that the morality of an action is dependent upon the intention of the agent, in the sense that no act could be said to be good without this good intention. His position is that all facts must be considered and that an act is not really good, in the highest sense, unless the intention as well as the results are good.

The first remark addresses Clarke's view that if we read (W) as (W1) it implies that many robberies and murders are permissible, for many such acts are done with no intention to communicate a proposition. Thompson's remark does not refute this view; it merely asserts without argument what Clarke denies: that every robber intentionally conveys a falsehood through his deed. Thompson's assertion demands an argument; it is not plausible without one. If it seems to be, this stems from Thompson's way of putting it, which employs the phrase 'deny these essential relations'. In some contexts that phrase might indicate, plausibly, that the robber disrespects human relations that are essential to human well-being. However, we cannot read it that way in the present case, for (W1) says nothing about respect, disrespect, or human relations.

Thompson's second remark addresses Clarke's objection to (W2), the view that an act is wrong just in case the act itself, apart from the agent's intentions, implies a falsehood. The gist of Thomson's remark is that Wollaston, no less than Clarke, thinks that facts about intentions must enter into estimates of right and wrong. After reading this remark one naturally turns to the page in Wollaston's book that Thompson cites as evidence.⁴³ Interestingly, that page contains no evidence for Thompson's claim.⁴⁴ But even if it did, his claim would not refute Clarke's objection. It is no part of Clarke's objection that in Wollaston's opinion, intentions are irrelevant to the wrongness of an act. Clarke's essential point, which is untouched by Thompson's remark, is that *if* Wollaston intends (W) as (W2), he is committed to the view that intentions are irrelevant to wrongness.

⁴² Thompson, *Ethics of William Wollaston*, 48–49.

⁴³ Namely, page 15 of the 1725 edition of *Religion of Nature*. This is the edition Thompson cites throughout his book.

⁴⁴ I suspect that in citing the page Thomson has in mind Wollaston's remark that 'designedly to treat things as being what they are not is the greatest possible absurdity' (*Religion of Nature*, 15). This remark contains a word ('designedly') that refers to intentions, but this is a far cry from providing evidence that in Wollaston's view, facts about intentions must enter into estimates of right and wrong.

Thus, Thompson's reply to Clarke fails. Also, I know of no better extant reply. So let us proceed to the next question: what is the best response to Clarke's objection, and is it effective?

The most feasible response would be one that identifies a fourth reading of Wollaston's moral principle, one that yields a thesis with the following features. First, it is plausible, meaning, in part, that it withstands not only Clarke's objections but any natural variations of them. Second, it meets this condition without distorting Wollaston's ethical theory. It captures or approximates Wollaston's intended thesis.

These conditions are difficult to meet. Consider, for instance, the thesis below. Clarke did not discuss it, but in the present age, an age in which 'hypothetical observer' theories are familiar, it may come to mind.

(W4) Necessarily, an act is morally wrong if and only if, were a highly informed, flawlessly reasoning person to observe it, his observation would lead him to accept a falsehood.

Although similar to (W3), (W4) differs from (W3) by referring to a highly informed, flawlessly reasoning person. Different or not, it is no better than (W3), as we can see by again considering the con man. A highly informed, flawlessly reasoning observer would draw no false conclusion from the con man's deed. She would see through his con act. This is because, presumably, she would be highly informed about the ways of the world, if not about the con man himself. Thus, (W4) falsely implies that the con man's act is permissible.

In sum, Clarke's critique of (W) has considerable force. His objections to (W1) through (W3) succeed; also, they are robust against further variations of (W), particularly (W4). If (W) has a reading that makes it defensible, Wollaston's supporters have the burden of finding it. Not only has Clarke put that burden on their shoulders; he has done plenty to show that they are unlikely to bear it.

4. BOTT AND HUTCHESON ON MORALLY WRONG ACTS OF SPEECH

Bott and Hutcheson each oppose (W) on several grounds. An objection each of them makes is that immoral acts of speech (e.g., lies), the epitomes of wrongdoings that affirm propositions, do not owe their wrongness to any affirmation of a falsehood.⁴⁵ Instead, they owe it to such things as their harmful results or the agent's ill intentions. At first glance it may seem that Bott and Hutcheson are simply furnishing counterexamples to (W), but they have a second aim as well. That aim is hinted at in the first of the following passages; asserted in the second.

⁴⁵ *Principal Notion*, 7–9; *Illustrations*, 253–58.

If any action be significant it is certainly the act of speaking. And yet even in this the virtue is not the significancy of truth, nor the vice the signifying falsehood. (*Illustrations*, 258)

[Let me] observe that even in lying itself, which . . . seems to be the most direct offence against truth, it is neither the principal nor indeed any proper circumstance at all that truth is violated. . . . And if truth, or the violation of it, does not properly come into the notion of a lie, one would much less expect to see how the formal ratio of other vices can consist in a disagreement with it. (*Principal Notion*, 8–9)

It is no stretch to attribute the following reasoning to Bott and Hutcheson:

If any wrongdoings owe their wrongness to an affirmation of a falsehood, then surely lies, or more generally, morally wrong acts of speech, are among them. After all, acts of speech are the epitomes of acts that signify truths or falsehoods.

However, even in these cases the wrongness of the act is not tied to any affirmation of a falsehood. That is, it is not a necessary truth that acts of speech are wrong if and only if they signify a falsehood.

Therefore, contrary to (W), it is not a necessary truth that actions are wrong if and only if they signify a falsehood. Indeed, . . .

Very likely, few or no wrongdoings owe their wrongness to the affirmation of a falsehood. (W) would most likely be false even if it pertained not to all actions but merely to a subset of them, a subset that includes no acts of speech.

Bott and Hutcheson are not simply trying to refute (W); they also are claiming that even if we revise (W) so that it pertains only to some actions, none of them acts of speech, (W) is most likely false. After all, if (W) is false of the paradigm cases of acts that affirm propositions, why would it be true in other cases?

Bott and Hutcheson each supplement their argument by defending its most contentious premise, namely, the second one: that it is not a necessary truth that acts of speech are wrong if and only if they signify a falsehood. Hutcheson's defence, once its complexities are ironed out, is a critique of what he sees as the viable readings of what that premise denies: that necessarily, an act of speech is wrong if and only if it signifies a falsehood.⁴⁶ Bott's defence, which is simpler, tries to establish the premise by identifying an immoral act of speech that signifies nothing but truths. In what follows I focus on Bott's defence, though I give Hutcheson's some attention as well.

Bott argues as follows:

Let a truth be ever so trifling, e.g., that the pen I am writing with is four inches long, if I know it, and yet assert it is but three, I am guilty of an immorality. Why? Not because I

⁴⁶ *Illustrations*, 253–58.

offend against truth, or assert what is really false, but because I assert what I know or think to be false, and so am guilty of such an act as tends to breed distrust, uneasiness, etc. That this is the true reason, and not the other, is evident because the guilt would be the same if, though the pen was really four inches in length, I, through a mistake, thought it was but three and yet asserted it was four. . . . This . . . gives me an opportunity to observe that even in lying itself, which of all other vices seems to be the most direct offence against truth, it is neither the principal nor indeed any proper circumstance at all that truth is violated. (*Principal Notion*, 7–8)

Bott's argument comes to this: Suppose I think that my pen is three inches long, but I assert, with the aim to deceive, that my pen is four inches long. Suppose further that my pen is four inches long. My act of speech, being a deliberate effort to deceive, is morally wrong.⁴⁷ Even so, it affirms a truth rather than a falsehood. Therefore, it is false that acts of speech are wrong just in case they affirm a falsehood.

If this argument succeeds it not only supports the premise Bott aims to establish – that it is not necessarily true that acts of speech are wrong just in case they signify a falsehood – but also directly refutes (W).⁴⁸ For it shows that some morally wrong deeds affirm no falsehoods.

But does the argument succeed? At least one author says no. Here I refer to the anonymous author of a reply to Bott entitled *A Defence of Mr. Wollaston's Notion of Moral Good and Evil; In Answer to a Letter, in which It is said to be Considered and Refuted* (1725).⁴⁹ According to this author,

though this act [the lie Bott describes] does not interfere with truth in one respect . . . it interferes with truth in another. It interferes with this true proposition: that I take this pen to be but three inches in length. (*Defence of Wollaston*, 10)

⁴⁷ Or is it? Perhaps the lie is so inconsequential that it is not wrong. But we can let this pass. At most, it shows that Bott should have chosen a less trivial example.

⁴⁸ Unless, of course, we read (W) as (W1) or something close to it. But as said earlier, what Wollaston means by (W) is (W2). And in any case, (W1) is false. By the way, Bott is aware that his argument, if sound, directly refutes Wollaston's moral principle. This is evident from a sentence I elided from the previous quotation: 'Here I asserted what was true [that the pen is four inches long], and so am free from an immorality (according to our author's definition), and yet all the world and my own conscience would tell me I was guilty' (*Principal Notion*, 8).

⁴⁹ Published in London, hereafter cited as *Defence of Wollaston*; included in facsimile in Tweyman's edition of *Religion of Nature*. Some scholars attribute this pamphlet to Joseph Spence (1699–1768), a fellow of New College, Oxford, at the time the pamphlet appeared; later an Oxford professor of poetry and modern history. See Chester Chapin, 'Was William Wollaston (1660–1724) a Deist?' *American Notes and Queries*, 7 (1994) No. 2: 72–76 at 75 n. 1; and Austin Wright, *Joseph Spence: A Critical Biography* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1950) 8. While on the subject, allow me to mention another reply to Bott's pamphlet. It appears in the anonymously authored *A Brief Profession of Religion, As founded on Reason, Consistent with, and confirm'd by Revelation* (London, 1725) 12–22. This reply is poor; its arguments are weak or off target. To give one example, it faults Bott for waiting until page 12 of *Principal Notion* to mention Wollaston's belief that moral wrongness comes in degrees. Its point is that from the start Bott should have treated that belief as a key element of Wollaston's philosophy; also, that to treat it that way is to rob some of Bott's critical remarks (in *Principal Notion*, 9–10) of force. This criticism threatens none of Bott's strongest arguments, including the ones I discuss in this paper.

The point here can be put as follows. In Bott's example, although the speaker does not *assert* a falsehood, his act of speech still *signifies* a falsehood, namely, that the speaker does not think that the pen is only three inches long. Hence, Bott's example fails to establish its intended point: that it is not necessarily true that acts of speech are wrong if and only if they signify a falsehood.

This reply trades on the fact that when we make an assertion we often communicate things that are not part of what we literally assert. We do so through various *implicatures* carried by our utterance.⁵⁰ Normally, if I say 'This pen is four inches long' I do not merely convey that the pen is four inches long; I also convey that I *believe* the pen is four inches long. I do so because my act of speech implicates, though my proposition does not entail, that I believe what I am saying. Hence, if I actually believe that the pen is only three inches long my utterance implicates, and in that sense 'signifies', a falsehood. Of course, if the pen is really four inches long my utterance also signifies (through its content) a truth. But this does not affect the point that it signifies a falsehood as well.

The reply fails. Firstly, it has force only if we read 'signifies' broadly enough that merely to *implicate* a proposition is to *signify* the proposition. However, to read it that way is damaging to (W), for it widens the class of counterexamples to which (W) is open. Suppose I say 'Janet is a lawyer, but she's honest', intending to reveal later that I am kidding in my use of 'but'. (In other words, I do not believe that lawyers are seldom honest.) Here my utterance implicates, falsely, that I think that lawyers are typically dishonest. But surely my act of speech is not wrong on that account. So here we have a counterexample to (W) that capitalizes on the broad reading of 'signifies' at work in the reply to Bott. On a narrower reading the example would lack force.

Secondly, the reply does not touch Bott's main contention: that in the case of an immoral act of speech that signifies a falsehood, the immorality does not stem from the signification of falsehood. At most, the reply shows merely that Bott has not effectively illustrated his point.

Bott searched for a morally wrong act of speech that signifies no falsehood. Perhaps he should have searched for a permissible act of speech that signifies a falsehood.⁵¹ Such acts are easy to find, especially if 'signifies' has the broad meaning implicit in the reply we have been discussing. One such act is my utterance about Janet; others readily come to mind.

For example, if I exclaim 'You won't believe how many people attended Pam's wedding!' my utterance implicates that many people attended her

⁵⁰ Roughly, an implicature is something an utterance conveys owing not to the truth conditions of what is uttered, but to such things as conventions for efficient conversation. See H. P. Grice, 'Logic and Conversation', in *The Logic of Grammar*, edited by Donald Davidson and Gilbert Harman (Encino, CA: Dickenson, 1975) 64–75; and Stephen C. Levinson, *Pragmatics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983) ch. 3.

⁵¹ On a later page (19–20) he does this, but not for the purpose we are now discussing.

wedding.⁵² Suppose that very few people attended it, and my surprise at that fact was the occasion of my remark. Were I more skilled at choosing words I would have used ‘few’ rather than ‘many’ in my remark; hence, my remark would have carried no false implicature. But was my act of speech immoral? Surely not.

In the examples I have discussed, although the innocent acts of speech implicate a falsehood, the propositions uttered are not themselves falsehoods. However, we can find innocent acts of speech in which the propositions uttered are false. Hutcheson makes this point as follows:

Significancy of falsehood is found in the very propositions given in schools as instances of falsehood, absurdity, contradiction to truth, or blasphemy, the pronouncing of which are actions signifying more properly than most of our other actions; and yet nobody condemns them as immoral. (*Illustrations*, 255; see also *ibid.*, 260)

The point here is simple. If a logic instructor says ‘Otto is bald, but Otto is not bald’ as an example of a contradiction, his act of speech is not wrong. But of course the proposition about Otto is false. Thus, some permissible acts of speech signify falsehoods, not in the sense that they merely implicate falsehoods, but in the sense that the propositions uttered are false. Such acts are further evidence for the premise Bott and Hutcheson defend: that it is not the case that, necessarily, acts of speech are wrong if and only if they signify a falsehood. Also, like the earlier examples, they are direct evidence against (W).

In sum, the premise we have been examining is true: it is not a necessary truth that acts of speech are wrong if and only if they signify a falsehood. Also, as Bott and Hutcheson contend, if we combine that premise with another plausible premise – the premise that if any wrongdoings owe their wrongness to an affirmation of a falsehood, then wrong acts of speech are among them – we must draw not one conclusion but two. The first and most obvious (it follows from the first premise alone) is that (W) is false: it is not the case that, necessarily, an act is wrong if and only if it signifies a falsehood. The second is that (W) would most likely be false even if it pertained not to all actions but merely to a subset of them, a subset that includes no acts of speech.

5. BOTT’S OBJECTION TO THESIS (D)

Let me now turn to an objection to (D), Wollaston’s view that the wrongness of an act varies with the number and importance of the truths the act denies. The objection comes from Bott, who writes this:

A meets *B*, a poor wretch at the point of starving, takes notice of his case, says everything that is right about it, and goes his way. *C* comes immediately after, sees what *B*’s case is, gives him relief, and departs. Here *A*’s words and *C*’s action are supposed perfectly to agree with *B*’s circumstances; that is . . . , they each of them say, *B*’s case is really what it

⁵² This example is a variation of one in Levinson, *Pragmatics*, 165.

is. . . . Therefore, according to [Wollaston], because the agreement is equal, the moral goodness of their acts must be equal too. But is this true? (*Principal Notion*, 11–12)

Bott's key point is that *C*'s act differs in moral status from *A*'s despite the fact that, if Wollaston is right, the two acts affirm the same proposition.⁵³ *A*'s act affirms through words, *C*'s through a physical deed, that *B* is a poor starving wretch. Since there is no difference in what the acts affirm, (D) implies that the two acts are equally right or wrong. However, they are not equally right or wrong. *C*'s act is right; *A*'s is wrong. (Bott is assuming, of course, that *A*, like *C*, is capable of assisting *B*.)

The anonymous author of *A Defence of Mr. Wollaston's Notion of Moral Good and Evil* replies to Bott by arguing, in essence, as follows.⁵⁴ Although *C*'s act affirms no falsehoods, *A*'s certainly does. When *A* 'goes his way' without helping *B* he thereby signifies, falsely, that *B* is not starving. This, at least, is what Wollaston would say. Hence, contrary to Bott, Wollaston's moral theory has no counterintuitive results in this case. It agrees with common sense by implying that *A*'s act is wrong whereas *C*'s is right.

At best, this reply reveals a minor flaw in Bott's illustration; it does not refute his main point. His main point is that we can easily find two actions, one right, the other wrong, the nature of which would force Wollaston to say that they affirm the same propositions. To illustrate this point we need only make slight changes to Bott's example.

Suppose Ann meets Brad, a poor wretch at the point of starving, and says 'This person is starving'. Then, although Ann could help Brad with little sacrifice, she departs without helping him. Later, Cher meets Brad, sees his condition, and says 'This person is not starving'. Then, oddly, Cher helps Brad by giving him food and driving him to a homeless shelter.

We can describe Ann's act as that of speaking truthfully about Brad but refusing to help him; we can describe Cher's as that of speaking falsely about Brad but then helping him. Presumably, Wollaston would say that these acts signify the same falsehood. Ann's signifies physically, though not verbally, that Brad is not starving; Cher's signifies verbally, though not physically, the same thing.

Here we have an example of the kind Bott meant to provide. Thesis (D) implies that the two acts are wrong to the same degree. After all, if wrongness varies in degree according to the number and importance of the denied truths,

⁵³ For evidence that Wollaston would say that the acts affirm the same proposition, see *Religion of Nature*, 18. The case there concerns an injured person, but Wollaston would make the same points about a starving person. A second point: although Bott asserts, in the penultimate sentence in the above quotation, that the actions of *A* and *C* have the same moral status because the 'agreement is equal', on a fair reading he does not mean simply that the two actions bear the same kind of relation to truth, or that they bear it to the same degree. He means, in addition, they signify the very same truth(s). This is apparent from the middle sentence in the quotation ('Here *A*'s words and . . .') and from some of Bott's remarks later in that paragraph (*Principal Notion*, 12).

⁵⁴ *Defence of Wollaston*, 11–12.

then any two acts that deny exactly the same truths are equally wrong.⁵⁵ But of course Ann's and Cher's acts are not equally wrong. Cher's act is right (though odd); Ann's is wrong.

This objection shows that thesis (D) is unacceptable. However, to be fair to (D) let me finish this section by considering two possible replies to the objection.

The first reply is that Bott has ignored Wollaston's statement that 'merely to deny truth by words . . . is not equal to a denial by facts'.⁵⁶ Presumably, Ann denies truth 'by facts' when she fails to help Brad. Cher, however, denies truth merely by words. Hence, contrary to what Bott would say, Wollaston's philosophy does not imply that Ann's and Cher's deeds are right or wrong to the same degree.

This reply is ineffective. First of all, Bott does not ignore Wollaston's statement; he simply regards it, reasonably, as a spurious comment that clashes with the spirit and letter of Wollaston's philosophy.⁵⁷ Second, the reply succeeds only if it shows, not that on Wollaston's theory Ann's and Cher's deeds differ in degree of right or wrong, but that on Wollaston's theory Ann's deed is wrong whereas Cher's is right. Only by showing this can it show that Wollaston's system squares with common sense. But it does not show this. At most, it shows merely that on Wollaston's scheme Cher's act, although wrong, is less wrong than Ann's. After all, Cher's act denies a truth, even if only through words.

It will not do to respond to this point by reading Wollaston's statement to mean, not that denying truths merely by words is less wrong than denying them by facts, but that denying truths merely by words is not wrong at all. In the first place, Wollaston's statement does not say that. Secondly, to read it that way clashes not only with the spirit of Wollaston's theory but with some of his explicit assertions, including these:

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 any thing to be as it is, can be right. (*Religion of Nature*, 13)

It is the duty of such a being [an imperfect one such as a human] sincerely to endeavour to practice reason; not to contradict any truth, by word or deed; and in short, to treat everything as being what it is. (*Religion of Nature*, 63)

⁵⁵ But what if the two acts not only deny the same truths but also *affirm* some truths, and one of the acts affirms more truths, or more important truths, than the other? Wouldn't this make it less wrong than the other? Although a 'yes' answer would agree with the spirit of Wollaston's philosophy, it would disagree with the letter of it (see *Religion of Nature*, 22). In any case, it would have no bearing on the present example, for we have no reason to think that Ann's and Cher's actions differ in the number or importance of the truths they affirm.

⁵⁶ *Religion of Nature*, 29–30.

⁵⁷ *Principal Notion*, 20–21.

Let us proceed to the second reply to Bott's objection to (D). It comes from Clifford Thompson.⁵⁸ Thompson points out that according to Wollaston, although many acts, such as gestures and pantomimes, have a meaning owing to human conventions and the like,

there are many acts of *other* kinds, such as constitute the character of a man's conduct in life, which have *in nature*, and would be taken by any indifferent judge to have, a signification, and to imply some proposition, as plainly to be understood as if it was declared in words. (*Religion of Nature*, 8)

Thompson seems to think that in this passage, Wollaston is indicating that acts that convey propositions not 'in nature' but owing to tacit conventions and the like are not among the deeds that 'constitute the character of a man's conduct'. In short, such acts have no moral character.⁵⁹ Only acts that have a *natural* meaning, a meaning divorced from customs, shared assumptions, and so on, have moral properties. Ann's is such an act, for it conveys a falsehood through a meaning it has by nature. Cher's is not such an act, for it conveys a falsehood only through words; and words owe their meaning to human conventions. Thus, as Thompson sees it, Bott's objection fails. Wollaston's moral theory does not imply that Ann's and Cher's deeds have the same moral status.

This reply has several flaws, one of which is its claim that in Wollaston's view, if an act has no meaning 'in nature' it has no moral character. Even if this claim about Wollaston is defensible, it does not overcome Bott's objection. To parry Bott's objection by making Wollaston's theory absurd is not to *overcome* Bott's objection; if anything, it is to grant its force. And we surely make Wollaston's theory absurd if we take it to imply that an act has no moral character unless it has a 'natural' meaning. The act of pointing my thumb downward, or drawing my hand across my throat, has no meaning of that type. It derives its meaning from customs, shared assumptions, and so forth. Suppose, however, that I use it to signal an accomplice that he is to kill an innocent person. Then surely my act has a moral character – an evil one.

6. CONCLUSION

Let me conclude with four points. First, despite minor flaws in some of the objections discussed here, ultimately those objections succeed. They show that (W) and (D) are unacceptable.

Second, I have only scratched the surface of the critical works I have discussed. Those works contain further valuable material, including further objections to Wollaston's moral theory. Of course, with one exception

⁵⁸ Thompson, *Ethics of William Wollaston*, 96–97. Perhaps I should replace 'comes from' with 'is adapted from'. The truth is, Thompson's objection is unclear. He is brief in making it, saying that the 'confusion [it exposes] has been dealt with, at length, elsewhere'. Here he is referring to pages 35–43 and 46 of his book. But even there he does not adequately pin down the 'confusion' to which he refers.

⁵⁹ Here I am interpreting Thompson's point in the first few lines of *Ethics of William Wollaston*, 97.

(Hutcheson's) they are only minor works, but such works can contain good philosophy; also, they can illuminate the thought of their time and the writings of major authors.

Third, the works I have discussed illustrate the point just made. They shed light on two questions. First, why did Wollaston's work fade in esteem among philosophers not long after it appeared? Second, why did Hume and many later authors treat Wollaston's views so brusquely? Although the answer to these questions is complex (and, to some extent, unavoidably conjectural), I believe that part of it is this: Soon after Wollaston's theory appeared its errors began to be recognized, at least among moral philosophers. This is partly because those errors were not hard to find, and partly because Bott, Clarke, and Hutcheson made them vividly clear. In the works of those authors Wollaston's philosophy received devastating criticism – criticism that had power partly because, unlike many criticisms that came later, it was fair and responsible as well as acute.⁶⁰ Hence, it is no surprise that Hume, Bentham, and others were brusque with Wollaston's moral theory. By the time Hume wrote the *Treatise* what needed to be said about Wollaston's work had been said by Bott, Clarke, and Hutcheson, and what they had said had shown Wollaston's theory to be untenable.

Fourth, earlier I mentioned what I suspect to be a common line about Wollaston, one that attributes the neglect of his moral theory chiefly to the abuse his theory received from Hume and later famous authors. I have sought not so much to refute that line as to fill a lacuna in it. The unfair criticisms penned by Hume and later famous critics were perhaps influential in pushing Wollaston's theory to the sidelines. It is doubtful, however, that Wollaston's theory lost prominence and respect solely, or even mainly, as the result of unfairness or of criticisms that began with Hume. In trying to understand the fate of Wollaston's theory we must not neglect the work of his *early* critics. Far from disfiguring his theory or dismissing it with a few words of sarcasm, they confronted it with genuinely telling objections.⁶¹

Indiana University–Purdue University Indianapolis (IUPUI)

⁶⁰ This is not to suggest that it had no sarcasm mixed with it. See particularly *Examination*, 2–3, 19, 43–45.

⁶¹ For valuable comments and advice I thank Timothy D. Lyons, Anthony Skelton, M. A. Stewart, and an anonymous referee for BJHP.