Wollaston, William

John J. Tilley, Indiana University–Purdue University Indianapolis (IUPUI)

Introduction

William Wollaston (1659–1724) was one of several early modern British philosophers known today as "moral rationalists" (*see* RATIONALISM IN ETHICS). Others in this group included Ralph Cudworth, Samuel Clarke, John Balguy, and Richard Price (*see* CUDWORTH, RALPH; CLARKE, SAMUEL; BALGUY, JOHN; PRICE, RICHARD). They were foils or opponents of such "moral sentimentalists" as Lord Shaftesbury, Francis Hutcheson, and David Hume (*see* SHAFTESBURY, THIRD EARL OF; HUTCHESON, FRANCIS; HUME, DAVID), their disagreements with whom anticipated and influenced many later debates over moral cognitivism and moral intuitionism (*see* COGNITIVISM; NON-COGNITIVISM; INTUITIONISM, MORAL). Uniting the rationalists was the view that reason, rather than feeling, sentiment, or a moral sense, is the source of moral perceptions. Many rationalists held also that what we detect when we perceive moral rightness is some sort of "fitness," reasonableness, or agreement with truth.

Wollaston held a form of the latter view according to which an act is morally right just in case it agrees with truth in this sense: it affirms no falsehoods. Although this view was untenable it drew much favorable attention. The book in which it appeared, Wollaston's *Religion of Nature Delineated* (1724), went through eight editions by 1759 and sold many thousands of copies. However, Wollaston's theory also drew harsh objections, some of which receive attention in this essay.

The remainder of this essay has two parts. The first is about the details of Wollaston's moral theory; the second is about the objections his theory attracted.

Wollaston's Moral Theory

Among the components of Wollaston's moral theory, four are especially important. The first is an account of actions according to which they signify or affirm propositions. In other words, to do them is to act as if *p* is true, and hence to signify that *p*, where *p* is a proposition (1974: 8–13). To take an example from Wollaston, 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" (1974: 8–9).

The second component is Wollaston's criterion of right and wrong. His formulations of it are imprecise, but we can put it charitably as follows: Necessarily, an act is morally wrong if and only if it signifies a falsehood. That is, necessarily, an act is morally wrong just in case it denies or conflicts with a truth, meaning that to do it would be to act as if a proposition, *p*, is true when in fact the negation of *p* is true (1974: 13–18, 20–5, 26, 28, 31, 171).

The third component is Wollaston's view that God has established a harmony between consistency with truth and respect for happiness. No act can conflict with a truth without somehow diminishing or conflicting with happiness; likewise, no act can conflict with happiness without somehow conflicting with truth (1974: 31, 38–40, 143).

The fourth component is Wollaston's account of how wrongness varies in degree. Some acts are more wrong than others, so his theory must accommodate this fact. Wollaston purports to accommodate it by maintaining that the degree to which an act is wrong varies with the number and importance of the truths the act denies. Suppose an act conflicts with exactly one truth. Then the more important that truth is, the more wrong the act is (1974: 21–2).

This account of degrees of wrongness requires an account of how truths vary in importance. Although Wollaston is not entirely clear on this issue, he holds that variations in importance somehow relate to happiness (1974: 21). Charitably interpreted, his view is that truths vary in importance depending on the extent to which comportment with them promotes happiness and noncomportment with them does the opposite. (Although this is indeed the most charitable interpretation, it raises an objection, namely, that the word "comportment" creates serious indeterminacy. Owing to variations in human goals, two people might comport with a given truth through two very different actions.)

Wollaston's arguments for his moral theory are weak. One of them says that it would be absurd to talk to a post as if it were a person. It then follows with the question, "And why should not the converse be reckoned as bad; that is, to treat a man as a post; as if he had no sense, and felt not injuries, which he does feel" (1974: 15, spelling modernized). Wollaston's apparent point, an implausible one, is that the wrongness of treating a man as a post lies chiefly not in the harm it does him but in the absurdity it implies – namely, that the man is a post or that he feels no injuries. At any rate, the argument is not forceful.

Objections to Wollaston's Moral Theory

Wollaston's theory invites many objections; however, many of the most familiar ones fail. This comes to light in several recent studies (Feinberg 1977; Joynton 1981, 1984; Tilley 2009; Tilley 2012; Tweyman 1974: 87–99, 103–111; 1976).

For instance, some of Hume's objections fail because they presuppose faulty readings of Wollaston's criterion of wrongness (Hume 2007: 297 note). These include a reading according to which Wollaston's criterion asserts that wrongness and significance of falsehood are *identical* properties (Tilley 2009). Clearly, if Wollaston's criterion asserts such a thing, it is committed to the absurdity that maps, clocks, and other objects with a representative function can be morally wrong. (After all, such objects can signify falsehoods.) However, it is uncommitted to this absurdity if we interpret it fairly, which is to read it as it was stated in the previous section (Tilley 2009). This amounts to reading it as the view, not that wrongness and significance of falsehood are identical, but merely that they are necessarily coextensive within the domain of actions. Although this view implies that any *action* that signifies a falsehood is wrong, it does not imply that *anything* that signifies a falsehood, including any inaccurate map, is 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 with *W*. In the domain of adult male people, being a bachelor and being unmarried are necessarily coextensive. In other domains, however, to be unmarried is not to be a bachelor.

Although Wollaston's moral theory withstands many familiar objections to it, it succumbs to many others, including those in the early pages of John Clarke of Hull's *Examination Of the Notion of Moral Good and Evil* (1725). There Clarke identifies the three most viable readings of Wollaston's claim that actions signify propositions. Since Wollaston's principle of right and wrong presupposes that claim, corresponding to each reading of that claim is a reading of Wollaston's moral principle (Clarke 1974: 6–11, 12, 20). The resulting three principles can be stated thus:

1. 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.
2. 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.

3. Necessarily, an act is morally wrong if and only if, were a person to observe the act, his observation would lead him to draw a false conclusion.

Only the second of these principles captures Wollaston's intended thesis. In Clarke's view, however, the third is the most viable reading of that thesis (1974: 20). The third is also the best-known reading, because Hume adopted it (possibly owing to Clarke's influence) in some of his objections to Wollaston's philosophy (Hume 2007: 297 note). By doing so he opened himself to the objection that his reading of Wollaston's position seriously distorts it (Feinberg 1977: 347, 349; Joynton 1981: 447; Tweyman 1974: 108–11).

Clarke subjects all three principles to potent criticism. Concerning the first one, he observes that to hold it is tacitly to hold that many murders and robberies are not wrong (1974: 11, 13). 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 may intend his act to imply "I'll shoot you if you don't give me your money," but often that implication is true.

In response, Wollaston would say that to rob a person is to signify, falsely, that her valuables belong not to her but to the robber (Wollaston 1974: 28, 138, 171–2). But as Clarke observes, it is implausible to think that every robber intends to convey that proposition. Arguably, it is more plausible that he does the opposite, that through his use of force he affirms that the valuables belong to the person being robbed (Clarke 1974: 11).

Regarding the second principle, Clarke's objections to it include one that we can adapt as follows (1974: 12, 13; see also 56, 60–2). 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 the second principle 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 the second principle, unless p is true my act is wrong.

Another of Clarke's objections is that the second principle is intolerably indeterminate (1974: 14–17). If, as that principle 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 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. 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?"

Clarke rejects the third principle partly on the following grounds (1974: 20–2, 24–5). Although many acts have a clear-cut moral status, many such acts would have an indeterminate status if the third principle were true. Suppose a con artist goes through his con act with the aim of cheating a person out of some money. Is his action wrong? Barring unusual circumstances, the answer is clearly yes; however, the third principle implies, implausibly, that the answer is indeterminate. This is because naive observers would fall for the con act and conclude that the agent is a "civil honest gentleman," whereas experienced people would see through the act and conclude that the agent is a "cunning designing rascal" (1974: 21).

These are just some of Clarke's objections, which in turn are just some of the forceful objections Wollaston's theory received shortly after it appeared. (For others see Hutcheson 1971: sec. 3.) They show that Wollaston's moral theory is untenable. His theory remains interesting, however, partly for the influence it had, if only through its errors, on later moral rationalists, and

partly because some contemporary philosophers (e.g., Abad 2007; Feinberg 1977; Tweyman 1976) have found valuable or suggestive elements in some of Wollaston's tenets. Diana Abad (2007), for instance, finds implicit in Wollaston's philosophy a useful account of propriety – useful in that it can help us (she believes) develop an acceptable account of moral desert. Another theme of interest is what Wollaston's philosophy, or rather the popularity it enjoyed during much of the eighteenth century, may reflect about the assumptions, concerns, and culture of its time.

See also: BALGUY, JOHN; CLARKE, SAMUEL; COGNITIVISM; CUDWORTH, RALPH; HUME, DAVID; HUTCHESON, FRANCIS; INTUITIONISM, MORAL; NON-COGNITIVISM; PRICE, RICHARD; RATIONALISM IN ETHICS; SHAFTESBURY, THIRD EARL OF

References

Abad, Diana 2007. *Keeping Balance: On Desert and Propriety*. Frankfurt: Ontos.

Clarke, John 1974 [1725]. *An Examination Of the Notion of Moral Good and Evil, Advanced in a late Book, entitled, The Religion of Nature delineated*, ed. Stanley Tweyman. Delmar, NY: Scholars' Facsimiles & Reprints.

Feinberg, Joel 1977. "Wollaston and His Critics," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, vol. 38, pp. 345–52.

Hume, David 2007 [1739]. *A Treatise of Human Nature*, vol. 1, ed. David Fate Norton and Mary J. Norton. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Hutcheson, Francis 1971 [1728]. *Illustrations on the Moral Sense*, ed. Bernard Peach. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Joynton, Olin 1981. "Wollaston's Theory of Declarative Actions," *Southern Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 19, pp. 439–49.

Joynton, Olin 1984. "The Problem of Circularity in Wollaston's Moral Philosophy," *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, vol. 22, pp. 435–43.

Tilley, John J. 2009. "Physical Objects and Moral Wrongness: Hume on the 'Fallacy' in Wollaston's Moral Theory," *Hume Studies*, vol. 35, pp. 87–101.

Tilley, John J. 2012. "The Problem of Inconsistency in Wollaston's Moral Theory," *History of Philosophy Quarterly*, vol. 29, pp. 265–80.

Tweyman, Stanley 1974. *Reason and Conduct in Hume and His Predecessors*. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff.

Tweyman, Stanley 1976. "Truth, Happiness and Obligation: The Moral Philosophy of William Wollaston," *Philosophy*, vol. 51, pp. 35–46.

Wollaston, William 1974 [1724]. *The Religion of Nature Delineated*, ed. Stanley Tweyman. Delmar, NY: Scholars' Facsimiles & Reprints.

Further Readings

Brown, Charlotte R. 2006. "Wollaston, William," in D. M. Borchert (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2nd ed. Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, pp. 832–4.

Lucci, Diego 2007. "Judaism and Natural Religion in the Philosophy of William Wollaston," *British Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies*, vol. 30, pp. 363–87.

Lucci, Diego 2014. "William Wollaston's Religion of Nature," in Wayne Hudson, Diego Lucci, and Jeffrey R. Wigelsworth (eds.), *Atheism and Deism Revalued: Heterodox Religious Identities in Britain, 1650-1800*. Farnham: Ashgate.

Rogers, A. K. 1927. *Morals in Review*. New York: Macmillan.

Smith, George H. 1978. "William Wollaston on Property Rights," *Journal of Libertarian Studies*, vol. 2, pp. 217–24.

Stedman, Ralph E. 1935. "The Ethics of William Wollaston," *The Nineteenth Century and After*, vol. 118, pp. 217–25.

Tilley, John J. 2012. "Wollaston's Early Critics," *British Journal for the History of Philosophy*, vol. 20, pp. 1097–1116.