

# Hutcheson and his Critics and Opponents on the Moral Sense

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## Abstract

This paper takes a new look at Francis Hutcheson’s moral sense theory and examines it in light of the views of his rationalist critics and opponents who claim that there has to be an antecedent moral standard prior to any sense or affections. I examine how Gilbert Burnet, Samuel Clarke, and Catharine Trotter Cockburn each argue for the priority of reason over a moral sense and how Hutcheson responds or could respond to their views. Furthermore, I consider the proposal that rather than regarding Hutcheson’s moral sense theory as fundamentally opposed to moral rationalism, Hutcheson and Clarke endorse a shared moral metaphysics, as argued by Patricia Sheridan. Although I consider this proposal as too broad and believe it overlooks relevant metaphysical differences between Clarke and Hutcheson, I argue that the dispute between Hutcheson and his critics and opponents will not be settled without taking their underlying moral metaphysics into consideration.

## 1. Introduction

Francis Hutcheson played a major role in the development of eighteenth-century British moral philosophy and is well known for his claim that we distinguish between moral good and evil by

means of a moral sense. For Hutcheson, humans do not merely have the widely acknowledged five external senses, but also a moral sense, a sense of beauty, and some other senses.<sup>1</sup> According to him, the moral sense, like all other senses, is a power to have perceptions. All humans, Hutcheson maintains, are equipped with a moral sense, which when presented with morally significant actions approves them as morally good or disapproves them as morally bad actions. Let us take a closer look at Hutcheson's own descriptions of how the operations of the moral sense can be understood in analogy to the operations of other senses:

These *Moral Perceptions* arise in us as necessarily as any other Sensations; nor can we alter, or stop them, while our *previous Opinion* or *Apprehension* of the *Affection, Temper, or Intention* of the Agent continues the same; any more than we can make the Taste of Wormwood sweet, or that of Honey bitter.

If we may call *every Determination of our Minds to receive Ideas independently on our Will, and to have Perceptions of Pleasure and Pain*, a Sense, we shall find many other *Senses* beside those commonly explained. (Hutcheson [1728] 2002, 16–17)

Hutcheson's moral sense theory was certainly original, but it also prompted several critical responses, leading to lively debates whether morality can be founded in a sense or whether it presupposes reason. This paper aims to shed new light on the dispute between Hutcheson and his rationalist critics and opponents. In section 2, I explain how Gilbert Burnet, Samuel Clarke, and Catharine Trotter Cockburn each in their own way argue for an antecedent moral standard grounded in reason. Section 3 discusses Hutcheson's responses or possible responses to their views. I pay particular attention to how Hutcheson challenges Clarke's assumption that morality is based on eternal and necessary relations and show that Hutcheson questions Clarke's understanding of the metaphysics of relations. In section 4, I engage with Patricia Sheridan's proposal that it is important to acknowledge the commonalities between Clarke and Hutcheson and not just their differences.<sup>2</sup> Sheridan argues that both philosophers endorse a shared moral metaphysics. Although I acknowledge that it is important to consider commonalities, I regard Sheridan's interpretation as not fine-grained enough and suggest that it overlooks relevant metaphysical differences between Clarke and Hutcheson such as their disagreement concerning the metaphysics of relations. Nevertheless, I propose that the dispute

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<sup>1</sup> See Hutcheson (2002 [1728], 17–18).

<sup>2</sup> See Sheridan (2007).

concerning the priority of reason or a sense between Hutcheson and his critics and opponents will not be settled without taking their underlying moral metaphysics into consideration.

## 2. Hutcheson's critics and opponents

Hutcheson's proposal that we have a moral sense by means of which we approve or disapprove morally good or bad actions was questioned by his contemporaries and several eighteenth-century critics. In this section I will pay particular attention to the views held by Gilbert Burnet, Samuel Clarke, and Catharine Trotter Cockburn, who either directly criticize Hutcheson or defend views that are in tension with his position.

One of Hutcheson's early critics was Gilbert Burnet (1690–1726), who engaged in a public correspondence with Hutcheson in the *London Journal* between April and December 1725.<sup>3</sup> Burnet (using the name Philaretus) criticizes Hutcheson (named Philanthropus) that morality lacks a solid foundation if it is based on a moral sense. Burnet's correspondence targets Hutcheson's *An Inquiry into the Original of our Ideas of Beauty and Virtue* (Hutcheson [1725] 2004) first published in 1725. Hutcheson addresses several of Burnet's objections in his next work *Illustrations on the Moral Sense* (Hutcheson [1728] 2002).<sup>4</sup> Here I want to highlight two problems that Burnet raises for Hutcheson's moral sense theory. First, Burnet questions the accuracy of a moral sense and claims that some further test is needed that makes it possible to assess the rightness of this sense:

I wanted therefore some further test, some more certain rule, whereby I could judge whether my senses, my moral sense as the author calls it, my taste of things, was right, and agreeable to the truth of things, or not. And till I obtained this satisfaction, I could not rest contented with the bare pleasure and delight it gave me. Nay, indeed, without this, I could not indulge myself in this pleasure, without a secret uneasiness arising from my suspicions of its not being right; and from a kind of constant jealousy I entertain of every pleasure, till I am once satisfied it is a reasonable one. (Burnet and Hutcheson 1772, 18)

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<sup>3</sup> For further biographical details see, Moore (2004). The correspondence is reprinted in Burnet and Hutcheson (1772).

<sup>4</sup> For further discussion, see Gill (2006, 156–67).

Burnet worries that we can be mistaken about the pleasure that is perceived by a moral sense. He claims that '[t]here must be [...] something antecedent to justify it, and to render it a real good' (Burnet and Hutcheson 1772, 18). This antecedent standard concerns moral rightness and assesses whether something that is perceived to be pleasant by a moral sense is also morally right. The problem that Burnet here raises can be seen as a version of the problem of misrepresentation that can be raised more generally for theories of perception.

Additionally, Burnet worries that Hutcheson's view cannot account for moral certainty or necessity. Burnet believes that morality like mathematics holds necessarily.<sup>5</sup> He acknowledges that 'natural affections, and the moral sense attending them ... [tend to] coincide with the dictates of reason' (Burnet and Hutcheson 1772, 50), because these have been wisely and orderly designed by the Creator. However, he draws attention to an important difference. If reason, rather than a moral sense, is regarded as foundational, then it will be possible to establish moral propositions with certainty. To support this point Burnet asks us to consider and analyse a proposition and to break it down into its constituent parts until we reach some basic or fundamental propositions or principles. On the one hand, if during this process of analysis, 'we arrive at natural affections, or a moral sense' (Burnet and Hutcheson 1772, 50), Burnet argues, it would not be possible to use these fundamental principles as a basis in demonstrations, because such principles are not proven and lack certainty. On the other hand, 'when we go back to reason in our investigations ... we reach a principle, which is self-evident and certainly demonstrable' (Burnet and Hutcheson 1772, 50).

Since Hutcheson's arguments in *Illustrations* do not only address Gilbert Burnet's objections, but also target Samuel Clarke's moral fitness theory, it is worth outlining some of the core features of Clarke's moral theory. We have evidence that Hutcheson was familiar with Clarke's Boyle Lectures.<sup>6</sup> The second set of Clarke's Boyle Lectures, *A Discourse concerning the Unchangeable Obligations of Natural Religion, and the Truth and Certainty of the Christian Revelation* (Clarke 1711), contains his most detailed exposition of his moral views and thus I will mainly draw on this work. Clarke, like Burnet, regards morality as analogous to mathematics.<sup>7</sup> He believes that morality arises from original and necessary differences between good and evil that

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<sup>5</sup> See Burnet and Hutcheson (1772, 20–2, 50–3).

<sup>6</sup> For instance, section 2 of Hutcheson's *Illustrations*, titled 'Concerning that Character of Virtue and Vice, The Fitness of Unfitness of Actions' contains a note that explicitly refers to 'Dr. *Samuel Clarke's Boyle Lectures*; and many late Authors' (Hutcheson 2002 [1728], 155 note).

<sup>7</sup> See Clarke (1711, 36–7, 39–40).

have their foundation in the nature of things and criticizes moral theories that are based on positive laws:<sup>8</sup>

For if there be no such thing as Good and Evil in the Nature of Things, antecedent to all Laws; then neither can any one Law be better than another; nor any one thing whatever, be more justly established and inforced by laws, than the contrary; nor can there any reason be given, why any Laws should ever be made at all: But all Laws equally, will be either arbitrary and tyrannical, or frivolous and needless; because the contrary might with equal reason have been established, if, before the making of the Laws, all things had been alike indifferent in their own Nature. (Clarke 1711, 42)

Clarke's moral philosophy is grounded in what he calls 'the nature of things'. Different things have different natures and, hence, he claims that there are necessary and eternal differences, which he also describes as necessary and eternal relations. For Clarke the differences among things are 'as evident and undeniable' (Clarke 1711, 36) as that one number is greater, equal, or smaller than another number. He argues further '[t]hat from these *different relations* of different things, there necessarily arises an *agreement* or *disagreement* of some things with others, or a *fitness* or *unfitness* of the application of different things or different relations one to another' (Clarke 1711, 36).<sup>9</sup> In light of these fitnesses and unfitnesses, Clarke believes we can understand how we should interact with God, with other human beings, and with ourselves. For instance, he maintains that 'it is undeniably more *Fit*, absolutely and in the Nature of the thing it self, that all Men should indeavour to promote the *universal good and welfare of All*; than that all Men should be continually contriving the *ruin and destruction of All*' (Clarke 1711, 38). More generally, Clarke maintains that 'by this understanding or Knowledge of the natural and necessary relations, fitnesses, and proportions of things; the *Wills* likewise of all Intelligent Beings are constantly

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<sup>8</sup> Clarke especially targets Thomas Hobbes's moral philosophy that assumes that positive contracts are needed to establish moral obligations. See Clarke (1711, 40–2, 44, 47, 96–101).

<sup>9</sup> Clarke also offers a helpful summary of these considerations in the following passage:

There *are* therefore certain *necessary and eternal differences* of things; and certain consequent *fitnesses* or *unfitnesses* of the application of different Things or different Relations one to another; not depending on any positive Constitutions, but founded unchangeably in the nature and reason of things, and unavoidably arising from the differences of the things themselves. (Clarke 1711, 47)

directed, and must needs be determined to act accordingly' (Clarke 1711, 47–8). For Clarke not only finite intelligent beings are expected to act in accordance with these fitnesses, but also God.

As we will see in section 3, Hutcheson presses Clarke and other defenders of moral fitnesses to clarify what the supposed fitness relations are and raises doubts that they can provide an adequate foundation of morality, at least in the absence of a moral sense. Before I turn to Hutcheson's response, I want to turn to another critic of Hutcheson's moral sense theory, namely Catharine Trotter Cockburn (1679?–1749). Like Clarke, Cockburn defends a moral fitness theory and argues for the existence of necessary and eternal relations, from which fitnesses or unfitnesses arise.<sup>10</sup> Cockburn defends her view against the objections raised by theological voluntarists who claim that moral laws or moral relations depend on God's will. Cockburn does not deny that God's will is needed to create a system of beings. However, once God has created a particular system of beings, these beings have natures that are necessary and immutable and cannot be changed, not even by an act of divine will. Given the natures of things, Cockburn argues, certain relations exist among the different beings, from which fitnesses or unfitnesses arise. She writes:

Whether God will bring into actual existence a particular system of beings, of any determinate nature, depends undeniably on his sole will and pleasure; but whether that system of beings shall have such and such relations, from whence certain fitnesses and unfitnesses must result, depends not on his will, but on the nature of the beings he is determined to create. To suppose, that he may will them to have other relations, *etc.* is to suppose, that he may will them to be another kind of beings than he determined to create; for if they are the same, the relations and fitnesses resulting from their nature, are necessary and immutable. (Cockburn [1743] 2006, 107–8)

In what, if any, sense does Cockburn's moral philosophy leave scope for a moral sense? Cockburn vehemently rejects the view that the moral sense is a 'blind instinct'.<sup>11</sup> She further maintains that for Hutcheson the moral sense is a blind instinct and comments on this point in a letter to her niece Ann Arbutnot, dated 2 October 1747:<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> See Cockburn (2006 [1743], 2006 [1747]).

<sup>11</sup> See Cockburn (2006 [1743], 109, 113, 116–17, 2006 [1747], 157); Broad (2020, 224, 236, 242–3).

<sup>12</sup> Cockburn also comments Hutcheson's moral sense and interprets it as a (blind) instinct in Cockburn (2006 [1743], 113, 2006 [1747], 157).

You ask me who it is that calls the moral sense a *blind instinct*, for you are sure Mr Hutcheson does not. But *that* is understood to be Mr Hutcheson's meaning by all who have wrote upon it and I dont hear that he contradicts it, indeed an *instinctive approbation of virtue* and so on can have no other meaning, for all instincts are figuratively said to be blind, that is they act without judgement by a kind of *Taste*; and therefore you see I several times express a doubt *whether the moral sense and conscience* are the same thing; if they are the same principle or faculty in us, I think at least they are different Ideas of it, and I take care to shew that by *conscience* I do not mean a *blind instinct*. (Broad 2020, 242–3)

Cockburn clearly rejects any view that identifies a moral sense with a blind instinct. This is because she believes that there has to be an antecedent moral standard by which we judge actions to be right or wrong.

She acknowledges that it is also possible to understand a moral sense in terms of conscience and is more open to this meaning, as the following passage intimates where she comments on Clarke's understanding of conscience:

But 'tis sufficiently plain through all his works, that by conscience he [i.e. Clarke] does not mean a *blind sense or instinct*, but some principle or faculty, the operations of which depend on the judgment of the understanding. (Cockburn [1743] 2006, 117)

We find further evidence that for Cockburn the moral sense, or conscience, presupposes an antecedent obligation or moral standard, in the following passage that targets notes by Edmund Law in his translation of William King's *Origin of Evil*:

the uneasiness we feel upon the practice of anything contrary to what moral sense approves, is a *consequence* of the obligation, not the *foundation* of it, and only shows, that we are conscious of being obliged to certain actions, which we cannot neglect without standing self-condemned; self-condemnation manifestly presupposing some *obligation*, that we judge ourselves to have transgressed. (Cockburn [1743] 2006, 109)

To sum up, these three philosophers agree that there must be some antecedent moral standard that is prior to a moral sense. On this basis, I now turn to the next task and consider how Hutcheson responds or could respond to their views.

### 3. Hutcheson's response to his critics and opponents

Hutcheson engages in detail with Burnet's objections and Clarke's moral fitness theory in *Illustrations on the Moral Sense*. Instead of rehearsing all his arguments here, I want to highlight the main strategies that he uses to challenge the views of his critics and opponents. One of his strategies is to press his critics and opponents to clarify their views. Another strategy is to show that their views only become plausible if a moral sense is presupposed.<sup>13</sup> This means that Hutcheson does not directly reject their views, but rather aims to show that ultimately they have to agree with him that a moral sense is fundamental.

#### 3.1 Hutcheson's response to Burnet's objections

With regard to the problem that the moral sense can mislead us about pleasure, as Burnet has argued, Hutcheson turns to the more general problem of misrepresentation and draws an analogy with the perception of beauty.<sup>14</sup> Hutcheson does not deny that misrepresentation occurs. However, he maintains, contrary to Burnet and others, that it does not follow from this that the idea of virtue must be based on conformity to reason. If this inference was plausible, then, by the same token, we would have to say that because our perceptions of beauty or our perceptions of external objects can be mistaken, our ideas of beauty or our ideas of extension cannot arise from a sense of beauty or an external sense, but must instead be based on conformity to reason.<sup>15</sup> Hutcheson acknowledges that reason plays a role in the correction of mistaken approbations of actions as good or evil, like reason plays a role in the correction of mistaken sensations, but it does not follow from this that 'the *Original Idea of Extension, Figure, Colour, or Taste* [is to be placed] in *Conformity to Reason*' (Hutcheson [1728] 2002, 151).

More generally Hutcheson questions what is meant by 'conformity' to reason.<sup>16</sup> If one regards reason as the power of finding true propositions, then conformity of actions to reason can be understood as '*Conformity to true Propositions, or to Truth*' (Hutcheson [1728] 2002, 137). This leads him to examine whether moral difference can be explained in terms of 'that *Conformity which is between every true Proposition and its Object*' (Hutcheson [1728] 2002, 137). For instance, one may

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<sup>13</sup> For instance, see Hutcheson (2002 [1728], 157).

<sup>14</sup> See Hutcheson ([1728] 2002, 147–8).

<sup>15</sup> See Hutcheson ([1728] 2002, 147).

<sup>16</sup> See Hutcheson ([1728] 2002, 136–8).



propose that moral goodness or virtue is to be understood in terms of conformity between a true proposition and its object, while moral evil or vice is a matter of non-conformity between a proposition and its object. As Hutcheson points out, this proposal is not convincing, because true propositions can describe not only morally good but also morally evil state of affairs. He invites us to consider the following propositions: ‘preservation of property tends to the happiness of society’ and ‘robbery disturbs society’. Both are true propositions, Hutcheson argues, and thus the moral difference of these two propositions cannot be explained in terms of conformity between a true proposition and its object (or state of affairs). Hence, Hutcheson concludes that conformity between a true proposition and its object is not a suitable candidate for distinguishing between moral good and evil.<sup>17</sup> It is, of course, possible that those who claim that actions must conform to reason mean something different by ‘conformity to reason’, but the burden falls on them to clarify what they mean by it.

Hutcheson draws attention to a further ambiguity of the expression ‘conformity to reason’: First, it can refer to the reasons that excite an action, or we may say the reasons that motivate us to act. Or, second, it can refer to the reasons that justify an action. Hutcheson, following Grotius, calls these exciting and justifying reasons respectively.<sup>18</sup> He aims to show that ‘all *exciting Reasons* presuppose *Instincts* and *Affections*; and the *justifying* presuppose a *Moral Sense*’ (Hutcheson 2002 [1728], 138).<sup>19</sup>

Hutcheson offers several arguments and examples to explain why exciting reasons presuppose instincts or affections.<sup>20</sup> To support his claim, he asks us to consider why someone desires wealth and to examine whether we can identify an exciting reason that does not presuppose an instinct or affection.<sup>21</sup> Someone who desires wealth will likely give the following reason, namely that it tends to lead to pleasure or happiness. Next, we can inquire what their reason is for desiring pleasure or happiness. Hutcheson, believes that at this stage it becomes difficult to identify an exciting reason and instead our desire for pleasure or happiness arises from an instinct. He writes:

This Proposition is indeed true, “There is an *Instinct* or *Desire* fixed in his Nature, determining him to pursue his Happiness;” but it is not this *Reflection* on his own Nature,

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<sup>17</sup> See Hutcheson ([1728] 2002, 137–8).

<sup>18</sup> See Hutcheson ([1728] 2002, 138), Burnet and Hutcheson (1772, 55–6). See also Grotius ([1625] 2012, II.1.1, 81, II.22.1–3, 301).

<sup>19</sup> See Radcliffe (2013) for helpful further discussion.

<sup>20</sup> See Hutcheson ([1728] 2002, 139–44), Burnet and Hutcheson (1772, 56–9).

<sup>21</sup> See Hutcheson ([1728] 2002, 139–40), Burnet and Hutcheson (1772, 57).

or this *Proposition* which excites or determines him, but the *Instinct itself*. (Hutcheson [1728] 2002, 140)

Let us turn to another example and consider what exciting reasons may be given for why a person pursues the public good. Hutcheson anticipates that someone may propose the following exciting reason, namely ‘that “the Happiness of a *System*, a *Thousand*, or a *Million*, is a greater Quantity of Happiness than that of *one Person*: and consequently, if Men desire Happiness, they must have stronger Desires toward the *greater Sum*, than toward the *less*.”’(Hutcheson [1728] 2002, 142) However, he points out that this proposed reason presupposes ‘an *Instinct towards Happiness*’ (Hutcheson [1728] 2002, 142) which has to precede the reason. Moreover, he draws attention to two different ways of understanding the claim that the happiness of a system is greater happiness by asking to whom it is greater happiness. One option is that it is greater to the individual, another that it is greater to the system. In either case, he argues this claim is only plausible if we presuppose affections. In the former case, the reason that excites the ‘Desire of a *happy System* supposes *Self-Love*’ (Hutcheson 2002 [1728], 142); in the latter case, it presupposes ‘*publick Affections*’ (Hutcheson 2002 [1728], 142).

Without such *Affections* this Truth, “that an hundred Felicities is a greater Sum than one Felicity,” will no more excite to study the Happiness of the *Hundred*, than this Truth, “an hundred Stones are greater than one,” will excite a Man, who has no *desire of Heaps*, to cast them together. (Hutcheson 2002 [1728], 142)

More generally, Hutcheson is convinced that we can always find instincts or affections that explain our motivation to act, at least when the action is calm and rational. This is because ‘in every calm rational Action some *end* is desired or intended’ (Hutcheson 2002 [1728], 139). These ends, he argues, can be traced back to some prior affections. Moreover, he believes that all our affections belong to one of the following four classifications, namely self-love or self-hatred which are directed towards oneself, and benevolence or malice, which are directed towards others. This leads him to conclude that there cannot be exciting reasons prior to affections or instincts.<sup>22</sup>

Turning to the further question, namely whether justifying reasons presuppose a moral sense, Hutcheson considers why we approve of actions and examines whether this can be

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<sup>22</sup> See Hutcheson ([1728] 2002, 139).

explained by means of conformity to truth, or reasonableness, independent of any moral sense.<sup>23</sup> Conformity to truth here concerns the conformity between a true proposition and its object, which is the action in this case. Since true propositions do not just have morally good actions, but also about morally bad actions, as their object, this proposal cannot explain why we approve of morally good actions. Rather Hutcheson argues that it can merely show whether an action is fit to attain a particular end. This leads him to propose that ‘*justifying Reasons*’ then must be about the *Ends* themselves, especially the *ultimate Ends*’ (Hutcheson 2002 [1728], 145).

To illustrate how Hutcheson argues for his claim that justifying reasons presuppose a moral sense, it can be helpful to consider why we approve the pursuit of public good. One may suggest that ‘the *justifying Reason* of the *Pursuit of publick Good* [is] “*that it is best all be happy*”’ (Hutcheson [1728] 2002, 145). However, as Hutcheson points out, this means that ‘we approve Actions for their *Tendency to that State which is best*, and not for *Conformity to Reason*’ (Hutcheson [1728] 2002, 145). Furthermore, it leads to the question ‘what means *best*?’ (Hutcheson [1728] 2002, 145). If the answer is that it means ‘*morally best*’, then the reasoning is circular. Alternatively, if *best* means ‘*naturally best*’, then actions would be approved for their tendency to the most happy state, namely a state where all are happy. Now one can ask for whom this state is most happy: for ‘the *System*, or the *Individual*?’ (Hutcheson [1728] 2002, 145). If it is the former, we need to consider ‘what Reason makes us *approve the Happiness of a System*?’ (Hutcheson [1728] 2002, 145). At this stage, Hutcheson argues, ‘we must recur to a *Sense* or *kind Affections*’ (Hutcheson [1728] 2002, 145–6). If instead it is a state that is most happy for the individual, then the action is approved because of its ‘*Tendency to private Happiness*, not *Reasonableness*’ (Hutcheson [1728] 2002, 146). These considerations show that if we investigate our moral judgements and examine why we approve some actions in the way we do, we will ultimately reach a point where we rely on pleasant feelings or a moral sense.<sup>24</sup>

### 3.2 Hutcheson’s possible response to Cockburn

Cockburn’s two main works in moral philosophy, namely *Remarks upon some Writers in the Controversy concerning the Foundation of Moral Virtue* and *Remarks upon the Principles and Reasonings of Dr. Rutherford’s Essay on the Nature and Obligation of Virtue*, were first published in 1743 and 1747 respectively. Hutcheson, who died in 1746, did not live long enough to see the publication of the

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<sup>23</sup> See Hutcheson ([1728] 2002, 144–5).

<sup>24</sup> See also Harris (2017, 333–4).

latter and, as far as I am aware, he did not discuss the former work in his writings. Nevertheless, it is worth considering whether Cockburn's claim that for Hutcheson the moral sense is a blind instinct is fair and what resources his philosophy provides for responding to her interpretation. I approach this issue in two parts: First, I ask whether Hutcheson's moral sense is blind and, second, whether it is an instinct.

According to Hutcheson, the moral sense approves or disapproves actions, but he makes clear that this act of approbation or disapprobation is not based on a voluntary decision to approve or condemn any actions. He writes that '[w]hen we are contemplating Actions, we do not *chuse* to approve, because *Approbation* is pleasant; otherwise we would always approve, and never condemn any Action' (Hutcheson [1728] 2002, 155). This means that '*Approbation* is plainly a *Perception* arising without previous *Volition*, or Choice of it, because of any *concomitant Pleasure*' (Hutcheson [1728] 2002, 155). For Hutcheson, the moral sense, like all other senses, can be seen as a kind of perception; it receives external input that is processed by the mind, which results in the production of sensations. He describes the operations of the various senses as follows:

Those Ideas which are rais'd in the Mind upon the presence of external Objects and their acting upon Bodys, are call'd Sensations. We find that the Mind in such Cases is passive, and has not Power directly to prevent the Perception or Idea, or to vary it as its Reception, as long as we continue our Bodys in a state fit to be acted upon by the external Object. (Hutcheson [1725] 2004, 19)

Based on this general description of how the various senses operate, we can say that the human mind is passive when it processes external input about an action, which lead the moral sense to approve or disapprove of the action in question.<sup>25</sup> However, does it follow from this that the moral sense is a 'blind instinct'?<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> See Walschots (2017, 38–41) for further discussion.

<sup>26</sup> There is one passage in Hutcheson's textbook *Metaphysics* where he explicitly speaks of a 'blind instinct'. This is in the context of a chapter on the will where he introduces a distinction between two types of desires, namely sensual and rational desires. He states:

One desire we share with the dumb animals. It is called *sensual [desire]* and directs us toward pleasure by a kind of blind instinct; it is driven by a quite violent emotion of the mind to obtain certain sensual goods and avoid sensual ills. The other is a calm emotion which calls in the counsel of reason and pursues things that are judged, in the light of all the circumstances, to be superior, and are seized by a nobler sense. It is called *rational [desire]*, or *will* in the proper sense. (Hutcheson [1742] 2006, 127)

The sensations produced by the moral sense can be said to be immediate, or pre-reflective, but it seems problematic to call the moral sense ‘blind’, at least without specifying further what is meant by this. The moral sense has an intentional object, because it is directed towards something, namely actions, that it approves or disapproves. By contrast, phenomena that are commonly called instincts, need not have intentional objects. For instance, the process of swallowing food and digesting it involves many instinctive reactions and co-ordination among multiple organs, nerves, and muscles, but these processes can take place without there being a mental state that has these processes as its intentional object.

It remains to consider whether it is plausible to regard Hutcheson’s moral sense as an instinct. An answer to this issue depends on whether Hutcheson distinguishes instincts from the various senses that he postulates. Other Scottish philosophers writing later in the eighteenth century clearly distinguish instincts from other mental operations such as sense perception, appetites, desires, or affections.<sup>27</sup> Although these philosophers are willing to accept a moral principle such as conscience or a sense of duty, it is worth noting that they do not adopt Hutcheson’s postulation of the various different senses, including the moral sense.

Hutcheson’s distinction between exciting and justifying reasons intimates that he distinguishes a moral sense from instincts and affections, because he argues that exciting reasons presuppose instincts or affections and justifying reasons presuppose a moral sense. Had he meant to identify the moral sense with an instinct, he could have argued that both types of reasons presuppose a moral sense (or instincts). As I will show in a moment, this distinction – though less explicit – is also in the background of remarks that he makes about instincts in the second Treatise of his *Inquiry* ([1725] 2004).

In the *Inquiry* Hutcheson examines whether virtue ‘arises’, ‘flows’, or ‘springs’ from instincts.<sup>28</sup> He claims that he does not understand why some other philosophers reject that something can ‘be Virtue, which flows from Instincts, or Passions’ (Hutcheson [1725] 2004, 133). Hutcheson challenges these philosophers, who instead claim that ‘Virtue arises from Reason’ (Hutcheson [1725] 2004, 133), by prompting them to inquire what reason is. As Hutcheson proposes, reason enables us to identify and pursue ends, which leads to the question whether ends, and ultimate ends in particular, presuppose instincts. He writes:

The ultimate End propos’d by the common Moralists is the Happiness of the Agent himself, and this certainly he is determin’d to pursue from Instinct. Now may not

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<sup>27</sup> See Reid ([1788] 2010), Beattie (1790).

<sup>28</sup> See Hutcheson ([1725] 2004, 133–4).

another Instinct toward the Publick, or the Good of others, be as proper a Principle of Virtue, as the Instinct toward private Happiness? (Hutcheson, [1725] 2004, 133)

The important point for present purposes is that Hutcheson here appeals to instincts to explain *motivation* to action rather than approbation of actions. To return to the distinction between exciting and justifying reason, we can say that this passage supports his claim in *Illustrations* that exciting reasons presuppose instincts (or affections).<sup>29</sup> This means that his considerations in the *Inquiry* do not offer support for identifying the moral sense with instincts. Instead not only *Illustrations* but also the *Inquiry* offer support for the view that motivation to action presupposes instincts (or affections), while approbation of actions presupposes a moral sense.

Hutcheson also mentions instincts in some of his other works.<sup>30</sup> For instance, in his textbook *Metaphysics* he describes them as follows:

There are also certain natural propensities of the mind, or instincts, to perform, pursue, or avoid certain things, without any preceding reasoning, and with no thought of their importance for our own or others' advantage. (Hutcheson [1742] 2006, 135)

This passage offers further support that he regards instincts as motivating us 'to perform, pursue, or avoid certain things' (Hutcheson [1742] 2006, 135). It also shows that instincts for Hutcheson are pre-reflective. It is worth noting that it does not follow from this that motivation to action is always pre-reflective. Indeed, as Hutcheson maintains, we can be motivated to action by instincts or affections. Affections, in contrast to instincts, involve reflection for Hutcheson.<sup>31</sup>

Overall, we can assume that Hutcheson would challenge Cockburn's assumption that he identifies the moral sense with a blind instinct, not merely because it is not 'blind', but also because Hutcheson regards it to be important to distinguish motivation to action (exciting reasons) from approval of actions (justifying reasons). On his view, instincts or affections motivate us to act, while the moral sense approves of actions. These are distinctions that Cockburn fails to acknowledge.

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<sup>29</sup> The following statement also supports this reading: 'And as it must be an Instinct, or a Determination previous to Reason, which makes us pursue private Good, as well as publick Good, as our End' (Hutcheson [1725] 2004, 133).

<sup>30</sup> See Hutcheson ([1742] 2006, 135–6, 139, 1755, 1:4)

<sup>31</sup> For further details of Hutcheson's account of affections and how they are distinguished from sensations, see Hutcheson ([1728] 2002, especially 30, 49–50).

### 3.3 Hutcheson's response to Clarke's fitness theory

Hutcheson's responses to Burnet that I discussed in section 3.1 are directed against the view that some moral standard is required antecedent to all sense or affection and that this standard must be based in reason. Additionally, Hutcheson challenges moral fitness theory as defended by Clarke and others.<sup>32</sup> Before we take a closer look at his arguments, it is worth acknowledging Hutcheson's own intentions. He claims that he does 'not intend[...] to oppose [Clarke's] scheme, but rather to suggest what seems a necessary Explication of it: by shewing that it is no otherwise intelligible, but upon the Supposition of a *moral Sense*' (Hutcheson [1728] 2002, 157).

Hutcheson finds it hard to grasp what the supposed eternal relations and the fitnesses that are meant to arise from them are and presses Clarke and others to clarify their position. Hutcheson presents two main challenges: first, he disagrees with Clarke's realist understanding of relations; and, second, he distinguishes different types of relations and asks whether these can provide a foundation of morality without presupposing a moral sense.<sup>33</sup> Let us consider these arguments in turn.

Hutcheson agrees with Clarke that things are different, but he believes that it is important to consider ideas in addition to objects. When we compare 'two *Ideas* there arises a *relative Idea*' (Hutcheson [1728] 2002, 156). For instance, when I perceive two oranges I can compare them with regard to their size. During this act of comparison I form 'relative ideas' of bigger, equal, smaller, and so on, Hutcheson argues. More generally, he claims that 'Relations are not *real Qualities* inherent in external Natures, but only *Ideas* necessarily accompanying our *Perception* of two Objects at once, and comparing them' (Hutcheson [1728] 2002, 156). This suggests that Hutcheson rejects the view that relations exist mind-independently in the external world. Instead he regards relations as mind-dependent.<sup>34</sup> A more detailed discussion of relations can be found in his textbook *Metaphysics*, where he also endorses this mind-dependent account of relations.<sup>35</sup> There he writes:

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<sup>32</sup> His arguments in section 2 of *Illustrations* are directed against the view "that there are *eternal and immutable Differences* of Things, absolutely and antecedently: that there are also *eternal and unalterable Relations* in the Natures of the Things themselves, from which arise *Agreements* and *Disagreements*, *Congruities* and *Incongruities*, *Fitness* and *Unfitness* of the *Application of Circumstances*, to the *Qualifications of Persons*; that *Actions agreeable to these Relations are morally Good*, and that the *contrary Actions are morally Evil*." (Hutcheson [1728] 2002, 155–6)

<sup>33</sup> See Hutcheson ([1728] 2002, 156–60).

<sup>34</sup> This point is also noted in Sheridan (2007, 269).

<sup>35</sup> See Hutcheson ([1742] 2006, 70–1, 106–8, 124).

Apart from the related things themselves and the cause of comparison or ground, which is sometimes no different from the nature or essence of the related things, there is nothing more in the things themselves which corresponds to a relative idea; otherwise there would be innumerable other things attached to just about every thing. For there is no part of matter which does not bear some relation to every other part, no spirit which will not be found to be either similar or dissimilar, equal or unequal, to every other. Whenever, therefore, a relation is ascribed to things themselves, reference is always being made, albeit vaguely and obscurely, to a relative idea which either is or may be in a mind. (Hutcheson 2006 [1742], 107)

By contrast, Clarke who claims that there are eternal and immutable relations seems to accept that there are relations that exist mind-independently. Hutcheson's understanding of relations as relative ideas that only exist or may exist in a mind, calls into question the metaphysical foundation on which Clarke's fitness theory rests, namely the existence of eternal and immutable relations.

Additionally, Hutcheson seeks further clarity as to what the supposed relations could be by distinguishing three different types of relations: First, there are relations between inanimate objects, second, there are relations between inanimate objects and rational agents and, third, there are relations between rational agents. This brings him to his next task, namely to 'examine what *Fitnesses* or *Unfitnesses* arise from any of these *sorts of Relations*, in which the *Morality* of Actions may consist; and whether we can place *Morality* in them, without presupposing a *moral Sense*.' (Hutcheson 2002 [1728], 157)

Hutcheson quickly puts the first sort of relations aside, because it is not plausible to assume that virtue or vice occurs in actions that have no relation to 'a *rational Agent's Happiness or Misery*' (Hutcheson 2002 [1728], 158). Otherwise virtue and vice would have to be found in chemical or mathematical operations.

With regard to relations between inanimate objects and rational agents, Hutcheson argues that the relations by themselves are neither morally good nor evil. For example, consider the relation between an apple and a human being. What motivates a human being, for instance, to eat the apple? What explains why others approve or disapprove of such actions? We can only explain motivation to action or approval of an action, Hutcheson argues, if we take the



affections of the agent in question into consideration and presuppose a moral sense that approves or disapproves of an action.<sup>36</sup>

What can be said about the third sort of relations, namely relations among rational agents? Hutcheson acknowledges that some actions have a natural tendency to give pleasure, while others give pain. Can these relations be relevant for understanding the so-called fitnesses or unfitnesses? Hutcheson draws attention to a problem, namely that ‘most contrary Actions have *equal Fitnesses* for contrary Ends; and each one is *unfit* for the End of the *other*’ (Hutcheson 2002 [1728], 158). For instance, ‘*Compassion is fit* to make *others happy*, and *unfit* to make others *miserable*’ (Hutcheson 2002 [1728], 158–9). This suggests that actions have to be considered with respect to ends. Can the fitnesses be said to consist in the ends? Since a subordinate end cannot constitute a good action, ‘unless the *ultimate End* be good’ (Hutcheson 2002 [1728], 159), Hutcheson maintains that this question can be restricted to ultimate ends:

What means the *Fitness of an ultimate End*? For what is it fit? Why, ’tis an *ultimate End*, not fit for any thing farther, but *absolutely fit*. What means that Word *fit*? If it notes a *simple Idea* it must be the *Perception of some Sense*: thus we must recur, upon this Scheme too, to a *moral Sense*. (Hutcheson 2002 [1728], 159)

Once again, we see that the view presupposes a moral sense. Hutcheson acknowledges that it is possible that instead of denoting a simple idea, ‘fit’ denotes a complex idea, but in this case Clarke and others need to clarify their view and owe us a more precise definition of what they mean by fitness.<sup>37</sup>

#### 4. On the metaphysics of morality

As the discussion above has shown, Hutcheson presents clever arguments to challenge the views of his rationalist critics and opponents and to show that their views only become intelligible upon the supposition of a moral sense. Although it is not uncommon to assume that Hutcheson’s moral sense theory is clearly opposed to moral rationalism,<sup>38</sup> Patricia Sheridan has challenged such interpretations and argued instead that Hutcheson sees his view ‘more as an

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<sup>36</sup> See Hutcheson ([1728] 2002, 158).

<sup>37</sup> See (Hutcheson ([1728] 2002, 159–60).

<sup>38</sup> For instance, see Franckena (1955), Schneewind (1998, 340–1).

elaboration and partial correction to Clarkean fitness theory than as an outright rejection of it' (Sheridan 2007, 263). Her thesis is 'that Hutcheson's theory of morality shares far more common ground with Clarke's morality than is generally acknowledged' (Sheridan 2007, 264). Sheridan's interpretation makes it worth taking a closer look not just at the differences but also at the commonalities between Hutcheson, on the one hand, and Clarke and other philosophers who postulate an antecedent moral standard grounded in reason, on the other hand.

To begin, let me outline what Sheridan takes to be the 'common ground' between Hutcheson's and Clarke's moral philosophy:

The teleological aspect of Hutcheson's thinking has an obvious precedent in Clarke's fitness theory. Just as Clarke appeals to nature-relative fitness relations as evidence of benevolent design, so Hutcheson invokes the species-relativity of the perception of order, and the associated pleasures, as indicative of the will of a supreme designer. (Sheridan 2007, 273)

This does not mean that Hutcheson rejects rationalistic moral theory altogether. He maintains a commitment to the moral metaphysics found in someone like Clarke; his system is aimed rather at their exclusive reliance upon reason as the basis of moral epistemology. (Sheridan 2007, 275)

Sheridan argues that Hutcheson and Clarke both share a moral metaphysics that is based on teleological assumptions. She is right to point out that both philosophers regard humans as part of a larger system, and both acknowledge order, harmony, and design of the universe. However, it is worth noting that such views can also be found in the writings of many other philosophers of their day. Hutcheson will have encountered them in Marcus Aurelius *Meditations* that he translated into English together with James Moor (Hutcheson and Moor 2008 [1742]).<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> For instance, the following passage from Marcus Aurelius's *Meditations* shows that he regards humans as part of a larger whole or universe that is arranged as a well-ordered system:

All things are linked with each other, and bound together with a sacred bond: Scarce is there one thing quite foreign to another. They are all arranged together in their proper places, and jointly adorn the same world. There is one orderly graceful disposition of the whole. There is one God in the whole. There is one substance, one law, and one reason common to all intelligent beings, and one truth; as there must be one sort of perfection to all beings, who are of the same nature, and partake of the same rational power. (Hutcheson and Moor [1742], 84) 2008, 84)

Furthermore, such views can also be found in Shaftesbury's philosophy.<sup>40</sup> Shaftesbury emphasizes the beauty and order of the universe and regards humans, or 'particular minds', as copies of a larger universal mind.<sup>41</sup> He believes that understanding the metaphysical arrangement of the universe is of practical significance and can help us to seek and acquire happiness. Indeed, he recommends that 'the *particular* MIND shou'd seek its Happiness in conformity with the *general-one*, and endeavour to resemble it in its highest Simplicity and Excellence' (Shaftesbury 2001 [1711], 2:201). Shaftesbury's philosophy provided much inspiration for Hutcheson's development of his own philosophical views.<sup>42</sup> Indeed, as the subtitle of the first edition of his *Inquiry*—namely 'In which the Principles of the late Earl of Shaftesbury are Explain'd and Defended, against the Author of *The Fable of the Bees*'—indicates, he sees himself as defending Shaftesbury's view. In order to argue that Hutcheson and Clarke both hold a shared moral metaphysics, Sheridan mainly draws on passages from Hutcheson's *Inquiry*. I take it that Shaftesbury's philosophy would have been a more important source of inspiration for Hutcheson's views concerning the beauty, harmony, and design of the universe than Clarke's philosophy and a more fine-grained analysis of the commonalities and differences between Clarke's and Hutcheson's moral metaphysics than Sheridan offers is needed.

As already mentioned above, Hutcheson criticizes Clarke's account of eternal and immutable relations and there is evidence suggesting that he rejects Clarke's metaphysics of relations. Clarke argues that morality is analogous to mathematics by emphasizing that relations play a fundamental role in his moral theory. Hutcheson questions this analogy and instead prefers to regard morality as analogous to beauty.<sup>43</sup> This again brings Hutcheson's moral philosophy closer to Shaftesbury's than to Clarke's.

I am inclined to think that this dispute concerning the role of relations is not merely a point of epistemic disagreement between Hutcheson and Clarke, but rather it concerns the metaphysical foundation of morality. For Clarke fitnesses or unfitnesses arise from eternal and necessary relations. Such relations have no place in Hutcheson's moral metaphysics. Instead he emphasizes the importance of a moral sense. Although a moral sense can be said to provide epistemic access to morally significant content, it is also important to acknowledge that

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<sup>40</sup> See Shaftesbury ([1711] 2001). Ralph Cudworth is another likely source of influence for both Shaftesbury and Hutcheson.

<sup>41</sup> See Shaftesbury ([1711] 2001, 2: 201).

<sup>42</sup> Shaftesbury's writings were discussed in Robert Molesworth intellectual circle in Dublin, to which Hutcheson belonged. For further discussion of Shaftesbury's influence on Hutcheson, see Carey (2006), Darwall (1995, 207–10), Gill (2006, 139–40), Harris (2017), Jensen (1971, 29–31).

<sup>43</sup> For further discussion, see Gill (2007).

Hutcheson's moral sense has and requires a metaphysical basis. Hutcheson's claim that by means of the moral sense we approve virtuous and disapprove vicious actions presupposes metaphysical assumptions about the human constitution. Only if we assume that all humans have been equipped with a moral sense that universally approves of virtue and disapproves of vice gains Hutcheson's view plausibility.

I want to suggest that these considerations shed light on the limitations not only of reason, but also of the senses. A sense can be designed to approve of morally good actions, but it is also possible to imagine a sense that was designed to approve of morally bad actions, or a sense that was designed to approve actions that best promote self-interest. As we have seen, Hutcheson challenges his contemporaries who claim that an action is morally good if it conforms to reason. If we accept this criticism, the question arises whether Hutcheson's own position, namely that an action is morally good if it is approved by a moral sense, should be treated with similar scrutiny. Is it sufficient to focus on the approval of an action by a moral sense? Or do we rather have to take the metaphysical constitution of the moral sense into consideration? This intimates that the dispute between Hutcheson and his critics and opponents will not be settled merely by deciding the question whether reason or a sense has priority in moral considerations, but that we additionally need to take a closer look at the underlying moral metaphysics.<sup>44</sup>

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